

## Against the Grain

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# The Scholarly Publishing Scene: Marks, Kent, and Me

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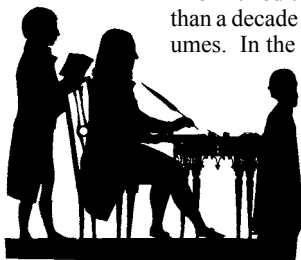
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# The Scholarly Publishing Scene — Marks, Kent, and Me

Column Editor: **Myer Kutz** (President, Myer Kutz Associates, Inc.) <myerkutz@aol.com>

When I started writing books nearly fifty years ago, I had an idea about the end result of what I was doing. That first book was a short monograph, *Temperature Control*, which **Wiley** published in 1968. I thought it would remain on library shelves for many years. Why not? After all, a decade earlier I'd had a student job in the **MIT** library, and weren't the basement stacks full of old books, among other materials? Just to further entice me, the reception area at **Wiley's** offices on Third Avenue in Manhattan was wood-paneled and lined with shelf after shelf of books whose ranks I yearned to join. (To this point, no surprise, my dream is reality. According to WorldCat, for instance, half a dozen research libraries within a short drive from my Upstate New York home have a copy.)

My thinking was reinforced twenty years later, when I edited the first of my twenty or so engineering handbooks. That was in 1986, when **Wiley** published the first edition of the *Mechanical Engineers' Handbook* with my name on the spine. I had the idea that the handbook would have a long shelf life, and in some future edition, would live on long after I was gone. Again, why not? The main competitor (although it focuses on fundamentals, while mine focuses more on new practices) was the ubiquitous *Marks'* handbook, which was still going strong three decades after the death of **Lionel Simeon Marks**. (**Marks** was born in Birmingham, England in 1871 and died of a heart attack in Providence, RI in 1955. According to Wikipedia (Sorry!), he held a mechanical engineering professorship at **Harvard** for over four decades, starting in his early twenties, and also taught at **MIT** in the early 1900s.) The *Marks' Standard Handbook for Mechanical Engineers* was first published



(without the word *Standard* in the title) by **McGraw-Hill** in 1916 and is now in its 11th edition. There have been three editors subsequent to **Marks** himself, but his name remains in the handbook's title. The first of the three successor editors was **Theodore Baumeister, III**, who worked at **DuPont**. His name was as prominent as **Marks'** had been. **Eugene Avallone's** name was added to **Baumeister's**, and **Ali M. Sadegh's** was added later (both mechanical engineering professors at **The City College of the City University of New York**, where future editors presumably can be recruited).

Actually, *Marks* started as a competitor to an older **Wiley** handbook — *Kent's Mechanical Engineers' Handbook*, which was first published in 1895. **William Kent** (1851-1918) was the founder. Handbook dimensions were pocket-sized. **Kent's** original title was *Mechanical Engineer's Pocket-Book*: A reference-book of rules, tables, data, and formulae, for the use of engineers, mechanics, and students. At the outset, new editions came much more rapidly than they do now. The eighth edition was published in 1910, only fifteen years after the first. **Kent's** son, **Robert Thurston Kent**, born in 1880, took over at some point in the early 1900s and new editions came more slowly. Trim dimensions had grown beyond pocket size. Eventually, others edited the handbook, but as was the case with *Marks*, **Kent's** name remained in the title. The 12th edition was published in 1950, more than a decade after *Kent* had split into two volumes. In the 11th edition, published in 1936,

the first volume was called *Design, Shop Practice* and the second volume *Power*. In the next edition, the first volume title was changed to the more professional and academic sounding *Design and Production*. It was edited by **Colin Carmichael**, who also

edited a book on electric motors. The *Power* volume was edited by **J. Kenneth Salisbury**, an expert on steam turbines. Like early editions of *Marks, Kent* was bound in faux leather. Someone gave me a copy of one of the volumes as a going-away gift when I left a drafting job at the Portsmouth Navy Yard and went back to **MIT** for my sophomore year. (I got the job by acing an easy civil service exam.)

That 12th edition was *Kent's* last. The base of **Wiley's** engineering handbook program was tiny (four or five titles in all), particularly compared with **McGraw-Hill's**, and nothing was done with the program until the late 1970s, when a former **McGraw-Hill** executive was hired to revive it. When I signed on to edit a mechanical engineers' handbook, I thought that **Wiley** would keep **Kent's** name in the title, but they had no intention of doing so. I wanted to make a fresh start as well, and it seemed a no-brainer to jettison much of *Kent's* page like, for instance, tables with numerical

values that engineers could easily call up on the Texas Instrument pocket calculators that were so popular at the time. In the end, contributors used almost nothing from the old book in my new one. Besides, by then it was three decades since the last publication of *Kent*. So **Wiley's** decision made a lot of sense.

Yet **Kent's** name has by no means disappeared. You can still find copies of some editions of his handbook (he published several other books) on **Amazon, Ebay, Abebooks**, and **Alibris**, among other places, mostly for a few dollars, although in some cases at collectors' prices. I'm not sure, however, even given considerable time, that you would be able to put together a collectable set of your own of all the *Kent* editions. Of course, numerous state and academic libraries have various editions in their physical-copy collections. The book has been digitized, and you can peruse the contents of some pre-1923 editions. So *Kent*, in one edition or another, appears destined for perpetual life, albeit in a vegetative state impervious to the ministrations of editors.

In my view research libraries are keeping their physical and digital copies of *Kent* as historical artifacts. The situation with *Marks* appears to be far more preferable — although I don't know **McGraw-Hill's** plans for it. In any case, *Marks* appears to be a living organism with body parts (chapters) that editors and contributors can fix as they see fit. They can keep the handbook roughly the same size or they can expand it into a multi-volume work. Whatever the decision, *Marks* has its place on the shelves of research libraries.

Until recently, I'd thought the same about my own *Mechanical Engineers' Handbook*, which is published in four volumes, to take into account the growing breadth of the discipline. The fourth edition is in production, with publication due at the end of this year. I hope to be around for several more editions. I also hope that **Wiley** will see fit to keep the *Handbook* alive and will keep my name in the title or at least on the cover or title pages of future editions that other editors will deal with. But now that research libraries are increasingly buying published materials in digital format, is it safe to assume that future editions of my handbook will reside in those libraries in one form or another? Handbook publishers — commercial houses, pretty much — rightly in business terms and in the interests of shareholders, will focus on whatever deals they can make that maximize the bottom line. Of course, publishers and libraries do have a, should I say, contentious partnership. For example, publishers are making complete archives of scholarly journals available to libraries as a benefit to patron researchers. Perhaps handbooks in multiple editions will be treated the same way. I can only hope that the promise of pride I felt when I first entered the book-lined reception area at **Wiley** so long ago, and my hope for longevity of my books, will not be lost.

## Booklover from page 77

stone, massive rumbling sounds and massive exhortation from the guard: *Pronti!* — and the guard runs alongside in pursuit of his own exhortations. The columns of the station slip smoothly away. Lights scurry along, intermingling like knitting needles. Gleams of light from the reflectors catch the carriage windows, caught by the draught, proceed through, beyond and across the opposite windows, lie along the line, trailing, slide on the rails, rise and disappear behind the cart-sheds. Dwarf streets, misshapen and hybrid corners — the jaws of the viaduct swallow them with a hollow roar. The blustering of approaching gardens close to the blind. The restful space of the curling carpet of vines. Fields.” 🌸