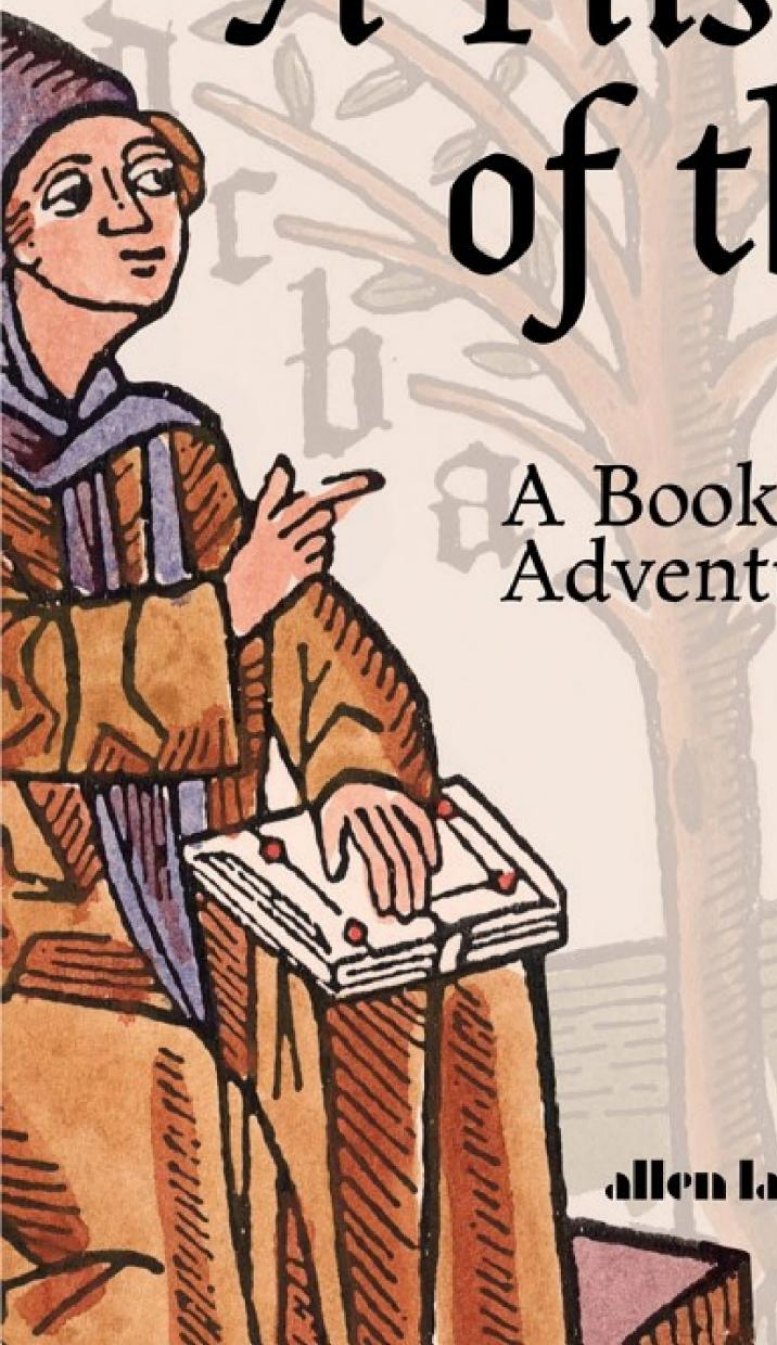
Dennis Duncan

# Index, A History of the

## A Bookish Adventure



allen lane

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# About the Author

**Dennis Duncan** is a writer, translator, lecturer in English at University College London, and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. He has published numerous academic books, including *Book Parts* and *The Oulipo and Modern Thought*, as well as translations of Michel Foucault, Boris Vian, and Alfred Jarry. His writing has appeared in the *Guardian*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and the *London Review of Books*, and recent articles have considered Mallarmé and jugs, James Joyce and pornography, and the history of Times New Roman.

*For Mia and Molly*

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# Introduction

> 'I for my part venerate the inventor of Indexes ... that unknown labourer in literature who first laid open the nerves and arteries of a book.'
>
> Isaac D'Israeli, *Literary Miscellanies*

It is hard to imagine working with books – writing an essay, a lecture, a report, a sermon – without the ability to find what you're looking for, quickly and easily: without, that is, the convenience of a good index. This convenience, of course, is not confined to people who write for a living. It spills over into other disciplines, into everyday life, and some of the earliest indexes appear in legal statutes, medical texts, recipe books. The humble back-of-book index is one of those inventions that are so successful, so integrated into our daily practices, that they can often become invisible. But, like any piece of technology, the index has its history, one that, for nearly 800 years, was intimately entwined with a particular form of the book – the codex: the sheaf of pages, folded and bound together at the spine. Now, however, it has entered the digital era as the key technology underpinning our online reading. The very first webpage, after all, was a subject index.[1] As for the search engine, the port of embarkation for so much of our internet navigation, Google engineer Matt Cutts explains that 'The first thing to understand is that when you do a Google search, you aren't actually searching the web. You're searching Google's index of the web.'[2] Today, the index organizes our lives, and this book will chart its curious path from the monasteries and universities of Europe in the thirteenth century to the glass-and-steel HQs of Silicon Valley in the twenty-first.

A history of the index is really a story about time and knowledge and the relationship between the two. It's the story of our accelerating need to access information at speed, and of a parallel need for the contents of books to be divisible, discrete, extractable units of knowledge. This is information science, and the index is a fundamental element of that discipline's architecture. But the evolution of the index also offers us a history of reading in microcosm. It is bound up with the rise of the universities and the arrival of printing, with Enlightenment philology and punchcard computing, the emergence of the page number and of the hashtag. It is more than simply a data structure. Even today, faced with the incursions of Artificial Intelligence, the book index remains primarily the work of flesh-and-blood indexers, professionals whose job is to mediate between author and audience. The product of human labour, indexes have produced human consequences, saving heretics from the stake and keeping politicians from high office. They have also, naturally, attracted people with a special interest in books, and our roster of literary indexers will include Lewis Carroll, Virginia Woolf, Alexander Pope and Vladimir Nabokov. The compiling of indexes has not, historically, been either the most glamorous or the most lucrative of professions. We might think of Thomas Macaulay's lament that Samuel Johnson, the most eminent writer of his age, nevertheless spent his days surrounded by 'starving pamphleteers and

indexmakers'.[3] Had he but known it, Johnson might at least have consoled himself with the thought that in this company of indexers he would be surrounded by the most eminent writers of other ages too, and that, though undersung, the technology they were tinkering with would be central to the reading experience at the dawn of the next millennium.

What do we mean by an index? At its most general, it is a system adopted as a timesaver, telling us where to look for things. The name suggests a spatial relationship, a map of sorts: something here will point you to – will *indicate* – something there. The map need not exist in the world; it is enough for it to exist in our minds. Writing in the middle of the last century, Robert Collison proposed that, whenever we organize the world around us so that we know where to find things, we are in fact indexing. He offers a pair of illustrations that could hardly be more 1950s if they came wearing brothel creepers:

> When a housewife makes a separate place for everything in the kitchen she is in fact creating a living index, for not only she, but all her household, will gradually get used to the system she has created and be able to discover things for themselves ... A man will get into the habit of always putting change in one pocket, keys in another, cigarette-case in a third – an elementary indexing habit which stands him in good stead when he checks up in his hurry to the station to see whether he has remembered his season-ticket.[4]

A mental index: that's how women find the sugar and men find their cigarette-cases. In fact, glibness aside, Collison makes an important point here. The mapping of the kitchen works not just for the housewife but for 'all her household': it exists in multiple minds. What if someone were to write it down: 'flour: top cupboard on the right; spoons: drawer by the fridge', and so on? Then we would have a system that could be used instantly, on the fly, even by someone who was unfamiliar with the kitchen. Now we are getting closer to something more like what we, surely, think of as an index, something that doesn't exist solely in the mind; a kind of list or table telling us where things are. We expect some abbreviation, presumably. A map that's as big as the territory is an absurdity; so too with an index. A library catalogue – library catalogues, as we will see in Chapter 1, have played a major role in information science – will boil books down to their salient details: title, author, genre. In the same way, a back-of-book index will distil its source work into a collection of keywords: names, places, concepts. Abstraction, then: reducing the material, summarizing it, to create something new and separate. The index is not a copy of the thing itself.

What else? As Collison says, most of us can carry around the layout of a kitchen in our heads. If you had to write it down, how long would your kitchen inventory be? Not, perhaps, unmanageable. But what about a longer inventory? All the objects in your house? All the books in a library? When the list approaches a certain length it becomes unwieldy: it becomes no more convenient to search through the list than to search the shelves themselves. What we need is arrangement. The index needs to be ordered in a way that its users will recognize, that makes it easy to navigate. This is where the index and the table of contents diverge.

Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, rather unhelpfully, defines *index* as 'the table of contents to a book', and on the face of it the two have much in common. Both are

lists of labels with locators, i.e. page numbers (but, as we'll see, the page number too has its own history, and other types of locator – Bible chapters, for instance – predate it). Both point to places in, or sections of, the main text, and in the late Middle Ages the two even go by the same array of names – *register*, *table*, *rubric* – making them indistinguishable without closer inspection. When Chaucer's Knight briskly refuses to speculate on what happens to one of the characters in his tale after their death – 'I nam no divynistre: / "Of soules" find I nought in this registre' (in other words, 'I have no special insight: my register has no entry for "Souls"') – it is hard to know precisely which type of list he has in mind. Nevertheless, the two are quite distinct book parts – bookends straddling the main text, one before, one after – each with its own function and history.

Even without locators, the table of contents provides an overview of a work's structure: it follows the ordering of the text, revealing its architecture. We can glance at a table and reasonably conjecture what the overall argument is. To a degree, therefore, a table of contents is platform independent. It offers broad-brush navigation even in a work that exists as a series of scrolls – and indeed it has a history that stretches back into antiquity, before the arrival of the codex. We know of at least four Latin writers, and one Greek, from the classical period who attached a table of contents to their works.[5] Here, for example, is Pliny the Elder, the great Roman naturalist, dedicating his magnum opus the *Natural History* to the Emperor Titus:

> As it was my duty in the public interest to have consideration for claims upon your time, I have appended to this letter a table of contents of the several books, and have taken very careful precautions to prevent your having to read them. You by these means will secure for others that they will not need to read right through them either, but only look for the particular point that each of them wants, and will know where to find it.[6]

Or, to paraphrase, 'Because you're so busy and important, I know you won't be able to read the whole thing. Therefore, I've attached a handy table so you can browse what's on offer and pick the chapters that interest you.'

A lengthy work like the *Natural History* would be spread over many scrolls, maybe even dozens. Locating a portion of the work would be a matter first of finding the right one, then laying it on the table and unfurling it carefully to the desired section. Not an unimaginably tedious process, as long as one *does* end up at the desired section. The chapter, after all, is a large enough division of text to make the effort worthwhile. But let us for a moment allow ourselves an anachronistic fantasy: let us imagine that, along with the table of contents, Pliny also supplies a new device with his work, an innovation beamed in from another age a thousand years hence, an instrument that Pliny, without knowing quite why, decides to call an 'index'. And let us imagine that Titus, late one night, is moved to see what the *Natural History* has to say about one of his predecessors on the throne, the Emperor Nero, murderer of Titus' childhood best friend. (In modern webspeak we have a name for this type of late-night reading: doomscrolling.) By candlelight our imperial reader unrolls Pliny's index. The *Natural History* makes six references to Nero: three in Book VIII, one in Book X, a couple more in Book XI. Titus notes them all down and, after locating the scroll containing Book VIII, spends an age finding the first mention, a passing reference to a minor architectural alteration to the Circus Maximus carried out at Nero's command. Another frenzy of rolling and

unrolling, but the second reference is even more glancingly related to the topic in hand. It concerns the faithful howling of a dog distraught at its master's execution under Nero. Titus groans. By now he is getting frustrated. The balance of labour and reward, of time spent scrolling versus time spent reading, is not, he reasons, a favourable one. He checks the third locator, but several minutes later all he has learned is that his predecessor once spent 4 million sesterses on woollen bedspreads. The Emperor allows himself a brief smile then retires, unsatisfied, to bed. It is not hard to see why the index is an invention of the codex era, and not the age of the scroll. It is a truly random-access technology, and as such it relies on a form of the book that can be opened with as much ease in the middle, or at the end, as at the beginning. The codex is the medium in which the index first makes sense.

Furthermore, unlike a table of contents, an index without locators is about as much use as a bicycle without wheels. It doesn't enable us to gauge roughly where to open the book, and it doesn't present us with the argument in summary. This is because the chief mechanism of the index is arbitrariness. Its principal innovation is in severing the relationship between the structure of the work and the structure of the table. The ordering of an index is reader-oriented, rather than text-oriented: if you know what you're looking for, the letters of the alphabet provide a universal, text-independent system in which to look it up. (We might even say that most indexes are doubly arbitrary, since the commonest locator – the page number – bears no intrinsic relationship to the work or its subject matter, but only to its medium, the book.)

So, while the odd table of contents may creep in from time to time, this is a book about the index, about the alphabetical table that breaks down a book into its constituents, its characters, its subjects, or even its individual words; a piece of technology – an add-on – designed to speed up a certain mode of reading, what academics have taken to calling 'extract reading', for those of us who, like the Emperor Titus, are too time-poor to start at the beginning.

As for the vexed issue of the plural – whether we should use the Anglicized *indexes* or the Latinate *indices* – the great Victorian bibliographer Henry Wheatley, in his book *What is an Index?* (1878), points to Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, where the word is *indexes*. If the Anglicized form is good enough for Shakespeare, reasons Wheatley, it should be good enough for us, and this book will follow him in this. Indices are for mathematicians and economists; indexes are what you find at the back of a book.

When I first began to teach English Literature at university, here is how a lesson would typically begin:

**Me:** Can everyone please turn to page one hundred and twenty-eight of *Mrs Dalloway*?

**Student A:** What page is it in the Wordsworth edition?

**Student B:** What page is it in the Penguin edition?

**Student C (*holding up a book: mid-century; hardback; no jacket*):** I don't know what edition I've got – it's my mum's. What chapter is it?

After a minute or so, homing in via chapters and paragraphs, we would all be ready to analyse the same passage, only to go through the same process a couple of times more each class. About seven years ago, however, I noticed that something different

was beginning to happen. I would still ask everyone to look at a particular extract from the novel; I would still, more in hope than expectation, give the page reference from the prescribed edition; a sea of hands would still go up immediately. But this time the question would be different: 'What does the passage start with?' Many of the students now were reading on digital devices – on Kindles, on iPads, sometimes on their phones – devices which did not use page numbers, but which came equipped with a search function. Historically, a special type of index, known as a concordance, would present an alphabetical list of every word in a given text – the works of Shakespeare, say, or the Bible – and all the places they appear. In my classroom I began to notice how the power of the concordance had been extended infinitely. Digitization had meant that the ability to search for a particular word or phrase was no longer tied to an individual work; now it was part of the eReader's software platform. Whatever you're reading, you can always hit Ctrl+F if you know what you're looking for: 'One of the triumphs of civilisation, Peter Walsh thought.'

At the same time, the ubiquity of the search engine has given rise to a widespread anxiety that search has become a mentality, a mode of reading and learning that is supplanting the old modes, bringing with it a host of cataclysmic ills. It is, we are told, changing our brains, shortening our attention spans and eroding our capacity for memory. In literature, the novelist Will Self has declared that the serious novel is dead: we no longer have the patience for it.[7] This is the Age of Distraction, and it is the search engine's fault. A few years ago, an influential article in the *Atlantic* asked the question, 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?' and answered, strongly, in the affirmative.[8]

But if we take the long view, this is nothing more than a recent outbreak of an old fever. The history of the index is full of such fears – that nobody will read properly any more, that extract reading will take the place of lengthier engagements with books, that we will ask new questions, perform new types of scholarship, forget the old ways of close reading, become deplorably, incurably inattentive – and all because of that infernal tool, the book index. In the Restoration period, the pejorative *index-raker* was coined for writers who pad out their works with unnecessary quotations, while on the Continent Galileo grumbled at the armchair philosophers who, 'in order to acquire a knowledge of natural effects, do not betake themselves to ships or crossbows or cannons, but retire into their studies and glance through an index or a table of contents to see whether Aristotle has said anything about them'.[9] The book index: killing off experimental curiosity since the seventeenth century.

And yet, four centuries later, the sky has not fallen down. The index has endured, but so, alongside it, have readers, scholars, inventors. The way we read (the *ways* that we read, we should say, since everyone, every day, reads in many different modes: novels, newspapers, menus, street signs all require a different type of attention of us) might not be the same as twenty years ago. But neither were the ways we read then the same as those of, say, Virginia Woolf's generation, or a family in the eighteenth century, or during the first flush of the printing press. Reading does not have a Platonic ideal (and, for Plato, as we will find out, it was far from ideal). What we consider to be normal practice has always been a response to a complex of historical circumstances, with every shift in the social and technological environment producing an evolutionary effect in what 'reading' means. Not to evolve as readers – to wish that, as a society, we still read habitually with the same profound absorption as, say, the inhabitants of an eleventh-century monastery,

isolated from society with a library of half a dozen volumes – is as absurd as complaining that a butterfly is not beautiful enough. It is how it is because it has adapted perfectly to its environment.

This history of the book index, then, will do more than recount simply the successive refinements of this seemingly innocuous piece of text technology. It will show how the index responded to other shifts in the reading ecosystem – the rise of the novel, of the coffee-house periodical, of the scientific journal – and how readers, and reading, changed at these points. And it will show how the index often shouldered the blame for the anxieties of those invested in the modes of reading that went before. It will chart the relative fortunes of two types of index, the word index (also known as a *concordance*) and the subject index, the first unfailingly faithful to the text it serves, the second balancing its allegiances between the work and the community of readers who will come to it. Both emerged at the same moment in the Middle Ages, with the subject index rising steadily in stature so that, by the mid nineteenth century, Lord Campbell could boast of having tried to make indexes mandatory by law in new books.[10] The concordance, by contrast, remained a specialist tool for much of the last millennium before roaring to prominence after the emergence of modern computing. But, for all our recent reliance on digital search tools, on search bars and Ctrl+F, I hope that this book will show that there is still life – exactly that: *life* – in the old back-of-book subject index, compiled by indexers who are very much alive. With this in mind, and before we start in earnest, two examples will illustrate the distinction I have been attempting to draw.

In March 1543, Henry VIII's religious authorities raided the home of John Marbeck, a chorister at St George's Chapel in Windsor. Marbeck was accused of having copied out a religious tract by the French theologian John Calvin. In doing so, he had broken a recent law against heresy. The penalty was death by burning. A search of Marbeck's house turned up evidence of further questionable activity, handwritten sheets that testified to an immense and unusual literary endeavour. Marbeck had been compiling a concordance to the English Bible. He was about halfway through. Only half a decade previously, the Bible in English had been contraband, its translators sent to the stake. Marbeck's concordance looked suspicious, precisely the kind of unauthorized reading that had made the translation of the scriptures such a contentious matter. The banned tract had been his original crime, but now the concordance was, as Marbeck put it, 'not one of the least matters ... to aggrauate the cause of my trouble'.[11] He was taken to Marshalsea prison. It was likely that he would be executed.

In Marshalsea, Marbeck came under interrogation. The authorities were aware of a Calvinist sect in Windsor and saw Marbeck as a minor player, someone who might, under pressure, implicate others. For Marbeck this was a chance to acquit himself. With regard to the Calvinist tract, the statute forbidding it had only come into law four years earlier in 1539. But, protested Marbeck, he had made his copy before that. A simple defence. The concordance posed a more serious problem. While ardently religious and industriously literate, Marbeck was also an autodidact. He had not been schooled deeply in Latin, but had learned just enough to navigate a Latin concordance, plundering it for its locators – the instances of each word – then looking these up in an English Bible and thereby building his English concordance. To Marbeck's interrogators it seemed unthinkable that he could be working between two languages without being fluent in both. Surely a theological project like this could not be undertaken by a single amateur, devoted but untutored. Surely

Marbeck was merely the copyist, taking direction from others, an underling in a broader faction. Surely there must be some coded intent in the concordance, some heretical selection or retranslation of its terms, rather than the guileless, procedural conversion Marbeck claimed.

An account of the inquisition, probably taken first hand from Marbeck, appears in John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* (1570). The accuser here is Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester:

> What helpers hadest thou in settyng forth thy boke?
>
> Forsoth my lord, quoth he, none.
>
> None, quoth the Bishop how can that be? It is not possible that thou shouldest do it without helpe.
>
> Truly my lord, quoth he, I can not tell in what part your Lordshyp doth take it, but how soever it be, I wil not deny but I dyd it without the helpe of any man saue God alone.[12]

The questioning continues in this vein, with others joining in the attack:

> Then said the Bishop of Salisbury, whose help hadst thou in setting forth this booke?
>
> Truly my Lord, quoth he, no helpe at all.
>
> How couldest thou, quoth the bishop, inuent such a booke, or know what a Concordance ment, without an instructer.

Amidst the disbelief there is also a curious type of admiration. When the Bishop of Salisbury produces some sheets from the suspect concordance, one of the other inquisitors examines them and remarks, 'This man has been better occupied than a great many of our priests.'

Now Marbeck plays his trump card. He asks the assembled bishops to set him a challenge. As they are all aware, the concordance had only got as far as the letter L before Marbeck was arrested and his papers confiscated. Therefore, if the inquisitors were to choose a series of words from later in the alphabet and Marbeck were to compile entries for them – alone in prison – he would thereby demonstrate that he was perfectly capable of working unabetted. The panel accept. Marbeck is given a list of terms to index, along with an English Bible, a Latin concordance, and materials to write with. By the next day, the task has been triumphantly completed.[13]

Marbeck was pardoned, but the drafts of his concordance were destroyed. Still, innocent and undeterred, he began again, and seven years after his arrest he was able to bring the work uncontroversially into print. Nevertheless, Marbeck's preface sounds a cautious note. He states that he has used 'the moste allowed translation' so that no heretical doctrine might have slipped in that way. Furthermore, he declares that he has not 'altered or added any Worde in the moste holy Bible'. Nothing added, altered, or retranslated. Marbeck would live for another four decades, an organist and composer whose life had been spared because his concordance was only, scrupulously, that: a complete list of words and their instances, with no interpretation and therefore no heresy.

By contrast, let us glance briefly at the back pages of a history book from the late nineteenth century. The work is by J. Horace Round, and its title is *Feudal England*. Much of Round's study sets out to correct what he sees as scholarly errors made by

Edward Augustus Freeman, Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford. Freeman emerges as Round's *bête noire*, responsible, Round feels, for a significant wrong turn in the study of the medieval period. Over the course of 600 pages, however, this animosity is diffuse. Feudal England, after all, and not Edward Freeman, is the principal subject of the book. In the index, however, the gloves come off:

> Freeman, Professor: unacquainted with the Inq. Com. Cant. 4; ignores the Northamptonshire geld-roll 149; confuses the Inquisitio geldi 149; his contemptuous criticism 150, 337, 385, 434, 454; when himself in error 151; his charge against the Conqueror 152, 573; on Hugh d'Envermeu 159; on Hereward 160–4; his 'certain' history 323, 433; his 'undoubted history' 162, 476; his 'facts' 436; on Hemings' cartulary 169; on Mr. Waters 190; on the introduction of feudal tenures 227–31, 260, 267–72, 301, 306; on the knight's fee 234; on Ranulf Flambard 228; on the evidence of Domesday 229–31; underrates feudal influence 247, 536–8; on scutage 268; overlooks the Worcester relief 308; influenced by words and names 317, 338; on Normans under Edward 318 sqq.; his bias 319, 394–7; on Richard's castle 320 sqq.; confuses individuals 323–4, 386, 473; his assumptions 323; on the name Alfred 327; on the Sheriff Thorold 328–9; on the battle of Hastings 332 sqq.; his pedantry 334–9; his 'palisade' 340 sqq., 354, 370, 372, 387, 391, 401; misconstrues his Latin 343, 436; his use of Wace 344–7, 348, 352, 355, 375; on William of Malmesbury 346, 410–14, 440; his words suppressed 347, 393; on the Bayeux Tapestry 348–51; imagines facts 352, 370, 387, 432; his supposed accuracy 353, 354, 384, 436–7, 440, 446, 448; right as to the shield-wall 354–8; his guesses 359, 362, 366, 375, 378–9, 380, 387, 433–6, 456, 462; his theory of Harold's defeat 360, 380–1; his confused views 364–5, 403, 439, 446, 448; his dramatic tendency 365–6; evades difficulties 373, 454; his treatment of authorities 376–7, 449–51; on the relief of Arques 384; misunderstands tactics 381–3, 387; on Walter Giffard 385–6; his failure 388; his special weakness 388, 391; his splendid narrative 389, 393; his Homeric power 391; on Harold and his Standard 403–4; on Wace 404–6, 409; on Regenbald 425; on Earl Ralk 428; on William Malet 430; on the Conqueror's earldoms 439; his Domesday errors and confusion 151, 425, 436–7, 438, 445–8, 463; on 'the Civic League' 433–5; his wild dream 438; his special interest in Exeter 431; on legends 441; on Thierry 451, 458; his method 454–5; on Lisois 460; on Stigand 461; on Walter Tirel 476–7; on St. Hugh's action [1197] 528; on the Winchester Assembly 535–8; distorts feudalism 537; on the king's court 538; on Richard's change of seal 540; necessity of criticising his work, xi., 353.[14]

One could hardly imagine a more comprehensive or devastating attack, and yet it is hard not to be amused by it – by its relentlessness, its obsessional intensity. It is difficult to see its scare quotes – 'his "certain" history ... his "undoubted" history ... his "facts"' – without imagining Round speaking, delivering the index out loud, a livid sarcasm in his voice. This is the subject index in its most extreme form, as far from the concordance as it can get. Where Marbeck's method was meticulously neutral, Round's is the polar opposite, *all* personality, all interpretation. Where Marbeck's concordance was thorough, Round's index is partial. It would be fair to say that John Marbeck owed his life to the difference between a concordance and a subject index.

But Round's index is a curio, a wild outlier. The good subject index, though inevitably imbued with the personality of its compiler – their insights and decisions – is far more discreet. As with acting, it is rarely a positive sign if the general viewer starts to notice the workings that have gone into the performance. The ideal index anticipates how a book will be read, how it will be *used*, and quietly, expertly provides a map for these purposes. Part of what will emerge from this story, I hope, will be a defence of the humble subject index, assailed by the concordance's digital avatar, the search bar. The concordance and the subject index, as it happens, came into being at the same moment, perhaps even the same year. They have both been with us for nearly eight centuries. Both are vital still.

1

# Point of Order
## *On Alphabetical Arrangement*

'(Stoop) if you are abcedminded, to this claybook, what curios of sings (please stoop), in this allaphbed!'

James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

In the summer of 1977, the literary magazine *Bananas* ran a short story entitled 'The Index' by the British science-fiction writer J. G. Ballard. The story begins with a brief Editor's Note:

> the text printed below is the index to the unpublished and perhaps suppressed autobiography of a man who may well have been one of the most remarkable figures of the twentieth century ... Incarcerated within an unspecified government institution, he presumably spent his last years writing his autobiography of which this index is the only surviving fragment.[1]

The rest of the story – the rise and fall of one Henry Rhodes Hamilton – comes in the form of an alphabetical index, from which the reader must piece together a narrative using only keywords, brief subheadings, and the sense of chronology that the page numbers provide. This oblique approach to storytelling offers plenty of opportunities for wry euphemism. We are left to guess, for instance, at Hamilton's true ancestry from the following non-consecutive entries:

> Avignon, birthplace of HRH, 9–13.
> George V, secret visits to Chatsworth, 3, 4–6; rumoured liaison with Mrs. Alexander Hamilton, 7; suppresses court circular, 9.
> Hamilton, Alexander, British Consul, Marseilles ... depression after birth of HRH, 6; surprise recall to London, 12; first nervous breakdown, 16; transfer to Tsingtao, 43.

Further entries reveal Hamilton to have been foremost among the twentieth century's alpha males:

> D-Day, HRH ashore on Juno Beach, 223; decorated, 242.

Hamilton, Marcelline (formerly Marcelline Renault), abandons industrialist husband, 177; accompanies HRH to Angkor, 189; marries HRH, 191.
Hemingway, Ernest ... portrays HRH in *The Old Man and the Sea*, 453.
Inchon, Korea, HRH observes landings with Gen. MacArthur, 348.
Jesus Christ, HRH compared to by Malraux, 476.
Nobel Prize, HRH nominated for, 220, 267, 342, 375, 459, 611.

Meanwhile, the pattern of entries relating to statesmen and religious figures – initial friendships followed by denouncements – suggests the story's clearest plot line, concerning Hamilton's world-conquering megalomania:

Churchill, Winston, conversations with HRH, 221; at Chequers with HRH, 235; spinal tap performed by HRH, 247; at Yalta with HRH, 298; 'iron curtain' speech, Fulton, Missouri, suggested by HRH, 312; attacks HRH in Commons debate, 367.
Dalai Lama, grants audience to HRH, 321; supports HRH's initiatives with Mao Tse-tung, 325; refuses to receive HRH, 381.
Gandhi, Mahatma, visited in prison by HRH, 251; discusses *Bhagavadgita* with HRH, 253; has dhoti washed by HRH, 254; denounces HRH, 256.
Paul VI, Pope, praises Perfect Light Movement, 462; receives HRH, 464; attacked by HRH, 471; deplores messianic pretentions of HRH, 487; criticises Avignon counter-papacy established by HRH, 498; excommunicates HRH, 533.

For the story of Hamilton's downfall, Ballard picks up the pace of the action by clustering the events sequentially around the last letters of the alphabet. HRH forms a cult, the Perfect Light Movement, which proclaims his divinity and seizes the UN Assembly, calling for a world war on the US and the USSR; he is arrested and incarcerated, but then disappears, with the Lord Chancellor raising questions about his true identity. The final entry concerns the mysterious indexer himself: 'Zielinski, Bronislaw, suggests autobiography to HRH, 742; commissioned to prepare index, 748; warns of suppression threats, 752; disappears, 761'.

Ballard's conceit with 'The Index' is a rather brilliant one. Nevertheless, on one key level, 'The Index' doesn't quite *get* indexes, and perhaps no readable narrative really can. Ballard knows we'll read his index from start to finish – from A to Z – and so he pegs the chronology of his story, albeit loosely, to the order of the alphabet, the index's primary ordering system. Keywords to the front of the alphabet tell of HRH's early years; his hubris becomes pathological in the Ts through Vs; his comeuppance is told among the Ws and Ys. Two discrete ordering systems, alphabetical and chronological, are actually largely congruent here: the form and the content of the index are in a rough alignment. This is not what indexes are about at all.

If we are going to understand the index, we will need to delve into its prehistory to get a sense of what a strange, miraculous thing alphabetical order really is: something we take for granted, but something which appeared, almost out of nowhere, 2,000 years ago; something we use every day, but which a civilization as vast as the Roman Empire could choose to ignore completely in its administrative apparatus. With that curious hiatus fresh in our minds, let us start not in Greece or Rome but in New York, and not in antiquity but rather closer to our own time.

For us today, while we might not warm to an alphabetical art show, it's not as if we won't happily use alphabetical order in other contexts. As schoolchildren, our names are read out from an alphabetical register every morning; when we are older, we will scroll without a pang through the contacts lists on our mobile phones. What could be more convenient? And when we see the names of the dead listed on a memorial, we do not, surely, worry that their sacrifices are diminished for being commemorated alphabetically. With barely a thought we know how to use a table where alpha order is the sole organizing system (as in the old residential phone books), or where it works in tandem with another specialized or context-specific categorization (as in the old Yellow Pages, where entries were grouped first by trade, then alphabetically within these). It's a system with which we are completely familiar, something so deeply ingrained, something we acquire so early, that it might seem self-evident. Can you remember being taught, for the first time, how to look something up in a dictionary? I can't; I'm not sure it happened that way, that I didn't just figure it out. And yet, somehow, we must all have learned that lesson, one that has not always been considered intuitive.

In 1604, Robert Cawdrey published what is generally considered the first English dictionary. As with many books of the time, the full title of Cawdrey's work, as it appears on the first page, might strike us today as extraordinarily long and detailed:

> A Table Alphabeticall conteyning and teaching the true writing, and vnderstanding of hard vsuall English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French, &c. With the interpretation thereof by plaine English wordes, gathered for the benefit & helpe of ladies, gentlewomen, or any other vnskilfull persons. Whereby they may the more easilie and better vnderstand many hard English wordes, vvhich they shall heare or read in scriptures, sermons, or elswhere, and also be made able to vse the same aptly themselues.

There is much to take in here, not least that charmless phrase, 'ladies, gentlewomen, or any other vnskilfull persons'. But at least we can glean the gist of Cawdrey's intention: that this is a book intended to provide the definitions of loan words, words that are used in English but that are 'borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French, &c.'. It is for readers who have not had the benefit of having been schooled in these languages, so that they might understand these words when they crop up in English books. Although most scholars now speak of Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall*, abbreviating the title like this has the rather odd effect of telling us how the book is arranged, but not what it contains.

Given that the work announces itself, first and foremost, as an alphabetical table, it comes as some surprise to see this lengthy explanation, in the opening pages, of how the book should be used:

> If thou be desirous (gentle Reader) rightly and readily to vnderstand, and to profit by this Table, and such like, then thou must learne the Alphabet, to wit, the order of the Letters as they stand, perfectly without booke, and where euery Letter standeth: as (b) neere the beginning, (n) about the middest, and (t) toward the end. Nowe if the word, which thou art desirous to finde, begin with (a) then looke in the beginning of this Table, but if with (v) looke towards the end. Againe, if thy word beginne with (ca) looke in the

list of the author's works, along with their *incipits* or opening words (since works in this period would not necessarily have a title as such), and the length of the work in lines. This last detail was important in the days before print, as it would allow librarians to determine whether they had a full copy of the work in question, as well as meaning that bookdealers could estimate the cost of having a copy made.

There's a strong argument that the title of Callimachus' catalogue referred to tablets that might have hung over the cases in which the scrolls were stored – shelfmarks, essentially, indicating what was there. If this is true, then 'pínakes' nicely expresses something important about the way that future indexes would work: the spatial relationship between reference and referent. Something *here* locates something *there*: a heading in the catalogue points to its equivalent on the shelves.

A brief digression on how scrolls were stored: a tablet hung above the shelves is one method of locating what you're looking for in an ancient library, but the Greeks had another, one that would identify an individual scroll. (Remember that dustjackets, printed spines, and even title pages – the methods we use to quickly single out a particular book – are all relative newcomers, no more than a few centuries old, and all fundamentally reliant on the *codex*, that is, the book as we know it today, with flippable leaves, gathered together and bound at the spine.) In order to identify a scroll without having to unroll it, a small parchment tag – essentially a name label – would be glued to the roll so that it stuck out, displaying the author and title of the work. It was known as a *sittybos*, or more commonly *sillybos* (whence our word *syllabus*, which we use to describe the contents of a course, just as a *sillybos* indicates the contents of a scroll).

When Cicero, the great Roman statesman and orator, decided to tidy up his personal library, one of the jobs that needed doing was the fixing of these labels to each roll. He writes to his friend Atticus:

> It will be delightful of you to pay us a visit. You will find that Tyrannio has made a wonderful job of arranging my books. What is left of them is much better than I expected. And I should be grateful if you would send me a couple of your library clerks to help Tyrannio with the gluing and other operations, and tell them to bring a bit of parchment for the labels, *sittybae* as I believe you Greeks call them.[17]


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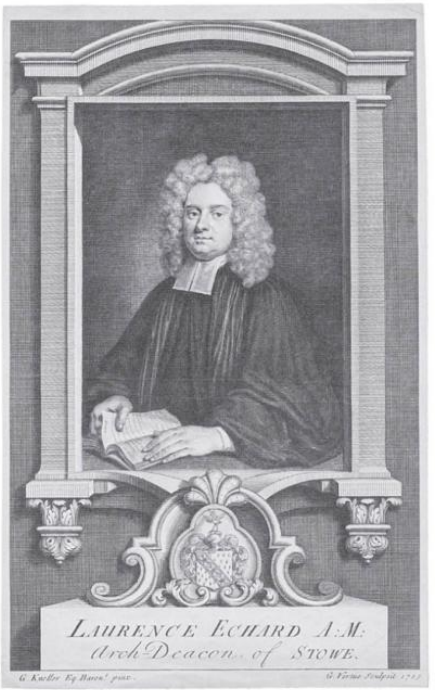


Figure 25: Laurence Echard (*c.* 1670–1730).

His name was John Oldmixon, and while we have no image of what he looked like, we do have an acidic pen portrait from Alexander Pope who pictures Oldmixon flinging himself 'in naked majesty' into the open sewer of Fleet Ditch.[29] A devoted propagandist for the Whig cause, he is described by Pope as 'a virulent Party-writer for hire', a dig which makes him sound both mercenary and extremist, if such a thing is possible. Nevertheless, Oldmixon's publishers imagined him less rabid as a compiler of indexes than as an author in his own right. And so it happened that towards the end of 1717 the publisher Jacob Tonson the Younger hired Oldmixon to index a work with strong Tory sympathies: the three-volume *History of England* by Laurence Echard.

Unlike Oldmixon, hard-up and languishing in obscurity in Devon, Echard was very much an establishment figure. He was archdeacon of Stow, and, again unlike Oldmixon, we have a portrait to show us what he looked like. Not only that, but we have surviving correspondence in which we can hear Echard rather vainly suggesting improvements to said portrait. The image was made for the frontispiece to Echard's *History* when it was reissued in 1720, and here is a letter to the publisher about it:

> The Inclosed Picture answers mighty well on the Face and Wigg, only some few think that the highest and middle Part of the Forehead want a small amount of covering from the Wigg. But I cannot say I am of that Opinion. I think indeed that the Hands, and some of the lower Parts of the Cut, still want *finishing*.[30]

The request is a masterclass in genteel command, moving down the portrait from the wig to the hands, while modulating from jolly satisfaction, through the first glimmers of critique – 'some few think ...' – before ending up at the crux of the

matter: the portrait will require alteration. Ha ha, no but *really*. This is the tone of someone used to getting their own way.

Oldmixon, on the other hand, is no such master of diplomacy. He really has only two modes – whining and snarling – and his letters are characterized by an oscillation between these. Here he is negotiating his payment for the index to Echard's *History* and comparing it with another indexing job he did for a different publisher (White Kennett's *Compleat History*, published by William Nicolson):

> Tis very Large and if I demanded 12gs for it woud be little ... I had for the Index to Kennets 3 Voll. 35l. pd me by Nicolson this I am sure is better in proportion and I was 3 hard Weeks about it. *Under 10l. I am positive not to take ...* Pray let me have the Books I wrote for & the Third Vollume of Eachard to do that Index also ... You shall have ye other next Week well done. That now sent has cost me a great deal of Pains & richly deserves 12l. it being but a 3d Part of what I find for Kennets of so stingy a Creature as Nicolson.[31]

It's a wild piece of haggling. Reading it is like listening to one side of a phone conversation, possibly about selling a car. But of course this is a letter: no one is interrupting Oldmixon as he veers from demanding twelve guineas, to ten pounds, then twelve pounds, takes a swipe at the 'stingy' Nicolson and calls into question how good his own last index was. Not exactly a smooth operator, then. But Oldmixon, it turns out, has a few tricks up his sleeve.

In 1729, a good decade after Echard's *History* first went on sale, an anonymous pamphlet appeared, presenting an outraged exposé of the index to that work. The pamphlet is called *The Index-Writer* and on its title page it rages at the 'WHIG HISTORIAN' (all angry caps) who had the 'partiality' and 'disingenuity' to misrepresent the great archdeacon. The second page gives us more of an idea of what Oldmixon has done, as well as a sense of how professional indexers were viewed in the publishing foodchain of the early eighteenth century:

> It may not be amiss to acquaint the Reader, that when Arch-Deacon Echard had finished his 3d vol of the History of England, the Drudgery of compiling an Index, was left to one who was thought not unfit for so low an Employment as giving an alphabetical Epitome of that Volume: it was not suspected that one thus employed should be so utterly void of all shame as to pervert the meaning of his author where the abuse must be so easily discovered and his unfairness laid open to public View; But it has so happened that the strong Propension this Person had to serve the Faction, and the little regard he bore the Truth, put him upon framing an Index, in many places contrary to the History, which the Reader will, to his Surprise, find giving one Account, and the Index another. This unfair practice is the Subject of the following Tract.[32]

Reading this, it is difficult not to feel some sympathy with Oldmixon. 'Not unfit for so low an Employment' – a phrase that surely makes us bristle. To the modern reader, at least, this passage is self-defeating: it sets us up to feel a certain relish that the lowly indexer should have found a way to undermine his supposed superiors: a worm who has turned. Whatever he has done, we want to side with poor, awkward Oldmixon against the vain, smooth-tongued archdeacon and his supporters.


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