

# ‘The precious work’: from the correspondence between Oula Jones and Bernard Levin, 1981–1999

---

*In 1981, an editor at Jonathan Cape commissioned Oula Jones to index Conducted tour by Bernard Levin. Bernard was pleased to allow all his subsequent books to be indexed by Oula, and a friendship sprang up between author and indexer resulting in a correspondence of almost 20 years. Here are a few extracts from it.*

---

## The first letter

3 June 1981

Dear Mrs Jones

Thank you very much indeed for your perfectly splendid index – comprehensive, meticulous and understanding. I could not be more pleased.

I have made a few notes, attached, none of very great significance. If you cannot read my dreadful handwriting (and few can, certainly not including me), please ring me; I’ll be out all morning, but in after lunch.

Of course you shall have a copy, properly inscribed; and your name will, no less of course, appear at the head of the Index.\*

Finally, I have another book in the pipeline after this one, to be published in the Spring of next year under the title of *Speaking Up*. It’s a second selection of my journalism, and if you are free at the appropriate time (not yet certain – it won’t go to the printers for some time yet) I would be very happy to think you would index that too.

Again, many, many thanks for your work. And so speedy, too!

Yours sincerely  
Bernard Levin

\* Sadly, even Bernard couldn’t manage that.

## Some years later . . .

29 April 1986

Dearest Oula

Have I not got enough trouble from importunate creditors, lawyers bearing writs, plumbers who do not keep their appointments, doctors who shake their heads gravely as soon as they catch sight of me, publishers who think I have nothing better to do than to write books for them, mad neighbours, bores at parties, bad dreams and discarded mistresses? Must I now add neurotic Indexers to my tribulations? How many times have I got to tell you that you are The Greatest Indexer in the World before you will believe it? Do you imagine I would go away with a light heart without reading my Index if it were in any other hands?

Very well. If you can do the Index in a week (now you’re on your mettle), there will be no problem. If you can’t (or won’t, you crosspatch) . . . my secretary will be holding the

fort at Wapping. My direct line is . . . ; she won’t be in all the time while I’m away, and probably not before about 11.30, but you’ll get her sooner or later, and she will make the necessary arrangements to get *The Precious Work* from you and get it into my hands. Then, provided you have remembered to make a copy, we can do it all by telephone.

I am assured by experts in these matters that excellent indexing can now be done by a computer. Watch it.

Love  
Bernard

## Later still . . .

31 January 1989

Dearest Madam

I am quite at a loss to understand your letter of recent date. You seem to be suggesting that there is a doubt in your mind as to whether – not when, but whether – you will be indexing my latest masterpiece. Let me remind you of what you were, and what doing, when I snatched you from the gutter and set your feet on the path of success and fortune, by entrusting (against the advice of many friends) my precious book to your hands. As I recall, you had had no commission for some 17 years, and that had been a work entitled *How to Care for your Dog*. And what has happened since then? I have made you the most famous indexer in the world: people, I gather, pluck a hair from the lavish mink coat that my work has enabled you to buy, just to be able to say that they have a hair from the coat of the woman who indexes Bernard Levin. Authors and publishers jostle and fight for your indexorial services. No glittering party in or for fifty miles around Edinburgh is complete without you, and at every such gathering you are the centre of attention, as the crowd presses round to ask, over and over again, the question that occupies their waking and sleeping hours: ‘What is he like, and what is it like working for him, in however humble a capacity?’

And now, it seems, you are not certain whether you can bend your talents, such as they are, to the task of littering the end of my new book with errors of every kind. Well, so be it, but let me remind you that that which the Lord giveth, the Lord is in a very good position to take away. With one snap of my fingers – ‘snap!’, just like that – I could ensure that the only books you will ever index again will be ones with titles like *1001 Mother-in-law jokes* or *You, too, can make a quiche*.

For your information, my new book will be delivered to my publishers in about ten days time. Be so kind as to strike through every page in your diary from now till further notice.

But stay! I have just noticed at the top of your letter, an indication that it was written on Burns Nicht, whatever that may be. I assume, therefore – who wouldn't? – that you were the worse for liquor when you wrote it. I am therefore willing to overlook your comments altogether, on receipt of a suitable apology for alarming me, signed by an ordained clergyman, or Justice of the Peace, certifying that on this occasion, at least, you were sober and in your right mind.

Love  
Bernard

### The last letter

19 April 1999

Very dearest Oula

Thank you for all the wonderful work and the jolly times we have had. Alas I am not able to work any more . . . 'Enough Said' is truly the last, but I have had wonderful times, and mustn't grumble.

Of course you can use any word or words [of mine for your piece].

Very much love  
Bernard

## From *The Englishman and military chronicle*, Calcutta

13:03:1851

We have received a copy of Mr T. C. Fenwick's Index to the Criminal Law of the Presidency of Fort William. Those who are already in possession of Mr Fenwick's Index to Civil Law will gladly avail themselves of the aid of the publication before us, which will be found full and complete, and we are assured that it is very accurate. We have long been disposed to join that grateful gentleman who always puts up a special prayer for dictionary and index makers. It is indeed the only reward which the latter obtain, for their severe toil rarely meets with a sufficient pecuniary recompense, and their names are forgotten even by those who profit from their labours.

20:03:1851

Another index! We have to thank Mr James Small, author of numerous mercantile tables, for an Index to the Acts passed by the Legislative Council of India, which will be very useful to all who have occasion to consult that remarkable exposition of Legislative wisdom. Nobody knows the difficulty of making a good Index until he has tried, even an Index to the titles of books cannot be satisfactorily made by all the librarians of the British Museum. The labour of such work is very great and rarely remunerative. In this instance we observe that the local government has subscribed liberally, therefore it is hoped that Mr Small will be compensated for the time he has bestowed on the work.

Contributed by Derek Copson, email: [Derekcopson@aol.com](mailto:Derekcopson@aol.com)

# CINDEX™ for Windows and Macintosh

The choice  
is yours

- easy to use
- elegant design
- outstanding capabilities
- unsurpassed performance
- legendary customer support

### CINDEX™ does everything you would expect and more...

- drag and drop text between indexes or word-processor
- view and work on multiple indexes at the same time
- check spelling with multi-language capabilities
- embed index entries in RTF-compatible word-processor documents
- exploit numerous powerful capabilities for efficient data entry and editing: search and replace, macros and abbreviations, auto-completion, etc.

Download a free demonstration copy along with its acclaimed *User's Guide* and see for yourself why CINDEX is the foremost indexing software for indexing professionals.

For Windows ('95 & higher) and for Macintosh (OS 8.0 & higher)

Special editions for **students** and **publishers** are also available.

## Indexing Research

tel: +1-212-633-0994  
fax: +1-212-633-9049  
180 Varick Street, Suite 1620  
New York, NY 10014  
[Info@Indexres.com](mailto:Info@Indexres.com)

Visit our Web site [www.indexres.com](http://www.indexres.com)  
for full details and ordering information.

Simply the best way to prepare indexes