

**Burke, Peter, *A Social History of Knowledge, Vol II: From the Encyclopedie to Wikipedia.***

Cambridge: Polity, 2012. Paperback; 360 pages; 17 black and white illustrations;  
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This is the second volume of Peter Burke's social history of knowledge which completes the survey up to the present, and highlights some quite interesting social aspects of the knowledge industry if one is willing to absorb many pages of facts and case studies. Burke demonstrates a comprehensive knowledge of knowledge, and provokes with some pithy, although not frequent enough, comment.

The book starts by documenting and analysing different forms of gathering and storing information and their transformation over the decades. Burke describes a wide range of information activities and methods, and every page is extensively end-noted. He presents many examples for each of his points, for example, he notes the enormous amount of material gathered from various sites and transported to the West, including the 16,000 kg of manuscripts etc. taken from Chinese Turkestan by just four German expeditions between 1902 and 1914, and the 40,000 objects taken from Machu Picchu by Hiram Bingham III to the United Kingdom. He also discusses the different points of view taken by these knowledge gatherers and the decisions made about what actually is valuable.

The author provides similar evidence and analysis in relation to the storage and dissemination of knowledge. He raises questions about who controls the knowledge and interprets it, which is certainly of interest to historians of power. Different modes of classification produce divergent outcomes and privilege certain perspectives. Burke is an expert in social history and this is clear in what material he presents and how he uses it to discuss various social trends.

Burke is possibly at his best when he analyses the trends of professionalisation, secularization, and nationalisation of knowledge and shows how these forces were neither obvious nor guaranteed. He gives many examples of the tragic or mundane loss of knowledge and the consequences of over-specialisation, and laments certain current trends in academia. He especially attacks the lack of interdisciplinarity and

the fact that many researchers miss connections because they are over-specialised. He is saddened by the loss of polymaths, and asserts that many scholars know everything about nothing. This is lively material and likely to generate debate and further research.

Of less interest and passion are his sections on how business uses knowledge, and on the sociology and chronology of knowledge. These chapters are, however, filled with interesting facts and figures and are quite readable. He also discusses the issue of government patronage of knowledge, especially the military funding of a vast percentage of American research, and the technologisation of knowledge.

I am not exactly sure who would buy or benefit from this book. It is unclear to me whether it is aimed at a student of epistemology, an undergraduate social historian, or maybe even a librarian. This may be just because Burke is writing in a new field and his work defies easy categorisation. The book certainly provides many interesting examples of various social trends, but it is hardly a “remarkable tour de force” nor “exhilarating to read” as stated on the back cover. The illustrations and pictures are also somewhat arbitrary and piecemeal; they illustrate both major and minor points. However, for someone wanting to explore various aspects of the gathering and dissemination of knowledge, Burke’s work does raise some intriguing issues and is certainly encyclopedic in coverage. As a cheap light read that may inspire or intrigue, it is certainly worth buying.

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