

She who must be an indexer

In our October 1988 issue we reprinted an article written by Mary Petherbridge in 1923, 'Indexing as a profession for women', that was described originally in *Good Housekeeping* as 'work that will make a special appeal to the studious, well-educated girl'.¹ Petherbridge does not consider any particular aptitude of women for the task, but revealingly writes, 'The student generally wants to find his information indexed under the most commonplace and ordinary of subject headings. He has neither the time nor the desire to puzzle out or guess at every conceivable form of heading under which the ordinary fact may lurk', whereas, 'Only individual teaching on actual work is any good for the training of a successful indexer. Slowly and painfully the apprentice begins her work ... She must think everything out for herself with an occasional question' (my italics).

The theme reappears in *Women in Publishing* of October 1988, in an article by Sara Firman, 'Indexing, women in'. She quotes the introductory booklet of the Rapid Results College course in Indexing, which declares that women enrolling for the course outnumber men, perhaps because they must exercise their specialist skills at home. Firman adds, 'This is borne out by the membership of the Society of Indexers—427 women: 223 men, i.e. 66% women. For the period 1987–88, 14 of the society's 18 officers (about 78%) are women'.

Again, the inaugural meeting in November 1988 of the Society of Freelance Copy-editors and Proofreaders was attended by an approximate proportion of 80% women, 20% men.

Mindful of the work involved

Can one suggest, without taint of sexism, that indexing may also be peculiarly suited to the female mind and temperament? Judy Batchelor's plea in *The Indexer* in 1985 for investigation into 'any common elements in indexers' psychological makeup' found no response; but she herself had posited a convincing model: 'the indexers' mind floating free, creative, full of possibilities: the world its book, world and mind alike to be enlarged, and simultaneously diminished, by the delicate momentary attachment of a network of cognitive relationships'.² Hazel Holt wrote of Barbara Pym, 'What she enjoyed most about indexing, apart from the pleasure of putting words into a certain order, was the peaceful, enclosed space an indexer inhabits. It requires a certain sort of concentration: you need to withdraw, as it were, into the world of that which is to be indexed, and this precisely suited Barbara's temperament'.³ A Pym character indeed declares, 'One feels that anything to do with card indexes is more in a woman's line'.⁴ Perhaps these intimations of delicacy, peace, immersion in relationships, do accord with the feminine nature (or upbringing?), suggesting

that this work is peculiarly suited to the feminine mentality as well, perhaps, as to domestic circumstances.

The transition to computer-use for indexing could even enhance its suitability as a craft for women. According to Elizabeth Gerver, 'Women's traditional ability to master languages with apparent ease extends also to the mastery of computer languages, and women's tendency toward linear logic also stands them in good stead in this field. ... Women are more likely to write good computer programs with the user in mind.'⁵

To love, honour, and ... index

It is the resorting to wifely indexing that can lead to abominable patronization. We have previously quoted an Open University Press sociology volume, 'The work women do is not of course confined to housework ... some wives help their husbands in their occupations. The wives of publicans serve in the bar and make the sandwiches ... the wives of university lecturers proof-read and make indexes'.⁶ One wife-indexer admitted in a letter to our Society, 'I sacrificed indexing principles to an on-going happy marriage!' Serious indexers (*f.*) may wince at the more wifely-thanky items among the following sample acknowledgements:

I must also thank my wife Claudia for preparing the index (amongst other traditional wifely tasks);⁸

The compilation of the index presented exceptional problems, and my wife took this burden from me. It is her only formal contribution to the volume, but all who write will know how much more important are the informal contributions of wives;⁹

Finally, my wife's active assistance and encouragement has sustained me at every stage from the initial reconnaissance of the site to the compilation of the index: the whole venture has been hers as much as mine¹⁰ [so why not joint authorship?]

Of course, wives may indeed be excellent indexers—no incompatibility of role! Indeed, among the five women winners of the Wheatley Medal for the Indexing, Alison Quinn, awarded it for 1965 for her index to the facsimile edition of Richard Hakluyt's *The Principall Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation*, was the wife of the volume's editor, Professor David Quinn, and has since indexed and co-edited many of his historical works: a fine example of marital indexing.^{11,12}

At the other extreme, however, some wives appear to be appointed indexer *faute de mieux*, as the nearest person in the room at the time the need is felt. As an example of the latter type, let us examine the index to a historical study published in 1985 by Oxford University Press, the subject of the following uxorious tribute in the Acknowledgements, to which we will accord anonymity.

The gloomiest moment of an historian's life is when his publisher demands an index. To my wife, who has relieved me of this and so many other burdens, I am deeply grateful.

For the 604 pages of dense and scholarly text with copious references and bibliography of this volume, there are provided an Index of Places of just over three pages, and Index of Persons ('not including modern writers'—thus the rather mystifying note at its head) of ten and a half pages. No Subject Index—heads may bow. There are no subheadings in either index, with one huge exception which we will come to later. There are, however, many rather curious glosses, thus:

Abelard (and Héloïse)
Andry, Charles-Louis-François (medical writer)
Andry de Boisregard, Nicolas (also a medical writer)
Blessed Virgin Mary (including Our Lady etc.)
Bouillon, maréchal de (also his son the Cardinal)
Christ (includes other titles)
Héloïse (and Abelard)
Judas (New Test.)
Moses (Old Test.)

[Mary and Jesus are not entered under those names; Mary can be found only under B for Blessed.]

Such identifications are singularly lacking in most cases, though, as few names are given initials or forenames; even abbé de Belmont and abbé de Boismont appear only as Belmont and Boismont. It cannot be obscurity that prevents the addition of forenames; Boswell and Newton lack them, as well as the less obviously identifiable Hardy (S.-P., one can discover from the references), among many others. Caraccioli, Diderot, Rousseau, and Voltaire all lack both forenames and subheadings, despite their strings of page references of 4, 9, 6, and 10 lines respectively. Not all page numbers are correct.

Subjects are apparently not indexed; but there are exceptions. Brahmins, Jansenists, Jesuits, Jews, and Stoics are all entered as such in the Index of Persons. Then, the Index of Places, with no other subheadings, has almost a column under Paris which is a mini-index arranged according to principles I cannot detect. The subheadings (indented) are, in order:

general [*sic*]
Police
Punishments
Palais Royal
Châtelet
Hôtel de Ville
Cour des Aides
Medical [the index's only sub-subheadings occur here, and very odd they are too]
Parlement of [with three lines of page-references]
Archbishop of
Curtés

Churches: [four listed by name, in order of occurrence in the text, not alphabetically]

Monasteries
Jews
Population statistics
Tax officials
Press
Stage coach
Diet
Suicide
Wills
Last rites
Funerals
Mourning

Rightful roles

The married state certainly need not preclude women from being competent indexers: but undertaking to love, honour and obey should not, we hold, necessarily include the indexing of the master of the house's literary works. Indexing is not one of the domestic virtues. If publishers would duly accept their responsibility for the provision of proper indexes—both as to finding a suitable compiler, and as to payment for the work—then good books would not be marred by hopeless indexes by housekeepers, wedded authors would not be reduced to exploiting their loved ones and frustrating their public, and the world would be a better place alike for readers, authors, and matrimony.

References

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