

VOLUME XVII, NUMBER 1, WINTER 2016/17

# CLAREMONT

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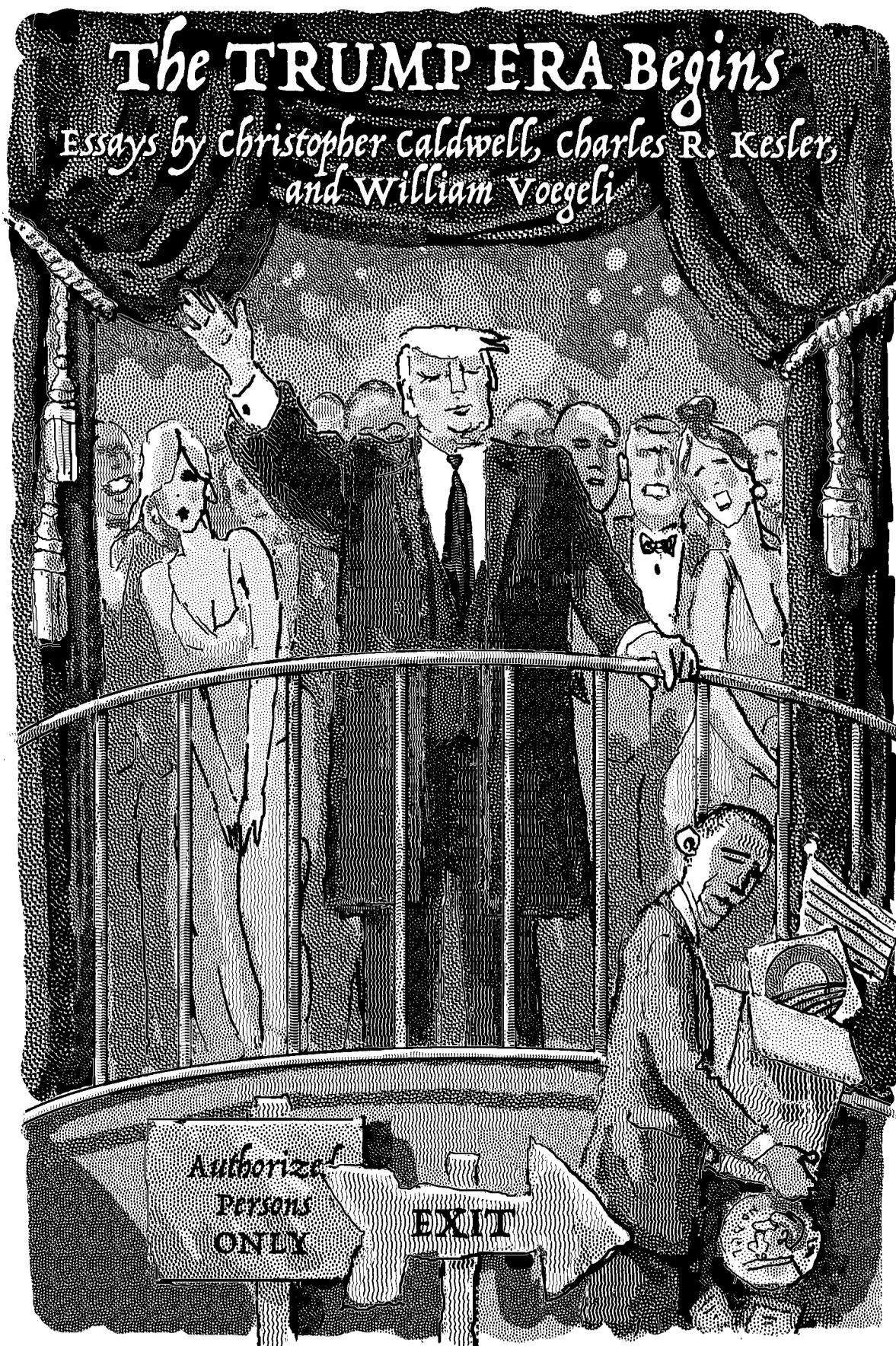
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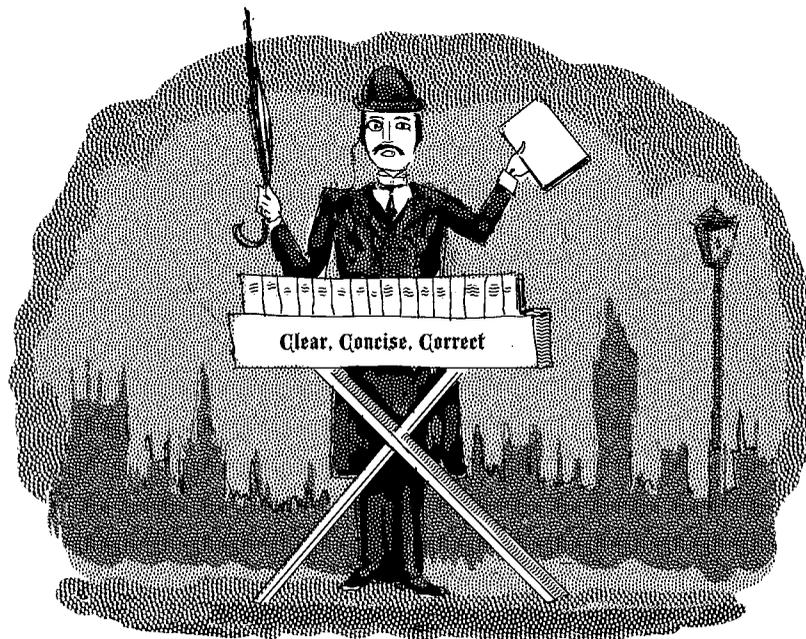
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Book Review by Richard Brookhiser

## A TO Z

*Everything Explained that Is Explainable: On the Creation of the Encyclopædia Britannica's Celebrated Eleventh Edition, 1910–1911,*  
by Denis Boyles. Alfred A. Knopf, 464 pages, \$30



**M**Y COPY OF THE 11TH EDITION OF the *Encyclopædia Britannica* fills two shelves, above and to the left of my desk—16 volumes, each about a thousand double-column pages long, in green binding with gold lettering on the spine. What I own is technically the 12th edition, with two supplemental volumes following the Index. But the bulk of it is the 11th, published in 1910-11. Taking down one volume at random—FRA to HAR—I see on the first page a list of all previous editions, beginning with the 1st in 1768. Then a copyright page, crediting “The Chancellor, Masters and Scholars of the University of Cambridge” (England, of course—no colonial copies, at Harvard or elsewhere, need apply). Then the title page: “The Encyclopædia Britannica A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information.” Then eight pages identifying contributors by their initials, from A.B.R.—Alfred Barton Rendle, M.A., D.Sc., F.R.S., keeper of the Department of Botany at the British Museum, who wrote about “Fruit”—to W.S.P.—Walter Sutherland Parker, deputy chairman of the Fur Section of the London Chamber of Commerce, who wrote about “Fur.” Finally, the articles, from “Franciscans,” which begins with a parenthesis—“(otherwise called Friars Minor, or Minorites; also the Seraphic Order;

and in England Grey Friars, from the colour of the habit, which, however, is now brown rather than grey)”—to “Harmonium,” which ends with a footnote, citing the “*Allg. musik. Ztg.* (Leipzig, 1821),” the German-language periodical *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*.

Is there anything, this side of the Sherlock Holmes stories, which gives such a potent dose of nostalgia? You hold in your lap a world that was even in its day somewhat stuffy: see the ligature combination of “a” and “e” in “Encyclopædia;” a world that was English: note the spelling of “colour,” even though, as we shall see, the original impulse for the encyclopedia came from elsewhere; a world that nevertheless was transnational: old German reference works would be scrupulously cited, so long as they had scholarly information to impart; finally, a world that was all-embracing: the followers of the God-drunk saint sharing their volume with portable lap organs, ghostly matters together with machines, all sides now.

**D**ENIS BOYLES OFFERS A FEW SUCH ruminations about the nature of the 11th edition in *Everything Explained that Is Explainable*, and they are delightful. But we fans of the 11th do not need him for that, for we are capable of supplying them ourselves. The managing editor of the online

journal the *Fortnightly Review*, Boyles tells a different, but equally fascinating story: how this great compendium got compiled. It is a story about publishing and advertising, about designing a product to meet a need and then putting it out there. Naturally it begins with two Americans.

Horace Everett Hooper was a Massachusetts man who made his career and his fortune in Denver and Chicago, distributing books. His target audience was literate, aspiring late 19th-century Americans, who wanted to furnish their homes and their minds. Hooper’s bestsellers were reference works: “practical, self-directed, easy to access, responsive to passing needs and new information and classless in every way,” as Boyles describes them. Buying and reading them was homeschooling. Hooper’s partner on the marketing side was Henry R. Haxton, a bohemian journalist with a stutter and a goatee. Haxton believed in dense, verbose copy, which he produced by dictating while pacing to and fro, sometimes for days at a stretch; the end result, reflecting his manic energy, could “convince readers that not to buy a set of encyclopedias was to accept less than the full portion of the life of the age.” Both men, like many of their countrymen, were Anglophiles. Haxton would say that he had once been a member of Parliament (he

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hadn't); one of Hooper's staples was a pirated version of the 9th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Then Hooper had an inspiration: why not persuade the *Britannica's* owners to let him market the real thing?

**T**HE ENCYCLOPEDIA, WHICH HAD FIRST been published by Scotsmen in the mid-18th century, was then distributed by the *Times* of London. The *Times* is now owned by Rupert Murdoch, but even as late as my twenties it was still what it had long been, the listserv of the English upper classes, filled with pokey ads, gossipy Commonwealth (formerly imperial) news items, Tory politics, and dotty letters to the editor. It lost money, and had seemingly no interest in making more, certainly not at the suggestions of a couple of Americans. One *Times*-man was interested, however: C.F. Moberly Bell, a cotton broker's son, born and raised in Egypt. Himself an outsider—envious Englishmen would whisper that he must be Jewish—Moberly Bell caught Hooper's enthusiasm.

Hooper, Haxton, and the *Times* produced a supplement to the 9th edition, called the 10th, but also aimed to bring out a brand-new model. They stimulated interest by relentless advertising; one of Haxton's schemes was a competition which could only be entered by submitting an address (thus generating a mailing list). "Flight was useless," wrote Moberly Bell's biographer.

The whole country from Land's End to John o' Groats...was pervaded by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. It loaded the breakfast table with the morning coffee.... There was no escape from the torrents of "follow-ups" save by the despatch of a firm order to purchase accompanied by an installment of one guinea.

In the home stretch, the *Times* balked. There had been too many ads, too much winning. So Hooper wangled Cambridge University as a sponsor and proceeded on.

His great coup was finding a capable executive editor: Hugh Chisholm, an Oxford-educated journalist and pundit. Chisholm marshalled the contributors—1,507 of them altogether. Many of them were scholars—168 fellows of the Royal Society, 47 senior staff

members of the British Museum. Quite a few were famous—J.B. Bury, Frederick Jackson Turner, Algernon Charles Swinburne, John Muir, Peter Kropotkin, T.H. Huxley. But many, like Chisholm, were journalists. Their journalistic prism was vital because the great weakness of the 9th edition had been its untimeliness: appearing volume by volume at a lackadaisical pace from 1875 to 1889, the later articles often contradicted those that had appeared a dozen years earlier. Chisholm and his peers knew how to write to deadline, and they kept their scholars and their stars on deadline. One young scribe, whose specialty was musical theater and whose previous gig had been at the *Tatler*, was sent to prod Sir George Greenhill on his entry "Ballistics." "A question arose," the journalist later wrote,

about the diagrams illustrating interior ballistics. Pointing to one of the figures, [Sir George] said, quoting from his article, "On the assumption of uniform pressure up the bore, practically realizable in a Zalinski pneumatic dynamite gun...the velocity curve  $AvV$  of which the ordinate  $v$  is as the square root of the energy, would be a parabola; and, the acceleration of the shot being constant, the time-curve  $AtT$  will also be a similar parabola." "Quite," I said with reeling brain.

The brain of the *Tatler*-man may have reeled, but Sir George's article, and all its fellows—44 million words worth—got done on time. The 11th began rolling off the presses, to transatlantic fanfare, at the end of 1910, and was complete by the following year.

Boyles mentions in passing that the 11th edition still underlies much of Wikipedia. I had noticed this in Wikipedia-hopping myself; any entry about a subject more than a century old—the Peace of Westphalia, for instance—is often torn from the flesh of the 11th. Since its copyright has expired, it is fair game for scavengers. I do wish Boyles had written a little more about this.

**H**E ALSO SURVEYS WHAT WE NOW find incomplete or outrageous. The 11th's article on psychology is almost all about perception, so Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, who were already

launched, go unnoticed (1821 articles from Leipzig on harmoniums, *ja*; *The Interpretation of Dreams, nein*). Other articles were disturbingly *au courant*. The article "Negro," by Thomas Athol Joyce, ethnographer at the British Museum, reads like the worst paragraphs in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*. "Skill in reckoning is necessary to the white race...but it is not necessary to the Negro." Past puberty, "sexual matters take the first place in the Negro's life and thoughts." Etc., etc. We squirm. Boyles squirms too, though he also places Joyce's views in the bosom of the Darwinianism of the age (illustrated by hair-raising quotations from Darwin himself). And yet racism is hardly the whole story. The entries on what we now call Third World cultures are equally blunt, written in a tone that modern opponents of nation-building endorse for real. "The Afghans," my copy informs me, are "apparently frank and affable in manner, especially when they hope to gain some object, but capable of the grossest brutality when that hope ceases. They are unscrupulous in perjury, treacherous, vain, and insatiable." Perhaps the tone of the 11th will come round again. Political correctness, no less than racism, accepts chasmic differences between peoples; it is simply polite about them. Foreign policy realists had no politeness to begin with.

Boyles carries his story just as far as it reasonably goes: to a post-publication falling-out with Cambridge, which liked success no better than the *Times*; through World War I, when ballistics was put to use; to the deaths of Hooper, Haxton, and the rest. *Everything Explained that Is Explainable* is lively and quirky, ballasted by hard work, lit by flashes of wit. Like the 11th itself, it highlights interesting people and odd turns of events, without ever losing the long arc of its purpose. The 11th edition was about self-improvement, individual and social. We don't believe in that as confidently as our great-grandparents did, but we haven't come up with anything else. The 11th can seem like a collection of old family photos (imagine wearing *that!*), but we can see ourselves in it, too.

*Richard Brookhiser is a senior editor of National Review, and the author, most recently, of Founders' Son: A Life of Abraham Lincoln (Basic Books).*

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