



Dennis Duncan. *Index, A History of the: A Bookish Adventure from Medieval Manuscripts to the Digital Age*.

Dennis Duncan, *Index, A History of the: A Bookish Adventure from Medieval Manuscripts to the Digital Age*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022. 352 pages. \$17.95.

The footnote has Anthony Grafton; the title page has Margaret M. Smith; but the index has not before been subject of a dedicated book-length study, and Dennis Duncan – lecturer in English at University College London – presents an eminently legible and appealing page-turner on the subject. The history of the index, it turns out in Duncan’s equally excellent and entertaining historical survey, has much to tell us about the history of how texts were used between the thirteenth century and the present day, and how producers of books have aimed to answer the demands of those developing uses within the confines of the available technologies of their times. Duncan succeeds in presenting a niche subject in book history in a way that will be found accessible and interesting to experts and non-experts alike, seemingly effortlessly using effective anecdotal examples to introduce and elucidate the more technical details and concepts required to guide the reader through his discussion of the development of indexing over time.

Before he turns to the index, in Chapter One, “Point of Order,” Duncan presents a brief history of alphabets, and specifically of the earliest uses of the alphabet as a structuring principle for information. Thus, he also introduces the reader to the key dichotomy that underpins the very usefulness of the index: that between the arbitrariness of alphabetical sequence versus the organization of the indexed text. It is in early libraries of scrolls that the word “index” arose, as the name of the tags affixed to the stored scrolls that carried identification of their authors and titles. Alphabetical order was used for structuring information in administrative contexts in Greek antiquity, but remarkably the Romans did not care for it, though they did still use alphabetical order in contexts where language was the subject, such as lexicons.

In Chapter Two, “The Births of the Index,” Duncan describes two kinds of index that each arose in the thirteenth century. The development of the universities and the establishment of the mendicant orders led to a need for more efficient ways of using books, in the service of teaching and preaching. Two types of index answered that need, both first appearing around 1230: the concordance or word index, and the subject index. As the relation between text and page was not stable between manuscript copies, locators in indexes referred to numbered sections (such as chapter or paragraph numbers) in the text – which in turn led to an increased standardization of the divisions particularly of widely studied

texts, such as the Bible, where the existing books were now subdivided into chapters.

Chapter Three, “Where Would We Be Without It,” addresses the second system of sequential ordering – additional to alphabetical order – that underpinned the success of the index: page numbering. Chapters primarily aid readability, not searchability, and already in the thirteenth century, the page became the focus of indexing. In manuscripts, however, page numbering of a given text was rarely stable across copies, and indexes had to be laboriously re-done for each individual copy. The printing of identical copies made page (or folio) locators more convenient, though this, initially, was not straightforward either: printed folio numbering (referred to as “the first printed page number” by Duncan (2022, 86), in a very rare slip into obfuscation to serve a general readership) was first introduced in 1470, but indexes could also use the quire signatures as locators – tricky for readers, since signatures, as a gatherers’ and not a readers’ aid, only appear in the first half of each quire – or require readers to add their own foliation.

With the index now established as a searchable, alphabetically sequential means of providing access to the information in books, linked to the stable locator of established page numbering, in Chapter Four, “The Map or the Territory,” Duncan turns to opinions and anxieties about the use of indexes. Early printed indexes, even while printed after the book was complete, were bound at the front, and readers were at times exhorted to read the index before the book. Somewhat later, the index was explicitly advertised as a means to return to the text after having read it. As each new development in information technology instils anxiety, so it was with the index: would it in fact be used to avoid actual engagement with the text?

By this halfway point in the book, Duncan has established the basic rules that underpin the index and its usefulness – so in Chapter Five, “Let No Damned Tory Index My *History!*”, he turns to occasions where indexers refused to play along. The rogue index; the index weaponized against its primary text. These are fascinating examples of occasions in the early eighteenth century where indexers undermined the works they indexed, sabotaging the text by highlighting its inconsistencies, or deliberately satirizing its contents.

In Chapter Six, “Indexing Fictions,” Duncan surveys indexes to genres of literature where we no longer expect to see them. Some indexes served primarily not as ways into the text, but as an advertisement of its qualities, such as those to the eighteenth-century journal *Spectator*. Alexander Pope’s epic indexes to his *Iliad* and Shakespeare editions were meant to present the works as suitable for life-long study (in the case of the *Iliad* doing so effectively; in the case of Shakespeare less so).

Continuing the chronological survey, Chapter Seven, “A Key to All Knowledge”, tells of the indexing optimism inspired by the industrial revolution; the rapid retrieval of information facilitated by the index was excitedly described as “electric.” The rise of learned journals raised the need to provide a means of access, and in the nineteenth century we encountered the first – incompletely realized – plans for a universal index, and the establishment (and rapid demise) of the Index Society.

Chapter Eight, “Ludmilla and Lotaria,” describes experiments in digital book indexing from the 1950s, where the lofty goal of electronic indexing was soon replaced by developments in machine-aided indexing, used by rather than replacing professional indexers in the realization that compiling a subject index is a humanistic task. Our lives are, in the present day, dominated by indexes more than they have ever been but the index that guides us whenever we use a search engine is not the back-of-the-book type, but one more akin to the universal index; and not primarily the subject index, but the

concordance became the dominant form.

A coda on reader-generated indexes concludes the volume's text, and is followed by not one, but two indexes: the first is a computer-generated index meant to demonstrate the uselessness of computer-generated indexes, cut off at "amusement, mere," confident of having achieved its aim. The second is a subject index playfully compiled by professional indexer Paula Clarke Bain, which includes a number of further self-referential demonstrations of indexing conundrums (not indexed) and index wit (see *under* index wit).

In the way the best books do, Duncan's study leaves the reader wanting more: could we have a history of the professional indexer? When did it become customary to provide separate indexes of persons, places, and subjects? What about indexing outside the Anglophone world, and in languages that do not use the Latin alphabet? The study is well supported by endnotes. A final question about paratext is raised by a striking absence from this volume: who will write the first history of the back-of-the-book bibliography?

Sjoerd Levelt, University of Bristol

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