
Along with *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the ninth edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and the Cook and Wedderburn edition of *The Works of John Ruskin, The Dictionary of National Biography*, known affectionately as the DNB, stands as one of the monumental works of Victorian scholarship. A financial white elephant from the outset, the edition reflects the commitment to higher learning of its founder, proprietor, and publisher, George Smith of the firm of Smith, Elder & Co.; the vision, dedication, and logistical skills of its two editors Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee; and the indefatigability of its contributors. Together, these principals managed to plan, organize, compile, write the entries for, proofread, and publish, over the twenty years between 1882-1901, the sixty-six volumes of the greatest single biographical resource in the English language.

The first book to be exclusively devoted to the DNB, apart from Sidney Lee’s two post-Supplement appendices, the *Index and Epitome* (known since 1939 as the *Concise DNB*) and *Errata* volumes of 1903 and 1904, Gillian Fenwick’s *Contributors’ Index* is advertised in the cover blurb as ‘the first guide to the contributors: authors, academics, recognized authorities on their subjects, and in many cases young writers making their first appearance in print.’ The editor herself is somewhat more modest, and accurate, in her prefatory admission that the *Index* is merely a rearrangement of the subjects in the *DNB*, listed under the names of the contributors (p. vii); but she makes a broader claim in her introduction: ‘Given the recent growth of interest in Victorian journalists, critics and men and women of letters the list of contributors can be read both as a record of an era and a guide to opportunities for modern scholarship’ (p. xviii).

Essentially an exercise in bibliometrics, employing the simplest sort-merge computer functions, Fenwick’s book is provocative in that it raises dozens of questions about the 696 indentified contributors. But beyond expanding their initials to full names and identifying the articles, volume by volume, written by each, ranging from a single entry for 253 of the contributors to a startling 1,423 by the biographer and journalist Thompson Cooper (1837-1904), a member of the editorial staff, she does not provide even minimal information. The focus of the *DNB* was solely on the 28,201 subjects included. At the very least, an index of the contributors ought to reveal something about the men and women who undertook the prodigious task of writing the entries, especially if it seriously purports to be a ‘guide’ to them. A simple rubric such as John Knox Laughton (1830-1911), naval historian, 915 [DNB], giving dates, thumbnail identification, number of entries, and a reference source (with author in case of *DNB* for ease of cross-reference) would have added little to the length of the text and have made the volume infinitely more useful. In her failure both to place the contributors in any sort of living context and to offer any other than the most elementary statistical analysis of the achievements of a handful of them, Fenwick has missed the first of
those 'opportunities for modern scholarship' to which she says her lists are
intended to serve as a guide.

The contributors to the *DNB* were never anonymous: all but 316 articles were
signed with initials and then keyed to the names of contributors in the beginning
of each of the sixty-six volumes of the original edition. When the *Dictionary*
was reprinted in 1908-09, these lists were conflated in the front matter of Vol. 1, with,
inevitably, minor errors, inconsistencies, and omissions, all of which Fenwick has
rectified in her *Index*. A great many of the writers and scholars commissioned to
prepare the entries were distinguished authorities in their fields; many were
either public figures or associated with the universities, the church, the profes-
sions, and other institutions. While the *Dictionary* was in progress, and for some
years beyond, the names of at least the major contributors would have been read-
ily recognized by a high percentage of users of the work. A century later, however,
a great many of these contributors are no longer the household names of scholar-
ship, and most modern scholars require prompts of some kind to recall their
importance.

In Fenwick's *Index*, the 696 contributors remain, as they are in the *DNB*, only
names. No attempt is made to pose and answer even the most obvious questions
readers might have about them, such as, how many contributors later became
*DNB* entries? (at least 236); how many women contributed how many articles,
and how many of these made *DNB*? (forty-four women contributed 1,201 articles;
eight made the *DNB*); how many contributors died before the completion of the
project, and who was the first to die? (fifty-six died before 1900; the drama critic,
Edward Dunton Cook, who had seventeen articles in Vol. 1, died in 1883, two
years before publication commenced); who were the oldest and youngest contrib-
utors? (John Ward (b. 1805) and Arthur Henry Mee (b. 1875); each had one article
in *DNB*, Ward in Vol. 5 (1886) when he was 81, Mee in Vol. 20 (1889), when he was
24).

Many of the answers to the questions in the previous paragraph come from
raw material provided by Fenwick; the remainder are taken from the *DNB* itself
and from the most valuable single document on the background of the *Dictio-
nary*: Sidney Lee's 'Statistical Account,' prefacing Vol. 63 and reprinted, with
slight revisions, in Vol. 1 of the 22-vol. edition. Although Fenwick draws heavily
on this document and on Lee's 'Memoir of George Smith' in her introduction, she
is at pains to magnify Lee's statistical errors and inconsistencies to establish the
superiority of her listing of contributors, pompously described as 'based on princi-
pies of modern literary research and bibliographical practice' (p. xxxix), over his,
which she labels 'rudimentary.' Lee's achievement in the 'Account,' notwith-
standing some palpable slips, is enormous and far more important than Fenwick's
dismissal of it (as 'a useful guide and introduction to the Dictionary and its writ-
ers, but unreliable, inaccurate, and limited in scope') would have it (p. xxiii).

Fenwick has made a distinct contribution by assigning each of nearly 30,000
articles to their respective authors in her Index, but in actual fact the corrections
she has made to Lee's work are neither as numerous nor as significant as she sug-
gests; and her attempt to trivialize Lee's contribution is uncharitable in the
extreme. She quotes Pollard to belittle Lee's 'passion for precision,' which sometimes led him into inaccuracies, but she is not above pedantry, error, and distortion herself, as when she asserts: 'This Index proves that ... Lee's calculations for the first sixty-three volumes were incorrect; for example, he says that they include biographies of 29,120 men and women when in fact there are only 27,236, and he says there were 653 contributors, when this Index shows there were 647' (p. xxi). What Lee actually says is that the DNB 'supplies notices of 29,120 men and women; of these 27,195 are full substantive articles, and 1,925 are briefer subsidiary articles' (p. lxvi). The latter almost certainly refer to those notices, of which there are hundreds in DNB, of related persons, many of them wives, whose names, printed in roman capital letters rather than boldface, are subsumed in the longer, 'substantive' articles. Factoring these articles into the statistics, the disparity to which Fenwick draws attention between her and Lee's numbers drops dramatically, from 1,844 more articles than appear in Fenwick's Index to forty-one fewer.

The difference of seven contributors between Lee and Fenwick probably relates to the sixteen jointly authored articles or to confusions in names, such as the two Clerkes (see Fenwick, pp. 76-77; DNB I: xii). Or they could even be ghosts, given that both Lee and Fenwick introduce at least one into their discussions. Lee assigns 'F.R. Oliphant [d. 1894]' to the Supplement, but no such person appears in DNB, either as contributor or subject; and Fenwick mistakenly includes Thomas Huxley in a catalogue of 'familiar names' among contributors (p. xviii), though his only association with DNB is as a subject. In any event, a discrepancy of seven contributors (out of 696) and forty-one articles (out of 28,201) amounts in each instance to less than one and less than one-tenth of one per cent, hardly enough to crow over.

There is another way of construing these figures, however, which points to a serious lacuna in Fenwick's listing of DNB articles. Since Lee, as the editor of DNB, specifically awarded article status to these 'subsidiary' pieces in calculating his totals, and gave them independent status in his Epitome (Concise DNB), it can be argued that Fenwick, instead of trying to one-up Lee by stressing his statistical ineptitude, would have been better employed in rescuing the 'subsidiary articles' in the DNB so that, to mention only one category of exclusion, Jane Welsh Carlyle and dozens of others women buried in the masculine entries of the Dictionary, would have a presence in her Index, as they now do not. In fact, a separate listing of the 'subsidiary articles' would have made an invaluable appendix to her book.

The only possible response to Fenwick's pejorative observation that Lee's 'Account' has been since 1900 'the only source of information on the more than six hundred contributors to the Dictionary' (p. xvii) is that it still is. However superior her Index is to Lee's abbreviation key to the initials of contributors in terms of who wrote what, the absence of any information about the contributors in the Index has to be set against Lee's survey of who was who among the most important and prolific, for whom he provides various kinds of detail – area of specialization or responsibility, death dates, DNB locations, and, for the thirty-four
most productive, a tabular listing of their contributions, which Fenwick adapts, alters, and corrects in Table 1. While Fenwick convincingly accounts for the role of the unsigned articles in Lee's totals, in adjusting his findings she also subtly distorts them, rearranging by number of articles Lee's order based on pages, which is not the same: Lee's 820 articles, for instance, translate into an entire volume more (1,370 pages as opposed to 900) than Thompson Cooper's 1,423, whose articles occupy roughly two volumes.

Fenwick's Index is a useful computer-generated supplement to the Dictionary of National Biography, but it lacks any semblance of a human touch. The contributors are treated as numerical abstractions rather than as the living counterparts to the men and women they wrote about, whose ranks many of them later joined. This is a major weakness of the book, as is the editor's singularly ungenerous treatment of Sidney Lee, her unacknowledged collaborator, without whose staggering efforts her Index could never have been produced.

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The authors of these anxious essays often lament the declining status of bibliography in research universities, yet the exiling of their pioneering works to the publishing frontiers of 'Omnigraphics Incorporated' and 'Oak Knoll Books' will surely encourage a realignment of power within the printed world. The intellectual, financial, and legal risks posed by Fakes and Frauds and Forged Documents would send a heavyweight university press running for the corner. These same challenges offer smaller, more courageous contenders a shot at champion status. Eager for battle, Myers, Harris, Bozeman and company brandish a cache full of armaments against the cheats and knaves of our odd profession. Not all their weapons are equally effective, but their combined strength wins a high rating for these two deployments of the latest bibliographical technology and speculation.

Both Fakes and Frauds and Forged Documents are conference proceedings. There their similarity ends. Such semi-scientific productions might seem less vulnerable to social pressures than might the usual waggish exercises in the humanities, but the forces of cultural differentiation are hard at work in these volumes. Myers and Harris and Bozeman all provide favour-currying lists of conference registrants, but Myers and Harris, in that devilishly British way, reduce