The publication of a further fifteen volumes, covering the years 1971–5, brings to a close the Subject Index of books added since 1880 to the British Museum Library and the British Library, which was begun by G. K. Fortescue (fig. 1) and is still widely (though not officially) known by its originator's name. After service in both the mercantile marine and the Royal Navy, George Knottesford Fortescue entered the British Museum in 1870 through the influence of his uncle, A. C. Tait, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was one of the Principal Trustees of the Museum. In 1884 Fortescue was appointed Superintendent of the Reading Room, in which capacity he soon became aware of the difficulties attending a subject approach to the collections by readers. To meet their needs in the field of contemporary publications, he devised the Subject Index, which he continued to edit after his appointment as Keeper of Printed Books in 1899, until his death, on the point of retirement, in 1912. Since then the work has passed through numerous hands; the increased volume of accessions has called for a group of indexers, while the field of subjects has extended ever wider. Nevertheless, the Subject Index has continued throughout to bear the mark of Fortescue's hand and thought.

The 1971–5 index contains about 470,000 entries, bringing the total number to approximately 3,127,000. To the reader and the librarian of today, faced with the information explosion and the emphasis on rapid, comprehensive service, it is extraordinary that the British Museum Library existed for over a century and a quarter before a detailed subject guide to any part of its collections of printed material came into being. Until then, the only information available was to be found in the systematic shelf arrangement of the books and the handwritten shelf lists in which this was recorded, but the limited subdivision of subjects restricted even their value. Furthermore, there were numerous parallel sequences of subjects on the shelves, due in part to the retention as individual entities of some of the collections received by gift or purchase, and also to the growth of the library and the extension of the buildings, each extension involving a new sequence of shelf-marks and a new set of subject divisions, more or less based on the earlier ones. This process of duplication continued until the advent of Thomas Watts who from 1838 to 1856 was responsible for shelving the books ('placing' in British Museum terminology). He introduced 'the elastic system' of press-marking which allowed for the expansion and future growth of subject runs. Watts, like John Winter
Fig. 1. George Knottesford Fortescue (1847–1912). British Library Archives
Jones and the elder Richard Garnett, who were brought into the library by Panizzi at about the same time, was a remarkable linguist, self-taught, and the three men were largely responsible for the achievement of Panizzi’s aims for the development of the collection of printed books and the reorganization of the General Catalogue.

An attempt at a classified subject catalogue had been begun in 1824 by the Revd Thomas Hartwell Horne, senior assistant librarian in the Department of Printed Books from 1824 to 1860. Horne had already in 1812 compiled the classed and alphabetical indexes to the Catalogue of the Harleian Manuscripts, but the new subject catalogue was abandoned unfinished, after ten years, in 1834. Thus until Fortescue’s time subject guidance had to be sought from published bibliographies, from the shelf lists and the placer in person, and from the General Catalogue. Readers were very rarely permitted access to shelves other than those in the reading rooms.

Until 1970 the placer continued to be responsible for shelving new books by Watts’s ‘elastic system’, though the number of entry points was greatly reduced as problems of space arose. Only at the placing stage was any comprehensive view of new accessions possible, but both Watts and the younger Richard Garnett, who succeeded him, had remarkable powers of memory for the books they handled. Watts was said to have placed, between 1838 and 1857, some 400,000 books, and to have been able instantly to point out more than a quarter of them.

The General Catalogue is essentially an author record, but some subject information can be gathered from its entries for corporate authors, official publications, and anonymous works. But the coverage is incidental to the purpose of the catalogue and very limited.

For Fortescue, however, the times favoured a new approach. The printing of the General Catalogue had begun in 1880, and printed author lists of accessions to supplement it were issued periodically. Fortescue was able to rearrange by subject the entries cut from these lists, and so provide copy for a printed subject index covering a period of five years. The term ‘index’ was preferred to ‘catalogue’, as the latter was thought to suggest a classified list such as that on which Hartwell Horne had worked. Fortescue, very much a practical man, had observed that the part of a classed catalogue which showed most signs of heavy use was always the alphabetical index, and this led him to adopt an alphabetical arrangement. Many of the headings which he chose to use, especially those for the names of countries and for such subjects as Capital and Labour, and Government, are very wide in scope, and have undergone much internal subdivision. General information on the system, particularly for entries under the names of countries, is included in the introductory note to each index. Under the modern principle of using the most specific form of heading, the headings would have been more numerous, and smaller. For example, works on strikes and on trade unions have been entered under Capital and Labour, those on revolution under Government, works on individual genera and species of fish under Fish, Monographs, and those on single American tribes under Indians, American, Monographs. The form of heading chosen is normally that found in the current literature of a subject.
In this way a series of indexes was produced, at first as a private undertaking by Fortescue, and later as official publications of the Department of Printed Books. Those for 1881 to 1900 were cumulated, and a single index issued for 1961 to 1970; all the others were for five-year periods. Importance was attached to the index as a guide to recently published works, and prompt publication preferred to the slower production rate which larger cumulations would have entailed. By 1931-5 the number of entries for the quinquennium had reached 84,000, in two volumes, and there were 116,000 for 1936-40, but the war years 1941-5 saw the total fall to 58,000. Thereafter the number rose to 100,000 entries for 1946-50, and reached 470,000, as already stated, in the volumes now published. From 1951 to 1955 there has been a move towards more specific headings, and an increase in the number of cross-references from alternative forms of heading; but in general the form of each heading was preserved unaltered in successive indexes. No separate list of headings has ever been issued. The editions have been small, 500 or 750 copies, initially for domestic use, though the work is sold, almost exclusively to other large libraries in Great Britain and abroad.

The possibility of producing larger cumulations, or of including works published before 1880, continues to be suggested from time to time, but has never been considered practicable. A note on the 1926-30 index expressed the hope that it might be possible at some future date to carry the index backwards and include the literature of the whole of the nineteenth century, but doubted whether the existing structure would be suitable for earlier material. It continued by saying that it was ever more clear, as Fortescue foresaw, that the idea of cumulating the whole was impracticable, though the reason given, that it was essential to have volumes of manageable size, is not convincing.

In producing the indexes from 1880 to 1945, the appropriate basic subject-headings were added in manuscript to the required author entries in the monthly accessions lists. The marked entries were then cut out and rearranged by subject, after which the editors finally arranged them, and pasted them on to sheets of paper. Subject-headings, cross-references, and any other editorial matter to be included were then written in by hand, and thus the copy for the printer was completed.

In the 1946-50 index, the first to be produced by photolithography, the entries from the accessions parts were pasted up in page form, together with the additional editorial matter which had been set by the printer. From 1951 onwards author entries and editorial material were available on cards, and were laid down in pages by the printer for photography. From 1956 the author cards when received for the Subject Index bore subject-headings, which had been included at the time of initial cataloguing. During the period in which the file of cards for each successive index was being formed, it was microfilmed at intervals, the film being made available to readers as a temporary measure. Under a new system introduced in 1976, catalogue entries, both author and subject, are recorded in a computer, and made available in the first instance on microfiche. The PRECIS (Preserved Context Indexing System), devised originally for the British National Bibliography, is used for the subject entries.

Compared with that of the General Catalogue, the staff of the Subject Index has always
been quite small, with up to six full-time graduate staff. They worked for the most part in close proximity, so that editorial matters were settled by informal discussion, decisions being recorded at first in interleaved copies of the index, and later on cards of distinctive colour in the card files.

The task of indexing accessions in infinite variety brought familiarity with a multitude of subject-headings, and, in time, with the whereabouts of useful information on them. As the books passed on their way to a permanent home in the stacks, a glimpse, rewarding, if tantalizingly brief, of these treasures was all that work could allow. In working on the cumulations, the large headings, perhaps containing up to 12,000 entries, or 200 pages of text, could require research in some depth, sometimes involving co-operation with a language or subject specialist.

Handling the very large numbers of cards and other printed matter, and making small alterations by cutting and pasting as an alternative to reprinting, was in the care of the catalogue shop, manned by the industrial staff of the Library. Their work ranged from such delicate tasks as the removal of a punctuation mark or accent, or the building up, letter by letter, of a word or words needed urgently and not available in print, to the dispatch of cards to the printer for copy, literally by the ton.

The Subject Index has undergone very few moves within the British Museum building. When Superintendent of the Reading Room, Fortescue would have used the Superintendent’s room opening out of the Reading Room corridor, which was destroyed in an air raid during the Second World War, and not included as such in the reconstruction. As Keeper he would have occupied the Keeper’s room at the north end of the long room beside the King’s Library. After his death, the work no doubt continued in one of the north wing work rooms, but in the 1920s it was being done in a gallery of the North Library. After the extensive reconstruction of the north wing, including the North Library, in 1934–6, the Subject Index section was moved to the Cracherode mezzanine, a pair of rooms created in the north wing by the insertion of an additional floor in the room used to house the library of the Revd C. M. Cracherode (1730–99), from whom it takes its name. It has remained there until the present time.

Apart from his work in the Reading Room and as Keeper, Fortescue is remembered for his catalogues of two important collections in the Department of Printed Books, the Thomason tracts, and the books, pamphlets, and journals relating to the French Revolution. He died on 26 October 1912, three days before the date on which he had arranged to retire.

Of later editors of the Subject Index, Richard Alexander Streatfeild (1866–1919) edited the works of Samuel Butler and wrote extensively on music, while Robert Farquharson Sharp (1864–1945), later Keeper of Printed Books, is remembered for his translations of Ibsen and Bjornson. Sir Henry Thomas (1878–1952) subsequently became Keeper, in 1943, and then Principal Keeper of Printed Books on the creation of that post. He was an eminent scholar in the field of Spanish and Portuguese literature.

The Subject Index has established and sustained a significant bond between the reader, the librarian, and the book. It has proceeded on foundations soundly laid almost a century
ago, and little changed, thanks to the provision of staff and accommodation which has been maintained, and the availability of wider expertise from other colleagues. There has been, in addition, a happy association over many years with printers, from whom much valuable advice and technical assistance has been received. All these circumstances have, in the experience of the present writer, added richly to the interest inherent in work of this kind, giving a continuing sense of fulfilment and satisfaction, and it is indeed fortunate that circumstances have allowed Fortescue’s index to continue to the point at which completely new methods, inevitably, have to be adopted. May those to whom they are entrusted reap as rich a reward.

3 An ‘analytical syllabus of the library’ is included in Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum (London, 1808).
5 Ibid., p. 76.
7 Esdaile, op. cit., p. 136.
8 A detailed bibliography of the Subject Index is included in the preface to the 1971-5 index.
11 Information kindly supplied by Mr A. Hyatt King.
13 Esdaile, op. cit., p. 183.
14 Ibid., pp. 181-3, 185-6.
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