

Alexander Cruden and his Concordance

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John Farrow

The oldest index continuously in print is almost certainly the *Complete concordance to the Holy Scriptures* compiled by Alexander Cruden and first published in 1737. Cruden was born in Aberdeen in 1699 and took his degree there. Disappointed in love in his early twenties he began to show disturbing signs of insanity (his biographer Chalmers¹ says that 'it is doubtful whether this operated as a cause or as a consequence') and was confined to an asylum for a short time. He left Aberdeen and after working for some years as a tutor set up shop in London as a bookseller and 'corrector of the press', or proofreader, obtaining in 1735 the title of Bookseller to the Queen. He began work on his Concordance in 1736, and had it ready for publication in little more than a year. However, his patroness Queen Caroline, to whom he was looking to defray the expenses of publication, promptly died, and Cruden had to sell up. This, together with an emotional tangle with a widow, led to a further bout of insanity. He was placed in an asylum in Bethnal Green, from which he managed to escape in spite of being chained to the bedstead. His bookselling days were over, but after a while he resumed working as corrector of the press, and continued thus until his death.

The remainder of his life was not entirely uneventful. For twenty more years he hovered on the margins of insanity. Following a further spell of confinement in 1753 he attempted unsuccessfully to sue his sister for having put him away; shortly afterwards he made a half-hearted attempt at standing for Parliament, with an equal lack of success. He petitioned the king for a knighthood, but the nearest he came to that was to be dubbed at a spoof ceremony at Cambridge, the willing victim of an undergraduate practical joke. He used to call himself 'Alexander the Corrector', and as an extension of his proofreading activities took it upon himself to correct the morals of the nation. On his walks he would carry a wet sponge for the removal of graffiti, and as a good loyalist he tried to rub out the number 45 whenever he saw it. According to his biographer, 'this employment occasionally made his walks very tedious'.

Cruden's eccentricities were tempered by a number of acts of genuine kindness, and the last decade or so of his life was relatively untroubled. A second edition of his Concordance was published in 1761, for which he was paid £500, and he received a further £300 on publication of the third edition, in 1769. He used to work on revising his Concordance by day, beginning before six in the morning, and would do his proofreading in the evenings, continuing until one o'clock and sleeping for only five hours. 'These habits', writes Chalmers, 'were well calculated to counteract the mental disease under which he had so long laboured; and the reader will learn with satisfaction, that his mind was restored to a degree of calm regularity to which he had long been a stranger.' He died suddenly in 1770, kneeling in prayer by his bedside.

Cruden's was by no means the first biblical concordance; he lists in the preface to his first edition all known previous

concordances from the thirteenth century on. The first complete concordance in English, published in 1550, was the work of John Marbeck, or Merbecke, a versatile scholar who was organist at the Chapel Royal and whose *Boke of Common Praier noted* is still sung in our cathedrals. Marbeck was less fortunate with his concordance. The chapters of the Bible had been subdivided into verses only a few years previously, and Marbeck, being unaware of this, referenced to chapters only. At some time around 1542 Marbeck's house in Windsor was raided and searched, and the notes for his concordance were seized and held to be heretical; Marbeck himself only narrowly avoided being burnt at the stake. Various other concordances in English were published over the next century and a half, but all were superseded when Cruden's appeared.

The third edition of Cruden's concordance, the last to be compiled by him, forms the basis for all subsequent editions. It was reset in octavo format in 1823, when Chalmers' *Memoir* was added. The most recent revision was in 1930, when the dictionary part of the concordance was drastically curtailed. Editions are generally printed three columns to the page, in a 6-point typeface. The arrangement is Keyword-out-of-context: each new indexed word is capitalized and centred on its column. The context of each occurrence is then given, each one on a new line, with no run-in. Indentation is employed when a word occurs more than once in the same book of the Bible. The enduring quality of the concordance owes as much to Cruden's careful attention to context and clarity of layout as it does to his accuracy. As a further aid to easy reference, frequently occurring words are split up and given several entries, according to the way they are phrased. For example, after a column or more of entries under PLACE there are groups of entries for A PLACE, HIGH PLACE, HIS PLACE, etc.

Inevitably there are shortcuts. If an identical or similar phrase recurs, only the first occurrence is shown in full, the others receiving a bare mention of book, chapter and verse. Another shortcut is what would today be a *see also* reference: at the end of a list of entries the reader is instructed to see a related word. There are for example two occurrences of the word OLIVES, after which appears the reference *See* OIL. Occasionally a reference appears on its own, usually for stock phrases, e.g. BELLOW *See* BULL. Sometimes the referenced keyword has no obvious connection to its referent, to puzzling effect, as with APES *See* PEACOCKS; there is no mention of apes in the contexts listed under PEACOCKS, and it is only by turning to the full text of the Bible that one discovers at I Kings 10, 22: "... once in three years come the navy of Tharshish, bringing gold, and silver, ivory, and apes, and peacocks", with a virtually identical verse at II Chronicles 9, 24. (This was yet another of Cruden's shortcuts: passages were sometimes silently abridged to make them fit onto a single line.) The currently available editions have alas expunged that most evocative of all references anywhere: PISSETH *See* WALL.²

The Concordance also doubled as a dictionary. Many of

the keywords had notes, often lengthy, explaining and exemplifying their literal and symbolic meanings. We are, for example, told that the ostrich represents cruelty and forgetfulness, in that the female, being too heavy to sit on her eggs without breaking them, buries them in the sand to be hatched by the sun; the female and the male watch the nest alternately, but if either wanders too far it is apt to forget where its offspring are buried. Chalmers thinks that Cruden's Calvinism can be detected in the definitions. This is for

theologians to debate, though no layperson can fail to notice the bloodcurdling relish of Cruden's description of Hell: 'Nothing is more intolerably painful, than suffering the violence of fire enraged with brimstone . . . It is represented as a dismally dark place, where there is nothing but grief, sadness, vexation, rage, despair, and gnashing of teeth . . .' All these dictionary definitions have been removed from current editions; some, like the ostrich's, without trace, others to be replaced with the editors' own definitions.

How long before Cruden's work is finally superseded by an electronic version? Hand-held electronic Bibles are now available, and a single CD-ROM can hold the full text of the Bible with access by Keyword in four different translations; but no electronic text can ever match the meticulous and humane scholarship that has given Cruden's Concordance its place as the standard work of reference in its field over two and a half centuries. Chalmers' comment on Cruden's status, written in 1789, is still valid today: 'Though Mr Cruden may not obtain a niche in the temple of genius, his name will stand high on the records of utility.'

References

1. *Memoir of Alexander Cruden*. This, according to Cruden's entry in *Dictionary of national biography*, was by Alexander Chalmers, and first appeared in an encyclopaedia of 1789. An abridgement of this was prefixed to editions of the Concordance from 1824 on.
2. I Samuel 25:22; also 34; I Kings 14:10; 16:11; 21:21; II Kings 9:8. You do not need to know this.

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