

Sympathy for the Index-writer

During an exploration of early volumes of Punch, in relation to a project on historical attitudes to language, David Crystal came across the following article from Volume 15 in 1848 (p. 274). As he comments, the epigram 'Plus ça change...', which Jean-Baptiste Karr coined the following year, seems particularly apt.

Pity the poor index-writer!

Only consider the everlasting industry, the indomitable patience, the curious talent it requires to constitute a great Index-writer. Oblivion is his fate – silent contempt is his only reward. His work is referred to probably more than any other in the book; he is always a friend in need when you are in search of a good article; he is ready at a moment's notice to point out some particular subject you long to cry or laugh over, and still his work is uncared for, his serried columns of interesting figures are looked over with dry indifference, and not one person in a hundred thousand who takes a valuable volume, such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, or *Punch*, is actually aware there is such a person employed upon it as the Index-writer.

It is too bad. Talents like his deserve a higher recognition. Think of the coolness of head, the firmness of hand, which his work requires! Consider the mischief he might cause if he inadvertently put a 9 instead of a 6! The Index-writer gets

blamed, and many are the bitter denunciations vented sometimes upon his anonymous head – but he never gets praised. He is thought nothing of when he is right – and yet when, by the strangest accident, he happens to be wrong, Gracious! what an outcry there is, and nothing is too bad for him.

Man is allowed to err at times, and is forgiven; but an Index-writer must be without a fault - he must be perfection itself. He is the virtual President of the Republic of Letters, and universal sufferage is the only return he gets.

But 'Wait a little longer.' The position of the Index-writer must one day be appreciated; the contempt has lasted too long. The brilliant merits of the Index-Writer must shine through the fog that for ages has enveloped them, and the World will, with its future adoration, repair its past neglect. Mankind is not so naturally ungrateful.

We are proud to announce that the first step will immediately be taken towards this mighty vindication. A young man of great talent, who has long distinguished himself in the difficult walks of Index-writing, is about to republish a large collection of them! They will comprise 163 Indexes, selected from all styles of literature, including both the light and the heavy; and the mass of learning they will exhibit will literally astonish the most contemptuous. This work cannot fail to be incalculably valuable to our collection of belles lettres. The Index in the present Number may be taken as a fair specimen.