The greatest and the worst indexes

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In September 2001, on the indexing email discussion list Index-L, Peter Rooney suggested that ‘a good project for the Wilson Committee of ASI would be to collect a list of candidates for the greatest indexes of all time’. I found this an irresistible suggestion, and hastened to discover the indexes on which praise has been most profusely heaped in The Indexer through the years.

1. The earliest, historically, is most certainly by the 16th-century ‘father of bibliography’, Conrad Gessner, hailed by Hans Wellisch as also the first compiler of multilingual and multiscrit indexes (Wellisch, 1978). His Historia Animalium, published in five volumes from 1551 to 1554, included indexes to the names of four-footed animals in Latin, Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, German, French, Spanish, English, Polish, Russian and Czech, all printed in separate sequences by language; the Greek and Hebrew names were shown in the original scripts, Arabic and Persian were partially transliterated, partially rendered in Hebrew letters. All entries were alphabetized letter by letter.

2. The Indexer published in 1967 two instalments of a series entitled ‘Indexing masterpieces’. The second, in the autumn 1967 issue (vol. 5, no. 4), dealt with the earlier index, James Thornton writing of Sir Edward Cook and Alexander Wedderburn’s index to their own edition of Ruskin’s Works (Thornton, 1967). The first volume appeared in 1903; the index volume (no. 39), in 1912. The editors declared that they aimed to produce ‘more than an ordinary index of reference’; instead, they hoped it would be ‘an analysis of Ruskin’s work’, and ‘in some measure serve the purpose of a concordance’. Thornton deemed it a ‘remarkable’ work, a ‘fine achievement showing very few inconsistencies’, in which ‘Cook and Wedderburn have added notably to the armoury of the indexer’. Michael Robertson (1994) wrote of this index in The Indexer:

The index is a vast monument to the skill and intelligence Cook and Wedderburn brought to their work: 689 two-column pages in length, most in 8-point type but descending to 6-point for detailed analytical articles (the entry for the Bible alone runs to 58 columns, with every single verse of every single chapter being given a subheading when mentioned by Ruskin). Its most fascinating, and perhaps unique, feature is its use of analytical synopses (rather like those given in the Oxford English Dictionary, on which the practice may have been modelled) at the head of longer entries.

3. The first ‘Indexing masterpieces’ article was by Esmond de Beer (1967), devoted to L. F. Powell’s index to his own six-volume revision of Boswell’s Life of Johnson (published by the Clarendon Press, 1950). De Beer (1967) described this index as

...a most efficient and most appropriate complement to the text. The index reflects the conversable character of the book to which it is attached: one dips into it, dallies, falls a willing victim, looks up reference after reference...the index is a most efficient and most appropriate complement to the text.

4. De Beer himself received retrospective praise from Robert Latham, Wheatley-winning indexer of Pepys’s diary, for his ‘superb index to the diary of John Evelyn with...its subtle refinements and almost inhuman accuracy’; ‘It gives you a model to follow’ (Latham, 1980, 1984). De Beer was himself the editor of this six-volume edition (Oxford University Press, 1955). After his death he was deemed in The Guardian ‘the king of indexers’ by Peter Laslett, who wrote:

The 600 pages of the index volume to Evelyn’s diary set a standard amongst the whole collection of books ever published in English.

5. In 1962, The Indexer reported a latter-day Gessner. H. D. Talbot, Lecturer in Geography at the University of Hong Kong, and the Society of Indexers’ (SI) Corresponding Member for Eastern Asia, wrote:

My wife (with my assistance) is at present indexing a translation and commentary on a Chinese Pharmacopoeia of the 16th century to be published by Hong Kong University Press. There is to be a Chinese Index, a Japanese Index, a set of Indexes for the other Asian languages, a clinical index, a chemical index, General Index, and also an index of botanical synonyms. (The Indexer, 1962)

6. In 1972, E. L. C. Mullins spoke to the AGM of SI as the Wheatley winner for 1971, and reviewed then all the first eight award-winning indexes. He pronounced the winner for 1965, Alison Quinn’s modern index to Richard Hakluyt’s Principall Navigations, ‘the most exciting index in the list’, as encountering ‘many and formidable difficulties...astoundingly generous with its information...a tour de force’ (Mullins, 1972). When the Medal was presented to Quinn, Sally Coole (1966) had commented:

It is constructed on a most ingenious plan, reminiscent of the well-known Chinese box...it combines with the analytical framework a large number of subsidiary indexes, each of which constitutes a review of all the material in the text dealing with its special subject.

7. In 1967 the Wheatley Medal was won by SI’s founder, G. Norman Knight, for his index to Winston S. Churchill...vol. 2, Young statesman, 1901–1919 by Randolph S. Churchill (Heinemann, 1967). Mullins (1972) said of this:

A superlatively fine contribution...Mr Knight has indexed the first volume also. Examine these two masterpieces of the indexer’s craft...they have the authentic quality of the master.

On Knight’s presentation with the award, Richard Bancroft (1968) had described the text of this proposed ten-volume series as:

...a historical work conceived on a huge scale. It covers nearly a hundred years and in this period nearly every figure and every
issue of any political importance in Great Britain is treated, often in considerable detail. . . . The index to volume 2 is on pages 723–775 and is about seven per cent of the volume.

8. It is rarely that an index receives a paean of praise in the national press. Oliver Stallybrass’s index to the four-volume *The collected essays, journalism and letters of George Orwell, 1920–50* (Secker & Warburg, 1968) did just that, as Knight recorded (Knight, 1969). Anthony Powell in the *Daily Telegraph* hailed it as ‘superlative’; *The Times* as ‘beautifully indexed’; *The Times Literary Supplement* as ‘exemplary’; and *The Financial Times* as ‘admirable’. The Economist asserted: ‘the editing and indexing are as thorough as they are excellent’.

9. Another index to receive wide praise from the press was the Wheatley Medal winner for 1983: that to *The diary of Samuel Pepys: Vol. XI Index*, edited by Robert Latham and W. Matthews (Bell & Hyman, 1983); index by Latham. Laudatory reviews of this index fill more than a page of the ‘Indexes reviewed’ section of *The Indexer* for October 1983, with a new category devised for them: ‘In a class by itself’ (pp. 272–3). *British Book News* averred: ‘the index is one of the best ever made’; the *Times* that it ‘succeeds by virtue of its astonishing thoroughness and accessibility’; and the *Times Literary Supplement* that ‘the primary requirements . . . that it should be accurate and comprehensive – are meticulously observed; but Latham has gone much farther than that . . .

10. Also published in 1983 was the five-volume (3002-page) index to the 43 volumes of *The Yale edition of Horace Walpole’s correspondence* (Oxford University Press). This massive index was compiled by Warren Hunting Smith with three assistants. *The Indexer* of October 1984 (p. 138) reprinted Robert Halsband’s *Times Literary Supplement* review of the index, including:

> The index is as meticulously thorough as human minds can contrive . . . All the letters are sifted and their contents classified in categories of astonishing detail. . . . typographical opulence, perhaps unique among indexes, helps to speed the skimming eye – exemplary features . . . This great edition has been called encyclopaedic. Its index justifies that accolade.

11. A whole article in *The Indexer* (Gordon, 1990) was devoted to *The Princeton Alciati companion: a glossary of neo-Latin words and phrases used by Andrea Alciati and the Emblem Book writers of his time*, published by Garland in 1989 and written and indexed by William Heckscher. The ‘English Index to the Latin Glossary’, 107 pages of the 296-page volume, was ‘designed to stand on its own feet’ and included ‘interior reference to catchwords within the English index which required and received a broader treatment’. Some entries constitute learned essays on their subjects, such as associative thinking, cricket, portraits, research, style, weather; the entry for ‘humour’ is a full three-page essay on the humour of the Renaissance; ‘Nachleben’ receives a page and a half. The volume was hailed as having both its index and glossary . . . replete with stimulating ideas and almost encyclopaedic information, providing illuminating and enjoyable reading . . . each enriches the other . . . WSH’s unique method of indexing enables the mind to float along an intensely fertile stream of relationships.

12. Finally, only one index has won both the UK Wheatley Medal and the US H. W. Wilson Award: the 34-volume *Dictionary of art* published by Grove’s Dictionaries in the USA and Macmillan Publishers in the UK in 1996, indexed by Gillian Northcott and Ruth Levitt. The report ran:

> The index volume of this prestigious work is over a thousand pages, each page carrying five columns of entries with around 70 entries per column. It has been compiled by indexers who are clearly sympathetic to the needs of the dictionary’s many users, bridging the gap admirably between the information required by the casual reader and the specifics demanded by art history scholars. . . . an example of scholarly indexing at its very best. (Terris, 1997)

* * *

We may note that, of these 12 volumes whose indexes received such high praise, two are works of biology or medicine (*Historia Animalium*, the Chinese Pharmacopoeia); two are reference works (*The Princeton Alciati companion, Dictionary of art*); three are collections of works or papers (*Ruskin’s Works, George Orwell’s shorter works, Walpole’s correspondence*); one an account of journeys (*Principall Navigations*); two biographies (Boswell’s *Life of Johnson, Winston S. Churchill*); and two diaries (John Evelyn, Pepys). The indexes were compiled in two cases by the authors of the works (Gessner, Heckscher); in four by the editors, and in one by the editor’s wife (Cook and Wedderburn, Powell, de Beer, Latham, and Alison Quinn); and in five cases indexers were separately engaged (the Talbots, Knight, Stallybrass, Smith and his assistants, Northcote and Levitt).

This is the list of 12 contenders for the title of ‘greatest index’, according to issues of *The Indexer*. I should be glad to receive comments, further suggestions or votes for a possible sequel report.

* * *

On the other hand . . . Andrew Christenson, having sent us the index cited below as no. 9 in 1994, challenged readers ‘to come up with a worse index’. Here is a list of the 12 worst indexes denounced in this journal. To appreciate their awfulness in full, readers should turn to the exposedes cited. It is the cumulative effect of all the faults cited that convinces; only a few examples can be picked out here for each one.

The indexers are not named or shamed here: indeed, we do not generally know their identity.

1. Oliver Stallybrass (1974) denounced the index to a French book, *L’Amérique et les Amériques* (publisher and date not given), as ‘the weirdest and most incompetent index I have ever needed to consult’. For more than a page of the journal he gives detailed substantiation of this claim. It includes:

> The idea of indexing concepts rather than words is wholly alien to this indexer . . . the prize for fatuousness must go to the indexing of the list, facing the title-page, of the twelve volumes in the series to which this one belongs; thus volume 1, *L’Homme avant l’écriture*, is indexed under ‘écriture’ as well as under its author . . . perhaps the most useful wodge of all is the half-column and more under ‘États-Unis’, which gives no fewer than 198 unadorned page numbers, from 5 (for chapter-headings in the ‘Sommaire’) to 396 (actually it’s 400), on which page there is a caption for a facing plate that includes the words, ‘. . . à Salt Lake City, États-Unis’ . . . the indexes are no more accurate in matters of detail than their conceptual framework is intelligently
constructed . . . no fewer than 100 headings are either wrongly alphabetized or correctly alphabetized under a wrong spelling . . . a number have resulted in duplicate or near-duplicate headings.


All page references are single, double (24–5, 24–25, 60–1, 60–61, sic., all occur) or single followed by _et seq._ Closer discrimination is apparently not possible, even where the index entry copies the chapter or section heading. Thus, chapter 10, ‘The evolution of technological processes’, pages 168–85, is indexed as ‘TECHNOLOGICAL PROCESSES, evolution of, 168 _et seq._’, while chapter 7, ‘Deficiency diseases’, pages 110–27, manages only DEFICIENCY 110 and DISEASE 110.

Three pages of index to 243 of text seems skimpy – nevertheless, there are many duplicated entries . . . Space saved by substituting cross-references might have been allotted to glosses for such bare, unexplained entries as:

Bonteheuwel; Bracconot; Clary; Ermer; Ergosterol; Ghee; Gracilis; Hemeralopia; Phytophthora; Terpenes; Voit

(Respectively, these are a settlement near Cape Town; a French chemist; a spice; hulled wheats; a chemical compound; clarified butter; a muscle; night-blindness; a fungus; oil constituents; a German chemist.)

Strangest, though, is the placing of entries. Some subjects can be found only as obscure subheadings, not having their own entry. CATTLE, COWS, CHILDREN and COOKING (perhaps the indexer was allergic to the letter C?) can be found only under:

Breedes of cattle 32, 51 [actually pages 32–3 deal with the live-weight of cattle that land in Africa can sustain; no reference to Africa either]

Endocrine glands of cow 45 [this is the only mention in the index of cows, whose blood plasma is tabulated on page 43, udder described on 44, emotions on pages 45–6, and appetites 46–50, with photographs of two on page 51]

Food/cooking of 10–11

Weight of school children 230

Terminology is quite unsettled and disordered. ANIMALS has three subheadings, but no reference to WILD ANIMALS, which is a separate entry under W, nor to cattle or cows, so slighted here.


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The index is sectionalized by the use of 34 headings in bold type, 10 of which are out of alphabetical sequence. Each has subheadings, some indented and some not; some in alphabetical order, some in page sequence, and some in no perceptibly meaningful sequence of any kind. Indentation is so wildly irrational that it is often impossible to tell where subheadings end and new headings begin.

The index has 380 entries, only 340 of which are given numbered page-references, and almost exactly one-third of these are followed by _et seq._ The remaining entries – more than one in ten of the whole – have as their only references such terms as ‘Post Chapter 3’ (note arabic numeral), ‘Post Chapter XI’ (note roman numeral), ‘See Appendix I’ (without brackets), ‘(See Schedule end of Chapter 1)’ (with brackets), and even ‘(See each Section respectively)’ (whatever that may mean!).

Cross-references are hilariously useless and ludicrously inconsistent. Within less than half of one page (page = a column), four successive cross-references are printed exactly as follows:

See Life Assurance for further details
See House Purchase
See also Index on ‘School Fees,

‘Suicide’ is cross-referenced to ‘Suicide’, by a tortuous path which begins as ‘(see Life Assurance Policy restrictions),’ leading to the only fully capitalized heading in the entire index, ‘LIFE ASSURANCE,’ which is followed two pages later by a heading – doubtless intended for a subheading, but unindented – ‘Policy Restrictions’, which in turn is followed (though separated by two intervening headings, not subheadings) by a further heading (not subheading), ‘Suicide/Third Party interests’, which has the same single page-reference as the first ‘Suicide’ which initiated this snakes-and-ladders operation.

. . . repetitiousness [which] so richly enhances the user’s chances of retrieving by serendipity information which cannot be traced by logic or commonsense.

The book’s ten appendices are listed by number and title in the index, under A for Appendices, but share one-page-reference, ‘Post Chapter XI 321’. On the last page of the text, the author draws a conclusion; with dog-like devotion, the index includes a heading, ‘Conclusion . . . 320’. . . perhaps the most engagingly maladroit entry is: ‘Retirement Policies–Partnerships (see Chapter on Partnerships Part 11)’ (see also Self-employed Deferred Annuities); under ‘Partnership’ the index has 17 subheadings and 2 sub-subheadings but no mention of ‘Retirement’, and the ‘see also’ reference has 20 subheadings but no mention of ‘Partnerships’. But what about those three little words, ‘see Chapter on’ (my emphasis)?

These few examples do little more than scratch the surface of this amazing index. To misquote St Thomas Aquinas, the whole is worse than the sum of its parts.


[The book is provided with] a ‘Geographical Index’ (title and running head in 3 languages) covering 2½–two-column pages (32 entries: names of countries); and a ‘Subject Index’ (title in English only, running head in 3 languages) covering 3½ pages of which the first contains only a list, alphabetically arranged, of the 30 subject headings which follow, still alphabetically arranged, but this time attended by massed ranks of page-references. There might have been 27 subject headings, but the indexer clearly felt that ‘Hospital Libraries’ might be a little long for comfort and has divided it into four separate entries, of which the longest has only 74 lines (say 740 references). There are no subheadings and no indenting; the page-numbers are placed under the entry-word, full out across the column, line under line until they stop. It will be seen that for a book of 1264 pages this pair of indexes is a miracle of conciseness . . .

Apart from two see also references there is no change of type-face. . . . The entries are in general not only few but splendidly long: ‘United States of America’ has 84 lines of numbers; ‘United Kingdom’ has 44; even ‘Bibliotherapy’ has 22. Thus the total view, of handsome, unbroken blocks of greyish-black print on a whitish ground, offers an almost hypnotic design of severe restraint; it should prove ideal for library wallpaper in times of recession.

5. In discussing encyclopedia indexes, Hans Wellisch (1982) observes of the _ALA world encyclopedia of library and information services_ (American Library Association, 1980): ‘The editors proudly state that the “innovative Parallel Index . . . is the first of its kind in comparable reference works”. Let us hope that it will also be the last . . . a caricature of an index.’ Wellisch’s specific complaints are:
The claim that ‘all’ related issues are brought together by references printed in the margins of the text (instead of in the back of the book) is vastly exaggerated. . . . under ‘China, People’s Republic of’, there is only a single index reference to a related topic, namely the ‘Chinese library in Fresno’; this turns out to be the caption of a picture showing a reading room ca. 1910, one of only two illustrations of the article ‘Bilingual and ethnic groups, services to’, and it shows some elderly Chinese gentlemen in rocking chairs, warmed by a tiny cast-iron stove. . . . Apart from this single index entry, there is nothing to refer to Chinese classification systems, which are dealt with at some length in the encyclopedia on p. 149, nor to the articles on libraries in Hong Kong and Singapore, both of which deal extensively with Chinese holdings. . . . This is only one example of complete lack of indexing and cross-referencing, and dozens of others could easily be found. . . . such index entries as there are often try to prevent or to repeat what the reader will find in the article to which the entry refers. For example, there is an index entry ‘hybreda’ (a gross misspelling of ‘hybrida’), which goes on to say ‘Renaissance script for vernacular texts, 476’. On that page, just about the same information is found in an article on ‘Renaissance libraries’.

6. John Vickers (1987) wrote of Conflict and reconciliation: studies in Methodism and ecumenism in England 1740–1982 by John Munsey Turner (Epworth Press, 1985): ‘the index is a dreadful botch which seriously detracts from the value of the book’. He goes on to prove his case over more than three pages, including:

Let us begin with those blemishes that are obvious at a glance, such as the strings of undifferentiated references which are the hallmark of incompetent indexing. These occur after a number of key headings (e.g. ‘Bunting’; ‘Establishment’; ‘Oxford Movement’), the worst examples being ‘Wesley, John’ (about 100 references) and ‘Wesleyanism’ (about 50 references). Some of these strings are much longer than they need be, because the index fails to recognize passages in which there is a sustained treatment of a topic, and to distinguish these from a number of separate references on consecutive pages (i.e. 113–17 rather than 113, 114, 115, 116, 117). The index contains references of cryptic brevity, e.g. to something called ‘The Scheme’. On examination, this turns out to be the 1968 Scheme for Anglican–Methodist unity. To make matters worse, there is a separate entry for this under ‘Anglican–Methodist Scheme’, with different page numbers.

In the case of persons, there is positive discrimination against those who are so well known as to require no identification in the text. Wesley’s legal adviser appears in the index simply as ‘Chulow’, because that is how he appears in the text; and for the same reason, Joseph Tucker, Dean of Gloucester, appears simply as ‘Dean Tucker’. . . . Lack of background knowledge combined with imprecision leads this indexer to confuse different people with similar names and to enter them under a single heading; e.g.:

Lord Peter King and Edward King, Bishop of Lincoln [appearing jointly in a single entry as ‘King, Peter’]
G. T. Roberts [died 1832] and Thomas Roberts [20th century Methodist minister] and Thomas Roberts [the biblical scholar]
George Smith [a Wesleyan historian] and George Adam Smith [the biblical scholar]
Samuel Wesley [John Wesley’s father] and Samuel Sebastian Wesley [his great-nephew].

Another entry reads: ‘Arnold, Stanley, 90’. A reader eager to discover the identity of this ‘Stanley Arnold’ is met with a reference in the text to ‘the great Victorian broad-churchmen like Stanley Arnold and Talbot’. It is obvious that a comma is missing between the first two names, so that the indexing should be under ‘Arnold, Thomas’ and ‘Stanley, A. P.’ (both of whom already have an entry).

The entry Irenicum is another example of error derived from an inconsistency in the text. This is a reference to Bishop Stillingfleet’s Irenicon, spelled correctly on p. 21, but incorrectly on p. 20.

Personal names are treated quite arbitrarily, sometimes being furnished with initials only, sometimes with a first name, sometimes neither – having no relationship to what is in the text. Initials are not always sufficient for identification: the entry ‘Waddy, S. D.’ could refer either to the Rev. Samuel Dougal Waddy or to his equally well-known son, Samuel Danks (‘Judge’) Waddy.

It seems clear that the indexer has never heard of subheadings and does not understand how to use cross-references. He manages to commit the cardinal sin of dispersing references under two or more synonymous headings. For example, there are separate entries, with different page references, for:

Oxford Movement/Puseyism/Tractarianism [and even so, some references, such as pp. 157–8, are missed altogether]

Lord’s Supper/Lord’s Table [two references appear under the latter where the reference in the text is clearly to the former]

There are many other examples of unnecessary duplication of headings, which should have been replaced by a single consolidated entry, . . .

Lack of discrimination is writ large across this index. Thus, finding on p. 55 a reference to ‘a recent study of the concept of righteousness in Paul by J. A. Ziesler’, the indexer can only pick up the name ‘Ziesler’, and ignores the fact that it is Paul’s teaching that is the topic under discussion in the passage as a whole. Neither Paul himself, nor, needless to say, the concept of ‘righteousness’ is indexed.

7. ‘Thundering about indexing’ (The Indexer, 1990) records Bernard Levin’s fulmination in The Times (10 Nov. 1989) about the ‘full, almost heroic awfulness’ of the index to John Henry Newman: a biography by Ian Ker (Oxford University Press, 1988), taxing it with paragraphs of undifferentiated page numbers and with subheadings ‘as ridiculous as they are otiose . . . listed only in the order in which they appear in the book’.

8. A year later, Cherry Lavell (1991) denounced the index to volume 63 (1989), of Leicestershire Archaeological & Historical Society’s Transactions: ‘The index (Indexer anonymous) contains some real howlers. The worst entry of all runs:

Leicestershire/Leicester churches visited by Archdeacon Burnaby, 1793–97, in the order that they appear between pp 48–66 often more than once: Cossington, Twyford, Thorpe Satchville, Hungarton, Leicester churches, Arnesby, [etc. – on the 46 more lines, 3–4 names per line, all in jumbled order] Is this the final copout? ‘Sort it out yourself’ seems to be the message of this entry.

Other points: the pottery is not under POTTERY but under EARLY BRONZE AGE. Moreover, there is a very long pottery report within an article, which does not rate even a ROMANO-BRITISH POTTERY or MEDIEVAL POTTERY entry; nor do the several villas rate a VILLA entry. AXES, PREHISTORIC rate a single page reference for a 6-page article, but their provenance, Charnwood Forest, does not get an entry under Charnwood. Indeed, the place-names are pretty arbitrarily treated, for minor references to JEWRY WALL MUSEUM are solemnly entered.

I was unable to deduce any principles on which this index had been constructed, except that it goes for nice concrete names, with only haphazard attention to subjects.

9. Andrew Christenson (1994) presents with horror sections of the index to The story of Peking man by Jia Lanpo and Huang Weiwen (published jointly by the Foreign Languages Press of Beijing and Oxford University Press of Hong Kong, 1990). He comments:
There are many problems as far as good indexing practice goes. The interesting thing is that the text reads quite well and does not have many of the typical Chinese-to-English translation problems. The index looks as if it was made by marking significant words or phrases in the text and then transferring them directly to the index without any further work.

Yet, he reflects, ‘this may not be the worst index in archaeology because it is so blatantly bad that the user would immediately be suspicious of it’.

Here are some sample entries (sic, all of them):

- almost complete mandible of Peking Man 131
- another Peking Man tooth 27
- big concave scraper 74
- fairly complete Peking Man skullcap 227
- first complete Peking Man skullcap 59, 65, 72
- first Peking Man skullcap 66, 70, 147, 229, 241
- from fish to human 216
- list of items boxed 161
- other paleolithic sites in China 107

‘Peking Man’ are the first words of 38 entries, including

- Peking Man assemblage 215
- Peking Man fossil 16, 24
- Peking Man fossil boxes 161
- Peking Man fossil collection 181
- Peking Man fossil remains 183

and followed by –

physical characteristics of Peking Man 218

Under T we find:

The 50th anniversary of the finding of the first Peking Man skullcap was commemorated 225
twenty-four sites 195

10. The Indexer (1992) quotes Bernard Levin’s diatribe in The Times (Nov. 1991), against Essays of Montaigne by M. A. Screech (Allen Lane, 1991). ‘Screech’s “index” is an abomination . . . an inexcusable insult to his author . . . nothing but a list of proper names . . . with a string of undifferentiated page-numbers . . . a shameful dégringolade’.

11. ‘Oh, dear, what can the matter be this time?’ wails John Vickers (1993) of the index to Amos: Victorian Methodist traveller by John Matthews (Self Publishing Association), ‘Just when you feel confident of having touched bottom, an even more horrendous example of botched indexing rears its ugly head!’ He makes his case thus:

The evidence that the index was produced on a computer (probably without an actual indexing program) is paraded at the very beginning, where the As are preceded by a group of misplaced entries in quotation marks.

The places in which Amos Matthews exercised his ministry are used as the main chapter headings and – presumably for that reason – do not feature in the index. This is an error of judgement, since the same place-names do occasionally turn up in other chapters. There is one exception, Lancaster. For no obvious reason, this is singled out for inclusion, only to be followed by a string of 49 page references, most of which are consecutive and could have been reduced to ‘161–200’.

There is conflation of different items whose only link is that they share a common label. The entry ‘Bethel, 123,126’ conceals the fact that the first reference is to a ‘Bethel Evangelistic movement’ in Liverpool, while the second is to Bethel Chapel in Wakefield.

The statement that a local Liberal M.P. was eventually elevated to the Peerage as Lord Burton gives rise to the entry ‘Peerage, 60’. The comment that Amos ‘had already slipped into his role as the Nonconformist Bishop’ is solemnly indexed under that last phrase. On the other hand, many significant details do not get a look-in.

12. Finally, we return to Christenson’s (1994) article, which also presented sections from the index to Life and fate of the ancient Library of Alexandria by Mostafa El-Abbadi (UNESCO/UNDP, 2nd edition 1992), ‘equally giving both the horrors and its own built-in warning’. Self-exposure is the worst judgement we can accord this:

Librarians
    See: Library, chief librarians
Libraries, ancient 75–6
Libraries, destruction by Crusades 175
Libraries, formation of 73
Libraries, history of 75–6
Libraries, in royal palaces 75
Libraries, in temples 74–5
Library 7–11, 30, 42
Library and scholarship, 69, 103
Library assistants 100
Library, book collecting 95–9, 169
Library, catalogue of 100–2
Library, chief librarians 92–4
Library, classification system of 100, 101–2
Library, destruction during Alexandrian War 150–2
Library, destruction during Arab Conquest 168–73
Library, fate of 145–79
Library, founding of 172
Library, history of 76–82
Library, management of 92–4
Library of Asur-Banipal 75
Library, organization of 99–102
Library, Ramesseum 66
Library, registration of books in 100
Library, role of 9
Library, Sarapeum branch 42, 91–2, 158, 160–1
Library, store rooms 152
Library, store rooms of 100
Medical research 90
Medicine 104, 117, 184
Medicine, apprenticeship 88
Medicine, Callimachian school of 119
Medicine, Coan school of Hippocrates 118
Medicine, divine healing 122–4
Medicine, Empirical school of 119–20, 140
Medicine, Greek and Egyptian interchange 121–2
Medicine, Herophilic school of 117–20, 140
Medicine, Methodist school in Rome 119
Medicine, terminology 119
Medicine, training and practice, 120–4
Mediterranean 27
Mediterranean countries 44
Mediterranean, western 76
Mediterranean world 18, 10–11
Megale bibliothekè
    See: Library
Neo-Platonism
    See: Philosophical schools, Neoplatonic
Neo-Platonists 129
Neo-Platonists
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Neo-Phytagorians 124, 132
Neo-Phytagorians
    See: Neopthagorians

Again, as with the ‘greatest indexes’, I would welcome comments, votes and further suggestions for the twelve worst indexes.
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