The List and Index Society

The List and Index Society was founded at the Public Record Office in 1965, with similar aims to those of the PRO's listing and indexing. The first publication, in duplicated paper form, was *Select catalogue of unpublished Search Room lists in the PRO* of 1965 which must have cheered the hearts of many historical researchers. This gives lists of legal records, state papers and departmental records in the categorical PRO order. The second volume was *Exchequer KR., ecclesiastical documents* of 1965 which was, as in so many cases with this series, a list or calendar rather than strictly an index. The List and Index Society reached volume 294 by 2002. The range of material is very wide, bearing in mind the PRO contains Chancery, Admiralty, Exchequer, War Office, Foreign Office documents, to name just a few departments which have been the subject of lists.

These four: the Index Society, the Index Library, the Lists and Indexes (two series) from the PRO, and the List and Index Society, are the most obvious of the groups with which the Society of Indexers gets confused. The last three are all publishers of essential historical lists and calendars for the historical worker. It may be said that understanding all their output would not be an easy task, but their products tend to be available in the larger academic libraries. Anyone who understands all these indexes would surely qualify to be Master of the Index!

Notes

1 Beare, G. What is an index? in this issue pp. 5–7, and Piggott, M. (2000)
2 On the society's vicissitudes, see Spufford, P. (1970).
3 For the latest situation, search internet using 'British record society'.
4 For more on this type of indexing, see Hunnisett, R.F. (1972).

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Working with the author

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It is an anomaly of the publishing industry that the index still remains, in theory, the responsibility of the author, if only to the extent that he or she will pay for it, either directly to the indexer, indirectly to the publishers in full, or as a charge on their royalties. There is also a commonly held view among many publishers that authors should actually compile their own indexes, because they know the subject best. Many do, and some do it extremely well. But a talent for indexing is not given to all, and authors frequently leave it to the publisher to find an indexer for them. It is odd, therefore, that it is only within the last few years that it seems to have become common practice even to let authors have sight of the index before it goes to press.

Most indexers will also regularly turn up inconsistencies in spellings, missing first names, and sometimes factual errors. The least one can do is to point these out to the commissioning editor and hope that they can be rectified, both in the text and in the index. By far the best thing, though, is to deal directly with the author, and establish the correct usage. Most publishers and freelance commissioning editors are now willing to give the author's contact details so that the indexer can email any queries for resolution, and send the index direct for approval. The resulting index then arrives on the editor's desk 'ready to go'.

Authors are sometimes reputed to be 'difficult', 'critical' and 'interfering'; they are likely to demand the inclusion of unnecessary detail and to quibble over the use of terms. Some do, but most are thankful someone is prepared to take on a task they have little time and less aptitude for; some are so enthusiastic about the index that they seek the indexer out for subsequent books they write or contribute to, regardless of where they are published.

'Difficult' authors can require tactful handling. The most common complaint (at least in academic books) is the omission of author references. This is often a matter to establish with the publisher who can rule that it is either 'policy' not to include them all, or that there is not enough space to do so; sometimes the publishers will concede, and the indexer will have to grit his teeth, go back, and add them all! Then there is the omission of minor topics. Again the argument of lack of space may be sufficient, if true; otherwise one seeks to persuade the author that the subject can be found under a slightly different heading, one which the reader is more likely to choose. On rare occasions one may have to invoke

the 'rules of indexing' to dissuade them from outrageous demands; or explain basic book-production processes, as in the case of one author who was conscious that the index was slightly too long, and said blithely that he could cut the text! Surprisingly often it is the authors who come with the most awkward reputation who prove the easiest to work with; when the indexer can demonstrate his or her concern, and ability, to enhance the book by some intelligent analysis, a good rapport can be developed.

Criticism can be instructive and constructive. Few publishers' editors can or do check or even comment on the indexes we submit and it is easy enough to become complacent, or worse, defensive. This is a mindset that peer review can help to dispel, and I believe there is no index that cannot be improved. There will almost inevitably be a few minor errors, and even adverse comments can help: having to justify what you have done, and argue your case, is a good exercise in self-criticism. Having to admit to imperfections may be salutary and uncomfortable, but is good for both the soul and the index.

'Grateful' authors fall into two categories: the ones who have tried and failed, and those who refuse to attempt the task. While either can be charmingly uncritical, some of the most difficult to work with are those who supply a list of head-words or dummy index, with or without page numbers. As anyone who has tried to work with a skeleton index knows, it is rather like reassembling a dismantled piece of equipment - most of it goes back together all right, but there is always at least one screw (or heading) left over at the end. On the other hand, if the author accepts that it can be only a rough guide, it can be fairly useful as a check list that nothing vital has been missed. Another hazard is the helpful author who makes corrections to the file you have emailed, but without highlighting the changes; a dozen small alterations in an index of 25 printed pages takes a long time to check.

Undoubtedly the most rewarding to work with are those authors who adopt you as their personal indexer. The relationship soon becomes a great deal less formal and, certainly in the academic world, can result in a good number of personal recommendations. In some cases it can come full circle, when an author takes the indexer to a new publisher, who then commissions further work. There are a number of other advantages, not least that they often make contact well in advance of the usual 'the page proofs are ready now and we need it in a week' scenario. The only disadvantage is the occasional 'tame' author who always pays from a personal account, by return; it is difficult to be sufficiently hard-hearted to charge for the extra time spent spotting proof corrections or adjusting your schedule to fit them in.

Not all contacts with authors are made through publishers or editors. Some people, charged by their publisher with the task of finding an indexer, will search *Indexers Available* and the Society of Indexers website; this is becoming increas-ingly common as the internet is more often used as a 'directory to everything'. Many, however, owe a great deal more to serendipity, chance encounters and personal friendships, some quite unexpected.

A number of indexers have meetings with authors before or during indexing and these are almost always instructive and productive, particularly if the subject is complex or specialized. This particularly applies if the index is for a corporate project rather than an ordinary book, when the indexer can often offer general advice about what is possible or necessary or desirable, or any combination of these. More often contact is established and maintained by telephone and/or email. In the days before email, telephone calls could be lengthy affairs: one indexer recalls going through a 30-page index almost line by line with the author. But either medium is quite conducive to developing not only a good working relationship, but, occasionally, long-term friendships.

Working relationships with authors is very much a matter of establishing trust in the first instance. Inexperienced authors, particularly those whose first book could be crucial to their academic career, can be nervous of the whole process of publishing and indexing, and will often expend much effort essentially duplicating or trying to mirror the indexer's work. At the other extreme is the author who finds it difficult to imagine the indexer as a fellow professional and accept his or her judgment as to what should or should not be included. Much diplomacy, negotiation and compromise is needed to produce an index that will satisfy all parties in this case, and it must be said that on the rare occasions when not everyone is pleased, it is usually the indexer who has to defer.

The best relationships are those of mutual collaboration, with the outcome an index which not only looks professional, but which properly reflects and enhances the subject of the book. More interesting still is that a number of authors have commented that the index has enabled them to see their book 'in a fresh light and see the additional value in the work as it is possible to trace new connections', or that it threw up parts of their argument that they had not even seen, and that it was 'fascinating to have someone take your work apart and reassemble it in a very different way'.

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