Indexing Defoe

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The extensive and varied writings of Daniel Defoe have long been esteemed by historians for their commentaries on the political and social life of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, but many have not been available since their original publication. A new multi-volume edition of a rich and representative selection of these works is now in progress, and is being issued with detailed editorial notes and full analytical indexes.

Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) is one of those celebrated English writers with a vast output who is remembered for only a small number of works: Robinson Crusoe, Moll Flanders, Journal of the Plague Year and Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain being perhaps the best known. Reputable authorities credit him with some 250 separate works, but the bibliography is a minefield, with attributions constantly being challenged and changed. What is more, most of his works have long been out of print, and are accessible only through special collections and the major research libraries.

The project

To correct this, the publishers Pickering and Chatto decided some time ago to republish a large part of the Defoe canon in a scholarly edition, as part of the series The Pickering Masters, with introductions, annotations and bibliographical apparatus. Appointed as general editors were P.N. Furbank, perhaps best known for his biographies of E.M. Forster and Diderot, and W.R. Owens, the Bunyan scholar, who had already jointly published a critical bibliography of Defoe, together with some works which are of questionable attribution.

I had been commissioned to compile an index to this bibliography, a relatively straightforward task, and the two editors recommended me to the publisher for the much more demanding job of indexing Defoe's works as they appeared.

The publisher's project is to produce 44 volumes, grouped under five thematic headings: Political and Economic writings (8 volumes); Travel and Historical Writings (8); Satire and Fantasy (8); Religious and Didactic Writings (10); The Novels (10); all due for completion by 2008. Many of the volumes are composite, containing a variety of short works and essays. Even so, it will not be Defoe's complete works, although the editors estimate a total of some 100 separate titles. In addition, the whole of Defoe's journal, The Review, is to be published in its original 18 volumes, at the rate of one a year, each with its own index, and promising a detailed consolidated index in the final volume of the series. (I rather suspect that this consolidated index may require a volume to itself if all of the subsequent individual indexes match volume one in length.)

So far, some twelve volumes have been published, including political and economic writings, travel writings, and most recently, the first volume (1704) of The Review, which has been unavailable since it first appeared, except for an imperfect facsimile reprint in the late 1930s. To political historians of the early 18th century this promises to be an invaluable and welcome publishing venture, and for literary historians it will establish excellent critically edited texts for the more familiar works.

Nature of works

In writing or speaking about indexing it is just as important to give some idea of the nature of the works to be indexed as of the practical approach to the treatment of them. In the case of Defoe, this is perhaps even more necessary. He is a familiar name, but a shadowy figure. Throughout his life he was closely involved in contemporary party politics and religious controversies; he was a commentator on international affairs; a sharp satirist and polemicist; supposed spy for the Tory party leader Robert Harley, 1st Earl of Oxford; and one of the father-figures of the English novel. He was one of our first journalistic hacks, but a man of principle who suffered imprisonment and the pillory for his Shortest Way with Dissenters, and, literary qualities aside, he stands out as a shrewd and illuminating social observer.

The vast range of Defoe's interests is pretty daunting and pitches the indexer headlong into the turmoil of his world. Here are a few examples of titles taken from the eight volumes of his Political and Economic Writings (now completed): Reasons against the Succession (1713); The History of the Kentish Petition (1701); The Secret History of the White Staff (1714); A New Test of the Church of England's Loyalty (1702); Eleven essays on the Union with Scotland; Reasons against a War with France (1701); The Villainy of Stock-Jobbers Detected (1701); An Essay upon the South Sea Trade (1712); Giving Alms No Charity (1704).

Some of these titles are pretty tempting; others frankly inscrutable, but they bear out the claim I constantly make that indexing is a continuing educational process. Still to come, and so far unseen, are the satirical and supernatural writings. Could Defoe be described as an early science-fiction writer? One of his fantasies, The Consolidator (1705), uses a voyage to the moon as a satirical vehicle to comment on contemporary life. Satirical he may have been, and not always light-hearted, but he was imaginative and even daring in his literary forms.
The indexes

When I agreed to undertake this task I believed I was partway there with at least one book, the Tour Through ... Great Britain (also edited by Furbank and Owens), which I had indexed for another academic publisher a year or two earlier. This was a richly illustrated, near coffee-table type publication, and I had no idea at the time how extensively abridged it was. The new edition extends to two volumes, has no illustrations, and covers three times as much ground as the earlier one. So, as expected, a fatter book made for a fatter index.

The standard approach to indexing any multi-volume work in progress is to take each part as it comes, but to establish a consistent style to be maintained throughout the whole series. In this case the publishers have been generous with space, and each index is printed in double columns in a set-out style, with alphabetical subheadings. Works by authors other than Defoe appear under the author's name, but Defoe's own works, when cited, appear directly under title. I believe that distributing his titles in this way makes for greater clarity particularly when sub-dividing his individual works, whereas listing them all under his name would make for a rather clumsy block of entries all in one place. Book titles all appear in italic, and to distinguish Defoe's works from other italicized headings (such as periodicals) I add the tag (DD) to identify the work as Defoe's.

The majority of the headings are personal and place-names, with institutions, historical events, titles of laws and treaties, and the like, but it seemed to me vital to be prolific with subject headings, too, for all the topics upon which Defoe comments. Thus, there are entries for such matters as: army (standing); bankruptcy; coffee; debt; education of women; the gentleman; gold; knitting frames; linen; lotteries; malt tax; oaths (national); plague; seamen; sickness benefit; slave trade; swearing; toleration (religious); universities; war.

Most of the terminology within the works is understandable, and many of the headings derive directly from the text, but cross-referencing from synonyms or parallel terms is occasionally necessary: thus, 'episcopacy see bishops'; 'arbitrary power see despotism'. Now and then a particular cross-reference indicates the emphasis of the author, e.g. 'children see foundlings'. It is possible that in a later work Defoe may comment on children more generally, not just as foundlings, in which case it will gain its own heading.

When an unfamiliar term is used as a heading I add a short parenthetical explanatory gloss, as in 'vails (tips for servants)'; although as there is only one page reference in this particular case I have made a duplicate entry as a subheading under 'servants: vails (tips)', as being more practical than making a cross-reference.

Style

So far there is little unusual or unorthodox about the principles or system I have adopted. However, all these writings date from some 300 years ago, and not only the matter but also the spelling can be unfamiliar and inconsistent. In the case of spellings of ordinary words I follow modern practice, whatever the form in the text. Thus, ancient, not antient; linen, not linnen; traffic, not traffick; Woolpack, not Woollpack. Fortunately, most of these archaic forms occur only as subheadings in the index, and so do not affect alphabetization. When they do in a significant way, a cross-reference is made from the unused to the used form.

Confusion over spelling is, of course, more problematic with proper names and especially foreign ones. Here I am fortunate in being able to refer to the editors' annotations, which in most cases establish identifications and regularise spellings. Count Zrinyi is just as likely to appear in Defoe's text as Count Serini, Prince Michael Apafi as Abaffi. However, it is not just foreign names: Sir Henry Hobart appears as Hubbard, which suggests that Defoe only ever heard the name, and never saw it written. Without editorial help some of these might very well have been taken as entirely different people leading to the unpardonable blunder of making separate entries for them in different places. When the index heading differs markedly from Defoe's usage in the text I add the text form in brackets, e.g. 'Zrinyi (Serini)', as an aid.

The notes appear as numbered end-notes and there are practical reasons for this, as there are a few of Defoe's own original footnotes which have been retained on the page. The editorial notes themselves are extensive and informative, and contain a good deal of matter that is not in the texts. I was asked to index the notes, but only where they do not simply repeat the citation in the text. This in fact proved to be a pretty full task in itself, as the notes are necessarily voluminous, giving not only identifications and such useful details as dates for events such as battles and accurate locations for unfamiliar places, but frequently mentioning personal names not in the text which may well have significance for the serious reader. I have numbered the note references in the index, as '147 (n16)', to give the most precise locator.

With different volume editors there must, of course, be occasional inconsistencies between volumes, though without a cumulative index to come this hardly matters. There is no perfect way of solving this, and I have followed the principle of adopting the individual editor's preferred style. Thus, if the editor of one volume consistently refers to Charles XII, King of Sweden, then that is how it will appear in the index; if another favours Karl XII, then it will appear so in the index, with, naturally, cross-references where necessary.

I have mentioned the value of the editorial annotations, and this has been especially so in the case of identifications. I have always taken the view that so far as possible an index should be a self-sufficient reference tool, and in indexing historical works I am prepared to spend a great deal of time researching correct names and titles. While an author may reasonably refer in his text to Lord Oxford, or to Mr Sacheverell, that will not do in the index. It can be very time-consuming to hunt elsewhere to establish that it is 'Oxford, Robert Harley, 1st Earl of', or 'Sacheverell, Henry' — and indeed, in the same volume, 'Sacheverell, John (Henry's father)'. I bless the editors of these works for having provided in practically all cases exactly the full identifications needed for the index. I say 'practically all cases', but...
there are still a few fugitive figures who remain unidentified. Just occasionally I have been able to supply full names, but I have learnt that if the editors have failed, pursuing them is likely to be a long and vain search.

Still to appear are the creative and fictional works. There is a growing argument in favour of indexing fiction, about which I have always taken a sceptical view. However, I foresee interesting and informative annotations to the novels, explaining allusions, identifying models for characters and historical references, and these will be indexed with care. But indexing Robinson Crusoe, the narrative? It has, at least, a pretty thin cast of characters.

The Review

Defoe's journal ran from 1704 to 1713 in eighteen volumes, and appeared once, twice, or even three times a week. The first issue, dated Saturday, Feb. 19, 1704, bears the full title A Weekly Review of the Affairs of France: Purged from the Errors and Partiality of News-Writers and Petty-Statesmen, of all Sides. It had a print run of just 400, and the few copies that have survived are mainly in poor condition, making a photographic reproduction difficult. The present publishers have taken the brave decision to re-set the entire run in as exact a copy of the original as possible, reproducing all the types and forms, italic, bold, small caps, and the like, with spacing, paragraphing and punctuation virtually in facsimile. This has made for a very complex typesetting operation. Add to this the irregular and sometimes wayward spellings and punctuation, and even the proofreading operation. Thus, the subject of the immorality and corruption of magistrates raised by one correspondent seemed deserving of entry, but not the innumerable and unidentifiable cases of hapless infatuation.

In fact, the original Review claims to have provided an index at the end of each volume, though this is little more than a detailed table of contents to each issue. A flavour of the 'Scandal Club' can be got from this original 'index', offering irresistible quotes:

- A Riddle sent to, and explained by the Society. 716
- A Letter from M.N. in the Case of Bigamy, answered. 719–20
- Another from a Lady, troubled with a whining Wretch, answered. 734
- Another letter about a Lady, with whom a Young Gentleman was deeply in Love, but had not the face to speak to her, answered. 734–5
- A Letter from Z.A. about the Production and Corruption of Immaterial Substance, answered. 799
- Another from H.D. about his Amours, answered. 804

Perhaps we should revise some of our ideas about concision in indexing style. I cannot help feeling that something has been lost.

Summary

The very nature of Defoe's writings demands detailed analytical indexing. Historically the period is curiously obscure: 'What do you know about Queen Anne?' 'She died' is a fairly familiar response. Yet it was an important period of transition. We see the beginnings of experimental science and the crumbling of the old religious certainties; the decline of monarchical absolutism and the dawn of party politics and constitutional parliamentary government; of modern capitalism and commerce; huge shifts in the balance of European power and the consolidation of imperial and colonial settlements; innovative artistic and literary endeavours. Of special topical interest is Defoe's extensive coverage of the Union of Scotland with England in 1707, and the striking parallels with present-day arguments about our own membership of the European Union, with the same concerns about loss of sovereignty, constitutional reforms, differing legal systems, parliamentary representation in an unfamiliar legislature, and financial and economic management.

Defoe observed all of this. Born in the year of the Restoration, he lived to see the end of the Stuarts and the crowning of the second of the Hanoverians. He was an articulate and committed witness, and reading him is like being in the presence of an authoritative contemporary newspaper. Combining it all out and offering systematic guidance will make him far more accessible as a primary source for his times. I hope that the few examples I have given of subject headings in the index go some way to illustrate how I have tried to fulfil this aim.

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