

Notices

Index to Pre-1900 English Language Canadian Cultural and Literary Magazines. THOMAS VINCENT. Ottawa: Optim Corp., 1994. \$249.00.

This *Index* is a computerized index in CD-ROM format to the entire contents of the individual issues of 191 magazines published in Canada between 1789 and 1900. The product of several years' work by Professor Thomas Vincent, one of Canada's preeminent authorities in the field of nineteenth-century periodical publishing, the *Index* is of interest to archivists since it provides unique access to a body of material central to the study of nineteenth-century Canadian social, religious, literary, intellectual, and publishing history.

Unfortunately, the disk shows unmistakeable signs of premature publication. A chief weakness is the lack of formal documentation: a fold out "Quick Reference Guide" is provided, but this scarcely replaces a detailed user's manual or guide. The *Index* is decidedly selective in scope. Comparative analysis with standard print bibliographies reveals large and surprising gaps in the *Index*'s coverage, but ultimately demonstrates the *Index*'s uniqueness and indispensability as a research tool which provides hitherto unavailable access to numerous important magazines.

A great strength of the *Index* is its comprehensive breadth of indexing. Virtually every discrete item in every issue of the magazines included in its scope has been indexed, including material which is too often excluded from similar indexes as unimportant minutiae, such as advertisements, letters to the editor, book reviews, and subscribers lists. Illustrations (principally engravings, maps, and photographs) are also indexed, although not always as discrete items. Unfortunately, this achievement is compromised by inadequate authority control, particularly in the "Subject" browse index, and by a general tendency toward inaccuracy in data entry. The subject index has been created without recourse to standard subject terminology or a thesaurus to direct searchers from non-preferred to preferred variants of subject terms. The resulting multiplication of related variant terms, all of which must be anticipated and included in a comprehensive subject search, necessarily diminishes the effectiveness of subject searching.

Perhaps the fairest way to characterize the *Index* as a whole is as a unique and indispensable research tool which is essentially flawed in design and production. Its principal weaknesses--the absence of documentation, the general lack of authority control and particular lack of consistency or depth in subject indexing, and an overall unacceptable level of inaccuracy and error--are compensated for by its principal strengths--the admirable breadth of indexing achieved throughout and the unparalleled access provided to a rich and extensive body of literature.

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