

What is an index?

Geraldine Beare

A brief look at Henry B Wheatley's article on the making of an index which was published by the Index Society in 1879.

Prologue

The surprise best-seller at Christmas 2003 was Lynne Truss's book on punctuation, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*. Alongside it, but sadly unsung, were two further books, *Between You and I: a little book of bad English* by James Cochrane with an introduction by John Humphrys and *The alphabet: a fascinating insight into the archaeology of language and the mystery behind the 26 letters which comprise the English alphabet* by David Sacks.

These are 'must have' books for any self-respecting info-holic like myself. Indeed, my shelves groan under the weight of similarly delightful tomes such as Dava Sobel's *Longitude* (Fourth Estate, 1998), Simon Garfield's *Mauve* (Faber and Faber, 2000), Georgina Ferry's *A computer called LEO* (Fourth Estate, 2003), Charles Seife's *Zero* (Souvenir Press, 2000) and of course David and Hilary Crystal's *Words on words* (Penguin Books, 2000).

As indexers, we all have a fascination with the minutiae of things, in the workings of language and in the challenges needed to reduce several hundred pages of text to a mere half dozen. Most of us are engaged in back-of-book indexing, though we all use modern technology to help us in the more mundane tasks. We continually promote the value of books with indexes and censure those without. Many publications now appear on the web, sometimes solely in electronic form, and many of these are easily searchable without the benefit of a back-of-book type index. This does not mean that indexes as we know them will die out, but rather that the field has expanded and will expand even further.

One hundred and twenty-five years ago Henry B Wheatley and the Index Society that he helped to found were of the opinion that indexes to subjects, and in particular to periodicals and journals, were the way forward. Indeed it was the main point of the Society. Large-scale comprehensive indexes covering as many sources as possible were the goal, together with the compilation of indexes to works which should have had indexes in the first place. The Society itself had come into being as a result of a number of letters and announcements spanning 23 years. The first of these had appeared in volume 10 of the journal *Notes and Queries* in 1854 and a further flurry of communications between 1874 and 1877 in the pages of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Athenaeum*. Across the Atlantic, Professor Justin Winsor, the Librarian of Harvard, responded warmly to the suggestions. The first Annual Meeting of the Index Society was held on Wednesday 26 March 1879 at the Royal Asiatic Society, Albemarle Street, London. In the Chair was the

President, the Earl of Carnarvon, and the Secretary was Wheatley himself. There were four vice-presidents, including Robert Harrison, Librarian of the London Library, who, in October 1877, had written the article in the *Athenaeum* that had been the bugle call to the formation of a society, and 16 committee members. Total membership stood at 225 and included libraries such as the Berlin Royal Library, Dublin National Library and various English libraries; institutions such as the Patent Office in Washington and the Royal Institution in London; universities, including three Oxford colleges, and the great and the good of society, including Baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts, the scientist Francis Galton and the mathematician/economist Stanley Jevons.

Several large projects were proposed and several were mentioned that were already under construction, including a *General Index of the Journals of Congress from the organization of the Government to the present time* (i.e. 1879); an English Civil War index covering a list of a persons engaged in any public capacity, military, ecclesiastical or civil from 1639 to 1660, and an index to the drawings in the Manuscript Department of the British Museum which had just been published. Besides encouraging this work it was also envisaged that a permanent place would be found in which to store these volumes and that the Society itself would publish various useful indexes – works-in-progress in reality – as part of its commitment to the idea of large-scale indexes to a diversity of subjects.

Wheatley himself was extremely concerned at the way indexes were being produced and wanted to make sure that some form of standardization and good practice was put in place. To this end, the first volume published by the Index Society contains his well-known work, *What is an index?* which has recently been reprinted by the Society of Indexers. But has anyone yet read it? I am fortunate in owning the three bound volumes containing this essay (Wheatley, 1878) and the proceedings of the first and second annual meetings. The latter two volumes also contain appendixes consisting of seven indexes to a variety of subjects such as *Marriage between near kin*, *Styles and titles of English sovereigns* and *Abridgements of patents*. But it is the essay *What is an index?* that I wish to consider.

What is an index?

Both Mary Piggott (1999, 2000) and David Lee (1999, 2002) have written about the Index Society and Henry B Wheatley

in *The Indexer* and in the *Anthology for the Millennium* in recent years, and I have no wish to repeat what they have so admirably covered, but neither looked fully at HBW's essay.

Wheatley begins with a brief history of the word index and its meaning, covering along the way 'Table, Register, Calendar, Summary and Syllabus, all of which were once generally used with much the same significance' (1878 : 7) He makes the point that many books were and remained unindexed and as a result readers, from students to researchers to readers in general, often made their own indexes – a practice that continued in his own time and probably still occurs today. On the value of indexes he quotes Thomas Fuller's comment made in 1650 where he says, 'An Index is the bag and baggage of a book, of more use then honour; even such who seemingly slight it, secretly using, if not for need, for speed of what they desire to finde' (p. 12)

Wheatley was greatly impressed by the old indexes of previous centuries and laments the fact that 'the occupation of the indexer has been allowed to fall into disrepute during the present century, and some have supposed that any ignorant hack can produce this indispensable portion of a book.' (p. 18) He goes on, 'An ideal indexer needs many high qualifications; but, unlike the poet, he is not born but made. [Some would dispute that, I think.] He must be a good analyser and know how to reduce the author's many words into a terse form. He must also be continually thinking of the wants of the consulter of his index, so as to place his references under the heading that the reader is most likely to seek.' (p. 19) Quoting from an article in the *Monthly Review*, he reinforces this: 'The compilation of an index is one of those useful labours for which the public, commonly better pleased with entertainment than with real service, are rarely so forward to express their gratitude as we think they ought to be. It has been considered as a task fit only for the plodding and the dull: but with more truth it may be said that this is the judgment of the idle and the shallow.' (p. 19)

Interesting and humorous indexes were quite acceptable to Wheatley and he quotes a delightful passage (p. 18) which includes such gems as: 'Birch, virtue of, in instilling certain of the dead languages' and 'Eating words, habit of, convenient in time of famine', both of which appeared in the *Biglow Papers* of 1848 by James Lowell. Author-produced indexes were also touched upon, as were indexes to fiction. Jonathan Swift and Samuel Richardson are both mentioned, the latter apparently a skilled indexer who 'in the early part of his career had filled up his leisure hours by compiling indexes for the booksellers and writing prefaces and dedications.' (p. 24)

Omission of an index was particularly reviled, not only by Wheatley and the Index Society but also by such luminaries as Thomas Carlyle, Lord Campbell (who proposed that any author who published a book without an index should be deprived of benefits of the Copyright Act), and a certain John Baynes 'who used to say that the man who published a book without an index ought to be damned ten miles beyond Hell, where the Devil could not get for stinging nettles.' (p. 27)

Having considered the origins and history of indexes and the formation of the Index Society, Wheatley gets down to the nitty-gritty of compilation, arrangement and printing.

Much of what he says we can appreciate today. How is the work to be set about? What is the consulter likely to seek? What headings are to be used? What should be included or left out? What form should the entry take – in particular how should names be treated? How about reprints? If the old index were a good one, there might be some excuse for its retention, but were it bad, then the misprints or errors would be retained in the new one to its detriment.

I quote: 'It has been said that a bad index is better than no index at all, but this is open to question, as the incomplete index deceives the consulter.... Many of the best indexes are indexes and something more; that is, information is added which may not be in the book itself, such as the date of birth and death of the persons mentioned... The Indexer needs knowledge so as to be able to correct his author when necessary, for the most careful author will make slips occasionally, and it is highly satisfactory when the Indexer can set him right.' (pp. 47–49) We cannot but agree with that.

As to arrangement, the discussion centres on chronological, alphabetical, or according to classes. The inconvenience of classification is soon dismissed, and then the problem of alphabetization is addressed. Here some interesting ideas are put forward from previous centuries, not all of them, fortunately, smiled upon. For instance, the arrangement under each initial letter according to the next following vowel, or the laziness of some compilers to leave sorting after the third letter. Names receive a great deal of coverage and Wheatley is firm in insisting that 'The indexer should insert the names of persons in all simplicity, and ruthlessly omit the Mr so frequently used by his author.' (p. 64) He does however modify this statement when confusion might occur between the name and a place where no Christian name is given.

Finally, the question of how the finished index should appear in printed form is discussed. Today, we have little or no say in the matter, but Wheatley is clear that the indexer should be concerned about how the index is prepared for the press and in seeing that their instructions are carried out by the printer. He is particularly scathing about the presentation of Births, Deaths and Marriages in newspapers lists. 'The inconvenience of the present system is greatest in the marriage advertisements, where the officiating clergy, about whom the reader cares nothing, take precedence, and crowd out of sight the hero and heroine. *Punch* had a good skit on this nuisance once, and said that when a poor man was thus hidden under a pile of parsons it became impossible to know what really had happened to him; whether he was in fact born, married, dead, or bankrupt!' (p. 67)

Conclusion

One hundred years after Wheatley and the Index Society put forward their radical idea for a massive database of indexes covering subjects as wide-ranging as science, literature and history, Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web. It was but a short step to the setting up of the internet and the powerful search engines that enable us to find virtually any information we wish. What is this but an electronic version of Wheatley's dream?

If you have not had time to read HBW's essay, I hope this will encourage you. If you have not yet bought it, I urge you to do so. Henry B Wheatley himself must have the penultimate word: 'There is, therefore, hope for us that when our other works are forgotten, we may still live as the compilers of an index.' (p. 70) Amen to that.

References

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