Past, present and future

Geraldine Beare

Geraldine Beare explores the history of indexing from its very earliest days, through the invention of the alphabet and the concept of alphabetical order to today's world of Google and the search engine.

> And in such indexes, although small pricks
> To their subsequent volumes, there is seen
> The baby figure of the giant mass
> Of things to come at large.
>
> *Troilus and Cressida*

As indexers we are in the business of information retrieval, and most of us see the index as the best means we have of doing this. Indexes as we would recognize them have been around for several centuries: the methods for retrieving information have been around for millennia.

The primitive index

Cave art is the first indication that primitive man was interested in preserving a record of his way of life. By cave art I refer not only to the paintings to be found throughout the world, from the famous caves at Lascaux in southern France, in the Akakus Mountains in Libya and in Central Arnhem Land in northern Australia, but also to engravings and tools such as the giraffes found at Niger and the elegant ground stones found in the Ténére Desert in Algeria. Scenes of everyday life are shown, and so also are scenes of hunting, trading, mythology and abstract design. Each generation reads and interprets them according to the available evidence. It is both a sociological and a scientific exercise.

Scientifically, the cognitive abilities of early man are being studied, and sociologically, the linguistic movement spearheaded by Ferdinand Saussure has been a great help, as has the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, in particular his four volumes on *The logics of myth*. Upper Palaeolithic art shows the modern viewer what life was like thousands of years ago – the images are in themselves an index. At the time they were made they acted as *aides-mémoire* for the people showing where animals could be found, how to kill and cook them, how to conduct their lives and perhaps how to just appreciate the images as art, not to mention the mystical element that runs through much of the imagery. Interestingly for us many of these primitive paintings and engravings, wherever they may be found, have a hand motif in them (see Figure 1) – sometimes singly or in groups. The pointing finger is very important once we reach illuminated manuscripts, and indeed the index finger is so called because it is the pointing finger.

For a true index to come into existence, at least as we would understand it, a written language needed to be invented and the written language needed to be capable of some sort of ordering. Early types of written language seem to be unsuitable even though they can be remarkably user friendly, as for instance are Sumerian pictograms (see Figure 2). On the other hand Etruscan and Phoenician (Figure 3) are even now indecipherable – or rather attempts have been made to decipher these marks but there is no consensus on their meaning. Similarly with rongorongo (Figure 4), an allographic system from Easter Island.

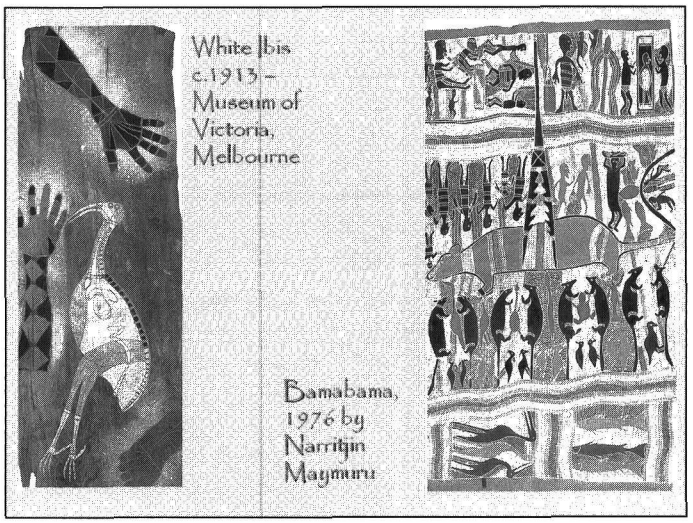


Figure 1

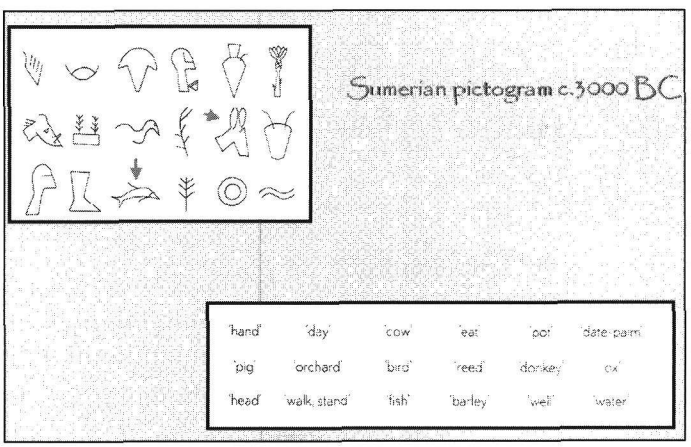


Figure 2

Hieroglyphics as index

Hieroglyphic signs first appear around 3000 BC. The Egyptian language developed over a period of 26 centuries

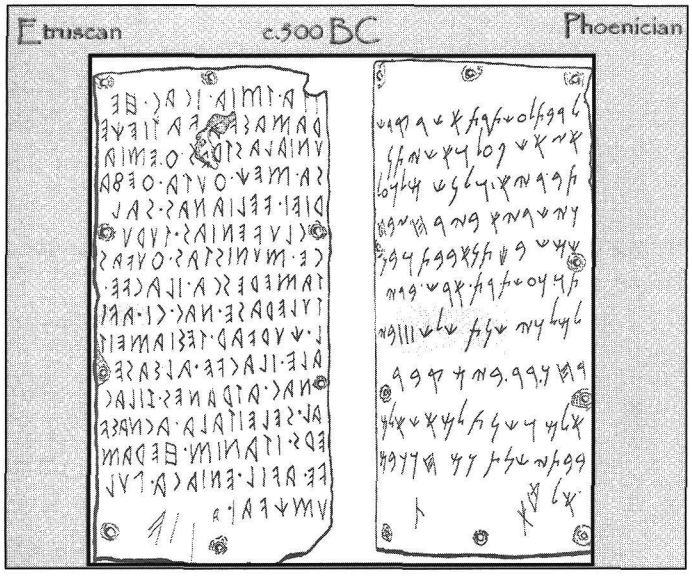


Figure 3

Figure 4

and included several stages. Old Egyptian corresponds to the language as it was used during the Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate period (27th to 20th centuries BC); Classical or Middle Egyptian during the Middle Kingdom (20th to 17th centuries BC); New Egyptian which started in the period of Akhenaten (16th–11th centuries BC) and finally Ptolemaic which is what is seen on the walls of the great temples constructed during the last native dynasties and the late Roman empire (*c*393 BC–394 AD). It is during this latter period, sometime during the 4th century AD, that the Egyptian language disappeared in all its most traditional forms thanks to the Emperor Theodosius having prohibited the practice of pagan cults. As a result, no more hieroglyphic texts were written in the Nile Valley. Naturally, as the years went by no one was any longer able to decipher this writing, since the Egyptian priests did not leave behind a grammar that would make it possible to understand the mechanics of their language. The discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799 provided the key. It appears to have been inscribed around 157 BC at the beginning of the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor (*c*191–145 BC), and was in the main translated during the early 1820s by Jean-Jacques Champollion (1790–1832).

Although hieroglyphics do not look a very promising start to the making of an index, nevertheless it is possible to make a case that what is known as the *Amduat* or the *Book of the hidden space*, which appeared during the Egyptian New Kingdom, contained the first index. This book portrays the journey of the sun-god Ra through the 12 hours of the night. There is a separate chapter for each of the hours, and each of the 12 sections contains an introduction followed by three registers containing pictorial depictions, together with a commentary and the names of the beings depicted. This in essence is an index, for it is a catalogue of the figures presented in pictorial form with captions. (Wheatley makes the point that although terminology changes over the years, the changes in general refer to similar things, i.e. table, register, calendar, summary and syllabus all had similar meanings.) The earliest known complete version of the *Amduat* is dated to Tuthmosis III, an 18th-dynasty Pharaoh who was initially co-regent with his mother Queen Hatshepsut, but reigned independently until about 1425 BC.

Ancient catalogues

Even earlier, around 1800 BC, catalogues were being produced of books (i.e. clay tablets) held at Hattusas in north central Turkey. Hattusas, now Bogazköy, was the capital of the Hittite Empire. A whole archive of clay tablets has been found, stored on wooden shelves, covering contracts, official documents, oracular prophecies, folklore, legal decisions and historical texts. Each entry begins by giving the number of tablets that made up the work being recorded, then the entry identifies the work itself by giving the title. This may be by citing the first line or by giving a capsule description of the contents. Then it tells whether the table marks the end of the work or not. It's a fairly sophisticated method for finding what one is looking for.

Similarly at Nippur, a Babylonian city some 160 km south-east of Baghdad, two tablets have been found both inscribed with a list of Sumerian works of literature – various myths, hymns and laments. One has 68 titles and the other 62, though neither of the lists is in any discernible order. Since writing had first appeared a thousand years previously,

and since this writing is in the main inscribed on clay tablets – a remarkably useful and long-lasting material – it is quite possible that catalogues first appeared a lot earlier than 1800 BC. Certainly, when archives started to come into existence – and these were around from at least 2300 BC – the cataloguing of contents would have been essential.

Ashurbanipal, Assyria's last important ruler, who held the throne for nearly 50 years from 668–627 BC, was the man who is credited with introducing the first systematically collected library in the ancient Near East. It was discovered at Nineveh, and contains hundreds of examples of writings of all sorts, including the wonderful Epic of Gilgamesh. It was founded for the 'royal contemplation' but seems to have been available to other interested users. Most modernly, it contains exhortations to readers to take care of the tablets and not to deface them: 'In the name of Nabu and Marduk, do not rub out the text!' or 'Who rubs out the text, Marduk will look upon him with anger.'

Languages and alphabets

Moving westwards, the Greeks meanwhile were also coming to grips with written language, borrowing the Phoenician language and adapting it for their own use. The Phoenician alphabet had 22 letters, the first Greek alphabet probably 26. The Etruscans in turn copied the Greek letters around 700 BC, and were followed by the Italian peoples, including the Romans. As the Romans conquered the lands around them, so their language and alphabet came to be used.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire the Roman letters were fitted to newer tongues, including primitive English around AD 600. Today about three-quarters of the world's population live in countries where an alphabet or alphabet-based script is the national writing system. Only Chinese, Japanese and Korean systems are not alphabetic. (According to the experts the alphabet was invented sometime around 2000 BC by Semites who lived as foreigners in Egypt. They were inspired by the Egyptian writing systems.)

By 500 BC Homer's verses were being read. The Greeks used a variety of materials to write on, including what is known as scratch paper – actually discarded chunks of broken pottery – wax tablets (panels of wood with one side coated in wax), a form of paper made out of papyrus and parchment, and other prepared skins.

Books in shops and libraries

Bookselling was a flourishing industry by the beginning of the 4th century BC, and libraries were a necessary institution, the most famous being the one at Alexandria. This was founded *c*300 BC. It was the policy of the library to acquire everything from exalted epic poetry to humdrum cookbooks. The Ptolemies, who reigned between 305–30 BC, aimed to make the collection as comprehensive as possible, and they spared no pains at acquiring everything in sight but in particular originals. Lycurgus, Athens' political leader from 338–325 BC, had passed a law stating that 'written versions of the tragedies are to be preserved in the records office, and the city clerk is to read them, for purposes of comparison, to the actors playing the roles, and they are not to depart from them'. The reason for this was that since every copy of a book was done by hand, errors inevitably crept in, leading eventually to a script that could be very far from the original version. This was not helped by actors themselves willfully changing the text to suit their needs.

As books arrived in the Alexandria library they were stacked in warehouses, and tabs were attached bearing the author's name and provenance. The rolls were sorted according to the nature of their contents and then placed either in the main library or the daughter library. The former had a more restricted access than the latter, and contained some 49,000 rolls (the latter had 42,800). The man in charge was Zenodotus, who lived during the reigns of the first two Ptolemies. He was a pioneer in library science, and to him goes the accolade of inventing alphabetical order as a mode of organization. The alphabetization only went as far as the first letter, but this was to be standard practice for many centuries – right up to the 19th century – although a fuller alphabetization did make an appearance as early as the 2nd century AD.

Zenodotus's successor, Callimachus (*c*305–240 BC), went even further. He produced 120 volumes containing a detailed bibliographical survey of all Greek writings. He made initial basic divisions into poetry and prose, then broke those down into subdivisions such as writers of tragedy, comedy, lyric poets and so on. Each author had a brief biographical sketch and a list of his works in alphabetical order. A key problem – familiar to us today – was how to handle entries that involved more than one category. There is no way of knowing whether or not he used cross-references, but it is highly likely that he did.

Both Zenodotus and Callimachus lived during the first half of the 3rd century BC, and their contribution to classification was immeasurable, but a final contributor to scholarship who should be mentioned is Dionysius the Thracian, who lived *c*100 BC. He it was who sorted out the elements and aspects of Greek grammar. He wrote a treatise in 50 pages covering the letters of the alphabet and the parts of speech, which was to be the standard text right up to the 12th century. The Romans based their Latin grammars on it, and through these it became the model for all modern grammars.

The library at Alexandria did not survive, the end probably coming in AD 270 when the Emperor Aurelian, in the course of suppressing the insurgency of the kingdom of Palmyra, engaged in bitter fighting in Alexandria. The whole palace area was laid waste along with the library.

During the 1st century AD several writers began arranging their material in user-friendly formats. They included Pliny the Elder (23–79 AD), who wrote his universal encyclopaedia, *Historia naturalis*, in 37 volumes, of which the entire first volume is a table of contents in which he lists, book by book, the various subjects discussed. Ptolemy (Claudius Ptolemaeus), an Egyptian astronomer and geographer, compiled his *Atlas of the world* around 150 AD, which contains a catalogue of places with latitude and longitude, general descriptions and details regarding his mode of noting the position of places. This work is considered by many to be the first index. And there were others such as Valerius Maximus who

wrote a collection of memorable deeds and sayings *c*30 AD, and Aulus Gellius who wrote *Attic nights c*160 AD, an assortment of items on Greek and Roman history, philosophy, grammar, rhetoric and antiquarian material in general.

Medieval times

Moving on in time, we come to Britain in the medieval period. Christianity had a profound effect on the production of texts. Controlled by the Church, illuminated manuscripts are the glory of the period, and it is in these that we once again come across the hand motif, first noted in Palaeolithic cave art, only this time much more refined. Here the hand, or rather the pointing finger, is used to denote a particular passage that should be read and noted. (See Figure 5.) Pointing fingers can be seen in marginalia as well as in the initial letters. One could view this as a somewhat retrograde step in the progress of the history of the index, and of course this is so, yet it is a very effective method of accurately indicating an important piece of text or image. Why produce an index when one is constantly reading and re-reading the Bible, which was the text above all others and known by heart by many? What the monks needed was not so much an index as an indication of where important passages were located on a page.

Yet inexorably the need for indexes grew as the Viking raids and the Norman Conquest receded in memory and the country became more settled and unified. As a result, the number of lists and surveys, commentaries, writs and record-keeping increased exponentially. And libraries once again came back into fashion thanks to the Dominicans. The Dominican rule of Humbert de Romanis (*c*1260) lays down all the principal duties of a modern librarian: choosing a good site for the building and making sure it is secure, waterproof and well ventilated; that it has sufficient shelving and that the shelves themselves are designated for different subjects; that there is a catalogue of books and that the stock is kept up to date.

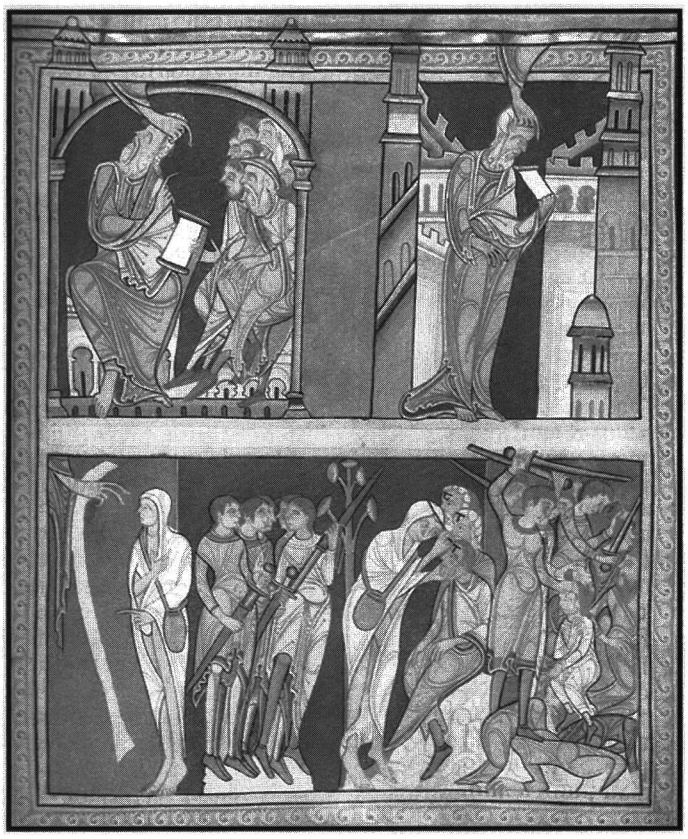


Figure 5 Lambeth Bible: Ezekiel

The peripatetic nature of court and nobility meant that household records, Chancery rolls and other necessary documents usually accompanied the king and his court, but eventually the sheer number of these documents made it impossible to carry them safely around the countryside, and permanent repositories were found. Generally the documents were kept under the safekeeping of cathedrals and monasteries, and most of the principal towns had their own royal archives complete with official archivist. Finding what one wanted was not easy, but eventually enterprising clerks came up with the solution of creating extracts of the royal documents.

The most remarkable collection of extracts is Barnwell Priory's *Liber memorandorum*, which was composed in the 1290s. It contains texts of nearly 90 official documents, and the compiler makes it clear that 'It will not be necessary in future to go to the castle to see the sheriff's roll, but rather the facts can be seen and learned from this book.' The compiler also notes that 'this record is to be found in a certain roll on the white part [i.e. top side of the parchment] at the end of the roll where this sign is depicted'. The sign in question is a hand with outstretched index finger – this can still be seen in the Public Record office at Kew.

Mental indexing was also practised. To learn all 150 psalms in the Psalter, for example, it was recommended to make a mental grid of 150 sections, to place the psalms in order within and then to learn them by heart. This was especially useful when pagination might differ from one copy to the next. But why was an alphabetical index not used more often? There is no answer to this, although the principle as we know had been existence for centuries.

There are examples of alphabetical arrangement from quite early on, a delightful example being the initial 'A' of St Jerome's dictionary, in which is drawn a man frantically trying to teach a performing bear the ABC by beating it with a stick to make it cry out 'A'. By the end of Edward I's reign (1239–1307) alphabetical indexes had been made to parliamentary statutes and other law books, and in English Bibles of the 13th century, the list of Hebrew names is arranged in strict alphabetical order to the third or fourth letter of each word.

The printed word

With the advent of printing in the middle of the 15th century everything changed. Multiple copies of works could be distributed throughout the land and across the world. The Church no longer had control over what was being written, and texts in the vernacular, including the Bible, became commonplace. Erasmus and Martin Luther ushered in the Reformation, and by the 17th century a wide variety of print was being produced. Newspapers, novels, books with images, playing cards, pamphlets, children's publications and magazines proliferated, and so did the art of indexing, initially to books of reference such as herbals.

Shakespeare mentions indexes in several of his plays, and Thomas Fuller commented in 1650 that '[a]n Index is the bag and baggage of a book, of more use than honour, even such who seemingly slight it, secretly using, if not for need, for speed of what they desire to find'. By the 19th century the value of indexes was commented upon by a number of eminent writers, including Thomas Carlyle and Lord Campbell, who proposed that any author who published a book without an index should be deprived of the benefits of the Copyright Act. A certain John Baynes went further and said 'that the man who published a book without an index ought to be damned ten miles beyond Hell, where the Devil could not get for stinging nettles'.

The Index Society

It is at this point, in the 1870s, that a flurry of correspondence appears resulting in the setting up of the Index Society. The first annual meeting was held on 26 March 1878 at the Royal Asiatic Society in London. In the chair was the president, the Earl of Caernarvon. The secretary was Henry Benjamin Wheatley. There were four vice presidents including Robert Harrison, librarian of the London Library, who had written the article in the *Athenaeum* (1854) which had been the bugle call to the formation of the Society. Institutional members included the Berlin Royal Library, the Dublin National Library, the Patent Office in Washington and numerous universities including three Oxford colleges.

Several large projects were proposed, and several were mentioned that were already under construction, including a General Index of the Journals of Congress from the organization of the government to the present time, and an index to the drawings in the manuscript department of the British Museum which had just been published. It was the opinion of Wheatley and the Index Society that indexes to subjects, and in particular to periodicals and journals, were the way forward. They wanted to see large-scale comprehensive indexes covering as many sources as possible – a very ambitious idea which only now, in the age of the World Wide Web, could possibly work.[1]

The Society was plagued with financial problems and in 1891 it amalgamated with the British Record Society's index library.

All went quiet for several years, but the idea of alphabetization and indexing continued to be in the consciousness of many individuals – and publications! *Punch* magazine, never slow to follow – or indeed lead – trends, illustrated the usefulness – or otherwise – of the alphabet. (See Figure 6.)

There were also serious people out there beavering away indexing and writing about the subject. Wheatley himself had written a treatise on *What is an index?* which was published by the Index Society in 1879. He makes the point that many books were and remained unindexed, and as a result readers from students to researchers often made their own indexes. He laments that 'the occupation of the indexer has been allowed to fall into disrepute during the present century, and some have supposed that any ignorant hack can produce this indispensable portion of a book'. He goes on:

> An ideal indexer needs many high qualifications; but unlike the poet, he is not born but made. [Some would dispute that!] He must be a good analyser and know how to reduce the author's many words into a terse form. He must also be continually thinking of the wants of the consulter of his index, so as to place his references under the heading that the reader is most likely to seek.

Quoting from an article that had appeared in the *Monthly Review*, Wheatley reinforces this:

> The compilation of an index is one of those useful labours for which the public, commonly better pleased with entertainment than with real service, are rarely so forward to express their gratitude as we think they ought to be. It has been considered as a task fit only for the plodding and the dull; but with more truth it may be said that this is the judgment of the idle and the shallow.

But despite these words, as we have seen, the Index Society folded after 12 years, and it was not until 65 years later that another attempt was made to set up a society devoted to indexing – and so far this society has been highly successful. I am of course referring to the Society of Indexers.

Modern indexers and their societies

The idea for the Society came from Gilfred Norman Knight, who had begun indexing in the 1920s. On his retirement he decided to pursue his interest, and after writing letters to national papers and organizing several discreet luncheons at the Civil Service Club, the Society of Indexers was born. The inaugural meeting was held on 30 March 1957 at the National Book League in London. On 8 May 1957 *The Times* wrote:[2] 'There are far too many societies. But plenty of people will readily supply a list of half a dozen that can be dispensed with in order to make room for the newly formed Society of Indexers. Here is a necessary body if ever there was one.' Nowadays, not only is there the original Society, which this year celebrates its 50th anniversary, there are also societies in Australia and New Zealand, America, Canada, South Africa, China, Germany and the Netherlands.

Indexing is a highly skilled profession. We are regulated by standards, guided by books and articles, taught via correspondence courses and keep in touch with one another through publications, meetings, conferences, email and chatlines. In the main, we work as we have done for years – centuries even – compiling to a formula indexes to books and periodicals, although other media are also being indexed, including still and moving images and sound. We work to deadlines and for not a great deal of money. The look and content of the index has changed very little since Wheatley's time; we continue to produce detailed entries which both author and editor expect – and with which, to a large extent, we agree. We are hired, if that is the right word, by editors, some of whom work in-house, but others are freelance like ourselves.

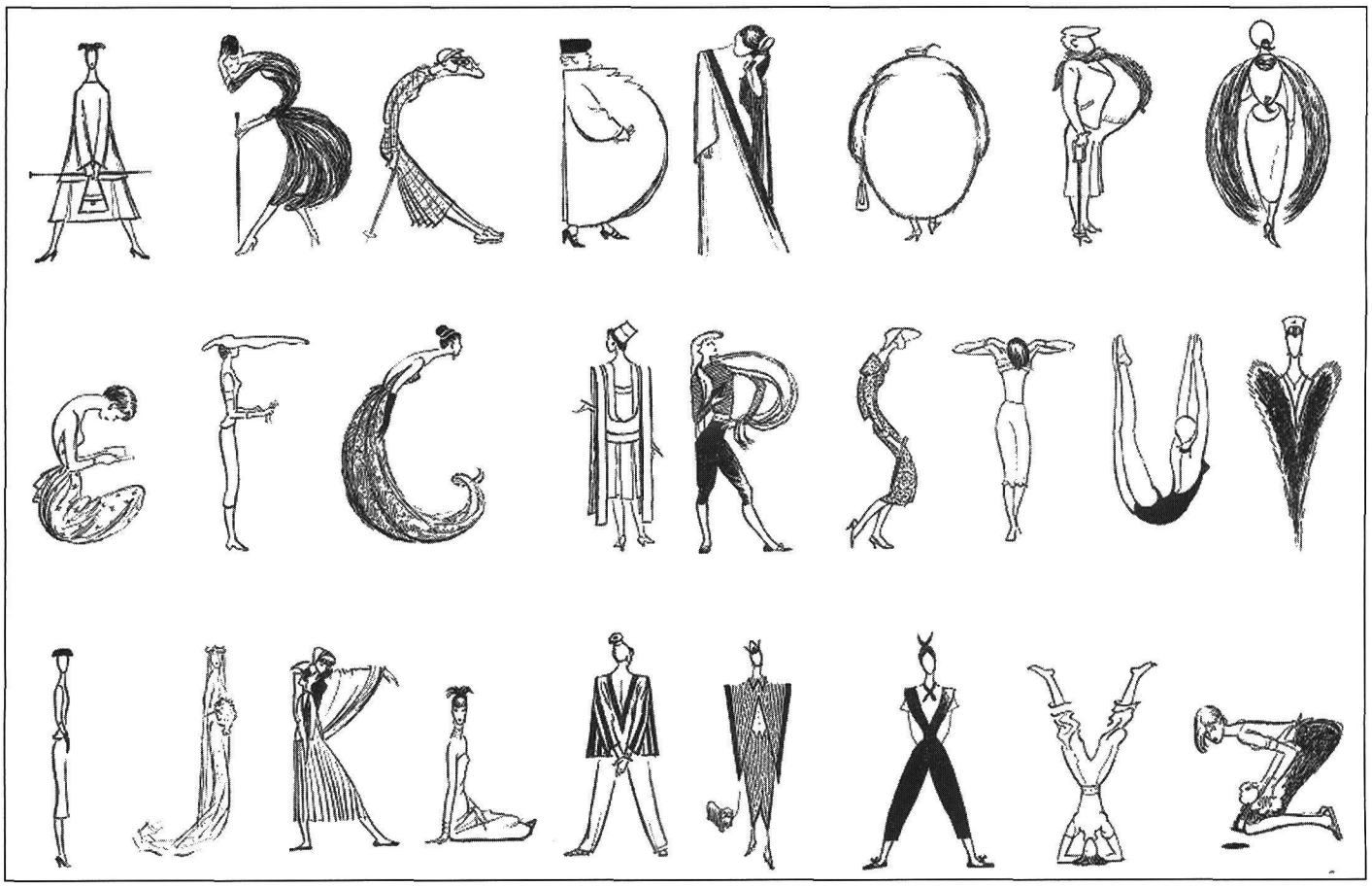
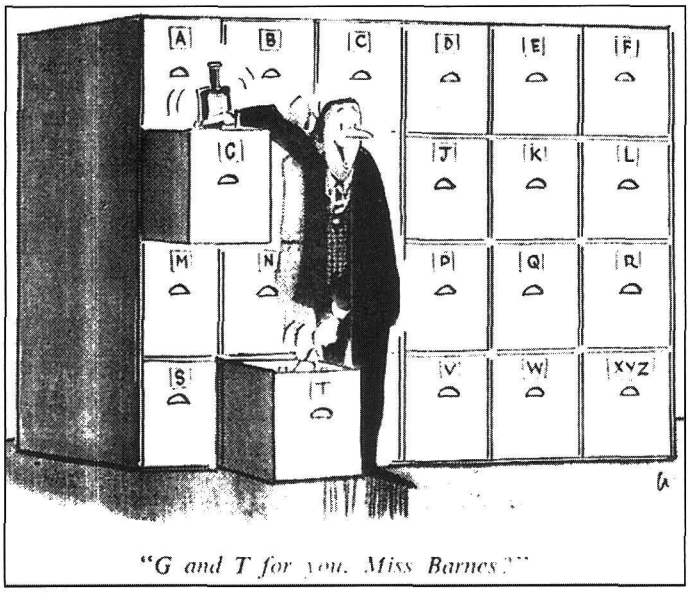


Figure 6 Punch alphabet by D. L. Mays, March 1955



"G and T for you, Miss Barnes?"

Figure 7

The outsourced index

But times are changing – and rapidly. Outsourcing is increasing, and publishing is jumping on the bandwagon with alacrity. India appears to be the country of choice for publishers, and for good reason. Over the last ten years or so a number of enterprising companies have set up businesses to provide electronic support facilities to e-publishing companies. Their target markets have been professional, trade, medical, legal, scientific/technical, scholarly, reference and college publishing. They provide an integrated, flexible and efficient service at a fraction of the cost of British suppliers, and with the ability to seemingly work 24/7 they are constantly accessible and willing to do whatever is asked of them. A major plus is their ability to speak English, and as a result their main markets at the moment are the United Kingdom and the United States – and now Australia – they are beginning to have an impact on areas of publishing not previously considered viable outside the home country.

For instance, the *New York Times* is already outsourcing many of its publishing tools from a US-based software company which is offshoring work to India. Reuters has made the decision to move editorial services from the United States and Europe to India, and digitizing of US newspapers is also being outsourced to the Indian companies. If journals can be dealt with overseas, so too can books and they are. TexTech, a company barely 18 months old and based in Chennai, has recently acquired an American publisher, Stratford Publishing. It now has a customer base spanning four continents – in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and India – and its customers include the world's largest publishers of higher-education, school and trade books. It is the vendor of choice for a large school book-publisher in the United Kingdom. Integra-India is 13 years old and is another company with bases in the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, Germany and Australia. It includes as its customers Elsevier, Pearsons, Thomson,

Springer, OUP, CUP, Taylor & Francis, Wiley and Palgrave Macmillan. It has offices in both the United Kingdom and United States, is based in Pondicherry and is currently positioned amongst the top five e-publishing companies in India. It is a pioneer in e-publishing and has recently acquired a financial partner in the shape of Barings-India.

Outsourced publishing services overall are currently running at about US$4.5 billion, of which US$200 million is being outsourced to India. According to a recent report by Capgemini and IDC, 85 per cent of companies are saving at least as much as they invest in outsourcing. Sixty-three per cent of companies are investing the savings back in the organization to improve operational performance, drive innovation or support growth, and 44 per cent of businesses surveyed said the most important criterion in selecting a business process outsourcing (BPO) provider is its ability to deliver transformational services. Tata Consulting Group, another huge Indian company which has recently taken over Corus, is the first service provider to generate US$1 billion in a quarter, and the company has doubled in size every 30 months. Fifty per cent of the world's GDP is services – and the sky is the limit.

New media, new searches

But this is not the only possible threat to our way of working. And it is a threat since, although the Indian companies continue to employ indexers and proofreaders from the United Kingdom and the United States, nevertheless they are growing their own professional indexers who will at some point take over. No – the main threat comes from the World Wide Web and technology in general. Information is easily obtained just by Googling a question. Books, journals, newspapers, reports, surveys all are being produced on the Web, and are fully searchable right down to the images, tables and advertisements. What's more, they can be downloaded into ever-more user-friendly hand-held devices.

This is not to say that books will vanish – they are far too nice for that. But looking to the future, bookshops may not be around, at least not in the form we know them now. All publications will be uploaded to a publisher's website from where customers will be able to download what they want. Printers and binders will be sitting in dedicated office space in our homes, or we will be able to go to a dedicated site where we will be able to go online, sample chapters, decide whether we want the book (or magazine), and then arrange for it to be downloaded, printed and bound however we want. This site may well be the old bookshop, and it may well have a range of books and periodicals to be seen – but not bought – for those who don't want to peer at a screen. It wouldn't matter what kind of publication – academic, scientific, art, biography, novel – all would be available to mix and match at will.

What about the index? If we go the route suggested, then back-of-book indexes could well become redundant. Text would be automatically searchable either on an individual book-by-book basis or across a range of media. On the other hand, custom-made indexes could be generated at the point of download, containing all the references necessary. At the moment, if we want any information we are directed to a print-based site. If we want information from other sources such as film, television or radio, specific publications such as *Private Eye* or more general sources such as newspapers and journals, we must do separate searches for each of these. In future the search engines will link us to the various sources as a matter of course – in fact Google is working on this at the moment – and Wheatley's vision will almost certainly come true.

This will take time – but not that much. Think back ten or even five years. Remember when there was no email, when computers were slow, when the World Wide Web and broadband weren't even thought about, when indeed indexes were still being produced on 5" x 4" cards – and that is less than 20 years ago. In 1991 there was just one website; in 2003 there were 60 million. People spend on average 49 seconds on any one site looking for what they want. If they cannot find it they move on. Speech, image and multi-lingual retrieval are all happening. Cross-border searches are now possible to the extent that you can type in a question in one country, have it searched in another country in an entirely different language, then have the answer returned in the originating language.

Digitization continues apace. Thomson Gale for instance has digitized hundreds of thousands of books from the 18th to the 20th centuries. HarperCollins is transferring all its physical books into a virtual, digital warehouse. Several thousand titles are already available on its website, and several thousand more will be made available over the next couple of years. Google tweaks its algorithms every month to improve searching, and natural language is the Holy Grail of the computing world. No more simple questions and endless possible answers – sensibly worded queries with more focused results is the goal.

Are indexers needed?

Today we indexers must ask ourselves, 'Do readers still want the detailed indexes we at present produce?' Certainly authors, publishers and we ourselves do, and we would throw up our hands in horror if it wasn't so. But should we not be thinking in terms of simplifying the index? In a biography, think of the columns dedicated to the biographee. Do we really want all that information? Google the name and information comes up. Maybe we should return to the pointing finger to tell us what is important. Some sites will highlight sections of text that are of interest – the *New dictionary of national biography* does this, and it works well. It is not only one of the best sites for giving you the information you want on anything that appears within the database, it will direct you to related people and subjects as well. Recently it has started producing articles of specific interest which are also beautifully searchable, and is very fast and easy to use. Time for people is of the essence. Do readers want to plough their way through our wonderfully detailed, lovingly produced indexes? I believe that the visible index as we know it will vanish, but that the hidden index as represented by the search engine will grow and improve, become more sophisticated and user-friendly.

I conclude with a comment written by Eric Hoffer who was born in 1903 in the Bronx. Self-taught and an omnivorous reader, he was an itinerant worker during the 1920s and 1930s, became a stevedore during the Second World War and between 1951 and 1982 wrote ten books including his

most famous one, *The true believer*, on mass movements. He is a much-quoted author and this is one of his most astute sayings: 'In times of change, learners inherit the world, while the learned remain beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.'

Notes

1 *Editorial note*: we hope to include in a later issue of *The Indexer* an account of one of these projects – a plan (under the auspices of the Royal Society and the then Astronomer Royal) to maintain a multilingual index to all European scientific publications.
2 See full editorial on page 225 of this issue of *The Indexer*.

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Geraldine Beare is a freelance indexer. Apart from the usual back-of-book indexes, she has compiled indexes to the Strand *magazine,* Punch *magazine and Pathe newsreels. She has been programme organizer, newsletter editor and vice-chairman of the Society of Indexers. She also wrote Occasional Paper No. 4 on indexing newspapers, magazines and other periodicals (SI 1999). Email:* gjwriter@beeb.net

Bishop Jebb's book

One hundred and thirty-six years ago, John Jebb, who was afterwards Bishop of Limerick, Ardfert, and Aghadoe, bought a folio-size notebook. He paid nine and ninepence for it to William Watson and Son, Booksellers, 7 Capel Street, Dublin, which was not dear, for it contains six quires of paper. And what paper! paper manly yet seductive, paper which persuades the lagging and corrects the errant pen, sustains the heavy ink, retains the light, tempts even the twentieth century into calligraphy. In its depths there are two watermarks: one of Britannia, seated in a shield beneath a crown, the other of the date 1799 beneath intertwined initials. The reference must be to the union of England and Ireland, and when the Bishop bought the book he must have felt that that little problem at all events was solved. The book is bound in boards, and strong quarter-calf, but the leather recently cracked, like much else in my time, and one of the covers is now loose. This would distress me, if there was anyone to whom I could hand on the book, as it has been handed down to me. But there is no one, and even if I were a clergyman with grandchildren there would be no one. Bequests are coming to their natural end, traditions are retiring to that insecure fortress, the museum. There is not time for the personal memory-sogged past, and there is not room for it either. If after my death – which interests me less than his interested the Bishop – the book should survive, the important thing in it will be the blank pages. Still delightful to write on, they may profit posterity.

. . . Opening it I read the initial entry. `Begun this commonplace book at Cashel Wednesday November 11, 1804' – in red ink. Signed 'John Jebb' in black ink.

. . . The first two pages of the commonplace book are ruled for an index: a beautiful piece of work. Each letter of the alphabet has a section, and each section is subdivided into five, one for each vowel. When the bishop entered a thought, he underlined the first word in it, and referred appropriately in the index to ts page. Thus Pa in the index has reference to pages 6 and 12, where 'Pastoral Care' and 'Parnel's beautiful Hymn to Contentment' are discussed. Po 14 directs us to the Poor in Spirit. The index is beautiful rather than effective, and in continuing the book I have disdained it. He did not write in the book much, and has only filled up eighteen of its pages. His unworthy successor (as I must tediously term myself) has filled over a hundred pages, so perhaps it is my book. But two hundred pages remain virgin, so it is still nobody's. I know what my grandfather would think of my sacrilegious temerity. The sacred volume has passed unsullied from Cashel to Limerick, to Clapham, to quiet rectories in Kent and Essex, and here I am scribbling notes about Marx in it, or copying extracts from Madame de Sévigné. I don't know what the bishop himself would think: he is too far away; indeed I cannot imagine him taking any notice. The spiders' threads one throws backwards into the past seldom stick. As a rule, they encounter complete non-recognition, and return to one.

From *Two cheers for democracy* by E. M. Forster; Edward Arnold, 1951. This essay dated 1940.