

Alan Currall: *Encyclopaedia* (2000)
By Henry Hitchings

Alan Currall's *Encyclopaedia*, commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella in 2000, has a modest but not trivial place in the history of encyclopedic works.

For many, that history begins with Pliny the Elder. The Roman naturalist and sometime cavalry commander compiled his *Naturalis Historia* in the first century AD. A compendium of 20,000 facts gleaned from 2,000 books, it contains information about everyday matters as well as treasurably arcane ones – such as how to break a diamond with the blood of a goat.

The first really good English encyclopedia was not published until 1728. It was put together by Ephraim Chambers, who had previously been apprenticed to a maker of globes and maps. The man to whom he was apprenticed was a Mr Senex, who was only two years his senior, and Chambers does not seem to have taken the role all that seriously. He preferred to devote himself to the studies that ultimately allowed him to embark on creating what he believed would be 'the best book in the universe'.

Chambers's mission was to provide a manageable guide to human knowledge. Yet his encyclopedia's second edition (1738) ran to two hefty volumes and nearly 2,500 pages.

An attempt to translate Chambers into French would eventually result in a work that dwarfed his efforts. This was the *Encyclopédie* of Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. Published in installments between 1751 and 1772, it ended up as a 28-volume behemoth, aptly described by Philipp Blom as 'a triumph of free thought, secular principle and private enterprise', which presaged the French Revolution in taking a stand against the authority of both Church and Crown.

The eighteenth-century encyclopedists were not engaged in some sort of quaintly conservative activity. Their endeavours were part of the efflorescence of print culture. At the same time they were symptoms of a passionate contemporary commitment to 'staging' knowledge by means of exhibitions, histories, manuals, lectures and festivals, as well as through institutions such as the British Museum (founded in 1753) and the Royal Academy (1768).

In its own way, Alan Currall's *Encyclopaedia* is an exercise in the staging of knowledge. In common with other works of its kind, and specifically with pre-modern ones, *Encyclopaedia* is a performance, poised between seriousness and parody.

The encyclopedist aspires to completeness while acknowledging that this is an impossible goal, and the doomed nature of his or her project is part of its magic. Currall makes no pretence of offering a definitive resource, but he faces up to an issue that haunted many of his predecessors: the necessity of subordinating one's editorial and authorial status so as to capitalize on the expertise of others.

The creators of encyclopedias, from Pliny onwards, have made a point of self-effacement and of emphasizing the cumbersome, disagreeable aspect of their labours. They have taken a perverse pleasure in simultaneously giving order to the world and insisting on the meagre extent of their own

contributions to it. They have also tended to recognize that the experience of those who use their works begins as a sense of curiosity and wonder but soon drifts into reverie.

Although Currall's *Encyclopaedia* tells us less about the world than the creations of Chambers or Diderot and d'Alembert, it gets to grips with many of the same practical and philosophical concerns.

Nevertheless, it represents a break with encyclopedic tradition and can be seen as a maverick precursor of Wikipedia. Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger went live with their collaboratively created reference work in January 2001, and, though today the sovereignty of Wikipedia seems deep-rooted, it did not become the internet's most popular work of this kind until 2005.

Currall anticipated Wikipedia's model of capitalizing on what we now like to call user-generated content. To create *Encyclopaedia* he conducted a form of vox pop, asking people he knew to provide definitions of key concepts. Their responses varied. Some were specific, others vague. Some struck a note of apology, while others veered off into political critique.

Many of the resulting 'entries' inspire one to nod approvingly or gawp as the respondents flounder. We may exult in the imagination of what's being said or smirk at its haphazardness.

It is noticeable that most of the entries blend received wisdom, experience and conjecture: typically the movement is from the empirical to the improvised, as attempts at objectivity give way to unblushingly subjective explanations.

Currall's is the type of work I tend to categorize as 'carefully careless'. It has a quality of unpolishedness that appears naïve yet is in fact strategic. Its DIY aesthetic is not only a badge of authenticity and a reflection of the contributors' gradually accumulated savvy, but also an acknowledgement that the epistemological structures we impose on the world are pretty fragile.

Encyclopaedia was and remains an intriguing social experiment, raising questions about authority, definition, the virtues and disadvantages of crowd-sourcing, the widespread conviction that encyclopedic works must be infallible, and the ways in which we organize and map what we know – whether consciously or not. It also embodies a principle that is both old and surprising: because the world is forever suffused with radical newness, the encyclopedias that document it need to be radical too.

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