I have long been wanting to take a tilt at what appears to be one of the hallowed conventions of book indexing. I suspect that the experts, so far from rallying to my support, are more likely to set upon me with howls of derision, or even of outrage, but I am sufficiently senile anyway to risk that. The convention in question may have a technical name, but, being very much of an amateur, I am ignorant of it. It might perhaps be called “Overloading”, and it applies specifically to books having a single main subject, whether person (biography, in fact), place, or thing.

The personal category provides the most glaring examples of Overloading, as well as being the easiest to illustrate; so let us straightway consider the (imaginary) Life and Letters of the Rt. Hon. Tarquinius Proudman. How many indexers would dare to omit altogether the entry “Proudman, T.”? Only one, I fancy—and there are circumstances, as will shortly appear, in which even I should hesitate to give it a complete miss. On the other hand, you would normally find “Proudman, T.” duly indexed at the head of column after column after column of sub-entries, extending as likely not to several pages—classified, perhaps, in three or four separate sections, but even so almost needing an auxiliary index to help you to find any individual object of search.

Of how much use is this practice? Over the years, I have made many honest efforts to find out by testing various types of reader. The reaction of almost all of them has been the same. Thus (if I may still use the aforesaid Proudman as a convenient illustration, and moreover assume his chief claims to fame to be common knowledge), with reference to his Ministerial period, readers would have turned to “Foreign Office” in the index; with reference to his ambassadorial career, they would have looked up “Ruritania” and “Claustrophobia”—or perhaps, if less well informed, “Ambassadorships”; with reference to his marriage to a famous ballerina, they would have looked up “Uppanova, Isoara”, or “Proudman, Isoara” (under one of which they would justifiably have been referred to the other)—or even, just possibly, “Marriage”. Amongst ordinary readers I have found nobody who had anything to say in favour of (the equivalent of) a “Proudman, T.” entry—until a month or two ago, when a notable bookman, whose name would probably be known to many of you, remarked to me “You’ve forgotten one class to whom the sort of entry you reject is invaluable: the reviewer who wants to be saved the trouble of reading the book itself.” And he was right, I had quite forgotten that character; but, whatever my fellow indexers may feel about encouraging him, for my part I have no desire to do so. I ought perhaps to add that among that type of undesirables I do not include the reader who has genuine cause to consult a book on specific points, without reading the whole of it, and who in fact seldom benefits from the kind of Overloading that I have in mind.

*Based on paper read to the Society in March, 1961.
Yet the provision of a vast index entry for the central figure or theme persists in spite of its disfavour with most of those for whose use it is intended. When, a few years ago, I was asked by the Cambridge University Press to write a short pamphlet on indexing and in it I recommended the wholesale rejection of that practice, my MS version shocked that very distinguished authority Mr. Stanley Morison. “You really mustn't go as far as that,” he told me, so I toned down my suggestion somewhat, but—though even more amateurish then than I am today—I would not relinquish it altogether.

Today I feel just as uncompromising about the principle, though I have learned that there are circumstances in which concessions must be made. When indexing a biography or autobiography, I start with a predisposition against an individual entry for the central figure, primarily because the whole book is about him; but I am prepared to find, as I proceed, certain facts about him—mainly of an abstract nature, such as personal qualities—needing to be indexed, yet most unlikely to be looked for elsewhere than under his own name. I hope I shall not be considered egotistical if I illustrate my point by actual work done—personal opinion, after all, can only be backed by personal experience.

In approaching Mr. Dudley Sommer's *Haldane of Clan* (published last year by Allen & Unwin) I was aware that Haldane's fame resided chiefly in his Ministerial career at the War Office, and later as Lord Chancellor, and also to some extent on his work for education. Obviously the most natural headings under which the reader would look for the facts relating to these activities, as it seemed to me, were respectively:

(i) “War Office” (or perhaps “War Minister”, or “War, Secretary of State for”); supplemented by such additional headings as “Army, British”, “British Expeditionary Force”, “Territorial Army”.
(ii) “Lord Chancellor” and “Lords, House of”.
(iii) “Education”; plus, of course, any specific institution with which Haldane was concerned, e.g. “London University”, “Workers’ Educational Association”.

All the above to be sub-headed as freely as need be.

And so on in respect of all Haldane’s many activities. But it soon became clear that the repeated emphasis in the book on certain of his personal traits—courtesy, foresight, imperturbability, industry, memory, patience, and the like—demanded a “Haldane, R. B.,” entry, for nowhere else would they occur to the reader. There were also just a few events of his career that had no obvious keyword of their own, such as an unsuccessful application for “silk”, followed by a successful one, and the breaking-off of an engagement (if he had married I should have left that to a “Haldane, Lady (wife)” heading). So I compromised. “Haldane, Richard Burdon” was given an entry of his own, in two parts, the first comprising about a dozen of the main events of his career, in chronological order (incidentally, why must sub-headings always, according to some authorities, be alphabetical? May not rule just occasionally give way to common sense?); the second headed

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Personal traits and listed in alphabetical order; and at the end a cross-reference to four or five other main headings elsewhere that might just possibly have been expected as sub-headings here. Even so, the whole “Haldane, R. B.” entry extended to exactly one column in length; whereas the normal practice of loading up every fact relating to Haldane—Ministerial, legal, educational, the lot—under a “Haldane, R. B.” entry would have swelled it to a length of several pages, thereby piling up a haystack around the readers’ needles.

Just one more personal illustration. Indexing still more recently The Memoirs of Lord Ismay, I started with my usual predilection (or prejudice, if you will), and found no reason throughout the whole book of some 460 pages to depart therefrom. Not unnaturally, the author did not expatiate on his own personality; and I did not encount, in a book packed with incident, one single item that had not what seemed to me its own appropriate keyword. However, I did think it well to insert at the head of the index, as a form of shock-absorber, the following note:

“In order to avoid the difficulty and delay in reference induced by several pages of sub-headings under the main heading ‘Ismay, Lord’, the author’s activities have all been indexed under the persons, places, institutions, etc. to which they relate, his name, wherever appropriate, being indicated by I.”

Once more, and for the last time, let me emphasize that my contention relates only to the central theme or character of only those books manifestly concerned with a central theme or character: in other words, that there is, or should be, “no room at the top”. Entries loaded with sub-headings there must of course be, plenty of them, freely distributed throughout any good index; indeed their compilation is, to my mind, the task that calls for the indexer’s highest skill of all. But I submit that this treatment, applied automatically and indiscriminatingly, as it so often is, to central figure or theme, is not a mere irritating fashion, but a positive evil, for it cannot avoid doing mischief in either one or the other of two ways. On the one hand, if (to revert to an earlier metaphor) the needles are to be found nowhere but in the haystack, the index will be seriously defective through the omission of essential entries from the places where they are practically certain to be first looked for. On the other hand, if the needles as well as being submerged in the haystack also have duplicates in appropriate places, then a weapon is placed in the hands of the type of publisher who would either dispense with an index altogether or at the very least impose a limit on its size. For such an index becomes unnecessarily swollen and extravagant—for the reader a lesser evil, but for the publisher a legitimate grievance.

I could produce up-to-date examples of these details, and indeed will do so if challenged; but I should prefer to postpone this to the free-for-all that may or may not be impending. For it is just possible that one or other of the illustrations that I have in mind may be the laborious and cherished product of some member
of my present audience; and I would rather not add to the pile of bricks that may anyhow be thrown at me an outsize one dropped by myself. Therefore I beg leave to be granted a fair chance to exercise caution.

In conclusion, then, the whole thing seems to me to boil down to this: is an index intended to be, or to contain, a summary of the book? I say no; that function belongs, if anywhere, to the Table of Contents, or to analytical chapter-headings, separate chronological tables, and the like. I submit that an index should be a collection of pointers directing every possible type of reader, with the least possible delay, to every item on which he can possibly need the fuller information provided in the book. For that information he must consult the text itself and not expect to find a summary of it in the index.

INDEX MECHANIZATION

Medical librarians in particular have been greatly indebted to the Library of the Surgeon-General's Office, Washington, now the National Library of Medicine, for its bibliographical aids to research, without which the task of the librarian would be so much harder. The various series of the Index-Catalogue have proved invaluable, and the Current List of Medical Literature successfully filled the gap caused by the belated appearance of the Quarterly Cumulative Index Medicus. When the latter ceased publication, having progressed to the end of the literature for 1956, the National Library of Medicine once more came to the aid of research workers by planning a vast co-operative index to medical literature that has now taken the place of the Current List. This latter ceased publication with the December, 1959 issue, but was revived in January, 1960, under the title Index Medicus. This is published monthly, and the twelve issues for each year are cumulated and passed to the American Medical Association, which publishes the resultant Cumulated Index Medicus in three bound parts as a successor to its Quarterly Cumulative Index Medicus.

These changes have involved extensive experiments and a vast amount of research, involving the use of photographic equipment, punched cards and various other techniques. These are described at length in a special issue of the Bulletin of the Medical Library Association (Vol. 49, No. 1, Part 2, Jan., 1961) devoted to the National Library of Medicine index mechanization project. This outlines the development of the various indexing journals involved, presents the problems encountered, and details the methods employed in their solution. The resultant tools are in constant use in medical libraries throughout the world, and no doubt the National Library of Medicine is continuing its investigation into possible improvements that will offer even better service to those who rely upon the facilities offered by the foremost medical library in the world. J. L. T.

A controversialist, "after almost exhausting his weapons of attack in the preface, and in the body of the book, if he is very skilful may let fly a few Parthian arrows from the Index."

Hill Burton: The Book hunter.