

Proposal for
Material Cultures 2010, Edinburgh

under the heading
readers and reading practices

Indexing as autobiographical practice in the 19th century :
an examination of copies of John Todd's *Index Rerum*

John Todd's *Index Rerum* (1833, and much reprinted) was a personal database system designed to facilitate indexing of all the reading done by the "student and the professional man." The system was borrowed from John Locke's own. Key (index) words would be entered on the page whose two letters at the top —the first for a word's initial, the second for the first vowel following that initial — matched that word. As a one-volume index to many volumes, Todd's *Index Rerum* was obviously suited to the needs of ministers, lawyers, and physicians, among others. It was widely used.

And yet only two of the eight copies that I have closely examined used the book exclusively for its designated indexing purpose. Instead, we find short and lengthy extracts; personal resolutions; diaries; pressed flowers; autographs; "ready reckoner" data and computations for mill and other engineering work; drafts of (unsent?) letters; a personal memoir. We find multiple users, in cases where a daughter or widow takes over the unused or lightly-used book of father or late husband. We find experiments in writing one's signature. We find receipts, drafts of poetry, and other matter loosely inserted.

How are these various practices — all captured in these *Index Rerum* —to be understood? This small sampling represents only a tiny "reading experience database," but the reading is woven in with other practices. Taken together, I argue, these activities were instrumental in developing and maintaining a personal identity, one that indexing helped assure was connected to a larger intellectual milieu.

My reading takes into account critical contemporary views of Todd's *Index Rerum* (there were competing systems, of course), and is informed in part by recent scholarship on what may be its closest analogue, *zibaldoni* (copybooks) of Renaissance Italy.

Reference: some scans, transcriptions and ongoing analysis of these copies is presented at
<http://www.jmcvey.net/rerum>

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