

C1 Sir Edward Cook's 'Art of indexing' (1918)
C2 The art of indexing
C8 *Punch* and the indexer

Michael Robertson
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This reprint from The Indexer of 24 years ago, one of a series on index-makers, introduces the essay that follows.

'A publisher who issues a book without an index should be hanged.' This modest proposal, attributed to Carlyle, is one of many vigorous assertions spicing Sir Edward Cook's essay, 'The art of indexing', which appeared in his collection *Literary recreations* in 1918.¹ The moderateness of the position is conclusively shown by Cook's rejection of an earlier plan by a 'friend of Francis Douce, the antiquary' to damn such publishers 'ten miles beyond Hell'. 'For my part,' says Cook, 'I think that simple damnation is enough in the case of a single book, and that the extra ten miles of Douce's friend might be reserved for those who collect an author's works without indexing them.'

Cook (1857–1919) was an influential political journalist with Liberal leanings, and he edited the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1890–2), *Westminster Gazette* (1893–5), and *Daily News* (1895–1901); from 1901 to 1911 he was a leader writer for the *Daily Chronicle*. From 1915 to August 1919, he was joint manager of the Press Bureau, which was responsible for censoring British newspapers during the war. He was knighted in 1912, and made a KBE in 1917. In addition to his political writings,² he wrote several biographies,³ as well as guides to the National Gallery (1888), Tate Gallery (1898), and British Museum (1903). He also collaborated on a guidebook to London written by his wife Emily, bringing out a fifth, revised edition of it after her death in 1903,⁴ and published her book *From a holiday journal* in 1904. A biography of Cook himself was published in 1921.⁵

The inspiration that lay behind these varied literary and political activities, and formed them into a whole, was the work of John Ruskin – a fact that may seem hard to imagine today, when Ruskin's wider reputation has declined. The influence exerted by Ruskin's criticism of Victorian values and his radical social philosophy, with its harsh condemnation of the injustices of capitalism, has been largely forgotten. Appropriately, Cook's most monumental literary achievement was his work as co-editor, along with Alexander Wedderburn, of Ruskin's *Works*.

The edition, in 38 large volumes, was crowned by the publication of its index (volume 39) in 1912, compiled by Cook and Wedderburn themselves. They aimed to produce 'more than an ordinary index of reference' – instead, they hoped it would be 'an analysis of Ruskin's work', and 'in some measure serve the purpose of a concordance'. The index was reviewed in detail by James Thornton in a previous issue of *The Indexer*⁶ 'in the series 'Indexing Masterpieces',

and Thornton pays tribute to it as a 'remarkable' work, a 'fine achievement' showing very few inconsistencies.

The index is a vast monument to the skill and intelligence Cook and Wedderburn brought to their work: 689 two-column pages in length, most in 8-point type but descending to 6-point for detailed analytical articles (the entry for the Bible alone runs to 58 columns, with every single verse of every single chapter being given a subheading when mentioned by Ruskin). Its most fascinating, and perhaps unique, feature is its use of analytical synopses (rather like those given in the *Oxford English dictionary*, on which the practice may have been modelled) at the head of longer entries. A few examples of these may indicate the style and flexibility with which the index was approached:

Beautiful, Beauty. [In this article, references are first given to the cardinal passages in which Ruskin's theory of beauty may be found – (1) in the form of aphorisms; (2) in various propositions, these references being so arranged as to trace his argument. (3) General references are then given, and these may be regarded as illustrations of the foregoing principles. (4) 'Lamp of Beauty,' in architecture.]

Truth, truths. [This article is divided under three heads – (1) Truth in general, (2) in architecture, (3) in painting. The divisions, though convenient, are not always rigid, many of R.'s remarks under (2) and (3) being of general application.]

Usurers, usury (including Interest on money): [(1) Defined and discussed; (2) Condemned, its evils; (3) In Literature and History; (4) Defence of, and modern attitude to it; (5) As dealt with in R.'s writings; (6) Miscellaneous references.]

Cook's essay on 'The art of indexing', therefore, represents the fruit of many years of thought and work as a practising indexer (he mentions the 'infinite labour' of the Ruskin index; 'the art of indexing,' he concludes, 'is long and tiresome'). The principles (drawn from Wheatley⁷) which he defends are today commonplace, although still not universally practised: 'One book one index'; 'every long heading in an index' should have 'sub-headings, and the order of arrangement under each should be alphabetical' except 'where the essence of the matter is chronological and the book itself is so arranged'; there should be no 'long strings of page numbers' – 'the indexer must analyse them and tell

you not only on what page each mention will be found, but also what is the subject of the mention on each page'. An index 'should enable a reader, first, to find readily the place where the author has said a particular thing, and, secondly, it should enable him to find all that the book has said on a particular subject'. 'The maker of an index to another man's work must be impartial.' These are standards that should by now be commonplace; and it is perhaps saddening to find that today's indexers are still fighting the battles of 80 or more years ago – 'How seldom it is in modern books,' Cook writes, 'that the name of the index-maker is given!'

The essay concludes with a quotation from Ruskin himself on the art of the index: 'It is easy enough to make an index, as it is to make a broom of odds and ends, as rough as oat straw; but to make an index tied up tight, and that will sweep well into corners, isn't so easy.'

Acknowledgement

This article first appeared in *The Indexer* 19(1), 312.

Notes and references

- 1 London: Macmillan, pp. 55–76. The essay is quoted by Robert L. Collison in his *Indexes and indexing* (London, 4th edn 1972), p. 25, and described (in an understatement) by Collison as 'a lively defence of the art'. Norman Knight also quotes the essay in his *Indexing, the art of* (London, 1979), p. 29.
- 2 *The Irish Land Act, 1881* (1882), *Britain and Turkey* (1914), *How Britain strove for peace* (1914), *Why Britain is at war* (1914).
- 3 Edmund Garrett (1909), *The life of John Ruskin* (1911), *The life of Florence Nightingale* (1914) and *Delane of the Times* (1915).
- 4 Cook, Emily C. *London and environs* (1897), 5th edn 1909.
- 5 Mills, J. Saxon. *Sir Edward Cook: a biography*. London, 1921.
- 6 Thornton, James. 'Cook and Wedderburn's index to Ruskin's Works.' *The Indexer* 5(4), 154–8.
- 7 Wheatley, Henry B. *How to make an index*. London, 1902.

The art of indexing

Edward Cook

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine:
Who sweeps a room as for thy laws
Makes that and th'action fine.

There is no book (in the category of general literature) so good that it is not made better by an index, and no book so bad that it may not by this adjunct escape the worst condemnation. Carlyle, the foe of Dryasdust, reserved his heaviest fire for those members of the species who had not even the decency to index themselves. He gives a list of books at the beginning of his *Cromwell*: 'Enormous folios, these and many others have been printed, and some of them again printed, but never yet edited – edited as you edit wagon-loads of broken bricks and dry mortar, simply by tumbling up the wagon. Not one of those monstrous old volumes has so much as an available Index!' And again at the beginning of his *Friedrich*:

Books born mostly of Chaos, which want all things, even an index, are a painful object The Prussian Dryasdust, otherwise an honest fellow and not afraid of labour, excels all other Dryasdusts yet known He writes big books wanting in almost every quality; and does not even give an Index to them. Enough: he could do no other: I have striven to forgive him.

The strife was hard and not, I imagine, successful, for Carlyle is credited with the saying that a publisher who issues a book without an index should be hanged. The Roxburghe Club, thinking that trial should precede execution, proposed that the omission of an Index, 'when essential,' should be an indictable offence, and Lord Campbell, in a more practical

spirit, proposed that in such a case an author should be deprived of copyright. In spite of such fulminations, authors and publishers continually offend, and even when an index is given it is too often done in a perfunctory and slovenly manner. 'A dreary book crowned by a barren index,' says Lord Rosebery of Forsyth's *Captivity of Napoleon at St Helena*, writing as one who had barely survived 'the hideous task' of reading his way through those 'indigestible' and massive three volumes. The fact is that the importance of the art of indexing is little understood. Many people do not even know that it is an art at all.

Two classes of books in particular should always have a good index – the best books and the most unreadable books. The best books, because there is so much in them that a reader will want to find again; the worst books, because lacking an index they are without any reason for existing at all. Take, for instance, the Parliamentary Debates. No man of sense reads them for pleasure. They are valuable only for reference, and a book of reference without a complete index is almost a contradiction in terms. For many years *Hansard* was indexed as badly as could be. It is now much better done, because the entries are fuller and more numerous.

Should even a novel have an index? There is high authority for answering, as the parliamentarians say, in the affirmative. Dr Johnson, in writing to Mr Richardson about *Clarissa Harlowe*, said:

I wish you would add an index rerum, that when the reader recollects any incident, he may easily find it, which at present he cannot do, unless he knows in which volume it is told; for *Clarissa* is not a performance to be read with eagerness, and laid aside for ever; but will be occasionally consulted by the busy, the aged, and the studious;