

“Preface,” *Meyer’s Conversation Lexicon*, 6th Edition, Volume 1 (1907)

Abstract

Meyers Conversation Lexicon [*Meyers Konversations-Lexikon*] was a major German encyclopedia. From 1839 to 1984, when it merged with its main competitor, Brockhaus, *Meyers* was one of the most important vehicles for popularizing knowledge in modern Germany. Its animating principles dated back to the eighteenth century. They included the idea that men emancipated from the historic intellectual controls of religious bodies had every right of access to the vast stores of knowledge produced by secular science, and that broadly educated men were those best suited to democracy. All encyclopedias, including *Meyers*, were thus expressions of middle-class liberalism, whereas owning a set was a marker of bourgeois standing and respectability. The sixth edition, whose preface follows, included twenty individual volumes. The publisher sold no fewer than 240,000 complete sets.

Source

On the Sixth Edition of *Meyers Conversation Lexicon*

The *Conversation Lexicon*, according to the original meaning of the term, was originally intended merely to provide material and support for conversations about “state and learned matters” in sociable gatherings; ever since it became a “reference work of general knowledge,” the elevated demands have come with elevated obligations. The modern large-scale encyclopedia, as it has been developed by the founders and publishers of the *Meyers* series over decades of work with the growing participation of many hundreds of thousands, has long ceased to be merely a convenient source of information for the conversations of the lay public. Without ever losing sight of the needs and receptivity of this audience, which will always remain the first and last prerequisite of such an extensive undertaking, the publisher and the editorial staff have worked tirelessly to make the content of the *Conversation Lexicon* completely impervious to even the sharpest weapons of scholarly critique.

This unceasing labor has given us the satisfaction that even those strictly insular circles of scholars, who usually look down with noble disdain on the popularization of the sciences, have become open to the *Conversation Lexicon*, because its universally equal consideration of all the branches of human knowledge, its reliability, the painstaking orderliness of its organization, and the possibility of achieving quick orientation within the labyrinth of our intellectual creation, have commanded complete respect, even from scientific experts.

This goal has been achieved only because we have succeeded in attracting, for all sections of our work, collaborators who are themselves possessed of enough scholarly authority to inspire the confidence of their fellow experts from the outset, but who also have the ability to present the results of their research, and that of others, in a universally comprehensible and attractive form in keeping with the layman’s understanding.

Our encyclopedia has tasked itself with serving as the trusted confidant of families and scholars alike. It should defend its place in the bourgeois family and the scholar’s study, but it should also be used in reading rooms of every kind and thereby make the power and the comfort of knowledge accessible to the broadest circles. Our work has already fulfilled this mission in part; in fact, it has its place of honor in many hotels and taverns, in the former in reading rooms, in the latter on the wall above the regulars’ table, so as to act as the

supreme arbiter in all matters of dispute. The publisher feels all the more obligated to continue perfecting the work.

If one sees it as the “ideal” of the book that it might offer information about everything, then it shall and still will content itself with genuine knowledge, with the positive, the unshakably secure values of our knowledge, and not be seduced by pseudo-successes, even if they blind the eyes of our contemporaries; it shall know how to separate the fleeting from the lasting, and preserve level-headedness even in the highest surge of excitement about new phenomena.

This certainty and this soundness of judgment must be elevated to objectivity when we are dealing with things that elude exact research, or which are still contested in one form or another. This objectivity must prove itself especially in the most difficult of all fields of knowledge that fall within the purview of the *Conversation Lexicon*, namely politics. Since all attempts to place a large, encyclopedic enterprise in the service of a political party, or even to turn it into an instrument of agitation for such a party, have failed, the only lesson to be drawn is that the question of conservative or liberal cannot come into play for the trusted confidant of a people divided politically in manifold ways; that the *Conversation Lexicon*, instead, must renounce all political partisanship and must bear in mind, as its supreme consideration, only the national interest.

While we pursued this objectivity with the utmost earnestness and the most painstaking conscientiousness, we had to take care not to succumb to coldness and dryness for the sake of “impartiality.” And despite the brevity, attention was paid to making every article easy to read and understand. Empty phrases have been as strictly avoided as ambiguity in expression and vagueness of formulation. Particular attention was given to keeping the definition and explication of fundamental concepts so clear and transparent that even a reader with only the most rudimentary elementary knowledge can easily find his way around the material.

[...]

In the internal development of our work, we aimed to treat the various subjects with the greatest possible equality, to prevent any one voice in this polyphonic orchestra from making itself heard too loudly at the expense of the others. But we could not avoid giving some fields of knowledge more space than others. For the *Conversation Lexicon* is not merely supposed to be a systematic accumulation of the totality of our scientific knowledge; rather, it should also reflect the spirit and the prevailing current of the time in which it was created. In the nineteenth century, natural science and technology were the dominant forces, and at the beginning of the twentieth century, there is no sign that they have ceded their leading role, even if new ethical and aesthetic interests are asserting themselves everywhere. Giving full consideration to this irrefutable fact, it has been the aspiration of the editors to create, through an expedient arrangement and distribution of the enormous material, a balance between natural science and technology, on the one hand, and the humanities – primarily the historical and literary fields – on the other. And simultaneously to gain the necessary space to deal with the social interests that have rapidly assumed the utmost importance in the life of our times, by having set in motion all intellectual and technological forces at the same time.

[...]

However, the tried-and-true principles of the illustration method have been retained in the new edition. The *Conversation Lexicon* is not intended as a picture book to satisfy fleeting curiosity. Rather, its illustrations should have the same encyclopedic – i.e., generally didactic, thoroughly educational – character as the text, without dispensing with artistic execution in certain instances. [...]

Equipped with these comprehensive tools, our *Conversation Lexicon* embarks for the sixth time on its journey among the German people, from house to house, knocking everywhere there is a vibrant thirst for knowledge, where the urge for higher insight lifts the spirit and fills the heart. We may boast that we have wanted the best and have also given the German people the best to the best of our ability. Our goal has been achieved if this new edition of our “reference book of general knowledge” claims the place of honor it has earned in what has now been a sixty-year effort to spread general intellectual education.

The publisher

Source: “Preface,” *Meyers Großes Konversations-Lexikon. Ein Nachschlagewerk des allgemeinen Wissens*. Sixth completely revised and expanded edition. Volume 1. Leipzig and Vienna: Bibliographisches Institut, 1907, pp. V–VIII. Available online at: <http://www.zeno.org/nid/20006181899>

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: “Preface,” Meyer’s Conversation Lexicon, 6th Edition, Volume 1 (1907), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-29>> [May 17, 2025].