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No smoking dons

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The ODNB and the new structures of knowledge

The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography has been acclaimed for its magnitude and scope and examined for its treatment of individual subjects, and the question of who's in and who's out has been widely debated. But the ODNB also has a place in what is sometimes called the "sociology of knowledge", which addresses the organization, production and consumption of learning. Looking at the Dictionary in this way may help us to understand its place in intellectual history.

At the heart of Nicolas Barker's review in the TLS (December 10) is a comparison of the old and new Dictionaries: Leslie Stephen's (and Sidney Lee's) Dictionary of National Biography, published in instalments between 1885 and 1900, and then in decennial supplements until 1990, compared with the Dictionary edited by the late Colin Matthew and Brian Harrison, and published as a whole in 2004. This is entirely appropriate, not least because the Oxford DNB has built upon the first Dictionary, retaining all the Lives that it contained and many of its principles of organization and structure. Nevertheless, Barker finds the ODNB fragmented and kaleidoscopic rather than organic: in his view, the production of the new Dictionary was mechanical and bureaucratic, and consequently lacked something that its predecessor apparently possessed. "What is lost has gone like the smoke from Stephen's and Lee's pipes."

From references to their working environment at the original publisher, Smith, Elder, & Co (inkpots, proofs and pipes again) and to "the essence of an Oxford education" which was "to be 'well-smoked' by your tutor", the first DNB is presented, by implication at least, as the collaboration of a socially and intellectually homogeneous group of men, known to each other and sharing common cultural assumptions, whose headquarters were the Athenaeum and the other London clubs. There were many contributors to the DNB, in fact, who did not fit the comfortable image of the club man, as Gillian Fenwick's Contributors' Index to the Dictionary of National Biography (1989) makes clear. Nevertheless, in Barker's view, the work produced by this group of men was more satisfying (perhaps in the manner of a good smoke) than the new DNB, because more unified.

A rather different approach would note that the DNB was compiled during the late-Victorian "fragmentation of the common context", as Robert Young has characterized British intellectual life after 1870, during a period when the cultural and academic heritage previously shared by an elite readership broke down. Young may have exaggerated the degree and speed of the process of dissociation, but it is undeniable that British intellectual life, in common with the organization of knowledge and of work in general, underwent a process of specialization from the late-Victorian era which has continued to the present. The British were relatively slow to professionalize academic life (and it is a pleasing aspect of the ODNB that a significant proportion of its articles have been contributed by writers without formal academic affiliations). Nevertheless, the map of late-Victorian and Edwardian knowledge was becoming more complex and differentiated.

The first Dictionary was largely written by gentlemen-scholars, though it also employed young historians like T. F. Tout and A. F.

Pollard who were among the first generation of specialized, university-based, career academics. Changes to the organization of learning and the structures of academic life have altered the location, the self-identity, and the procedures of modern scholars and perhaps also their fondness for tobacco. As Ian Donaldson has noted recently (in *Essays in Criticism*, October 2004), the first DNB was metropolitan in focus, privately funded, and drew on independent authors. The Oxford DNB is located in a university, published by a University Press which has provided the overwhelming balance of resource, but has also received a public subsidy equivalent to about 15 per cent of its total cost.

The numbers producing and consuming scholarship in educational institutions around the world have expanded exponentially in a century. The specialized nature of much of today's scholarship is now so widely recognized that no one bothers to joke about it any more. And the sheer amount that we know, including what we know about the British past, has grown in consequence. The new Dictionary is international in its range, seeking to assess British lives that have been lived across the globe in all periods of our history, and it has used the expertise of 3,000 authors from abroad, in addition to the 7,000 domiciled in the British Isles, to achieve this.

It could not have been otherwise if the Oxford DNB was to escape the charge of parochialism - though even this number of contributors is not enough for some specialists who have complained, pace Barker, that too few rather than too many scholars have been employed, and that expertise has therefore been neglected.

Should we lament the loss of intellectual homogeneity when knowledge about British history, literature, science and culture is held so

widely, by so many, and often in very narrow but also very deep channels? What may appear as organic to one reader may be stiflingly exclusive to some, or simply amateur to others. A Dictionary that did not draw on many different contributors would be an anachronism, and would not reflect the widely spread interest in the British past not only in these islands, but across the globe. Matthew did not substitute mechanism for coherence, therefore; rather, he recognized that, to be a true reflection of the state of scholarship today, the Dictionary had to draw on the range of potential writers with relevant knowledge. And this reflected his deeper ideological preference, as well.

In his article on the ODNB (TLS, December 17) John Gross is correct to note the felicitous combination of Matthew's left-leaning politics and cultural conservatism. Perhaps they cancelled each other out: Matthew imposed no style or outlook on the Dictionary, other than to ask contributors to take the historical high ground and judge their subjects without fear or favour, because the imposition of any view at all - as from clubland in the 1890s, or from Oxford in the 1990s - would have confined the range of different approaches now current.

Indeed, Matthew was an instinctive pluralist who encouraged diversity, not least because it would make the Oxford DNB more interesting, more readable and less formulaic. He wanted a Dictionary that would stimulate debate rather than a dutiful record of achievement, and the differences of scholarly opinion now emerging are the welcome outcome of this strategy. Nor were his procedures mechanical in the pejorative sense of that term. Mechanism - the use of new technology and the following of standard procedures - was designed to be emancipatory, allowing the author to concentrate on his or her text and to make that text more accessible. Those green forms which contributors filled in, containing the key information on each life we wrote, have made possible the searches through the text of the online edition which everyone admires, Barker included.

The Dictionary was produced by many and diverse hands, therefore; its readership is differentiated as well. It is a resource for university academics, whose research will be much enhanced and accelerated by its many new articles and by the manner in which the online Dictionary can be searched by date, place, theme and idea. But even before its publication, professional biographers had staked out their distinctive territory and described their methods in Mark Bostridge's *Lives for Sale* (which Barker mentioned in his review). New compilations of biographical information have followed in the Dictionary's trail such as Angela Huth's collection of tributes to the great and good, *Well-Remembered Friends*. Religious denominations, myriad organizations devoted to great authors and historic figures, and those whom an earlier age would have called antiquarians, are assessing the ODNB's coverage of their special interests in newsletters and magazines. Public bodies have purchased sets for their libraries; businesses for their boardrooms. Those who produced the Dictionary are now engaged in demonstrations and lectures for local historical societies, the WEA and the penumbra of educational associations and groups often overlooked when we think about the production and consumption of scholarship. It is the reader in a public as well as university library whom we hope to reach.

Matthew also saw the Dictionary in a way hardly mentioned by reviewers thus far, as an educational resource. His gravestone describes him as an editor, historian (not biographer, note) and teacher. In the questionnaire distributed by the thousand in 1993, he asked respondents not only how much they used the old DNB in their research, but in their teaching also. That is why, in answer to Nicolas Barker, the online ODNB includes a list of all Home Secretaries, as well as Archbishops, Prime Ministers and British winners of a Nobel Prize. These lists are valuable in themselves, providing authoritative information which is often hard to find, and they will take a user - perhaps a sixth-former - directly to the text of the life being sought. Following the welcome precedent set by the Welsh Executive, it is hoped that the Dictionary will find its way into all secondary schools and public libraries across the land. A work of so many hands, produced in the national interest at a financial loss, and used in varied ways by so many constituencies, belongs to everyone. This Matthew understood.

The compilers of the new Dictionary may also judge its success in comparison with the first DNB by different criteria from those used in reviews so far, which have concentrated on literary, political and society figures of the past two centuries.

If we focus on sheer additions to knowledge, then the 5,000 medieval *Lives* (to the year 1500) are the most remarkable, though they have been discussed the least. By the time the DNB was given to Oxford University Press in 1917, it was evident that advancing knowledge had already rendered much of the medieval scholarship of the 1880s and 90s redundant. No serious scholar of the Middle Ages has used the DNB since the Second World War. Now we have *Lives* that do justice to the wide array of new evidence that has, in many cases, literally been unearthed, and to the extent and ingenuity of medieval studies in Britain today. As well as extending the coverage of women in the Dictionary, and finding authors for the new articles which resulted, the Dictionary's advisers searched assiduously for subjects and contributors in the fields of applied science, technology and business. As social and economic historians like Neil McKendrick and Martin Wiener reminded us in the 1970s and 80s, when the supposed decline of British entrepreneurship became a public issue, Stephen's Dictionary had grievously neglected these areas of national life. We take the greatest pleasure from the comments of the leading historian of science, Simon Schaffer, in a recent seminar in Oxford, that the research undertaken for the new Dictionary on the lives of the several dozen nineteenth-century British physicists has suggested new connections between them and thereby opened up fresh fields of inquiry.

While familiarity with the old Dictionary has tended to breed content, many readers will have experienced the frustration of consulting an entry from the Stephen era, which gave the vital statistics of a life, and lists of publications, but was almost silent on the content of those books - on the ideas, in short. Work through the lives of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political economists in the DNB for example, and you will learn relatively little about the development of economic thought.

Stephen, great intellectual historian though he was, frowned on intellectual biography in the Dictionary; in the spirit of our age, and in the belief that readers require it, we have encouraged it. We differ also, and inevitably, in the degree to which *Lives* in the ODNB have been properly contextualized. Tocqueville observed, in the second volume of *Democracy in America*, in 1840, that historians writing in aristocratic ages were inclined to "refer all occurrences to the particular will and character of certain individuals", whereas those living in democratic ages discounted the influence of individuals but assigned "great general causes to all petty incidents".

Biography has never been out of fashion in Britain, but over the past two scholarly generations, academic history has tended to focus on general causes, whether Marxist, structuralist, or some other. Our authors could not escape their formation in this historical culture, and we

did not wish them to: it is a virtue that many of the Lives in the ODNB have been written with the intent of locating the subject in relation to relevant political structures, economic forces, or intellectual contexts. In this way Tocqueville's two distinct approaches to history may be said to have been fused in the new Dictionary. Indeed, in the presentation of some of the most historically significant Lives, a final section on assessment and reputation has allowed authors to "place" their subjects in luminous concluding remarks which set out relevant historiography and rival interpretations. Stephen's Dictionary never attempted this, not least because the scholarship on which it depends has largely been the product of the twentieth century. We must admit that we know more than our ancestors, which is not to say that we know better. But it does make the Dictionary larger, different and more useful.

But in one aspect we may be the same: mistakes. Nothing has so surprised those who compiled the Dictionary as the attitude of some critics and reviewers to errors.

We knew, as they surely must also have known after a few moments, reflection, that a work of these dimensions, written by many hands, containing so many facts, must also contain errors, and Brian Harrison's introduction to the Dictionary admitted to this quite routinely.

(We also knew, *inter alia*, that a work which had used thousands of authors, and consulted many thousands more, employing some and not others, would incite dissatisfaction in certain quarters. Some recent public correspondence can be better understood in this light.) Lee's volume of errata, published four years after the first Dictionary was completed, runs to 300 pages, with approximately forty corrections per page. When the OUP received the Dictionary, its deliberations on the DNB's future generated many adverse judgements based on shortcomings in content and style which were already clear by 1920. The limitations of technology and finance prevented the thousands of errors then evident from being corrected and incorporated in the text for another eighty years. In the future, new and different information can be rapidly assimilated online.

The misunderstanding regarding errors - if that is what it is - may arise from the strange assumption (to us, at least) that the Dictionary should be definitive. It is not, nor can it ever be. It has been rewritten because scholarship has moved on and much of the content in the first Dictionary has been superseded by new information, more and different evidence, and changing perspectives on the past.

But that continuing advance makes the new Dictionary, in essence, a very large and compendious snapshot of our knowledge at the end of the twentieth century rather than holy writ. Like the first Dictionary, the second contains errors which have been, and are being, brought to our attention; and like any publication it must begin to age as soon as published. Nevertheless, the great bulk of the Dictionary as presented in 2004 will stand as this generation's verdict on two millennia of the national past. It will be a fixed point from which further biographical and historical discussion can develop. We shall be adding to it in regular releases every four months, initially online and cumulatively in print, augmenting the Dictionary with memoirs of the recently deceased and additional lives from earlier periods. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography will be an evolving resource (organic in a different sense from that used by Nicolas Barker) which will keep pace with new knowledge and the passing of generations. That one scholar knows more than another, or differs in opinion, is not a cause for complaint, but the motor of academic progress, and we are pleased to receive suggestions so that the Dictionary may play its part in intellectual advance.

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