

A great book is 125 years old

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A GREAT BOOK IS 125 YEARS OLD

The working life of Peter Mark Roget (1779–1869)

This year marks the 125th anniversary of the appearance of the first edition of *Roget's Thesaurus*. The British, who do not celebrate lightly but confine their festivities to marking only the most important occasions such as the Queen's Silver Jubilee, have also seen fit to mark the event in various ways.

This work, which originally appeared in eight volumes, probably has no direct equivalent in any other language. It has been compared loosely with Duden's great dictionary but *Roget's Thesaurus* list words according to their sense and meaning rather than in alphabetical order. It offers, for every word or expression that Roget found worthy of inclusion, a number of words of similar meaning or nuance as well as their antonyms. It has been, in the words of a contemporary writer, "a much loved and trusted friend" to generations of authors, playwrights, journalists and students.

30 Million copies

During Roget's lifetime, no less than 17 editions of his *Thesaurus* were published. It is estimated that in the anglo-saxon world as many as 30 million copies are in circulation at any one time, discounting the new editions that are published periodically to include new words which have evolved or been accepted into the language. The latest edition is currently being prepared for publication.

So what of the man himself? What is not so widely known about this multi-discipline scientist is that he was of Swiss origins (he is generally assumed to have been French). His father, a Genevois, was for many years pastor of a Swiss protestant church in London. Roget himself, however, felt himself to be British and often spoke with pride about "my English character". But in a nightmare moment in his life he had



Peter Mark Roget (1779-1869), scholar and compiler of the now world-famous Thesaurus.

cause to be grateful for his origins.

These very roots, these origins, actually saved Roget from an 11-year stint in prison, but more of that later.

Young doctor

The young Roget was raised in a Swiss private school in London. At the early age of 14 (not such an unusual occurrence in those days) he went to Edinburgh University to study medicine. At the age of 20 he had already published his first learned scientific paper. He had noticed that butchers and fishmongers seemed to suffer less from tuberculosis than other professions. So he analysed and studied his theory.

Just as many of today's young people have taken to cannabis smoking, so Roget found escape in the inhalation of nitrous oxide – laughing gas – with some of his contemporaries who included the poets Wordsworth and Southey. The difference was however, that Roget wrote about his experiences afterwards.

During the course of a couple of decades this man worked his way into the world of learned English societies. Had the word "establishment" been invented during Roget's life time, he would undoubtedly have been regarded as a member. He founded a library in Manchester and was a member of the board of governors of London University.

Prolific writer

He contributed articles totalling at least 300,000 words to various works of standard reference including the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. He also invented a form of calculating machine and, as his diverse and meteoric career progressed, was appointed personal physician to the Spanish Ambassador in London while being awarded a professorship of psychology. There was

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indeed no learned society in England to which Roget did not belong.

Alongside all this activity he once conducted a study into the City of London's water supply. Had he been alive today, Roget would almost certainly have been co-opted into one of the more dramatic committees of investigation which are so fashionable in our nuclear world.

Although the idea for his Thesaurus came to Roget as early as 1805 it was not until 1840 that he began to work on it in earnest and 1852 until the first edition appeared. An American author, Donald Emblem, who later wrote a detailed but highly readable biography of Roget, expressed surprise that Roget undertook this activity at all. According to Emblem, Roget was many things but certainly not a philologist. Even literary inclinations seem to have been alien to him. So, therefore, it remains much of a mystery why Roget should have devoted so much of his working life to this philological masterpiece.

A real nightmare

But what of the nightmare mentioned earlier in this piece? At the age of 23 he was commissioned to take two young English children to Geneva and there to supervise their education. It was at the time that Napoleon's France swallowed Geneva. One day another famous product of a Genevese father, Mme. de Stael, in whose company Roget

was sometimes to be found, warned that war was about to break out between England and France. Furthermore, all Britons in Geneva were to be arrested and transported to Verdun. Roget found it impossible to escape and, even if he had succeeded in reaching Switzerland proper, it is doubtful whether his fate would have been all that much better.

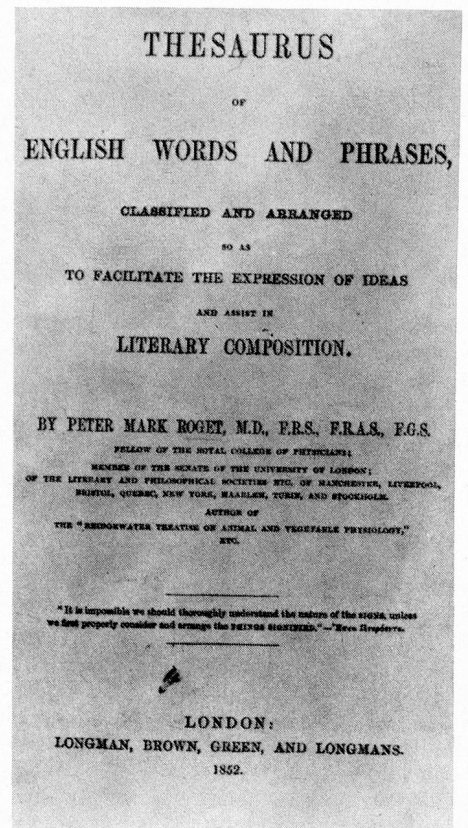
Conveniently remembered

So, suddenly Roget chose to remember his Genevese extraction. In a flash he had his rights verified and thus became the possessor of a French passport. He was free. But before his new-found fellow countrymen could conscript him into Napoleon's armies, he fled Geneva with his two young charges and went to Neuchâtel where the Prussian king still ruled and who protected the British.

The remaining Britons in Geneva were transported to Verdun where they were imprisoned . . . incarcerated, jailed, holed-up, interned, locked away, imprisoned. . . Roget's great work, his magnificent Thesaurus of English words and phrases, will give you many more words to describe the fate that befell many of his friends but from which he was, happily, able to escape.

We are indebted to the St. Galler Tagblatt from which this article has been freely translated and to its original author, Mr. H. G. Alexander.

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The title page of the first edition of Roget's Thesaurus.

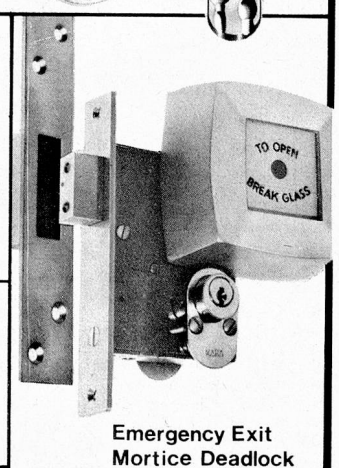
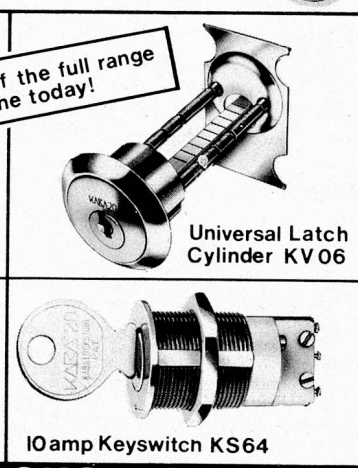
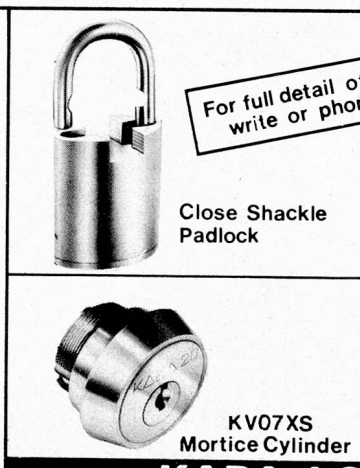
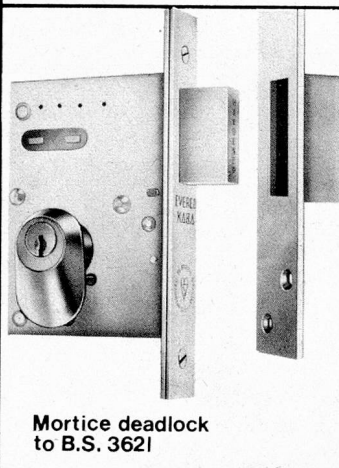
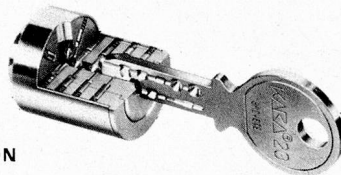
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