Preface

It is forty years since Webster’s Biographical Dictionary first appeared. It was the product of more than five years’ work by a large staff of editors, and it quickly justified their efforts by becoming a standard reference. In those forty years the book has seen some 21 updated printings recording the accelerating changes of an increasingly complex and cosmopolitan world. The task of maintaining the book’s currency, along with that of constantly improving its accuracy, has been made easier over the years by the thousands of readers and users who have written to offer criticisms, corrections, and suggestions and who are hereby publicly and sincerely thanked. But the task eventually demanded more than updating; hence, Webster’s New Biographical Dictionary.

The present work, while based firmly on its predecessor, is wholly revised and reedited to meet new demands. A new typographic design has greatly simplified the appearance of the pages and will make the book easier to use. Numerous other changes in the arrangement and treatment of information are discussed in detail in the Explanatory Notes section. One major change in the coverage of the book should be noted here: Living persons, whose biographies are virtually impossible to keep up-to-date in a book of this nature, are not included. References such as Who’s Who, Current Biography, encyclopedia yearbooks, and the like do an excellent job of reporting on current personalities. Webster’s New Biographical Dictionary takes as its job to present in a single volume biographical information on important, celebrated, or notorious figures from the last five thousand years, beginning with Menes, king of Egypt c.3100 B.C., and continuing through some 30,000 more.

As befits a work aimed at today’s and, we hope, tomorrow’s readers, the coverage of the non-English-speaking part of the world, especially of Asia, Africa, and what are called variously the developing or Third World nations, has been greatly increased. Yet as befits a work that will be used primarily by English-speaking consultants, the treatment afforded American, Canadian, and British subjects tends to be fuller and more detailed.

Webster’s New Biographical Dictionary retains such useful features of its predecessor as the indication of end-of-line division and pronunciation of names (fully discussed in the Explanatory Notes) and the separate list of prenames appended to the main body of the book. To that list have been added lists of common titles and honorifics and of common connective name elements.

It cannot be pretended that this book is free of error or that the selection of names to be included is in any sense definitive. It is confidently expected that the correspondence of the last forty years with readers around the world will continue, with new grist for the mills of the sharp-eyed detectors of typographical errors and editorial infelicities. Nonetheless Webster’s New Biographical Dictionary is offered as a worthy successor to its distinguished parent and an important addition to the line of Merriam-Webster reference books.

Webster’s New Biographical Dictionary was planned and edited by Robert McHenry, assisted by Frank Calvillo, assistant editor. Valuable help was provided by Dr. Frederick C. Mish, Editorial Director of Merriam-Webster. Pronunciation was the work of Dr. John K. Bollard, associate editor, assisted by Susan M. McDonald, assistant editor, and Dru A. Whitten, editorial assistant. Proof was read and corrected by Eileen M. Haraty, editorial assistant, Peter D. Haraty, assistant
editor, Daniel J. Hopkins, assistant editor, and Cynthia S. Ashby. The often demanding clerical work required by such a project was carried out under the direction of Gloria Afflitto. Acknowledgment is also due the staff of the first Webster’s Biographical Dictionary, headed by William Allan Neilson, John P Bethel, and Lucius H. Holt.