

# Continental European indexing: then and now

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*In this article Caroline Diepeveen explores the beginnings of the indexing tradition in Europe and considers to what extent that tradition has survived into contemporary practice there.*

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## Introduction

Hazel Bell wrote in *The Indexer* some years ago: ‘Historically, it has seemed that societies of indexers form only where English is spoken’ (Bell, 1991: 233). According to her, Japan was an exception in this respect. Not much has been heard of the Japanese indexers since, but the China Society of Indexers is party to the International Agreement and maintains a high level of activity. What about continental Europe? Until recently it has been more or less an indexing *terra incognita*, changing perhaps a little for the better with the establishment of the Netherlands Indexing Network (NIN) and the German Network of Indexers (DNI). This article gives an overview of the history of continental European indexing and then explores current indexing practices.

## The invention of indexes

Bella Weinberg and W. P. Gerritsen (a Dutch professor of philology) both locate the invention of subject indexes in 13th-century monasteries in France (Weinberg, 2000: 4–5; Gerritsen, 2003: 22). Jean Berger (2006: 24–8) has demonstrated that indexing techniques were used even earlier. These very early examples were Latin indexes produced in monasteries. They look very different from modern indexes, which raises the question: When can an index be called an index? In other words, what is the definition of an index? F. L. Brown (2000: 1) offers the following: ‘an index is a reference tool combining three elements: summary, alphabetization and locators.’

The early 12th-century land ownership registers that Berger found meet only two of the criteria: alphabetization and locators. However, the 13th-century indexes of religious manuscripts have all three elements: they use terms (i.e. headings) to summarize the text, locators (folio numbers) and alphabetization. Alphabetization has an interesting history (Berger, 2006). The early 12th-century land ownership registers used alphabetization by initial letter only. Tom Norton (2006) has demonstrated that in later centuries entries were alphabetized just through the first few letters, with sounds sometimes getting priority over alphabet.

Why did clerics living in 13th-century European monasteries suddenly feel a need for indexes? Gerritsen attempts to answer this question, linking the appearance of subject indexes to new ways of reading and studying texts that developed at that time. For centuries monastic reading (*Meditatio* – reading aloud to oneself) was the norm. Hugh of Saint-Victor, who lived in 12th-century France, distinguished three different ways of reading. The first he called *lectio docentis*, which is the teacher reading to his pupils. The English word ‘lecture’ is directly connected to this type of

reading. The second type is reading by the pupil or student, which is still known in English when one speaks of someone ‘reading classics’ at university. The third type is private or ‘silent’ reading.

This silent reading meant there was a need for order (*ordinatio*) in the way in which a text was presented. Texts (including the Bible) were now divided into chapters with chapter titles and smaller units, paragraphs (or verses), with signs marking the start of a new paragraph. This made it much easier to locate information. From the second half of the 12th century, the alphabetic presentation of texts became popular. This could be done with biblical terms and with herbs and things appearing in nature (e.g. *De Nature rerum* by Thomas of Cantimpré). However, not every text could be presented in alphabetical order; an example is the works of Aristotle. Alphabetical subject indexes were a simple way in which these texts could be searched. So, as Gerritsen says, indexes were a product not of renaissance humanism as is often thought, but of mediaeval scholasticism (Gerritsen, 2003: 25).

## Early European indexes

### Frequency

How many indexes were there in the early days of European printing? What was their frequency? For an attempt at an answer, Frederick Brown searched the Online Computer Library Centre (OCLC) catalogue (which has some 100,000 European titles for the period 1450–1600) and arrived at the rough indication of trends shown in Table 1 (overleaf).<sup>1</sup>

The table suggests that in the early days of printing indexes were a rarity (less than 5 per cent of books having them), but as printing expanded indexes appeared more frequently, peaking at a little under 10 per cent. It is interesting to note that London started modestly in terms of indexing, but caught up in the early 16th century. Brown (2000: 6) notes that Latin books were far more likely to have an index (10.2 per cent for the period as a whole) than books in vernacular languages (5.5 per cent for Italian and 3.0 per cent for German), probably reflecting the fact that Latin books were used extensively at universities and clerical institutions for the sort of close study for which an index would be particularly useful.

### Techniques and quality

Tom Norton (2006) makes some interesting comments on the quality of the indexes to *Il Libro del Cortegiano* (*The book of the courtier*). He notes, for example, that the 1547 index has only 285 entries, no cross-references, and

Table 1

City	1451–1474	1476–1499	1501–1524	1526–1549	1551–1574	1576–1599	Total 1451–1599
Antwerp	–	–	154 (0.6%)	578 (5.5%)	1443 (7.8%)	1125 (10.8%)	3533 (7.8%)
Cologne	–	396 (6.3%)	240 (5.8%)	538 (14.9%)	517 (17.6%)	521 (14.6%)	2443 (12.4%)
Nuremberg	–	343 (3.8%)	426 (1.9%)	629 (2.7%)	228 (3.9%)	185 (5.4%)	1980 (3.1%)
Strasbourg	123 (4.1%)	603 (7.1%)	987 (4.4%)	707 (8.8%)	336 (12.8%)	258 (10.5%)	3214 (7.3%)
Basel	–	356 (3.4%)	910 (8.2%)	1669 (14.1%)	1701 (18.5%)	760 (15.3%)	5657 (13.9%)
Venice	143 (4.9%)	2722 (4.3%)	1947 (5.1%)	2085 (6.6%)	3563 (11.6%)	3554 (10.5%)	14,615 (8.2%)
Seville	–	–	–	109 (3.7%)	149 (6.7%)	115 (9.6%)	527 (5.7%)
Paris	–	435 (2.3%)	1513 (9.5%)	2724 (11.3%)	2790 (8.2%)	1931 (8.2%)	9844 (8.9%)
London	–	187 (1.1%)	645 (6.4%)	2140 (10.0%)	3125 (9.4%)	4970 (6.9%)	11,617 (8.1%)
Total Europe	1154 (2.3%)	9813 (3.7%)	13,895 (4.4%)	18,809 (7.7%)	24,542 (9.6%)	26,828 (9.3%)	110,283 (7.6%)

comprises mainly names of people and places, with very few concepts. By modern standards it would be considered a poor index.

Gerritsen describes a slightly later index, one produced by Josephus Justus Scaliger to Janus Gruterus' *Inscriptiones antiquae totius orbi Romani* published in Heidelberg in 1602. Scaliger was a scholar at Leiden University and Gerritsen found the handwritten version of Scaliger's index in the university library (see Figure 1). Gerritsen describes how in 1601 Scaliger received an urgent note from Commelin, the publisher in Heidelberg, stating that Gruterus' book contained 1000 folio pages, was type-set and printed, with

only the index to be added. Could Scaliger perhaps...? Sounds remarkably like modern day indexing practices.

Scaliger accepted the task and went to work. It took him ten months to compile the index working on it full time from July 1601 until May 1602. He used a sheet of paper with a four column layout (see Figure 1). It is not clear why Scaliger did not use slips – perhaps, Gerritsen suggests (2003: 9), paper was still too costly just to cut it up. The slips technique, however, was certainly known at that time. Conrad Gesner described in detail his use of slips for the index to his *Pandectae*, published some 50 years earlier, in 1548 (Brown, 2000: 1). Perhaps Gesner was a much



Figure 1 The handwritten version of Scaliger's index

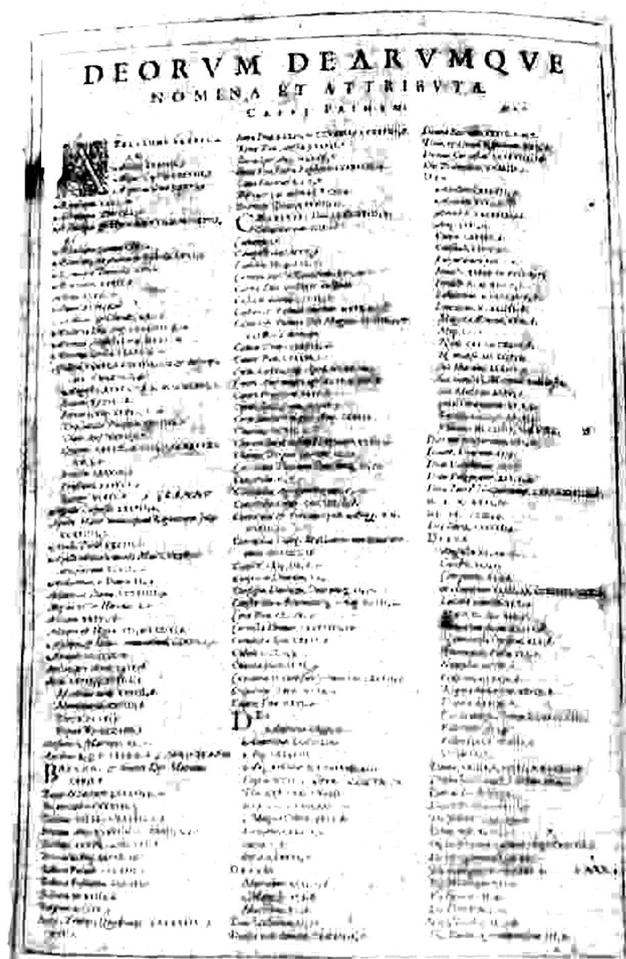


Figure 2 The printed index

wealthier man than Scaliger, but I am afraid the rationale behind Scaliger's indexing techniques will remain obscure.

Scaliger's final index consisted of 200 folio pages and was generally considered by scholars (including the 19th-century philologist Jacob Bernays) to be a masterpiece. Gruterus' book was used as a standard text book for more than 250 years. And Gerritsen (2003: 12) has no doubt that Scaliger's excellent index was the reason why the book was in use for such a long time. Scaliger's thoughts about indexing sound remarkably familiar to the modern indexer. He described his index as '*anima illius corporis*' ('soul of the body') and to the publisher he wrote: 'I have sent on the index. I have forbidden that mention of me be made' (Gerritsen, 2003: 11–12).

Of course, this represents only a tiny sample of indexes that were produced in early continental Europe, but we may conclude that the skills to produce indexes of excellent quality were already there four hundred years ago.

## Contemporary European indexes

### Frequency

How do the figures quoted earlier compare with contemporary European book indexing? How many European books have indexes nowadays? Over the years, some sweeping statements have been made about French indexing. Nancy Mitford, for example (in the *Sunday Times* of 22 June 1952) alleged that French books never have indexes (Robertson, 1995: 161). And Weinberg has asserted that: 'A successful American or British freelance indexer would not be advised to relocate to France, as French publishers do not perceive a need for their services.' Weinberg searched the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) on French Literature of the 20th Century and found that 294 of the 2357 books (or 12 per cent) had an index. A search of Bibliothèque Nationale acquisitions (including fiction) since 1997 indicated that only 17.9 per cent of books had an index. Taking the average of these two figures suggests that 15 per cent of recent French books have an index. This is well below the estimate Brown gives of 24.0 per cent of books in five modern European languages (French, Italian, German, Spanish and Dutch) combined (Brown, 2000: 5).

I decided to compare the French figures with figures from the Netherlands. The Dutch Royal Library gives weekly overviews on its website of all books published in the Netherlands, divided into subject categories and with a note showing whether a book has an index.<sup>2</sup> I used the A-list, which covers all books published through established channels, and looked at the philosophy and psychology, sociology, political science, history, law, medicine and technology categories for the first three months of 2006. On average 52.5 per cent of the books had an index, considerably more than the European average of 24 per cent that Brown found.

It is interesting to compare these figures with figures from the Anglo-Saxon world. I drew on a couple of North American studies. The first, conducted in the 1990s, concerned only academic books. It showed that 82.2 per cent of contemporary American academic books have an index (Bishop et al, 1991: 26). The figures for France and the Netherlands are not confined to academic books, however, and are therefore not

directly comparable. I found the second set of figures on the website of Martin Tulic. For the period 2000 to 2004 Tulic found that 42 per cent of American non-fiction bestsellers had an index. For the first quarter of 2006 he notes that the figure had gone up to 50 per cent, virtually the same figure as I found for the books published in the Netherlands over the same period.<sup>3</sup> In quantitative terms French indexing seems to have continued at more or less the same level for the last 500 years. By contrast, English indexing started rather late and has increased dramatically over time. The French figures include fiction, which distorts the figure somewhat. Nevertheless, the figure is certainly lower not only than the general European figure but much lower than the 52.5 per cent that we found for the Netherlands.

### Quality

We know that indexes have been produced in continental Europe since at least the 13th century and that they are still being produced there. What do we know about the quality of contemporary European indexes? Based on my own observations, a good-quality subject index in contemporary European publishing is a rarity. Pressures of time and money often mean that an index is dispensed with altogether, or limited to a simple name index. This happened, for example, with the translation of *My life* by Bill Clinton. The English original had a hefty subject index, the Dutch translation made do with a meagre name index without any attempt at differentiation within a name. The result was extraordinarily long strings, with, for example, some 250 locators attached to 'Clinton, Bill', and 100 or so for 'Clinton, Chelsea'. Exactly the same happened with the German edition (Fassbender, 2004: 95).

## The indexing profession in Europe

Although the name European Union for an organization now consisting of 25 European countries may suggest otherwise, Europe is not a unity. It is certainly not a linguistic unity, which means that indexing practices vary from country to country. It is impossible in this short article to do justice to indexing practice in all 25 countries. The Netherlands and Germany have seen the modest beginnings of indexing networks, and contributions on indexing practice in these two countries can be found elsewhere in this issue of *The Indexer*. In an attempt to gain some idea of indexing practice elsewhere I sent a short questionnaire to indexers in France (8), Denmark (4), Belgium (1), Italy (1), Spain (2), Switzerland (2) and Norway (1).

Confusion can be caused by the fact that in continental Europe the term 'indexing' is also used for what we would see as a classification process, or as a means of providing access to an information database. This is illustrated by the answer from Norway:

I think you are most interested in indexes in books and so on. That is not my field of work. I teach classification and indexing in library and information science, for instance thesauri and subject headings. All your questions are

irrelevant concerning my work. [Compare, for example, Bagheri 2006.]

Many of those to whom the questionnaire was sent were either just starting out as indexers or were ex-pats working only for the English market. Perhaps the level of ex-pat response is not surprising since I used an English-language questionnaire and my entry point was via the SI membership and known users of English-language indexing software. It is, of course, entirely possible to work for the British publishing industry while living outside the UK. But naturally this group could tell us very little about local indexing practices.

### France

French responses came mainly from technical writers, who certainly see indexes as a very useful reference tool. However they indicate that they would not be able to survive on indexing work alone. As Bella Weinberg implies in her comments on indexing in France, it seems that authors are expected to make their own indexes. She also noted the French practice of placing the table of contents, sometimes very detailed, at the back of the book rather than the front, and quoted a French professor of library science who said that most French researchers use the table of contents in the way an index would be used by researchers in English-speaking countries (Weinberg, 2000: 10).

A few peculiarities of French indexes (though by no means unique to them) are: a preference for separate indexes instead of an integrated one, separate indexing of different volumes, long strings of locators, the use of 'ff.' or 'sq.' to indicate that a subject continues on subsequent pages, no elision of page references and a lack of cross-references (Robertson, 1995: 161–3).

None of the respondents was able to point to a French course in indexing though these do exist as an element in other courses on, for example, information management.

Weinberg points in her article towards a French confidence in automatic indexing in the sense of the computerized selection of terms, as opposed to human indexing whereby term selection is done by humans. An account of one such programme, IndDoc, appears elsewhere in this issue of *The Indexer* (Zargayouna et al).

### Denmark

There seems to be something of an indexing tradition in Denmark, at least for academic books. One respondent remarked that Danish publishers sometimes purposely do not include an index, just to indicate that a book is of general interest, not an academic work.<sup>4</sup> Presumably they feel that including an index would scare readers off and thereby lower the sales, an argument I certainly haven't heard before. When indexes are included, they are very often name indexes only. Here again, we see a confidence in automatic indexing. As one Danish respondent says:

The leading society for text editing, Det Danske Sprog – of Litteraturselskab, published the collected works of the 19th-century philosopher Frederik Dreier in 2003. The

large index was highly praised in reviews but when I looked up 'Kvinder' (women) I was surprised to find next to nothing; Dreier was known as an advocate of women's rights. The index was made half automatically by means of the indexing function in MS Word. But in the 19th century the Danes spelled the word with Q – Qvinder.

All three Danish respondents are active indexers, but none of them earns a living just by indexing. They say that the market for indexing is limited, partly because Danish is a relative little-used language and indexing would not be cost-effective for Danish publishers. There is no training course in indexing.

### Germany and the Netherlands

Germany and the Netherlands get more extensive treatment elsewhere in this issue (see the articles by Pierke Bosschieter and Jochen Fassbender), but a few general points may be appropriate here. Many non-fiction books in these countries are published with an index, but generally it is a name index only. A high-quality subject index is a rarity in both countries.

Neither country has any specialized training courses in indexing, and there are very few professional indexers. However, I managed to trace two short publications in Dutch that deal with indexing. One is the booklet by Gerritsen that deals with early European indexing and has been referred to extensively in this article. The other one is a short manual on modern indexing practices (de Koning, 1999) which, interestingly, is written by a technical author. In line with France, the Netherlands interest in indexing comes from technical writers and not from the traditional publishing world. The manual was published in 1999 and was on the Dutch market for only a short while. This is unfortunate, because most of the advice given in this little manual is actually quite sound.

Loose-leaf legal indexing is an attractive market for Dutch indexers (see the article by Henk Revier, p. 119). As in France and Denmark, publishers put their trust in the quality and cost-effectiveness of automatic indexing. In the early 1990s the technical communications department of Twente Technical University in the Netherlands undertook a study on the use of computer manuals, specifically focusing on their indexes – Pierke Bosschieter discusses the results elsewhere in this issue.

There may be more interest in indexing in Germany and the Netherlands than in other continental European countries. However, compared with Anglo-Saxon publishing, there is little systematic interest in the subject. Publications or research in this area are incidental and based on the initiative of a few individuals. It is interesting, though, that the Netherlands seems to produce about the same percentage of books with an index as the United States.

## Conclusions

There is certainly a very old and continuing indexing tradition in continental Europe. This tradition has continued

more or less unchanged over time, whereas English language indexing has dramatically increased. In general, the level of indexing in Europe is lower than in English-speaking countries, in terms of both quantity and quality, although in terms of quantity the Netherlands comes close to or equals the United States.

Overall, we found that publishers in continental European countries have more confidence in the merits of automatic indexing than those in English-speaking countries. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that human indexers are not plentiful in Europe and therefore there is less awareness among publishers about the possibilities and quality of indexing by humans. There are indications that automatic indexing is gaining a foothold in the Anglo-Saxon indexing world as well, but it still seems to be limited to some tentative experiments in that area. Publishers are more aware of the quality aspects of indexing, and of what the human indexer can do that a machine cannot. This understanding is seriously lacking on the European continent. Among editors working at the well-established publishers, knowledge of indexing is very limited and cost is given priority over quality.

The situation as I found it in France, Germany and the Netherlands suggests that what little awareness there is of good indexing usually lies with technical authors, not editors. Making a living by indexing alone seems to be very rare and in none of the countries I looked at did I find a training programme dedicated to indexing.

As one of my Danish correspondents put it: 'There is virtually no knowledge or understanding [in Denmark] of the Art of Indexing.' The same could be said of indexing in continental Europe in general. Indexes are not a rarity, but a good subject index is. Continental European indexers are faced with the task of convincing publishers that it is worthwhile investing in quality indexes (and that at present this means employing human indexers).

In my view, support from the well-established indexing societies in the Anglo-Saxon world is vital in helping to raise this awareness among European publishers. We hope the Anglo-Saxon indexing societies are willing to take up this huge challenge and will support us. Two main areas can be identified where this support is needed:

- raising awareness among publishers about the quality of indexes
- promoting the training of indexers to ensure that sufficient indexers are available to produce good quality indexes.

## Notes

1. The missing years between the columns are in the original.
2. The URL for this website is: [www.kb.nl/kb/netuit/ned/frameset\\_A-lijst.html](http://www.kb.nl/kb/netuit/ned/frameset_A-lijst.html).
3. The URL for Martin Tulic's figures is: [www.anindexer.com/about/bestsellers/bestindex.html](http://www.anindexer.com/about/bestsellers/bestindex.html).
4. They are not alone. See, for example, 'No index? It must be fiction' on p. 99 of this issue.

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## Brookes

Those doing researching into indexing topics may find it useful to know that a complete set of *The Indexer* is now held at Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK.