Introduction

This book is a history of the European encyclopedia, an alphabetical book of knowledge that took shape in the seventeenth century. For three centuries afterward, printed encyclopedias in the European tradition were an element of culture and peoples' lives, initially just among Europe's educated elite but ultimately through much of the literate world. In the late nineteenth century, a blurb from a physician and contributor to *Johnson's New Universal Cyclopaedia* (1875–7) proclaimed *Johnson's* the best book for families short of the Bible.[1] As gigantic books, encyclopedias invited hyperbole, and one should be skeptical about testimonials, especially from contributors. Still, the notion that encyclopedias, by this time, stood at the forefront of books is corroborated elsewhere. In 1899, for example, a survey by a German newspaper identified the *Konversations-Lexikon*, or conversational dictionary – a kind of German encyclopedia – as the most influential book of the preceding century, ahead of the Bible and the naturalist Charles Darwin's writings.[2] By the mid twentieth century, encyclopedias were present in a large percentage of households in the rich world. Many were little used, but it would be tendentious to deny that they often informed and occasionally educated.

Living as we do in an age in which information is available for nearly effortless access, we tend to underestimate the importance of the ponderous precursors to our present devices and systems for finding information. If a link to the internet can now fulfill all the functions of a library in the eyes of some people, it is not unreasonable to imagine, in accordance with the 1759 edition of Louis Moréri's *Grand Dictionaire historique* (1674), that there were once "people for whom the Moréri takes the place of everything."[3]

[1] "Testimonials," 13.
[2] Kochanowska-Nieborak, "Konversationslexika," 183.
[3] "… des personnes à qui le Moréri tient lieu de tout." Moréri, *Grand Dictionnaire*, new edn., 1: iii.

The European encyclopedia, as conceived here, is approaching extinction. The age of alphabetical encyclopedias is almost entirely over, as is the age of encyclopedias printed on paper. Still, they enjoy an afterlife in electronic encyclopedias. At a minimum, electronic encyclopedias have borrowed from their content. More subtly, the organizing devices of the European encyclopedia – the keyword, the article, and the cross-reference, above all – were taken up by electronic encyclopedias. In fact, nearly all my book's themes remain pertinent to electronic encyclopedias. Questions of authorship, copyright, and economics, for example, are central to today's debates about Wikipedia. Can an encyclopedia be written without control by experts? Is it plagiarism to quote from Wikipedia without bothering to cite it? Does an accurate, up-to-date encyclopedia necessarily cost money? Familiarity with the questions' background can help us come up with answers.

Beyond this intrusion of the past on our own times, the European encyclopedia has a story worth telling. Viewed against the backdrop of all written history, it corresponds to a phase of an age-old endeavor: encyclopedism, or the recording of knowledge. The story of this endeavor comes close to forming a history of literate civilization itself, within which my episode covers a heyday. At the same time, while a tension between dreams and realities pervades the history of encyclopedism, it is especially fascinating in the case of the European encyclopedia, which was both a commodity and a storehouse of knowledge. This tension at the heart of the European encyclopedia could manifest itself variously. Sometimes it surfaced in the same person, as in the hard-nosed but utopian Charles-Joseph Panckoucke, the editor and publisher of the *Encyclopédie méthodique* (1782–1832).[4] At other times it was a tension between associates – for example, between the businessmen Horace Hooper, a visionary, and Walter Jackson, a pragmatist, who together ran the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* around 1900.[5] Whether for good or for ill, it was a motor for creativity.

The European Encyclopedia Defined

The European encyclopedia, as understood here, was never a single encyclopedia suitable for all of Europe. A mid-eighteenth-century supplement pronounced Moréri's *Grand Dictionaire* a book "of all nations," a claim

[4] Loveland, "Why Encyclopedias Got Bigger," 243.
[5] Kogan, *Great EB*, 146, 206–7; Kruse, "Story," 257.

reflecting its adaptation into English, German, Dutch, and Spanish.[6] Yet despite cascades of translation and imitation across borders, the localism remarked on by an Italian observer in 1771 never disappeared: "Each nation has its own particular encyclopedia because each nation has its own language, has its own ideas, has its own maxims, has its own arts, has … its own prejudices …. a European encyclopedia … is impossible."[7] Instances of such localism will be noted throughout this book.

Nor was the European encyclopedia necessarily an encyclopedia published in Europe, though before the twentieth century the majority were. Rather, it was an encyclopedia growing out of a European tradition in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, primarily in Britain, France, and the German states – that is, in western or even northwestern Europe. Shortly after its inception, the European encyclopedia took root in European colonies such as New England and New Spain (later Mexico). Then, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it began to be adapted and translated for use on the peripheries of Europe and in other places, charting a course toward internationalization.[8]

It is probably futile to try to define what an encyclopedia is with much precision. A better approach is to recognize that encyclopedias have always existed on a continuum with other works of reference, notably dictionaries, and that they are seen as encyclopedias because of their relationship to models and prototypes.

Here I define the European encyclopedia loosely as having two characteristics, neither one distinguishable with perfect clarity. First, it was alphabetical – though my book brings in non-alphabetical works when they seem relevant. Second, it covered knowledge on a grand scale. Indeed, certain encyclopedists claimed to have treated all knowledge. Beyond the megalomania and self-promotion underpinning such claims, conceptions of what knowledge was differed with historical context. The expected scope of an encyclopedia was nonetheless stable from the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the twentieth. This was the period of what I will be calling the modern encyclopedia. Modern encyclopedias varied considerably – in size, most conspicuously – but they were distinctive in

[6] *Supplément au Dictionnaire*, 1: *2*r*. For the foreign-language adaptations see Miller, "Louis Moréri's *Grand Dictionnaire*," 49–50.

[7] "Ogni nazione ha la sua particolare enciclopedia perché ogni nazione ha il suo linguaggio, ha le sue idee, ha le sue massime, ha le sue arti, ha … i suoi pregiudizi; ed in consequenza che un'enciclopedia europea … è impossibile." Abbattista, "Folie," 428.

[8] See for example Denny and Mitchell, "Russian Translations"; Proust, "Encyclopédie," 414–15; Proust, "De quelques dictionnaires"; Herren and Prodöhl, "Kapern," 48–9.

their coverage relative to preceding and following works. Specifically, they treated the arts and sciences as well as places, events, and individuals, but not the myriad details of practical know-how and popular culture, two aspects of coverage that only came into their own with Wikipedia.

Before 1750, in contrast, some alphabetical works were devoted to the arts and the sciences, while others were devoted to history and geography, or narrower fields such as chemistry or law. Only a handful of such proto-encyclopedias came close to the coverage of the modern encyclopedia, chief among them the so-called dictionary of the arts and sciences, the universal dictionary, and the historical dictionary. As their generic names indicate, these works were not called encyclopedias. Instead, they were assimilated to the genre of the dictionary or lexicon, as shown below in Chapter 1. Regardless of their titles and lack of generality, they are crucial for understanding the modern European encyclopedia. For this reason, they play a big role in the following chapters.

Beginning with such seventeenth-century proto-encyclopedias, my book is thus devoted to an originally and markedly European phenomenon that lasted around 300 years. These limitations, geographical and temporal, reflect my conviction that the tradition of encyclopedia-making that developed in Europe was different from other traditions of encyclopedism. Such traditions were multiple, for many cultures have aspired toward a mastery of knowledge. Since the invention of writing some 6,000 years ago, these aspirations have given rise to texts summarizing knowledge. Among them were wide-ranging Sumerian lists from around 2500 BC and canonical religious books such as the Vedas and the Bible. All of these works have been characterized as encyclopedias.[9] As written texts proliferated in Greek and Roman antiquity, another form of encyclopedism developed to help make sense of them. Like annotation and bibliography, this was a distinctively secondary kind of literature, that is, one superposed on an established framework of text-making.[10] Likewise, during the medieval period, European, Arabic, and Chinese culture all engendered works posthumously labeled encyclopedias.

With regard to geography, a distinction between traditions of encyclopedism is easy to draw, but it deserves defense and nuance. Encyclopedism in China dates back to the third century AD, and encyclopedism in India

[9] See for example Michel and Herren, "Unvorgreifliche Gedanken," 14; McArthur, *Worlds*, 37. On encyclopedism see also Becq, *Encyclopédisme*; Schaer, *Tous les savoirs*.
[10] König and Woolf, "Encyclopaedism," 31–2.

to perhaps a thousand years earlier.[11] Interactions with European encyclopedism were insignificant, however, before the nineteenth century in India and the twentieth in China. Chinese *leishu*, or "categorized books," are often assimilated to the European encyclopedia, but the comparison points to differences as well as similarities. Whether organized thematically or by rhymes or calligraphic strokes, *leishu* were collections of quotations. They resembled the so-called "florilegium," or book of extracts, a robust genre in Europe through the time of the Renaissance, but they differed from the European encyclopedias under scrutiny here, in which borrowed material was more regularly adapted.[12] Before 1900, moreover, though China had other forms of encyclopedism – some concerned with domestic and everyday life – many Chinese encyclopedic works were written to help candidates pass tests leading to jobs as civil servants.[13] A comparable specificity of purpose is hard to find for European encyclopedias.

The case of Arabic encyclopedism is more ambiguous.[14] Arabic scholarship flourished in the medieval period and was sometimes European, since the Iberian peninsula was one of its centers. In part as a relay to Greek antiquity, it exerted a huge influence on scholars writing in Latin and thus on Latin encyclopedic works. In Richard McKeon's abstract formulation, the medieval encounter between the scientific, principle-driven Arabic "encyclopedia" and the discipline-based Latin "encyclopedia" pushed European intellectual culture toward modern science.[15] Still, it is unclear if the term "encyclopedia" applies to medieval Arabic works, or at least to the most prestigious ones, the so-called classifications of the sciences. As this modern name indicates, they were focused on the structure of knowledge, not knowledge itself. Co-existing with them was the more encyclopedia-like *adab* – a term originally meaning something like "etiquette" or "decency." Mostly by administrative secretaries, *adab* communicated shallow knowledge on a wide range of subjects to fellow administrators and to anyone aspiring to cultivation. Their impact on European encyclopedism was undoubtedly minor. In any event, the great age of Arabic encyclopedism

[11] On Indian encyclopedism see Filliozat, "Encyclopédies." On Chinese encyclopedism see Bauer, "Encyclopaedia"; Bretelle-Establet and Chemla, *Qu'était-ce qu'écrire une encyclopédie?*; Diény, "Encyclopédies."
[12] Blair, "Florilège," 185–97; Drège, "Des ouvrages," 19–20; Bauer, "Encyclopaedia," 668.
[13] Zurndorfer, "Passion," 505–27; Elman, "Collecting," 131–53; Bauer, "Encyclopaedia," 666, 677–8, 690.
[14] On Arabic encyclopedism see Biesterfeldt, "Medieval Arabic Encyclopedias," 77–98; Chapoutot-Remadi, "Encyclopédie"; Fierro, "Saber"; Pellat, "Encyclopédies."
[15] McKeon, "Organization," 183–6.

was long past by the time the European encyclopedia developed in the seventeenth century.

Soon after that time, European encyclopedism became an item of export, a trend that accelerated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By the mid twentieth century, one can speak of global encyclopedism. For this reason, my account includes European-inspired encyclopedias in other countries, though Europe and its former colonies retain a dominant role. Even within Europe, I return again and again to encyclopedias in English, French, and German. These encyclopedias were the most original and influential in all of Europe, the models and sources for other encyclopedias. In part, nonetheless, my emphasis corresponds to my linguistic competence, or rather, its limits. A broader scope might be preferable, but it is worthwhile integrating scholarship on English-, French-, and German-language encyclopedias – as I do here, with a sprinkling of material from other languages – since most histories of encyclopedias remain bound to exclusive national and linguistic traditions.

Chronologically speaking, I have chosen the mid seventeenth century for the start of my study. Like histories of European or "western" civilization, most histories of encyclopedias begin with Greek and Roman antiquity and go on to lavish attention on the Middle Ages if not also the Renaissance. In this narrative, the first encyclopedia is often a title from the first century AD, Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia*, a vast survey of knowledge. If nothing else, the *Naturalis historia* was a source for encyclopedias through the end of the eighteenth century. Other candidates for ancient encyclopedias are known largely in fragments.[16] Then come medieval "encyclopedias," among which figure prominently Isidore of Seville's *Origines seu etymologiae* (*Origins or Etymologies*), from the seventh century, and Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum maius* (*Great Mirror*), from the thirteenth.[17] All these texts can be considered as embodying encyclopedism – as can many others from the ancient and medieval world – but were they encyclopedias? Crucially, little indicates that contemporaries saw them as forming a genre, let alone one approximating that of the encyclopedia.[18]

Furthermore, while continuities can be found between encyclopedic works from before 1650 and those that came after, the differences are striking.

[16] Naas, "*Histoire*"; Schmitt and Loveland, "Scientific Knowledge," 339; Doody, *Pliny's Encyclopedia*, 1–6, 51–8. On ancient "encyclopedias" see also Grimal, "Encyclopédies"; König and Woolf, "Encyclopaedism."

[17] On medieval "encyclopedias" see Meier, "Grundzüge," 467–92; Beyer, "Encyclopédies," 9–40; Draelants, "Siècle."

[18] Doody, *Pliny's Encyclopedia*, 12–13, 40–58; Draelants, "Siècle," 104–6.

First, alphabetical order only became widespread as the primary order for encyclopedic works in the late seventeenth century.[19] Second, encyclopedic works in Latin declined in the seventeenth century, while those in living languages proliferated, a tendency corresponding to a broadening readership. Third, the market for encyclopedias took off in the second half of the seventeenth century. Above all, Moréri's *Grand Dictionaire* (1674) boasted nine editions or reprints by 1700.[20] Indeed, the *Grand Dictionaire* is sometimes seen as having triggered the vogue for alphabetical encyclopedias.[21] Fourth, with the exception of Pliny's *Naturalis historia*, general encyclopedic works from before 1650 had little direct influence on those published afterward, though they did establish tools for making texts consultable.[22] By contrast, a tradition of trans-European encyclopedia-making emerged in the late seventeenth century, characterized by exchanges of ideas and texts.

Organization and Methodology

Unlike many histories of encyclopedias, this book is not organized around historical periods. Among large-scale histories, Robert Collison's *Encyclopaedias* (1964) exemplifies this approach.[23] In Collison's book and others, a chronological framework makes for orderliness and lends itself to a comprehensive survey of titles. It can also lead to choppiness and a lack of focus, however. Here I aim for thematic coherence without providing a chronicle of titles or milestones. Instead of advancing from epoch to epoch, I will analyze the European encyclopedia from a variety of perspectives corresponding to my chapters. Only within chapters do I resort, intermittently, to chronological or geographical order. While this arrangement reduces zigzagging between different themes – a pitfall of chronological order – it risks creating its own zigzags by bringing together material from different places and times. The risk is outweighed, in my judgment, by the gain in comparative knowledge, but to minimize confusion, I reidentify encyclopedias when it seems necessary, resupplying their dates and, at times, other attributes. In addition, in the front matter, I have provided a chronological list of the encyclopedias most often mentioned here.

[19] Headrick, *When Information Came of Age*, 160–7; Yeo, "Encyclopedism," 670.
[20] Miller, "Louis Moréri's *Grand Dictionnaire*," 13.
[21] See for example Sullivan, "Circumscribing Knowledge," 319.
[22] On the lack of influence of medieval encyclopedic works see for example Twomey, "Inventing," 75–92. On tools for consulting developed in the Middle Ages see Draelants, "Siècle," 84; Blair, *Too Much*, 33–4, 88–9.
[23] Large-scale chronological histories of encyclopedias include Collison, *Encyclopaedias*; Rey, *Miroirs*, 87–234; Wendt, *Idee*.

In studying encyclopedias in three languages over more than three centuries, I have chosen to privilege synthesis and breadth. In other words, while my research leads to generalizations about linguistic traditions and change over time, it glosses over details. In fact, every encyclopedia was published in a particular time and place, and through the early twentieth century, they were almost all sold in a limited region. In addition, the switch to publication in Europe's vernaculars corresponded to a geographical narrowing of markets and thus to a certain localism. Unlike a Latin encyclopedic work, an encyclopedia in Dutch could not be expected to sell in Britain or Italy. Even as late as 1900, most contributors to an encyclopedia lived close to the region where it was published, which further encouraged local biases in coverage. On a trivial level, nearly every encyclopedia devoted extra space to the geography of the area where it was published. At one extreme, the article on Spain in the *Enciclopedia universal ilustrada europeo-americana* (1908–30) – nicknamed the *Espasa* after its publisher – took up a whole volume. Still, the localism of encyclopedias should not be exaggerated. From the seventeenth century onward, encyclopedists used other encyclopedias as sources, and not just encyclopedias from neighboring areas. Publishers, for their part, were familiar with encyclopedias from other regions and countries, which they regularly opted to translate or adapt.

My book also stresses continuity in the history of encyclopedias. In some ways, it makes little sense to compare an encyclopedia from 1970, say, with one from 1820. Among other things, book-making had changed, the market for encyclopedias had grown and democratized, and illustrations had become a normal part of any encyclopedia. Yet commonalities can be found between the old and the new. These are not so much on the pages of encyclopedias themselves, though it is easy to find articles that were copied or paraphrased from articles published more than fifty years earlier. Rather, many of the tasks facing encyclopedists in 1970 were still the same ones faced by encyclopedists in 1820. Prominent among them were the tasks of ordering material for alphabetical presentation, creating authoritative articles, and appealing to non-specialists. Such commonalities of purpose motivate my comparisons among encyclopedias of different periods.

To appreciate my comparative approach, consider, for instance, the question of whether encyclopedias were agents of change and liberation or whether they were stockpiles of old information, rendered all the more conservative by their support for established ideologies such as nationalism and communism. On the one hand, a first lesson of any overview is

that the question requires more than a simple answer. As shown below in Chapter 5, it would be wrong to imagine that encyclopedias were inherently liberating. Nor, as the example of Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond D'Alembert's anti-religious *Encyclopédie* (1751–72) proves, were they always orthodox or conservative. Indeed, since the very categories of the liberating and conservative are tied to our ideas of what ought to change, it would be better to recognize that encyclopedias all had a political aspect but that these varied widely, even if nationalism was a recurring element.

On the other hand, it is striking that the best examples of encyclopedias anticipating future knowledge come from the century from 1750 to 1850. In no encyclopedia was every article or more than a smattering of articles ahead of the times, but during this period – as noted below in Chapter 2 – scholars occasionally used encyclopedias to present or explore developing knowledge. In this sense, the period witnessed a distinctive convergence between encyclopedias and scholarly interests.

As this example indicates, my survey is meant to point to trends in the history of encyclopedias, some of them spanning centuries and linguistic boundaries. Only by assigning chronology a subordinate role can I hope to do them justice.

The chapters below, then, are thematically defined. They are both independent and intertwined. Chapter 1 analyzes kinds of encyclopedias, including varieties of proto-encyclopedias as well as such enduring variants as the linguistically oriented encyclopedic dictionary. Chapter 2 deals with the contents of encyclopedias from an abstract point of view – specifically, with respect to the notions of progress, practicality, objectivity, and nationalism. Chapters 3 to 6 deal with topics related to encyclopedias' contents as well: Chapter 3 with their size and economic viability, Chapter 4 with their preparation by authors and editors, Chapter 5 with their organization, and Chapter 6 with illustrations. The following three chapters then consider encyclopedias from a social point of view, reflecting on the people and institutions around them. Chapter 7 thus examines authorship in relation to encyclopedias; Chapter 8 encyclopedia-publishers and their ways of publishing; and Chapter 9 how people read and made use of encyclopedias. Chapter 10 is an epilogue, on the rise of electronic encyclopedias in the late twentieth century and afterward.

Portions of several chapters could have been moved to a different one. Chapter 3, for example, covers the price of encyclopedias, a topic related to both their economic situation – the focus of the chapter – and their owners and users, the subject of Chapter 9. Chapter 10 treats promotional discourse in printed encyclopedias as well as in Wikipedia, though the

subject also relates to my examination of objectivity in Chapter 3. In such instances, I recapitulate material when it is once again pertinent.

My research here is indebted to the fields of intellectual history and the history of the book. Encyclopedias have long been studied from the perspective of intellectual history, namely as vessels for knowledge and ideas. True to this inspiration, I devote much of the book to what is contained in encyclopedias. It would be rash to assume that encyclopedias simply reflected what was known at the time they were published. Beyond the idiosyncrasies of compilers and editorial staffs, the knowledge they offered could be dated or up-to-date, established or speculative, popularized or scholarly, and otherwise distinctive. Regardless, it would be a poor history of encyclopedias that neglected their content, particularly in its relation to contemporary knowledge and discourse.

At the same time, drawing inspiration from historians of the book, I see encyclopedias as objects that not only record knowledge but are also compiled, manufactured, advertised, bought, consulted, ignored, and so on. In short, encyclopedias take their place in a network of people and processes. This view of encyclopedias tempers my debts to intellectual history. In particular, unlike many intellectual histories of encyclopedias, mine places more emphasis on the practicalities of encyclopedia-making than on philosophical ideals, whether latent in the etymology of the word "encyclopedia" or spelled out in prefaces or manifestos. No doubt such philosophical ideals merit attention, especially when formulated by thinkers as famous as Gottfried Leibniz, Samuel Coleridge, or H. G. Wells. Still, their impact on actually published encyclopedias was less than one would guess from how much they are studied. In Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, for example, a handful of philosophical and programmatic texts have been studied exhaustively, illuminating the thinking of the two editors but shedding little light on the encyclopedia as a whole or the experience of using it.

In a perfect world, my book would be premised on a reading of all European-style encyclopedias from the late seventeenth century onward, as well as their advertisements, the correspondence of their authors, the archives of encyclopedia-publishers, and citations of encyclopedias in reviews and other texts. The corpus could even be broadened to include, say, texts influenced by encyclopedias or texts into which encyclopedias were copied or paraphrased. Such a mastery of available resources is impossible, unfortunately.

First, the amount of material is too large to assimilate. Since 1650, there have been hundreds of encyclopedias and thousands of editions of them,