

Preface

Indexing is an anonymous profession. An index may be praised or blamed, but rarely is the indexer named, lauded, or shamed. There is, regrettably, no publishing tradition of naming the person who compiled an index. Authors do occasionally thank and name their indexers, and authors who self-index sometimes admit to the fact in their prefaces; but these are the exceptions. "Alas," says Hazel Bell, at the beginning of her book, "the names of indexers are rarely known, from the earliest times to the present day; makers of indexes are little credited."

I have often wondered why this is so. Why are indexers so self-effacing? Or, perhaps it should be: why have they tacitly accepted the effacement imposed upon them? Is it simply the legacy of a pre-professional era? Is it a genuine humility in the face of The Author? Is it publishing inertia? The profession as a whole seems content with its lot. It is always "Indexes Praised" and "Indexes Censured" in the regular section of the Society's journal. Never "Indexers."

It is difficult to think of parallels for such self-imposed obscurity. The lexicographers who write the individual entries in a dictionary are not named, but at least their editorial role is clearly stated in the prelims. Encyclopaedia contributors, likewise, are usually listed. Only in the most amateur of reference works, such as the so-called "wiki" compilations, do we get a conscious avoidance of naming—and for good reason, given the misinformation they contain.

Perhaps, if the climate changes, indexers will begin to receive the public recognition they deserve. But how does one change a climate? The first step is to make people aware of the need for change. And the best way of doing that is to demonstrate what we have missed through unawareness. Having read Hazel Bell's book, I am sad that I did not know its contents before. I knew most of the names it contains and have had the privilege of meeting a few of them in the flesh, but I was unprepared for the range, diversity, and sheer brilliance of the personalities lying behind the names. She quotes Robert Collison's observation: "The personality of the indexer is never far behind the index." But without a

name, that sense of personality is doomed to stay vague, incomplete, and unmemorable.

From Flock Beds to Professionalism changes all that. It is, as its sub-title says, a history of index-makers, not a history of indexes. And although it is the history of indexing that governs the structure of the book, it is the personalities of the indexers themselves that shine through it. And not only the 65 "lone workers" here singled out for special treatment. I promise you, you will not forget Lindsay Verrier in the introduction who, worried about how to maintain control over a roomful of indexing slips and carbons, remarks: "Our main enemies are hurricanes, housegirls and cocktail parties."

Only when people realize just how many well-known names have engaged in indexing will the climate change. Who knows, apart from a scholarly few, that Lewis Carroll was an indexer? Or Samuel Pepys? Or Georgette Heyer? Or Nietzsche? Who knows, apart from those in the profession, that prominent people of our own time, such as Bernard Levin, have applauded and feted their indexers? After this book, it will be much easier to know.

Present-day indexers can justly be proud of their intellectual antecedents. And one day, future generations of indexers will be proud of them—but only if they are known. This book makes me think: has not the time come to make a case for the public and permanent recognition of indexers, as individual names rather than as mysterious underlying forces? It would cost publishers nothing, and it would send a message to the even greater forces of anonymity controlling internet sites: that it is people who must ultimately take responsibility for public texts.

Future Hazel Bells will make collections of twenty-first-century indexers as part of indexing historiography. But their task will be much easier if all they have to do to discover who compiled an index is look for the name at the back of the book that would routinely appear under the heading "Index." And perhaps, just perhaps, one of those historiographers will note that this new climate began with the publication of *From Flock Beds to Professionalism*.

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