

Bernard Levin and *The Indexer*

In 1976 Bernard Levin wrote in *The Times*, (17 December), an article titled 'A haunting, I promise, for those who refuse to tell who's who and what's what'. This was reproduced in full in *The Indexer* 10 (3) April 1977, 139-41. It began:

'One of the things I am going to do before I die is to achieve the restoration of capital punishment for publishers and authors who put forth their works without an index. ... An index is so obviously essential a part of a book that I am amazed not only at the meanness and lack of professionalism displayed by publishers who take no steps to ensure a good and ample index, but even more at the ignorance or lack of pride in their work that makes so many authors indifferent in the matter.'

My first letter to him was sent on 12 July 1978:

THE SOCIETY OF INDEXERS
From the Editor of THE INDEXER
Hazel K Bell, BA
139 The Ryde
Hatfield
Herts AL9 5DP
Tel: Hatfield 65201

12.7.78

Dear Mr Levin,

First, may I thank you for so much enjoyment derived over the years from reading your columns, both theatrical and now general in The Times -- always superb, whether serious, disturbing or comic, often cut out and passed on to friends.

I know you have joined the Society of Indexers, after writing the lovely piece we reproduced in THE INDEXER in April 1977. Could I now ask your permission to reproduce there, as a brief filler, the first two paragraphs from your article in The Times of 11 July, 'London pride ...', concerning the use of the term 'books' to denote pornography?

I hope it is not troubling you too much, if I add, that I have been trying to trace, also to mention it in THE INDEXER, a journal devoted to the meanings of words which I think you wrote about some time ago. I thought the name was VERBATIM, but my local library cannot trace any journal of that name. Could you tell me if this is right, and if the journal is still available?

Yours sincerely,

Hazel Bell (Mrs)

He replied:

THE TIMES
Times Newspapers Limited, P.O. Box no. 7, New Printing House Square,
Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8EZ (registered office)
Telephone 01-837 1234 Telex 264971 Registered no. 894646 England

19th July 1978

Dear Mrs. Bell,

Thank you for your letter and your most kind words. By all means use the two paragraphs; strictly speaking, you should also get the permission of The Times but for what is in fact only a quotation I do not think that you need bother. But it should, of course, be attributed to The Times as well as to me.

The magazine was indeed called VERBATIM and it is published in America at the following address -- Post Office Box 668, Essex, Connecticut, 06425.

Yours sincerely

Bernard Levin

The item appeared in *The Indexer* Vol. 11 page 109, Oct. 1978:

I cannot be the first to have noticed, but I believe I am the first to point out in print, that when nowadays one sees, above a shop window, the word 'Books,' unaccompanied either by the name of the bookseller or by an indication of the nature of the books sold, it is probable that what the shop is selling is pornography, mostly in the form of magazines.

In saying that this phenomenon marks yet another sign that the world is coming to an end, I am not basing the claim on the fact that pornography is being sold; I have no need of the stuff myself, but do not (unlike some) believe that what I don't want nobody else should be allowed to have. No; what saddens me is that the word 'books', which is surely, in whatever language, the noblest sound the human race has yet uttered, should now come to mean something so far removed from its original concept.

Habent sua fata libelli.

BERNARD LEVIN, *The Times*, 11th July

THE TIMES
Times Newspapers Limited, P.O. Box no. 7, New Printing House Square, Gray's
Inn Road, London WC1X 8EZ (registered office)

Telephone 01-837 1234 Telex 264971 Registered no. 894646 England

17th April 1979

Dear Miss Bell,

Thank you very much for your letter. I am most flattered that you wish to make use of my index in this fashion, and am entirely happy for you to do so.

Yours sincerely
Bernard Levin

On 17 Oct 1979 I sent:

Dear Mr Levin,

Thank you for your letter of 17 April, giving us permission to quote in THE INDEXER your index to *The pendulum years: Britain and the sixties*. I enclose a copy of an account of a talk given to us last year by R. C. Latham on indexing Pepys. I should like in this article to quote from your enthusiastic article on the Bell edition of the Diaries of Pepys, in The Times in 1976. I have quoted it twice; on page 1 and at the end. May I have your permission to do this? And do you have the exact date of this article? — I kept it in my own Pepys copy, but undated.

How we miss your regular column in The Times!

With apologies for troubling you again,

Yours sincerely,

Hazel Bell

The quotations from the index appeared under the heading, 'Bias in indexing' in *The Indexer* vol. 12 p. 54 April 1980, introduced by:

-- can prove most entertaining reading, as exemplified by the following extracts from the index to *The pendulum years: Britain and the sixties* by Bernard Levin (Jonathan Cape, 1970); a choice example of an author's own index, reproduced here by kind permission of the author.

Levin's comments on Latham's index to Pepys were quoted in 'Indexing Pepys' Diary', *The Indexer* Vol. 12 pp 34-35.

In *The Indexer* Vol. 13, April 1983, 'Indexes Reviewed' includes two extracts from reviews by Levin, both from *The Observer*. Under 'Indexes praised', of John Murray's *Bernard Shaw and Alfred Douglas: a correspondence*: 'There is also an outstanding index, truly a model of its kind, though its compiler is not so much as named, let alone thanked, in the acknowledgements'; and under 'Indexes censured', of Philip Snow's *Stranger and brother: A portrait of C. P. Snow*: 'Macmillan's should look to their editing ... And the index is useless.'

TIMES NEWSPAPERS LIMITED

Registered office: P.O. Box 7,

200 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1 X 8EZ

Telephone 01-83 7 1234 Telex 264971 Registered no. 894646 England

30th August 1983

Dear Miss Bell,

Thank you very much for your letter and Oula's delightful note.
Of course you may use it.

Yours sincerely,

Bernard Levin

Levin's gracious tribute to Oula Jones as indexer in the acknowledgements of his

Conducted tour was reproduced in *The Indexer* Vol. 13 page 52:

Kind words indeed

Bernard Levin has sometimes before expressed in print a rare and fervent appreciation of indexing. Now he pays most gracious tribute to the indexer of his latest book, in the acknowledgements to *Conducted Tour* (Cape, 1981), thus:
The index was compiled by Oula Jones of The Society of Indexers. This admirable and essential profession rarely receives its public due, though the work requires a high degree of skill and application; I am most grateful for the care and understanding that Mrs Jones has brought to the task.

In October 1983 a small item, supplied by Oula, appeared in *The Indexer* vol. 13 page 259:

Floral emendations

Indexer—on very hot day—typing up 14 pp index, is interrupted by call from publisher announcing complete repagination of page proofs ... however, 1500 amended entries later, feelings much soothed by arrival of superb basket of flowers from West End florist. The thoughtful author? Bernard Levin, of course, member of SI and champion of the index. (Next time, Bernard, just send a microcomputer, *with instructions*.)

24 Oct 83

Dear Mr Levin,

We are considering having in *The Indexer* a symposium of the views of authors of indexes to their own works (not compiled by themselves); how they feel on seeing the book broken down in this way, whether they feel the index adds to the book in any way, whether it is as they would have expected it to be, and so on. We would be most grateful if you would contribute your own views and reactions. However, we do not offer payment to our contributors, as ours is almost a voluntary society, so perhaps you may regard this as an impertinent request. If so, my apologies.

The new issue of *The Indexer* is out this week, including Oula's note about your "floral emendations", and quoting your reviews of *Man of Wars*, *Quest for the golden hare*, and the index to the Bell edition of Pepys diary. How frequently your name graces our pages!

Yours sincerely,

Levin's reviews from *The Observer* were quoted in 'Indexes Reviewed', Vol. 13 Oct. 1983. That of *Man of Wars* called 'The index to this excellent book ... a monument of industry and care ... an astonishing achievement' (page 266); that of *Quest for the golden hare*, by Bamber Gascoigne, published by Cape, concluded, 'Mr Maschler and Mr Gascoigne should in addition be flogged, for putting forth *this* book without an index' (page 271); three paragraphs of his review of Robert Latham's index to the Bell edition of Pepys diary were quoted on pages 272-3.

He phoned in reply to my request for a contribution to our proposed symposium, agreeing to write it, and asking when I wanted it by, and how long it should be. He phoned again 26 Jan 84 to be reminded. On 8 February I received:

TIMES NEWSPAPERS LIMITED
Registered office: P.O. Box 7,
200 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1 X 8EZ
Telephone 01-83 7 1234 Telex 264971 Registered no. 894646 England

8th February 1984

Dear Miss Bell,
Here is something for your journal as requested. I hope you think it suitable, but please do not hesitate to say if it is not. [AS IF!!! HKB]

Yours sincerely,

Bernard Levin

I replied:
17.2.84

Dear Mr Levin,

Thank you so very much for your lovely article on your attitude to indexes. It is delightful; I've sent a copy to Oula, wondering if she wants to add anything. The only problem now is that the other contributions to our proposed symposium are all so thin that I'm not sure whether to include yours with the rest, or print it as a separate thing altogether!

One way or another, it will be in our October 1984 issue; the April issue has now all gone to press.

With many thanks again,

yours sincerely,

The article appeared as the first item in 'Authors' attitudes to indexes', *The Indexer* Vol. 14 pages 85-6, October 1984. It began:

'I indexed my first book (very badly) because I wanted to know what this strange but to me intriguing job required. I finished it with a mighty vow to the effect that I would rather be dead than do it again.'

and included --

'I have been fascinated to see how my indexer has worked herself into my mind so that she can see the book through my eyes and give me the extra element, which consists of themes, concepts, principles, attitudes ... The ultimate test of an index to a book that is composed of the author's feelings ... is: could the reader construct the author's outlook ... from the index alone? I think, in the case of my books and my indexer, the answer is yes.'

Oula Jones, the indexer in question, commented on this in a Letter to the Editor, Vol. 14, page 211:

Indexing Bernard Levin is both terrible and delightful, in equal measure. Delightful because I know he's as concerned about the minutiae as I am (do you enter Diana and Duff Cooper under their noble titles?); because he's On My Side (though even he can't prevent publishers repaginating after the index is finished); and because he observes the courtesies of life in scrupulously acknowledging my work every time

and sending me a copy suitably inscribed: but terrible because he reads the index manuscript with his horrid penetrating gaze and picks up all my little slovenlinesses—initials where full names should be, titles of nobility avoided, over-abbreviated entries, as well as my (I hope) occasional appalling mistakes (I've just confused Vladimir Ashkenazy with Stefan Askenase and invented a poet called William Herrick, but then I've Been Ill. . .) The fact that despite all this he kindly refers to me as infallible I find terrible too.

Oula Jones
London W3

Vol. 14 no. 1 of *The Indexer*, April 1984, included in 'Indexes reviewed' part of Levin's comments in *The Observer* on Peter Heyworth's *Otto Klemperer: his life and times*: 'There is an outstanding index, its compiler -- Frederick Smyth -- for once acknowledged: *o si sic omnes*'.

I reviewed Levin's collection of journal articles, *The way we live now* in *The Indexer* vol. 14, pages 279-80, under the heading, 'And a good book, too', beginning:

'Bernard Levin is the undoubted literary champion of the cause of indexing, and has written many doughty words on our behalf. He must forgive us, then, if we take his vaunted sentiments to their extremes and regard his latest book merely as an adjunct to its index.'

and ending -- 'After all, though, indexers may with equal pleasure approach the book from the front, finding on its first page the most graceful acknowledgment: "The index is again the work of Oula Jones, of the Society of Indexers, who has brought to what is always an exacting task, and too frequently a thankless one, all her skill, patience and good humour." To quote the author on the subject of acknowledgements -- "*O si sic omnes*"!

He sent this response, a handwritten letter:

November 12th 1985

Dear Mrs Bell

Thank you very much for those kind and charming words in your review of Oula's Index (a capital letter, of course, for so noble a thing). What I would do without her I cannot imagine, though it would certainly not include doing my own.

Thank you again,

With all good wishes

Yours sincerely

Bernard Levin

In 1985 (23 December) Levin wrote in *The Times*, 'Enter the lists for this noble minority', including, 'Indexing ... is an appalling and prolonged labour ... a very high level of technical skill ...'. This article was recorded and profusely quoted in *The Indexer* Vol. 15 page 8, April 1986, as:

Apotheosis of the indexer

'The undoubted literary champion of the cause of indexing', we dubbed Bernard

Levin in our last issue (*The Indexer* 14 (4), 279), and again he wields his mighty pen splendidly on our behalf in *The Times* of 23 Dec. 1985, under the heading, 'Enter the lists for this noble minority'. In a full article he addresses himself to questions of the difficulty of indexing ('it is an appalling and prolonged labour (no wonder Hercules published his autobiography without one)'); the qualities demanded ('a very high level of technical skill'); the SI Register; rates of payment ('the truly shocking level of payment that this very remarkable and responsible work commands'); publishers' attitudes ('it is high time general publishers took the view that the work of the indexer is as essential as that of the jacket-designer or for that matter the printer and the supplier of paper, and carried the cost'); quality and absence of indexes ('I have read many books of outstanding quality, interest and value which have been seriously and irretrievably damaged by an inadequate index'). In conclusion, 'This is a plea for an admirable profession, equipped with real skills, to be accorded both the respect and the reward that it deserves ...'

Thank you, Mr. Levin, for gladdening our hearts with such a Christmas present.

Levin's *In these times* was reviewed in *The Indexer* vol. 15 page 190:

The fourth anthology of Levin's journalism, selected from articles published in *The Times* and *The Observer* since 1984, includes ('Easy as a, b, d') the acclamation of indexing and indexers whose original publication gave all *Times*-reading indexers a joyful and triumphant Christmas (see *The Indexer* 15 (1) April 1986, 8) and his contribution to our symposium of authors' attitudes to indexing (*The Indexer* 14 (2), Oct. 1984, 85-6)—something over six pages to boost our egos and our image.

Again he properly provides his book with both decent general index (14 pages. for xii + 283 pages of text) and full and most gracious acknowledgement/tribute to his indexer, Oula Jones—this must be the pattern and exemplar for all time of the author/indexer relationship. For the rest of the book—its scope, wit, trenchancy, and opinions may well be gauged from sample index entries:

art: and affirmation / definition of / inexhaustible / and morality / political censorship
/ and truth
censorship, political
corruption in high places
dogs, vicious

empathy, lack of
evil: combatting / explaining
Fallacy of the Altered Standpoint
freedom / for animals / economic / and fanaticism
generosity, vanishing
health, enforcing
mediocrity, cultivation of
morality: in art / atrophied / and humanity / and promises / within tyranny music, forbidden

Nanny State

The April 1987 issue of *The Indexer* included an article by John Vickers, 'Index, how not to' (pages 163-166). Levin sent a Letter to the Editor of *The Indexer* in response to this. I replied:

13 August 1987

Dear Mr Levin,

Thank you very much for your letter about authors' responsibilities for indexes, which I shall be delighted to include in the October issue of *The Indexer*.

We have yet another reference to yourself and Oula elsewhere in this issue, at the end of an article on 'The business side of indexing': I enclose that passage. I think we may account this *The Indexer*'s very own soap opera!

Yours sincerely,

This passage was in 'The business side of indexing' by Elizabeth Wallis, Vol. 15 page 209:

'... the likelihood is that you will never meet any of those you do business with. There are, of course, exceptions. The rapport, for example, between author Bernard Levin and indexer Oula Jones has been remarkably constant, and there are few authors with such high regard for indexing and understanding of the intricacies of the art.'

Levin's Letter to the Editor was published in *The Indexer* Vol. 15, page 238:

Authors and indexes May I enter a tiny demurrer to Mr. John Vickers' comprehensive demolition of a dreadful index, published in your April 1987 issue under the heading 'Index, how not to'?

Mr Vickers rightly castigates the hopelessly inadequate indexer and—again rightly—lays the principal blame on the publishers. But he entirely absolves his friend, the author of the maltreated book. That won't quite do. He says that the author 'got no sight of the index until he saw it in all its full horror in the printed volume'. Why not? Why didn't he insist, and go on insisting, that it should be submitted to him before it was printed? Why do such authors supinely allow their publishers to behave like that? As my readers know (to say nothing of yours), my own beloved indexer is without fault or flaw, yet I go through her work with a powerful magnifying-glass, and she is plainly glad that I do. This authorial willingness to be left out of the picture is widespread; I cannot count the number of fellow-authors who have complained in my hearing about, say, a rotten jacket for their books. When I ask why they did not demand to see the jacket in all its stages, from the first sketch, it almost invariably transpires that it never occurred to them to ask, whereupon I have a struggle

to refrain from telling them that they have no one to blame but themselves. When I wrote my first book, some seventeen years ago, I announced that I was going to interfere in every stage of the publication, right down to the typeface it was set in, and I have done so ever since. And surely if a book includes an index, a self-respecting author should be as jealous of its quality as of his own. Incidentally, I have found that the more involvement I demand in the publication of my books, the more my publishers like it.

Bernard Levin

London, WI.

The Society of Indexers' Annual General Meeting 1989 was held on 9 November (at the Library Association, London). The newspapers were full of the unexpected opening of the Berlin wall. The following day, the 10th, *The Times* published a quarter-page article by Levin, 'Don't come to me for a reference', denouncing the 'full, almost heroic awfulness' of the index to Ian Ker's biography of Cardinal John Henry Newman. The article was accompanied by a large cartoon showing a finger labelled 'Index' severely pointing the way of disgrace to a humble book-carrying scholar, and three-line subheading, 'Bernard Levin finds Cardinal Newman lost without trace in the index of his latest biography'. The text read, in part:

'Indexing is a highly skilled science ... There is a highly professional body, the Society of Indexers ... If you wish to be sure that your book is in properly expert hands, you must go to the custodian of the Register ... the noble and meaningful heading "Index" ...'

While acclaiming the text as wholly admirable, Levin gave detailed criticism of the index-paragraphs of undifferentiated page numbers, subheadings 'as ridiculous as they are otiose ... listed only in the order in which they appear in the book'. His gravest censure was reserved for the person at Oxford University Press, publisher of this work, who passed the index for press. He concluded the article:

'I want that somebody's blood -- all of it -- delivered to me in a clean jug, with a paint brush, thus enabling me to inscribe right across the facade of the OUP's main building: 'This firm was once taken seriously, and deserved to be.' And I also want the sum of £500 to be given by the OUP to the Society of Indexers, to be wholly devoted to the relief of indexers who have fallen on hard times, particularly those whose misfortune was caused by working for the OUP.'

I wrote to him about this:

16 Nov. 1989

Dear Mr Levin.

What a wonderful article on indexing you wrote in The Times last week! I am sure you know how delighted members of our Society are with it.

May I ask your permission, please, to quote from it in The Indexer as in the enclosed piece?

I received in reply:

THE TIMES

1 Pennington Street, London E1 9XN

Telephone: 01-782 5000 Telex: 262141

23rd November 1989

Dear Miss Bell,

Thank you very much for your kind letter. Mr. Levin is away from the office at the moment, but he would be happy for you to quote from the column in *The Indexer*.

He also wanted you to know that he had originally intended that the column should run on the day of your conference, and was most frustrated when news from Germany squeezed it out!

Thank you again for writing.

Yours sincerely,

[signed] Catherine M Tye

Secretary to Bernard Levin

-- that is, the opening of the Berlin wall!

In the April 1990 issue of *The Indexer*, I wrote an article summarizing and quoting all Levin's efforts and essays on our behalf to date: 'Thundering about indexing', vol. 17, page 45. It began:

'How pleasant to know Mr Levin. And to read his witty, penetrating articles, and to have him as a champion.'

I wrote to him again 19. 1. 1991:

Dear Mr Levin,

The Indexer has done very well out of your diatribe against the Newman biography index! We had a page on it and the following Times correspondence in April 1990 (I assume you noticed that -- page 45). For our April 1991 issue we have a review of the revised index; I enclose a proof copy of our review. Now that your original article is out in hard-back, we would like to take yet another bite at the cherry and add a postscript to our review, as enclosed. Will you give us permission to print this, please?

Yours sincerely,
Hazel Bell

I sent him John Vickers' article on the revised index to the biography of Newman that had been so castigated by Levin, 'Could still do better: the revised index to the Newman biography'. Levin replied:

THE TIMES

1 Pennington Street, London E1 9XN

Telephone: 071-782 5000 Telex: 262141

22nd January 1991

Dear Miss Bell,

Thank you very much for your most kind comments and for letting me see Dr. Vickers' article. Naturally, I am delighted to give you permission.

With all good wishes,

Yours sincerely,
Bernard Levin

Vickers' article appeared in the April 1991 *Indexer*, pages 189-90. Following this article, on page 190, appeared:

Post script: Bernard Levin's original *Times* article, retitled 'The index finger points', is reprinted in his latest (sixth) volume of journalism, *Now read on* (Cape, 1990). Its four still-stirring pages have, among others, the following index entries:

Indexers, Registered 156, 157

indexes: bad 157-9; good 156; strings, undifferentiated 157-8

indexing, skilled 156

Oxford University Press, appalling scandal of 57, 158, 159
Indexers 156, 157, 159

Society of

The acknowledgements include another gracious tribute to the indexer: 'Once again I have the pleasure of thanking Oula Jones of the Society of Indexers for her meticulous and essential contribution. One of the articles in this book is about a particularly lamentable index; if only its compiler had had the good sense to entrust it to her!'

12 Aug 91 handwritten from him (such thick paper, almost card, but letter-size!) --

Dear Mrs Bell

Thank you for your letter; of course you may use my references.

But surely you can't mean (p. 123) 'a whole complicated strata'; the singular 'a' cannot govern the plural 'strata'. Tut!

Yours sincerely
Bernard Levin

(Mea culpissima indeed! I hang my head. I had sent him for approval the passages in my then forthcoming *Indexing biographies and other stories of human lives* that referred to or quoted him. On one of those pages, he must have spotted the sentence that finally appeared in print as: 'Robert Latham evolved a whole complicated stratification to cope with Samuel Pepys himself in the index to the diary'.)

1.10.91

Dear Mr Levin,

Once again I am quoting your splendid article on indexing from The Times in print -- a highly cited article by now. I have begun almost to assume your kind permission, but think you may like to know of this attempt at a counter-blast. I am sending it as an open letter to The Author, as well as intending it for either a review article or the next editorial of The Indexer.

Yours sincerely,

Hazel Bell

He replied --

Registered Office: Times Newspapers Limited, P.O. Box 495, Virginia Street, London E1 9XY

Registered No. 894646 England

3rd October 1991

Dear Mrs Bell, [handwritten]

Thank you very much for letting me see what you want to print, and of course you are most welcome to do so.

With all good wishes,

Yours sincerely [handwritten]

Bernard Levin

I think this must refer to a short article of mine in *The Indexer* vol. 18 pp 29-30, 'An author's guide to disparaging indexing', reviewing (and denouncing) Michael Legat's *An author's guide to publishing*. This concluded by quoting from Levin's article, 'Don't come to me for a reference':

'One of the delusions which writers entertain is that if you can write a book you can also index it. Delusion indeed: indexing is a highly skilled science, and it would be as foolish for a writer unversed in its mysteries to compile his own Index as it would be for him to attempt, without the requisite knowledge, to cut the type from which his book is to be printed.'

5 Nov. 91: I have notes of a phone call from him, asking to know of the earliest indexes, for the article he was proposing to write, and speaking vehemently of the 'splendid translation' of Montaigne with a 'terrible index of names only and only page numbers'. The 1600 translation by John Florio had had 'an admirable index', he said, including subject indexing.

I sent him *The Indexer* with Hans Wellisch's article on herbals, and later faxed him this additionally:

THE INDEXER

Journal of the Society of Indexers

139 The Ryde

Hazel K Bell
Hon. Editor

Hatfield, Herts AL9 5DP
Tel: Hatfield 65201
fax (0707) 273601

16.11.91

Dear Mr Levin,

I am sending you a passage on earliest printed subject indexing from Hans Wellisch's new book, Indexing from A to Z. I am so sorry not to have thought of these when you asked me about the subject earlier.

Yours sincerely,

Hazel Bell

I then received from him:

THE TIMES

1 Pennington Street, London E1 9XN

Telephone: 071-782 5000 Telex: 262141

25th November 1991

Dear Mrs Bell [handwritten]

I don't know whether these two copies were precious file copies or superfluous, so I am sending them back to you anyway.

Stand by for fireworks!

Yours sincerely [handwritten]
Bernard Levin

This was sent three days before *The Times* published, on 28 November 1991, an article by Levin, 'Why Montaigne matters', regarding a newly-published volume, *Essays of Montaigne* translated by M. A. Screech. The article proved to be a fine fourth paean of Levin's to indexing and cry of distress at its depreciation.

The first two columns praise alike Montaigne ('one of the most lucid and straightforward writers who ever lived'), his essays ('depicted human nature more exactly, more thoroughly, and more variously, than any man ...'), and Dr M. A. Screech ('a notable Montaigne scholar'), translator of this volume of the essays, which Levin welcomes ('a new translation of Montaigne will, happily, introduce him to another generation of readers, and in his Elysian Fields they can browse'). But then --

'And then I turned to the index. I have made so much uproar about inadequate indexes that you might think publishers would by now always provide proper ones, if only to ensure they are not pelted with ordure from the hand of Levin, the Indexer's Champion. Well, I give notice that I have just signed a new contract with my ordure-merchant, who assures me that

his stocks are sufficient to last well into the next century. Screech's "index" is an abomination. He, a distinguished and experienced academic, offers an inexcusable insult to his author, so much so that he would have done better to dispense with an index altogether.

First, it is *nothing* but a list of proper names, whereas there is no writer in all history who cries out more loudly for an index to his ideas, his themes, his comments, his attitudes, his quotings, his self-descriptions, his musings, his experiences, his divagations, his jests. But that is not the worst. The wretched, dreary parade of names is anyway useless, because it is nothing but a string of undifferentiated page-numbers, with a pathetic sop in the form of bold-type numerals indicating "more than a passing reference".

Try him on Plato. There are 107 references, of which 18 are in bold type, and in neither category is there any further guidance -- not a single word anywhere to break the flow of meaningless numbers. Alexander the Great is an even better example: 45 numbers, of which 14 are the supposedly more useful bold-type entries.

Not long ago I was excoriating the slubberdegullions of the OUP for such an index; my rage was heightened by my knowledge of what the OUP had once been: a byword for publishing integrity, meticulous care and a staff that missed nothing. Now, with his new Montaigne, I have to pour abuse on a firm which bears another of the greatest names in British publishing, Allen Lane.

What makes this *dégringolade* all the more shameful is that an index to Montaigne *has* been made, and the circumstances of its making deny Screech and his publisher their last feeble excuse, viz, the difficulties encountered in a work which by its very nature rarely keeps still long enough for an index-entry to be pinned to it. But before me lies an index admirable in itself, and the more remarkable for having been compiled so long ago that it appeared only about 150 years after indexes as we would recognise them came into being.

The first translation of Montaigne into English was published in 1603. It was done by that remarkable man John Florio ... Now see some of Florio's enchanting entries:

... Apparell ... Acquaintance ... Artificiall workes among bruit creatures ... Authors of Bookes ... Bad means for goods ... Beasts and men considered together . . . Community in friendship . . . Codpeeces ... Descriptions of ourselves ... Election *vide* Choice ... Ghostes represented by feare ... Gravell and stone in the kidneyes and bladder ... Licentiousnesse in Philosophers ...

But you get the idea. More to the point, you get the flavour of Montaigne. Indeed, if you had never heard of Montaigne, but simply read through Florio's index, would you not turn eagerly to the text of what you must by then be thinking an intriguing work?

P.S. Allen Lane can't even get their jacket-copy right. Who is this "Eramus" claiming to have written *The Praise of Folly*?

I wrote to him:

20.12.91

Dear Mr Levin,

It has taken some time to write up your wonderful latest article on indexing in The Times; although you may have good stocks of ordure in reserve, I have exhausted my approaches to writing you up! I have scrapped two attempts, and produced now this straight history of your penmanship in our behalf. Do I have your permission to print this, please, and to quote the whole article from 'And then I turned to the index.'?

I enclose also another write-up about a strange new method of achieving disaster in indexing, which may interest you.

With very many thanks for all your splendid championship of indexing,

Yours sincerely,
Hazel Bell

My write-up of his article was 'Levin writes again', in *The Indexer* 18 (1) April 1992, 41-2. It began:

'There are anthologies of articles on indexing, and there are collections of newspaper articles of single journalists. We look forward to the glorious appearance of the collected articles in *The Times* of Bemard Levin on indexes.'

pointed out, 'Since [1977] each volume index of *The Indexer* has included an entry, LEVIN, BERNARD, with attendant subheadings.'

and, after recounting the tale of a terrible mess of an index that an editor had boasted in *The Times* Letters page of producing by computer, ended --

'This seems to prove once again that blind reliance upon computers can produce only a travesty of an index, while correct choice and form of entry, and proper subject indexing, require full human intelligence and skill -- as Bernard Levin was saying so eloquently when we came in.'

23 Dec 91 [handwritten from him]

Dear Mrs Bell,

Thank you very much for your most charming words. I am, of course, happy to be thus immortalised -- indeed honoured.

Did you see the reply from Allen Lane in the letters of *The Times*? The man must be crazy -- we are all in favour of ample indexes, but 150 pages??!
Anyway, be sure that I shall continue to uphold the noble cause of indexing.

With all good wishes, and the compliments of the season,
Yours sincerely,
Bernard Levin

P.S. (I imagine you took photocopies of the enclosed, but just in case ...)

I think the 'write-up about a strange new method of achieving disaster in indexing' must have been my 'Distortion and mutilation -- it can happen to us', which appeared in *The Indexer* vol. 18 pp 40-1, April 1992. It concerned Douglas Matthews' index to *Dickens* by Peter Ackroyd, which for the paperback edition of 1991 appeared to have been reset or run through a computer program that most unintelligently and disastrously rearranged many of its subheadings.

9 April 1992 Dear Mr Levin,

As The Indexer is despatched to members of the Society of Indexers direct from our printers, I am never able to put in a note directing your attention to the pages which regularly seem to feature you. However, the April issue will be out next week, and you will find the write-up of your sequence of articles on indexing in The Times on pp 41-2.

I am enclosing meanwhile a copy of the other journal I edit, Learned Publishing, which refers to your lovely article in LOGOS on page 114.

My booklet on indexing biographies is also out now, including as usual references to your writings.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,
Hazel Bell

(*Learned Publishing* reviewed *LOGOS* in its April 1992 issue, Vol. 5 pages 114-15, particularly praising Levin's article, 'Author (British) meets librarian (American)').)

**10 DEVONSHIRE PLACE,
LONDON WIN IPS**

071-935 0046

13th April 1992

Dear Mrs Bell [handwritten]

Thank you very much indeed for your most kind words;
The Indexer did indeed appear today. You are too kind.

Yours sincerely [handwritten]
Bernard Levin

FROM BERNARD LEVIN C.B.E.

I sent him a copy of *Indexing biographies and other stories of human lives* on its first publication in 1992, and received this letter (I cut the top off, so don't have the date):

Dear Mrs. Bell,

Many thanks for the copy of your booklet, which I will keep safe for Mr. Levin to study when he returns from his long trip abroad. Now I begin to understand why a good index is such a work of art!

Yours sincerely,
Catherine M Tye
Secretary to Bernard Levin.

THE TIMES

1 Pennington Street, London E1 9XN

Telephone: 071-782 5000 Telex: 262141

7th July 1992

Dear Mrs. Bell,

Thank you very much for your generous words of support. Mr. Levin is again enjoying an extended trip abroad, but you may be encouraged to know that he has received a large number of letters in support of this particular article. Your support will of course be especially appreciated.

Thank you again for writing.

Yours sincerely,

Catherine M Tye

Secretary to
Bernard Levin.

14 Nov 94

THE INDEXER
Journal of the Society of Indexers
Hazel K. Bell Hon. Editor

Dear Mr Levin,

The University of Chicago Center for Continuing Studies has requested our permission to photocopy for one-term use for 20 class sets for an educational course, 'Introduction to Editing', a selection of items that have appeared in The Indexer. These include your own contributions:

'Authors' attitudes to Indexes', Oct. 1984, pp 85-6
Letter, Oct. 1987, p 238

Please let me know as soon as possible if you have any objection to this.

With best wishes,
Yours sincerely,
Hazel Bell

On this, handwritten and ringed in red, Levin wrote:
Dear Hazel
Nihil obstat
Yours
Bernard