

## 17. Diderot's *Encyclopédie*

**D**ENIS Diderot (1713-1784) was born in Langres in the Champagne, the son of a master cutler. He was educated at a local Jesuit college and tonsured at the age of 13, though he never in fact entered the church. In his mid-teens his father took him to the capital, where he continued his education, eventually obtaining a Master of Arts degree in Philosophy at the University of Paris in 1732.

His father wanted him to enter the legal profession, but for the next 10 years he spent his time with books and women. He developed a wide range of interests, including the law, languages, the theatre and literature, but failed to settle down to any career, leading a bohemian existence and scratching a living from freelance journalism and translation.

In 1742 he fell out with his father by announcing his intention to marry Anne Toinette Champion, the daughter of a linen draper, a devout Catholic and four years his senior. His father threatened to disinherit him and had him imprisoned in a monastery to cool his ardour, but he escaped and eventually had his way and married in November 1743. The marriage was not a happy one, though it lasted for forty-three years, and Diderot had affairs with the writer Madeleine de Puisieux, and from about 1755 until his death with Sophie Volland, and his letters to her were the nearest he ever came to writing an autobiography.

He also tried his hand at many other genres, producing plays, novels, short stories and 'philosophical' *contes*. His first significant work was a **free translation in 1745 of the *Inquiry Concerning Merit and Virtue* by the English philosopher Shaftesbury, whose fame and influence had spread in France**. His interest in religion is displayed in the anonymous *Pensées Philosophiques* (1746), an answer to Pascal's famous *Pensées*, which was an apologia for Christianity. It is a collection of fragments and aphorisms such as: "Superstition is more injurious to God than atheism"; "Scepticism is the first step towards truth"; and "Christianity, instead of clarifying, gives rise to an infinite multitude of obscurities and difficulties". The Paris Parlement condemned the work and ordered it to be burned, declaring that it "places all religions on almost the same level, in order to finish up by not accepting any".

Diderot's early scepticism was only a halfway house to atheism. In his *Letter on the Blind* (1749), and speaking through the mouth of a dying blind philosopher, he rejects the arguments for the existence of the Christian god, notably the design argument, in favour of a nascent theory of evolution. Al-



though it was again published anonymously, he was quickly identified as the author and imprisoned for six months at Vincennes (the Bastille was full). He was released after signing a letter of submission and promising never to write anything prejudicial against religion again.

On release, he resumed work on a major project which was to preoccupy much of the next 26 years. In 1746 he had been approached by the publisher Le Breton to help translate Ephraim Chambers' English *Cyclopaedia* (1728), but before long the idea had changed into a plan to produce an original French equivalent. Indeed,

Diderot's aim was nothing less than to 'shake off the yoke of authority and tradition' and turn the work into an organ of radical and revolutionary opinion. Le Breton appointed him as chief editor and the mathematician Jean le Rond d'Alembert as his assistant.

Between 1751 and 1772 the *Encyclopédie* appeared in seventeen volumes of text and eleven volumes of illustrations. It was the single greatest publishing enterprise of the European Enlightenment. Each of the 28 folio volumes extended to a thousand pages in length, and with the intention of recording all existing knowledge, both practical and intellectual, the *Encyclopédie* contained some 72,000 articles by 230 contributors and sold an astonishing 250,000 copies across Europe.

Even before it appeared, the work aroused controversy. In 1750 Diderot wrote a *Prospectus* in which he outlined the aims of the *Encyclopédie*. He included a chart of the tree of knowledge which followed the one designed by Francis Bacon. But Diderot's model – clearly designed to undermine the Church – differed in that Theology, an independent branch in Bacon, was relegated to a withered and unproductive branch of Philosophy, leading directly to Divination and Black Magic. A Jesuit periodical, the *Journal de Trévoux*, took issue with the *Prospectus*, accusing it of both plagiarism and distortion. But Diderot replied that he openly acknowledged the debt to Bacon; indeed, in the *Prospectus* he wrote: "If we succeed in this vast enterprise our principal debt will be to Chancellor Bacon who sketched the plan of a universal dictionary of science and arts at a time when there were, so to say, neither sciences nor arts".

Diderot, d'Alembert and a few close co-workers wrote most of the articles for the first volume which appeared in 1751 with the full title: *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisoné Des Sciences, Des Arts et Des Métiers* ('Encyclopedia, or Rational Dictionary of Sciences, Arts and Crafts'). Diderot himself contributed nearly 2000 articles on subjects from crafts to metaphysics, and from philology to botany.

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Surprisingly, this first volume, covering A-AZYMITES, appeared with full Royal Privilege. The new Censor, Malesherbes, was a pragmatic liberal without whose protection the *Encyclopédie* would probably have died an unnoticed and early death. A member of the Academy of Sciences, he clearly sympathised with the enterprise and did everything he could to allow Diderot the greatest possible freedom. The Jesuits, on the other hand, rushed to discredit the work, pointing out its many typographical errors, its frequent failure to give sources or acknowledge quotations and, above all, castigating it for its bias: “the names of kings, savants, saints, etc., are excluded from the *Encyclopédie*, yet those of pagan divinities are admitted”, declared the *Journal de Trévoux* (November 1751).

The second volume, covering B-CEZIMBRA, appeared in January 1752, but this time its sale was stopped, and later an *arrêt* of the King’s Council suppressed both volumes: “His Majesty has found that in these two volumes a point has been made of inserting several maxims tending to destroy the royal authority, to establish a spirit of independence and revolt, and, under cover of obscure and ambiguous terminology, to build the foundations of error, of moral corruption, of irreligion, and of disbelief”.

Three months later, however – thanks to the intervention of the king’s mistress Mme de Pompadour – Diderot and d’Alembert were asked to continue the work, a fact which they announced with pride in the preface to the third volume, which covered CHA-CONSÉCRATION (October, 1753). Its growing popularity was reflected in the fact that it almost doubled its print run to 3,000 copies. The first two volumes were now still treated as illegal (no big deal as they had been sold already), and all further volumes were to be published with tacit permission and after having been subjected to thorough censorial scrutiny.

The following three volumes (CONSEIL-DIZIER, DO-ESMYNETE, and ET-FNÉ) were published without any interruption in 1754, 1755 and 1756. Trouble arose again after the publication of the seventh volume in 1757, which covered FOANG-GYTHIUM. In an outspoken article on Geneva, d’Alembert had stated that it was an awful city which banned plays, including those by the wonderful Voltaire, and that the ministers of the city were Socinians, who rejected the Trinity. They protested strongly and demanded a retraction, which d’Alembert refused. Diderot and Voltaire tried to smooth things over, but D’Alembert resigned as co-editor. Diderot was equally firm in his determination to carry on and persuaded d’Alembert to write the mathematical and geometrical articles for volume 8, due in 1758.

Then, in July of that year, Claude-Adrien Helvétius, one of the contributors, published *De l’Esprit*, which argued the case for environmental determinism: we are what our surroundings made us, and nothing more. The Catholic authorities cited this book as definitive proof that the philosophes and the *Encyclopédie* were out to destroy religion, royalty and even the family. The Paris Parlement – also mindful of the attempted assassination of Louis XV by Robert Francis Damiens in 1757 – followed suit with an investigation of all literature deemed ‘dangerous, scandalous and licentious’. Sales of the *Encyclopédie* were to be banned forthwith. An *arrêt* of the Council (8 March, 1759) revoked the privilege granted in 1746, and forbade the sale of the volumes already printed and the printing of any future volume. D’Alembert then stopped altogether.

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## **“The first step towards philosophy is incredulity” - Denis Diderot**

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Police agents were sent to Diderot’s house to search for and confiscate all papers relating to the publication, but they had been already moved to perhaps the safest place in the kingdom – the office of Malesherbes, the Chief Censor. Diderot was determined to carry on and finish the work and discharge his obligation to the book-sellers. Under the secret protection of Malesherbes, work was resumed almost immediately, with Louis de Jaucourt as new co-editor with Diderot. The ten remaining volumes were to be published together.

In 1764, when almost all the articles had been written, Diderot discovered that after he had corrected the proof-sheets, Le Breton, fearing more trouble, suppressed passages likely to be objectionable and to cause friction with the authorities. Diderot noticed the changes too late to prevent them. The articles were mutilated to an extent which it is now impossible to determine, as all the original manuscripts and proof-sheets were immediately burned.

In 1765 volumes 8-17 were published, completing the text of the *Encyclopédie*. Diderot then set about putting together the illustrations, which eventually appeared in 11 volumes in 1772. As well as this work, Diderot continued to write his own material, which included novels and plays. His disquieting novel *La Religieuse* (1760), which is the story of a young girl forced by her parents to enter a convent in violation of her own profound yearning for freedom, was adapted into a successful film by Jacques Rivette in 1966.

Denis Diderot, the brightest light of the French Enlightenment, deserted by his collaborators and betrayed by his publisher, died in 1784. His last words were allegedly: “the first step towards philosophy is incredulity”. His legacy is the *Encyclopédie*, a brilliant beacon which encapsulated the spirit of the Enlightenment. Its contributors, who included renowned thinkers like Voltaire, Rousseau, Buffon, Turgot and Montesquieu as well as Diderot himself, believed that not only the natural world but also human affairs were governed by natural laws discoverable by human endeavour rather than supernatural revelations.

As A.C. Grayling suggests, “What Diderot wished to convey was an attitude and an outlook: an attitude of enquiry untrammelled by dogmas, orthodoxies, or the restrictions of political control; and a correlative outlook based on reason, observation and experiment” (*Towards the Light*, Bloomsbury, 2008, p135). In short, the *Encyclopédie* sought not only to provide information but to guide opinion and, in Diderot’s own words in the article entitled ‘Encyclopédie’, the aim was nothing less than “to change the way people think”.

While many of its contributors had no interest in radically reforming French society, and some were even priests, the *Encyclopédie* pointed that way. It reflected its editor’s hostility to religious authority and advocated a new Humanism, a new stress on the importance of man, on free inquiry and on the secularisation of society. Given that Paris was the intellectual capital of Europe at the time and that many European leaders used French as their administrative language, these ideas had the capacity to spread, and so it also served as a means by which much of Europe discussed and formulated Enlightenment ideals.

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