



G. V. CAREY

MAKING AN INDEX

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CAMBRIDGE AUTHORS' AND PRINTERS'
GUIDES

III

MAKING AN INDEX

BY

G. V. CAREY

President of the Society of Indexers

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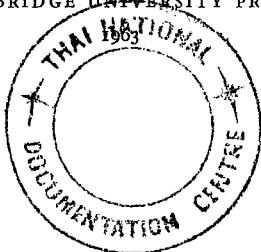
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MAKING AN INDEX

THERE is a saying quoted by a seventeenth-century bibliographer that the index of a book should be made by the author, even if the book itself be written by someone else. Whether or not intended to be merely witty, it has an element of truth; but it is a counsel of perfection. Though almost any book could be indexed more efficiently, and with less trouble, by its own author than by anyone else, there are far too many authors unwilling to shoulder the task. And, of course, many books that require indexes are not the work of a single author.

Let us, then, start by considering the various types of publication that require indexes and the various types of index required. Any sizeable contribution to knowledge—journal, thesis, book; historical, biographical, scientific—is the better for an index. For many such it is quite indispensable; and indeed for almost any literary work other than fiction the desirability of providing an index should be seriously considered. Its absence is much more often deplorable than its presence is superfluous. But indexes themselves will naturally vary in scale and in style in accordance with the style and subject of the publication to which they refer. At one end of the scale is the index comprising little more than the names of persons and places, with their mere page-numbers—so easy to compile that the indexer is at all times tempted to content himself with this type of entry. The result will seldom content the reader. (More will be said about that hereafter. Meanwhile, let it be admitted that there *is* a type of publication—in particular, the ‘gossipy’ book of contemporary reminiscences—for which an index of that kind is not merely better than none at all but is in fact perfectly adequate.) At the other end of the scale is the learned work, possibly in several volumes, demanding the most elaborate subject-index. And graded between these extremes are indexes composed of ‘name’ and ‘subject’, with their sub-

headings, and maybe, sub-subheadings, in varying proportion as demanded by an almost infinite variety of subject-matter. Even beyond these there are various categories of technical material requiring something in the nature of an index or catalogue; but let it be understood from the start that what follows here applies mainly to the indexing of books.

The book-indexer's first duty, then, is to estimate the *scale* of the task he is undertaking. And that is where the author has an unequalled advantage: he should know, the moment his work is finished, what sort and size of index it requires. Moreover he will (let us hope) fully understand the subject—and how many of even the most expert indexers can make that claim regarding *every* book they have indexed? At any rate, the indexer who is not himself the author will make a much better job of it if he reads through the whole book first. The consequent advantage of getting a general grasp of the subject and its treatment is obvious. If you have read the book through before starting on the index, you will be much less likely to make an entry of some quite isolated and relatively unimportant topic or detail that will only tend to overload the index to little purpose; or, conversely, to realise only after some fifty pages or more that some detail you thought trivial has gained in importance through unexpected repetition or subsequent emphasis, and demands an entry after all (for an illustration see pp. 5–6). The latter error has the direr consequences; for whereas a superfluous entry can be discarded without difficulty at any time, to go back to the start and try to dig out a reference casually disregarded some scores, or even hundreds, of pages earlier is often like looking for a needle in a haystack. Thus a preliminary reading of the whole work is of great benefit as an aid to *perspective*.

Commonly, however, especially where a lengthy work is concerned, the indexer, pressed for time, must start his reading and his indexing simultaneously. His estimate of the required scale of his task must then be made in some degree instinctively, as he goes along, and at the start he will be wise (for the reason given in the last paragraph) to err on the side of excess rather

than of economy. Fortunately, miscalculations can be corrected more readily in this type of work (in which, as will be explained later, each entry should be made on a separate card or slip) than in many others, but the sooner he 'gets his eye in' the better. Here, then, are some points that may help to guide him not merely in planning his work but also in carrying it out.

I

As a rule, for any single work (even though it runs to more than one volume), a single comprehensive alphabetical index is preferable to a main index supplemented by one or more classified indexes. There are, of course, exceptions: for instance, in a legal book that refers to numerous law-cases, or a theological book containing many quotations from the Bible, a subsidiary index of cases or of biblical sources, respectively, may be most helpful; but the same can seldom be said of the system, sometimes adopted, of separating proper names and abstract headings into two distinct categories. Generally, in fact, the inclusion of every kind of entry under a single alphabet makes for readiest reference. Certain variations of type may of course be useful (see after 'Tariff Reform' on p. 7), but it is important that any variation less conventional than the italics normally used for titles of books, plays, etc. should be explained in a note at the start of the index.

II

Proper names are naturally the first to suggest themselves as headings. Do not, however, start off with the notion that *every* proper name must necessarily go into the index, though no doubt most of them should. In a *Life of William Snooks*, for example, it may be related that the great man was born at 'The Cedars, Puddleby'. This reference to Puddleby, even though it be the only one in the book, should go straight into the index (obviously a place-name is likely to be more important than a house-name); and so should 'The Cedars' if referred to again in such a way as to attach any importance to

the house itself. It may even come to loom so large in the book as to demand a composite entry, such as:

Cedars, The, Puddleby: early home of Snooks family,
1-5; gardens of, 7-8, 65, 151; library of, 22-6, 179;
haunted room at, 33-4, 62; enlarged, 59; visited by
Royalty, 66, 141, 150, 178, 211; burnt down, 188-9;
rebuilt, 202; used as military H.Q., 217-21

But if there is no more than the one casual mention of it (W. Snooks having abandoned it in infancy), the mere name of the house is not of sufficient interest or importance to merit inclusion in the index. This in fact illustrates what was said in general terms about perspective on p. 4.

III

It is a matter for careful consideration whether, in a biographical work, the person about whom the book is written need have an entry to himself. In, say, a *Life of Abraham Lincoln* there will probably be a mention of Lincoln on at least one page in three, as an average. A heading 'Lincoln, Abraham' followed by a regiment of mere page-numbers will be of not the slightest use to anybody. On the other hand, as a composite entry, with a column or two of subheadings, it will become a kind of résumé of the whole book, exacting toil and vexation in the extraction of its details; or, if treated on a less elaborate scale, it may do little more than duplicate the function of the table of contents. If it becomes perfectly clear to the indexer that such an entry can serve no really useful purpose (but merely add many fruitless hours to his own labours), let him omit it. All this, moreover, applies of course not only to biography but to any work centred on a single main theme, e.g. in a *History of France* a 'France' entry can serve little purpose.

Here some (Americans in particular) will probably disagree. But it should be noted that this suggestion is not entirely unqualified, and in deliberating whether to adopt it or not the compiler is advised to weigh in particular the needs of that class of user—liable to be quite a numerous one—that has frequent

occasion to refer to the index without reading the book as a whole. In any case, only when it refers to the main subject of a *whole* book is it suggested that such an entry may be superfluous. All persons other than the central figure, all reasonably important topics other than the main topic, must be accorded individual entries. Indeed this whole proposal is based on the conviction that every one of the details so commonly piled up under the main subject-heading is susceptible to, *and likely to be looked for under*, a more obviously appropriate entry.

IV

The more mere page-numerals accumulate after a single heading, the less useful that entry becomes. Names of persons and places are specially liable to collect a host of mere page-numbers in their train, and just occasionally these do, from the nature of their contexts, defy any attempt to break them up into sub-headings. But in every such case the indexer, unless he is satisfied that it is neither unduly laborious nor wholly unprofitable for the reader to turn up each simple page-reference, must do his utmost to devise a composite entry, enabling the reader to find at once the particular context with which he is concerned.

Occasionally the subject of an entry is susceptible of a compromise, whereby the pages in which it is the principal theme can be picked out in a type different from that of the pages in which it gets a casual mention, e.g.

Tariff Reform, 17, 23, 25, **39-61**, 72, 104, 114

Again, there is no objection to combining bare page-references with classified subheadings under a single main heading; in some cases, indeed, it is unavoidable. Here is an instance:

Chamberlain, Neville, 71, 79, 96, 125, 140, 238, 252;
Chancellor of the Exchequer, 151-7; Lord Mayor of
Birmingham, 53; Minister of Health, 128-38; Prime
Minister, 165-96

The implication here is that on each of the pages stated with no qualification there is a casual mention of Neville Chamber-

lain, the context of which cannot be specifically, concisely, or helpfully indicated. Yet, for the sake of any who may desire to consult every reference to him that the book contains, all these 'mentions' must be indexed (some indexers prefer to put them at the end of the entry, under the subheading ':; other mentions').

V

The arrangement of subheadings in a composite entry is a matter for consideration. In 'The Cedars' example given on p. 6 they are in chronological order—or, to be more precise, in the order in which the facts relevant to 'The Cedars' occur in the book. This method is quite often as convenient for reference as any other, particularly with names of persons and places and with historical subjects. Perhaps more often, especially with abstract entries, an alphabetical arrangement of subheadings is more helpful. E.g. (in a philosophical work):

Law, divine, 27-31, 35, 92, 96; human, 32-4, 37-9, 42, 48, 63, 90-1; natural, 20, 25, 39-42, 46; of nations, 112-15, 126

Note that this method has also been employed in the 'Neville Chamberlain' entry above, though it is debatable whether there the subheadings would have been more usefully arranged in the chronological order in which the offices were held.

It is better not to mix under one main heading subheadings which in sense *precede* the keyword with those which in sense *follow* the keyword. E.g.:

Insurance companies, 1, 2; health, 27, 29, 30; life, 35-7; policies, 18-20; premiums, 21; risks, 7-10; unemployment, 31-4

should become two entries, as follows:

Insurance, health, 27, 29, 30; life, 35-7; unemployment, 31-4
Insurance companies, 1, 2; policies, 18-20; premiums, 21; risks, 7-10

It is true that there is a breach of this principle in the entry above relating to 'Law', where 'law of nations' is combined with 'divine law', 'human law', and 'natural law'; but in that

case there is no actual *mixture*, the three subheadings of the one type coming together and being followed by the single subheading of the other type, and surely no possible confusion of sense can arise (as it might in the 'Insurance' example). It is anyhow a pity to be completely dominated by hard-and-fast rules in matters which call supremely for common sense.

VI

The lay-out also of subheadings must be carefully planned. Note that in all the examples of composite entries hitherto the 'running-on' system, with subheadings separated by semi-colons, has been used. An alternative, and often more effective, system is to start each subheading on a fresh line, slightly indented under the main heading; occasionally even a combination of the two may be needed, e.g.

Point, Jack:

boyhood, 27-31, 35, 38

itinerant jester, 72-7, 81-4, 97, 99-100

Jocularia, 49, 63, 76, 82; date, 54, 58-9; sources, 59-61;

style, 62, 83

last days, 101-6

Obviously this latter system, while helping the eye, covers more space; and though clearness must always be a prime objective, the indexer must not disregard the claims of economy, using the fresh-line system only when satisfied that added clearness and convenience will more than counterbalance added length. If indexers earn the confidence of publishers in this respect, the publisher will have less excuse for hampering the indexer (as some of them now do) with rigid restrictions.

VII

Alphabetical order is susceptible of two methods of treatment. The first, and in general the better, is 'word-by-word', thus:

Free Church

Free Trade

Freedom

Freetown

The second is 'letter-by-letter', regardless of word separation, thus:

New Brighton
Newcastle
Newfoundland
New Zealand

Unless limited to lists of proper names, this second method may at times confuse or mislead.

A comma separating two words of a heading has priority over the mere space separating two words (see the second 'Insurance' example on p. 8, also 'John' below); and words commonly hyphenated should be treated as single words. E.g.:

John, St
John Barleycorn
Jolly Roger, The
Jolly-boat

VIII

The abbreviations M', Mc should be treated as though they were literally what they are in fact—Mac. Thus:

McAnally
M'Andrew
Mackenzie

Similarly 'St' should be alphabetically placed as though spelt 'Saint' in full. Note, however, that whereas places prefixed by St should preferably be indexed under S, the saints themselves appear more often (though not always) and perhaps more appropriately under their Christian names. E.g.

St John's (Newfoundland)

but

John, St, the Baptist

(or, if preferred,

John the Baptist, St).

IX

In the matter of foreign proper names that have prefixes, the normal practice is that if the prefix is a mere preposition the name that follows it takes preference; if the prefix is an article, or compound of article and preposition, the prefix takes preference. Thus:

Lesseps, de; Kluck, von; Costa, da

but

La Fontaine; Du Plessis; Des Moines.

When, however, such names have become anglicised—e.g. De Montmorency, De Quincey, De la Mare, Le Fanu—they should be indexed under the prefix, whether it be article or preposition. In this form, moreover, the name should be regarded as a single word, and (in contrast with the first system stated in VII, p. 9) the following represents a correct alphabetical order:

Defoe
De la Mare
Democracy
De Montmorency

X

In the matter of cross-references the indexer should deal as considerately with the reader as reasonable economy will permit, for it is always irksome to be made to take two bites at a cherry. A 'double-barrelled' entry that does not occupy more than a line in the index may just as well be given in full under each 'barrel'. Suppose, for example, that a certain famous statesman appears in one and the same book as both Disraeli and Beaconsfield. If his index-entry does not amount to more than a few mere page-numbers, they should be fully set out under both names. If, on the other hand, it involves an elaborate entry of several lines, a cross-reference 'Disraeli, Benjamin. *See* Beaconsfield, Earl of' (or vice versa, if Disraeli is the name under which he chiefly appears) is fully justified.

XI

On the other hand, the indexer must always be on the look-out for the word or phrase that demands double or even triple entry or cross-reference in the index. E.g. 'National Insurance Act' may need to be indexed not only under both 'Insurance' and 'National' (probably one of these a cross-reference to the other), but also under 'Acts of Parliament', if the nature of the book makes that general heading desirable; and similar instances can be multiplied.

XII

As has already been said, merely specifying the page-references of proper names is easy. Breaking them up into subheadings is harder; and hardest of all is dealing with abstract subjects. The main difficulty here is to hit on the most appropriate, and at the same time concise, keyword or words—and of course subheading problems will often enough arise here too. The indexer is sorely tempted to save himself trouble by being content with the obvious. He should therefore be continually asking himself whether a heading followed by a mere page-number is going to serve any useful purpose (it often will, of course), and—if he has any doubts—contriving a more specific and informative entry. He should always be trying to put himself in the place of the users of the index, alive to all their possible needs, tastes, and interests, to every facet of the subject-matter likely to concern them, to every keyword they would be likely to try; remembering moreover that indexes are consulted not only by those who have read the book itself, but also by those whose object is to acquire information on certain points *without* reading the whole book.

At the same time it should be borne in mind that an index is not a summary of, but a collection of pointers to, the text of the book. There is such a thing as 'spoon-feeding' the user by including in a comparatively unimportant entry details for which he should rely on the text. For example:

Nimshison, J., guilty of speeding offences, 97, 102, 111

is superfluous and wasteful of space, if that is all that the book has to say about him; all that in that case is needed is

Nimshison, J., 97, 102, 111

XIII

As will have become apparent from some of the examples already given, when a subject is dealt with on several successive pages of text, the first and last pages of the series are all that need be specified in the index. When a subject recurs periodically through a number of successive pages without necessarily being mentioned on each one of them, the word *passim* (= 'here and there') will do the trick, thus:

Inflation, 85-92 *pass.*

On the other hand, when the recurrence of a name on two or three successive pages is due rather to chance than to its connexion with the main theme, it is perhaps better to specify each page separately. The reason for this is that experienced index-users will, if unaided by the use of special type (see IV, p. 7), expect substantial treatment of the subject in, say, 85-7, but only casual mention of it in 85, 86, 87. (*Once again, in fact, put yourself in the user's place.*) When the subject referred to occurs in a footnote, the letter n. should follow the page-number in the index (e.g. '176 n.').

XIV

Something remains to be said about the apparatus required. For an index of appreciable size a box-file is essential, with cards or paper slips to fit it and enough alphabetical index-guides not merely to cover the whole alphabet but to permit of as many subdivisions of each letter as the work may demand. It is usually idle to try to estimate at the outset how these are likely to work out; a better plan is to start with the bare alphabet and to introduce fresh index-guides to subdivide it from time to time as the work expands. Accordingly, blank

index-guides, on which the compiler himself can write in pencil and which he can multiply and modify as often as he needs, are more useful than ones with the alphabet printed on them.

A separate slip should be used for each individual entry; to attempt to do otherwise will usually prove before long to be false economy, for the time will surely come when an entry demands to be squeezed in where no room has been left for it. The work should be done on a large table where it is possible to 'spread oneself', for it will usually save time to keep within easy reach the slips that are likely to be used repeatedly, and not to put them away in the file until the end of each session.

When the index is finished, the compiler should go carefully through all the slips, to ensure perfectly correct alphabetical order, consistency of abbreviation, etc.; and if at that stage he is disposed to combine two or more short entries on one slip, he will make his 'copy' handier for the printer thereby. In any case he should be prepared to do a certain amount of rewriting then, for some of his more lengthy and complicated entries are likely to have become rather disordered and untidy. It is, indeed, as well to decide at the outset to make 'rough' entries (for which the backs of used slips will come in handy¹) of items that one can foresee will loom large. Thus for a book on, say, the Suez Crisis it would be immediately obvious that 'Eden, Sir A.', 'Nasser, President', 'Dulles, J. F.', 'United Nations', 'France', 'Israel', are headings that, amongst others, are sure to need fairly lengthy composite entries; and if the indexer resolves from the start to make his subheadings to these in the form of rough jottings, to be ultimately rearranged in suitable order and rewritten, he will probably find that the result more than repays the extra trouble taken.

To retype the whole index as a continuous document is of course the ideal, but a printer will usually accept a batch of

¹ The good indexer will always insist on checking his index in print. If, on returning corrected proofs, he stores up his 'copy', he will find plenty of future use for it as suggested.

slips, if neatly written and carefully ordered. It will help the printer if the slips are not merely in alphabetical order, but numbered; and also, where there are subheadings and possibly sub-subheadings, if a note on their arrangement be added. This last, however, may be dispensed with if the indexer is scrupulously careful to reproduce on his slips the exact lay-out of each entry as it should appear in type, and notifies the printer accordingly.

The foregoing are put forward rather as suggestions that may prove helpful than as hard-and-fast rules—indeed, the reader has probably noted already the frequent intervention of exceptions and qualifications. There are purists who advocate absolute uniformity of method; on the other hand, one very experienced indexer has been known to state, ‘I break many indexing rules when experience tells me that the references would be expected in the other place’, and his standpoint is probably to be preferred, even in so precise a task as indexing. There is indeed a positive danger in so encumbering it with a multitude of rules that it comes to be regarded as a highly specialised job; for authors can then be the more readily excused for shying at it and leaving it to the specialist. The true aim is to be methodical rather than mechanical, and the best indexer is he who is most generously endowed with common sense—a quality that few authors will hasten to disclaim. I thus end where I began, impenitently of the opinion (of which my specialist colleagues are naturally somewhat sceptical) that the author, unless incorrigibly slipshod or absent-minded, *ought* to be the best indexer of his own work.

INDEX

AUTHOR'S NOTE.—A friendly notice in *The Times Literary Supplement* when this pamphlet first appeared suggested that it might have been the better for an index of its own, whereby the author could have given 'a full-dress demonstration of his principles'. An index to a work of about a dozen pages can hardly hope even in full dress to be within the bounds of decency. Yet the reviewer, though he may have had his tongue in his cheek, has put the author on his mettle and tempted him, at the opportunity afforded by a new impression, to take up the challenge.

In case there should be any reader so guileless as to be led astray, it had been the author's intention to give some distinguishing mark to all those entries in the index that he had devised with *his* tongue in his cheek—occasionally even (as it were) in both cheeks. As the work proceeded, however, he became so deeply involved in *paddenda* (let alone his determination to include every letter of the alphabet) that the opposite course seemed to be called for. Thus an asterisk marks those entries which—were the work of such a size as to require an index—would in his opinion be necessary, or at any rate helpful.

It remains only to affirm that the author has made a serious attempt to demonstrate, even in this not very serious index, some at least of the principles set forth in the preceding pages.

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AUTHORS' AND PRINTERS' GUIDES

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BY STANLEY MORISON

Preparation of Manuscripts and
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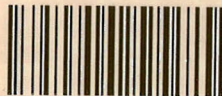
U.S.A.: 32 East 57th Street, New York 22, N.Y.

WEST AFRICA: P.O. Box 33, Ibadan, Nigeria

001.815

Car

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