

Judging indexes

The criteria for a good index

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A discussion of the criteria for gauging the quality of indexes, with specific reference to the progress of the Wheatley Medal.

Imagine a new indexer, who has just compiled his/her first index and is about to send it off. How good is it? Should he/she check all the entries from the printout? Yes? . . . the work is started upon, but it is not done, not fully. It is too hard a task. Or imagine another person. A competent and experienced indexer has sent off the index by email and it is received by this other person, the editor, a newcomer to the job, who looks at the work, is a bit uncertain about it, wonders how far to check it. A few spot checks are made on the index, no errors are found (shall we say), and the index is used. Later the editor amends the index for space within the limitations that are then known. In other words, the indexer's output is largely taken on trust.

The words 'it's a good index' may be welcome, but they are rarely based on detailed examination and can be almost meaningless. What a powerful person the indexer is; he/she may be quietly dictatorial as well as crucial to the quality of the book or other item. Only by re-indexing a work and comparing the results could you really begin to tell the quality of an index.

Here, then, are two people doing some checking on indexes, neither very thoroughly nor happily. This is how the Wheatley Medal panel feels when it first sees the offerings for the new issue of the annual medal, and it is as a member of this panel for the last few years (and current Chairman) that I write about the judgement of indexes. It is not the first time the subject has been tackled in the pages of this journal – Richard Bancroft (1964), Geoffrey Hamilton (1976), Monty Harrod (1983) and Jill Ford (1993) have all contributed papers to the discussion. But it is time again to air the subject, as there are pressures on us, of which more in the concluding section.

The Wheatley Medal: history and procedures

The Wheatley Medal is named after Henry Benjamin Wheatley (1838–1917).¹ His own indexing output is little able to be pinpointed, but his reputation was such that in 1961 the Library Association (LA) and Society of Indexers named their medal for the 'best index' after him. If we were to make the choice now it would be difficult to find any other name to replace his, though the world now contains many comparatively well-known indexers. The medal has been presented 31 times, though sometimes there has been more

than one winner, and it has been withheld nine times, including the first two years of its existence.

Rules have changed over the years to some extent. For instance, it now covers books to the April of the current year, to try to keep a lively interest from publishers. Whereas in the early days a winner was noted, with specific praise to others as 'highly commended', where justified, three candidates are now always shortlisted, with one being earmarked as the Medal winner, receiving the Medal itself, a certificate and a cheque for £500 (a much higher sum than it used to be).² Some of the changes have come about as the result of commercial sponsorship, the sponsors of all the Library Association's Reference Awards being Whitaker and Co. I return to the rules and possible changes at the end of this article.

Books are nominated by members of the Society of Indexers and the Library Association, by publishers, by the indexers themselves, by authors, by members of the Wheatley Panel, and indeed by anyone who wishes. There is usually a good mix of sources for the indexes received. Books not chosen are returned to their publishers.

The Wheatley Panel consists of three representatives each of the Library Association Cataloguing and Indexing Group (some of whom ask library colleagues to look out for likely books) and the Society of Indexers, and co-optees (important where complex indexes are involved), together with an LA Secretariat representative (an excellent adviser on procedure).

Sometimes the panel *does* know the name of the indexer who has prepared the work – at one time they were obliterated, but not now. Sometimes one or other of the panel will remove himself or herself so as not to produce possible bias.

Criteria used by the Wheatley Panel

The one thing the panel does not have to worry about is the length of the index, within reasonable limits; we are presented with a *fait accompli*, an artefact. What we are concerned with is index quality, using the criteria discussed below.

Accuracy

Although accuracy does not strictly appear on the criteria, in practice we always test the accuracy of the entries chosen.

An odd mistake can be overlooked, but indexes are very rarely 100 per cent accurate. This may of course be the fault of changes of page numbers in a text at the publishers, but we are not to know that. Although we do make enquiries of publishers, we do not press them on matters like this, and neither do we expect statements on their intent from them. We sometimes know who has indexed the works before us, but more often not, and it has been known for the publishers not to know who their indexers are. Incidentally, it is probable that the majority of Wheatley winners have not been members of the Society of Indexers, or even professional indexers. Self-indexing authors are not of course proscribed, and there have been a few excellent self-indexers over the years.

Clarity and comprehensiveness

We are always testing comprehensiveness; that is, that everything in the book is covered, and that the terms and headings are clear in what they say. The indexer always has a tussle with space versus clarity in expression – think of the ‘and’ conjunction. ‘Marx and Engels’ may be acceptable on the grounds that it conveys no implied meaning, but ‘Marx and violence’ is open to question, if we were wishing to show that this is Marx’s views on violence, rather than his own personal behaviour. Sometimes we find the ‘and’ conjunction over-used.

It is necessary to look through the whole of an index to get a decent idea of its clarity and comprehensiveness. It is harder to pick out parts of the book (or other item) to check for such things. As part of the analysis of comprehensiveness, we must also check cross-references, one of our favourite occupations. (And yet, I will admit that when I inform publishers of parts of an index to be cut down if space is known to be short, the cross-references are usually marked to go.) We have no particular axe to grind about word-by-word, or letter-by-letter arrangement, and neither do we slavishly check our British Standards all the time,³ though they may occasionally be drawn in.

We tend to like set-out subheadings, though would not kill an index with subheadings run on in paragraphs. However, although it is easier for us to see the structure of subheadings in the set-out version, the elegance of run-on paragraphs cannot be denied; indeed, the winner in 2000 used such a style.⁴ We hope that illustrative material will be indexed, but we know that publishers often specify that it should not be, or cannot provide the material at the right time. We are quite tender towards the indexer/publisher relationship, knowing how there is not so much bullying of the former by the latter, but that the indexer tends to be ignored and rarely sees proofs of the index. There is no gender preference for a winner, by the way!

One of the things we are specifically asked to do is mark down if we see *strings* of undifferentiated page numbers. We have actually received indexes with strings for every term; clearly someone has thought it a merit that there are such long lists of page numbers! We have been criticized for criticizing strings, on the grounds that they sometimes *must* occur. A string of undifferentiated page numbers in itself is

not a hangable crime, and I personally accept this, whilst generally not wanting to see too many of them.

Layout and physical presentation

These are very important aspects of a published index. It must *look* good as well as *be* good. I personally try to insist that my clients do not reduce point size to something virtually unreadable – something that has happened to me occasionally. An index was submitted to the Wheatley Panel during the period I have served on it that was probably an admirable index, but the wrong things were emphasized in bold type, and its presentation in a very small page compass was ludicrous. We have also had a multi-volume work, paginated throughout, with several thousand pages in total, yet with no indication as to which volume contained which pages; the volumes themselves did not even show the page numbers on the spine. This is bad design. It was also an index by a well-known indexer, who presumably would not have had any say in that particular decision.

Scope notes/introduction

These are interesting features of indexes, which we are not specifically asked to look for or assess. Most books do not require much in this way, but we have found pages of notes in some cases. I always enjoy these statements of intent, from details of use such as ‘bold page numbers are used for illustrations’ to ‘the index is intended for browsing’.

An outstanding index?

There has been questioning of the choice of Wheatley Medal winners, not so much that their indexes are not of high quality, but that they are too much in one sphere of less than general interest – medicine and law have been the main ‘culprits’. It is also thought that large indexes, or separate indexes, are more likely to be winners than small back-of-the-book ones,⁵ and this is a justified criticism, but one that it is impossible to avoid. We see many books with entirely competent and attractive indexes, but they cannot really compete with a very solid work with something special about it. The word ‘outstanding’ is one that we judges bandy about quite a bit. We do want to see something whose merits we are proud of having discovered, and that the indexer is proud of having compiled. On those occasions when no medal has been presented, it is this lack of *outstanding* quality that has been paramount.

We are always anxious to avoid the ‘mechanical’, another word that is also used quite often by the Wheatley Panel. For example, an index to a book on English parish churches that provided nothing but the names of the places where those churches were located would be regarded as ‘mechanical’, and that might well be all that was necessary for such a book. But we are looking for an *outstanding* index.

Electronic publishing and other departures

One sphere that enters our discussions every year is that of electronic publishing, and of the influence of the computer.

There is something of a split between those who think any tool is useful, and that we must judge by results, and others who see indexing as a fine art, envisaging the indexer as brilliantly producing a work of pleasure, which some of them undoubtedly do. Latham's index to Pepys's diary is one such example.⁶ One commercial firm one year submitted several indexes of the same type, which had involved heavy use of a computer. They were not really acceptable to the panel, though perfectly useful and competent, as they were utterly dull. But of course it is possible to produce good indexes with computer-originated material – I had a spell myself of working for two firms in this respect, and the indexer-input in amending mechanism was undoubtedly there. Incidentally, the panel has not entirely devoted its efforts to *printed* book and periodical indexes; from time to time its members have sat before the computer screen and assessed the indexes shown on it. But it is an uncomfortable subject, and the advent of an Electronic Panel would perhaps only be a partial answer to the problem.

Occasionally, we do have to judge the work of a group of indexers; the award was presented one year to a group working as a commercial firm for an excellent index.⁷ More difficult to deal with are those indexes that are not available in multiple form. Many are the tip-top indexes that are compiled in libraries and elsewhere but they simply cannot be visited by the panel, and will never win a medal.

Too few indexes?

One of the biggest criticisms of the Wheatley Medal set-up is the comparatively small number of indexes that are examined. Imagine the publishing empire we now have, and yet we usually deal with between 20 and 40 books. We have some difficulty in dealing as a panel with those we *do* have, and use a checklist by which we may eliminate from total examination by the whole panel some of the indexes before us, if four people consider the index to be lacking in essential features. We still do, however, feel some discomfort at the comparatively small number of items sitting there. We all spend two days or so looking at the material, including a full session with all of us examining each book in turn. Some of the discussions are very quick, and some are pretty long. There can be occasional acrimony, though more often harmony prevails. Eventually a puff of smoke is seen from the roof of the Library Association, and we all relax with another cup of tea! Presentation of the medal amid the cheers of the great and good of the literary world, more or less, takes place the following autumn.

Checklist

Finally, some comments about what an index should be provided with if it is to have a chance at the Wheatley Panel session. Most of the points have already been made, and this is a rehearsal:

1. *Accuracy.* Make sure you look over your index, as published. Read over every entry, perhaps aloud, and check a few entries.
2. *Consistency.* Be sure that the treatment of any part of the book (or other item) is the same as another.

3. *Clarity.* Make certain that everything is clear about the content of the index. Present a scope note that is clear and concise, or if it is a separate index, ensure that there is an interesting introduction.
4. *Strings.* Beware of strings of undifferentiated page numbers.
5. *Presentation.* Be sure that the look is good, that you are proud of it.
6. *Subject content.* On the whole, a name index is not going to demonstrate the problems you have solved, and those clever aspects that will win it a prize.

If your index is 'merely' competent, don't send it in, or recommend it. If your index is pretty solid, and a separate thing, you will have a better chance than a good back-of-the-book index. If your index is remarkable, for heavens' sake send it in! There has always been criticism of the comparatively small number of indexes submitted, which has always led to criticism of the publicity put out.⁸ The Society of Indexers and the Library Association have worked hard at this. It may well be that more publicity should appear when the medal has been awarded. Certainly the Wheatley Medal has not yet achieved what the Library Association's Carnegie Medal has done in the way of media coverage – but it is easy to understand why the Carnegie Medal, and not one of the Reference Medals series, has achieved what it has.

The future

As for the future of the Wheatley Medal, for several years we have lived with some fear that our funding might be cut. We are part of the Library Association's Reference Awards, which are funded by Whitakers, a company that changed hands not so long ago. We have good relations with them, but in the commercial world the worry is bound to be there. There are suggestions from time to time that the Society of Indexers should go it alone, particularly to cater for more 'normal' indexes (i.e. the non-specialist publications), and fund 'our own' awards, but I am not going to enter the field of politics here. I do think publishers should be more involved in the Wheatley Medal, but that would take some negotiation. At present, they have something of a raw deal, in that they provide books upon request, which are probably unsaleable after our use, and not much commercial advantage is gained by being a Wheatley Medal winner. There may be more work for us to do on this aspect of a medal which is well appreciated by the profession.

Notes

The views in this paper are personal, and not those of the Wheatley Panel as a whole, nor of the organizations that support it.

1. On whom I have done a lot of work and written an account for the *New Dictionary of National Biography*.
2. Given by the Society of Indexers.
3. Notably *BS 3700: 1988, British Standard recommendations for preparing indexes to books, periodicals and other documents*.
4. Barbara Hird in her index to the *Cambridge history of English medieval literature* (Cambridge University Press).
5. Notable exceptions being *How to catch trout* (W. & R. Chambers, 1963), *A short history of Wilson's School* (1987) and *Copy-*

editing (Cambridge University Press, 1975), which won medals for J. M. Dickie, Neil Fisk and Margaret Anderson, respectively.

6. *The diary of Samuel Pepys* (Bell & Hyman, 1983), was edited and indexed by Robert Latham, the index comprising the whole of volume 11.
7. Richard Raper and colleagues for their index to *The Works of Charles Darwin* (Pickering and Chatto, 1989).
8. A criticism not on the whole in my view justified.

References

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Based on a talk and discussion at the Society of Indexers Annual Conference, Sheffield Hallam University, 1 July 2001. David Lee is a former Chairman of the Society of Indexers and was Assistant Editor of *The Indexer* for many years. He worked in public, special and educational libraries, as a lecturer, and as library adviser in the Department of Education and Science. From 1989 to date, post-BBC, he has indexed more or less full time. Email: leeindex@ukgateway.net

H. B. Wheatley: forthcoming facsimile editions

The Society of Indexers does not forget that its forerunner was the Index Society, founded by H. B. Wheatley at a time when quite major works were published without indexes, and when the indexes that did appear were often of a lamentable standard. To mark the centenary of the publication of his *How to make an index*, the Society of Indexers will in 2002 publish, at a reasonable price, facsimile editions of this and of his earlier *What is an index?*, both long out of print. Further details will be posted on the SI website (<http://www.socind.demon.co.uk>) and a full review of these treasures will appear in this journal. Meanwhile, we can assure you that both books are not only thoroughly relevant to the indexer of today, but thought-provoking and highly enjoyable.

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