

Gissing's index to the papers of Henry Ryecroft

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George Gissing's late work, *The private papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), is described in *The Cambridge history of English literature* as lying 'in form, somewhere between the *journal intime* and the diary, reflection and observation being expanded to the length of brief essays', and in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* as 'a mock-autobiography'. As the purported autobiographer is a fictitious character, the eponymous Ryecroft, the book partakes also of the nature of fiction.

The first edition, from Archibald Constable in 1903, 293 pages of text, is provided with a four-page index, which remained present in all Constable's impressions of the book until 1918, except for an indexless sixpenny reprint they published in 1908 and reprinted in 1913. A reset "presentation edition" of 280 pages, first published in 1912, reprinted 1915 and 1939, had the same index on pages 277-80. From 1921 to 1930 new editions had a reset text, with index on pages 269-71. The subsequent English editions (1953 to 1987) had no index, except the 1982 and 1983 Harvester editions, which were photographic reprints of the first edition.

There had been few previous indexes to fictitious works. In 1751 Samuel Richardson, at the request of Samuel Johnson, had compiled an Index Rerum to the 3rd edition of his novel, *Clarissa*, and in 1754 he provided for *Sir Charles Grandison* an 'Index Historical and Characteristical of the Seven Volumes of this Work'. In 1805 Isaac d'Israeli added 'An Illuminating Index' of 22 pages at the end of the third volume of his amazingly-titled novel, *Flim-flams! Or, the life and errors of my uncle, and the amours of my aunt! With illustrations and obscurities, by messieurs tag, rag, and bobtail. With an illuminating index! In three volumes, with nine plates* (published by John Murray) — only for this novelty to be greeted in *Critical Review* (3rd ser. 4, Feb 1805) with: 'These five prefaces, ... and illuminating index (as this new expedient to swell a novel is absurdly called), entirely supersede the use of any text; and indeed we could have spared it without a sigh.' In 1811 d'Israeli provided an 'Index to the Notes which particularly relate to the Jesuits' at the end of his novel, *Despotism: or the fall of the Jesuits. A political romance, illustrated by historical anecdotes* (John Murray). The A. & C. Black editions of 1886-7 of Sir Walter Scott's *The Waverley novels* included short indexes, chiefly of proper names. In 1889 Lewis Carroll provided a whimsical index to *Sylvie and Bruno* (Macmillan), and in 1893 to *Sylvie and Bruno concluded*.

There seem to be two possible reasons for Gissing's taking the unusual course of including an index in his fictitious memoir. One must be to emphasize, draw further attention to, some of his favourite topics and opinions there treated of, such as:

Agnosticism; Author, the unsuccessful; Books, love of; Civilization, prospects of; Conscripting; Democracy in England; English virtues; Novel-writing; Prudery, English; Publisher and author; Quarrelling, universality of; Spring, thoughts of

and the joke he recounts, Steamboats, advertisement of. Then the 19-line entry for Ryecroft himself, which includes the subheading, 'self-criticism', surely gave Gissing a splendid opportunity to devise subjective subheads for his presumable self-representative, such as:

'no cosmopolite', 'apology for his comfort', 'anti-democratic temper', 'delight in giving', 'desire of knowledge', 'hatred of science'.

Another reason to include an index in a spurious biography is to lend it an apparent authenticity. Virginia Woolf did this with her entirely fictitious *Orlando* (Hogarth Press, 1928) in which the protagonist, Orlando, lives for 400 years and turns from man to woman. Leon Edel, in *Writing lives, principia biographica* writes of *Orlando*: 'In keeping with its nature the volume is endowed with an index. The pretence of scholarship and exactitude is maintained to the end.' Woolf's

'playfulness' about *Orlando*'s category met difficulties: booksellers, confused by its apparent status as biography, as indicated on the title page, and supported by its possession of an index, refused to sell it as fiction. Nevertheless, overcoming at least that joke, *Orlando* sold well. (Philip Bradley, 1989, *The Indexer* 16/4.246)

Similarly, Ranulph Fiennes included indexes (and maps and photographs) in his 'factional novels', *The Feather Men* (1993) and *The Sett* (1996 – Little Brown), to add to the impression of actual factuality. The original, hardback editions have 'Fact or fiction?' on the covers. When *The Feather Men* was

brought out in paperback a year later, the publishers presented it as fiction, removing the maps, photos and index accordingly.

So – those are perhaps the reasons for the inclusion of the index in *The private papers of Henry Ryecroft*. There is another factor, besides its being an index to a fictional text, that makes it interesting to a professional indexer such as myself: it is an example of a late 19th-century index. To see how far this differs from biographical indexes of today, I scanned in the original index from my 1903 edition of the book, and worked through it, inserting entries, details and further references that seemed to me lacking – by 21st-century, proper biographical standards.

I found the chief differences between the original index and my revision/expansion to be that Gissing used capital initials for all entries, whether common or proper nouns, inserted commas at the end of entries before page numbers, and usually gave only the first page number where the topic was mentioned, rarely extending the reference to the next or subsequent pages when the text continued to treat of the same topic. He usually gives only surnames in the index, when only these occur in the text; a modern indexer would insert forenames in the index entries. These are probably characteristics of the indexing of the period. I added many more entries: Gissing probably selected those topics he wanted emphasized, rather than attempting or intending a thorough analysis of the whole text into index form. There are a some slips in alphabetical order – Comfort following Conscriptio, Paestum following Painting, and the final entry, Xenophon, following Youth. Then, too, Gissing's selection of entries for the index is highly subjective, as shown above.

Here, as an example to compare, are the entries for Ryecroft himself; first quoted direct from Gissing's index, then as revised by me.

Ryecroft, his life and character, iii.; journal, vii.; pen, 3; cottage, 6; housekeeper, 6, 49, 88; no cosmopolite, 9; apology for his comfort, 12; life and labour in London, *vid.* London; library, 34, 228-9; anti-democratic temper, 47; memories of drill-sergeant, 57; “coaching” at Knightsbridge, 109; emotions on receiving legacy, 142; self-criticism, 165-8; retrospect of life, 217; delight in giving, 230; desire of knowledge, 262; hatred of science, 267

Ryecroft, Henry: character viii-ix, 9, 47-8, 113, 166; at school 100-1, 108-9; career viii-ix, 3; family x; in London, 19-23, 27-32, 98, 146, 149, 194, 211, 232-6; receives legacy ix-x, 142-3; home in Devon x, 6, 7-9, 112-13, 228, 229; retrospect of life, 217, 263-4; death xi; obituaries vii; journal and notebook vii, xi-xiv, 262-3

A previous critic of Gissing's index, Robert Irwin (Irwin, 2000), much disliked Gissing's book, lamenting:

If the novel is not very good in the first place, even the best sort of index will not rescue the book from mediocrity or worse.

but he does at least allow that this index matches the tenor of the text, writing:

A glance at the index suffices to show the novel to be bookmanly, tweedy, insular, complacent stuff.

– conforming to what Esmond de Beer wrote of L. F. Powell's index to his own six-volume revision of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*; he described the index as

a most efficient and most appropriate complement to the text ... reflects the conversable character of the book to which it is attached (de Beer, 1967).

But a real shame that this curious index has apparently become even rarer than the book to which it was appended!

References

- Bradley, Philip. Indexes to works of fiction. *The Indexer* 16 (4) October 1989, 246
- de Beer, E.S. Dr. Powell's index to Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. *The Indexer* 5 (3) Spring 1967, 135-9
- Edel, Leon. *Writing lives, principia biographica*. 1984
- Irwin, Robert. Your novel needs indexing. *New Writing* 9, ed. J. Fowles and A. L. Kennedy; Vintage/British Council, 2000

- Adapted version of an article that appeared in *The Gissing Journal* Volume XLII, Number 3, July 2006