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978-0-521-31403-9 - Worlds of Reference: Lexicography, Learning and Language from the Clay Tablet to the Computer

Tom McArthur

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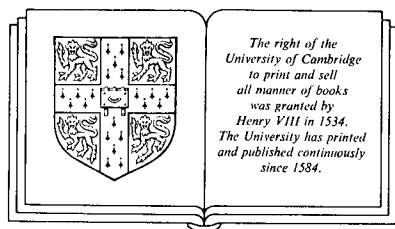
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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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New York New Rochelle Melbourne Sydney

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521306379

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First published 1986

First paperback edition 1988

Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2008

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

McArthur, Tom

Worlds of reference.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Dictionaries and encyclopedias – History.

I. Title.

AE1.M33 1985 030'.9 85-7860

ISBN 978-0-521-30637-9 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-31403-9 paperback

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Acknowledgements

My debt to the many researchers and sources listed in the notes and references is immense. In particular, however, I would like to acknowledge Robert Collison, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Richard Gregory, John Lyons, Karl Popper, Allen Walker Read and De Witt Starnes as seminal influences at important stages over the 12 years during which this work has developed from a compelling but amorphous idea to its present – albeit interim – stage. I would also like to thank David Abercrombie and John Sinclair for their personal encouragement when the project was still gestating, part of a thesis in lexicology at the University of Edinburgh in the early seventies. Particular gratitude is also due to A.J. Aitken, R.R.K. Hartmann and Roland Hindmarsh for their invaluable comments on various drafts of the material in recent years. Finally, I am also grateful to Susan Glendinning, Catherine Devillers, Feri McArthur and Betsy Stockdale for service beyond the call of duty as guinea pigs testing the general readability of the material. In covering such a vast area of human thought and effort I have been conscious throughout of the impossibility of one person adequately handling even one line of argument. I am very much aware of the gaps in my knowledge and the help I have received in reducing those gaps to manageable proportions. As a consequence, I am happy to share the virtues of the work with many, and to keep the vices to myself.

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Foreword and forewarning

Where is the Life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

*Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?**

T.S. ELIOT, *Choruses from 'The Rock'* (1934)

T.S. Eliot asked these questions in the third decade of the twentieth century, well before the electronic age and the information explosion had come upon us. The sentiment behind these three questions, however, amply expresses the tensions (religious, cultural, social, educational) that have accumulated over the centuries as our species has struggled to live less brutishly, think more wisely, amass more knowledge, and make more and more information available to more and more people for more and more purposes.

Today, in hard technological reality, we are creating a new world of finger-tip information. In the process, some would say, we are losing our souls. It is all too big, and the simpler truths of quill-and-parchment times can look very attractive in a wasteland of words, books, printouts, facts, and figures.

How did it come to this? How did we reach this state of doubt for some, delight for others, and overload for everybody? Did it begin with the Victorians or with the Puritans, or can we push the blame back to the ancient Greeks? Is it indeed a unique experience, or has it all happened before to earlier societies, and if it did can we learn anything from what happened to *them*?

This book seeks to provide at least a provisional answer to these questions, and to promote further discussion. It suggests that the fault (if fault there is, which I doubt) lies within the species *Homo sapiens* itself. However, this very name offers a clue to what is going on: the creature that is sapient, that needs to know, that must make sense of things if it can, and expand its horizons all the time. *Worlds of Reference* is an account of the long effort involved in knowing, and struggling to retain what we think we know.

In writing this survey, I have not tried to plumb the depths of any one of the many subjects on which I have touched. It would have been good to study ancient Sumer in the original clay and cuneiform, to have read Thomas Aquinas *in toto*, and to have become thoroughly versed in information theory, artificial intelligence and the microprocessor. To have tried to do all that and more, however, would have been (as Samuel Johnson once put it) 'to lash the wind' and be guilty of the sin of pride. The old adage *ars longa, vita brevis* is even truer today than when it was coined.

I am content therefore to have written an overview which draws together strands from many disciplines that I am convinced *ought* to be drawn together. If this should lead in due course to fuller research in, and a better understanding of, the same areas and the patterns I have tried to delineate, I shall consider the work to have been well worth while.

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To Feri, inevitably