

- How this impressive information book began and developed.

## THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA

Four times has the whole affair been on the verge of bankruptcy. It has suffered different ownerships, including Sears, Roebuck and Company twice. It has been accused of English bias, American bias, heresy, and anti- and pro-Catholicism. Two full-length books have been published to denounce it. During the whole of one six-year period, two joint proprietors battled through courts and lawyers.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* will be 200 years old this year. It first appeared in December, 1768 in Edinburgh, Scotland, represented an ambitious undertaking, even though it was a small beginning compared with the hundred pounds of knowledge which is the current edition. It was the first of 100 installments to be brought out weekly, priced at sixpence, and designed to be bound eventually into three volumes.

The founders were Colin Macfarquhar, a professional printer, and Andrew Bell, already a noted engraver although he was only 4'6" tall and grotesquely misshapen. The two men needed an editor, and they picked 28-year-old William Smellie, a printer whose parents had wanted him to be a corset-maker. Smellie was paid a mere 200 pounds for his three years of work, which included writing the bulk of the three million words in 2,689 pages. Where inspiration failed, he cribbed freely from Benjamin Franklin, Hume, Locke, Voltaire, and Johnson. Later in life, he proudly told how he'd done the job: "with pastepot and scissors."

The second edition was edited by James Tytler, who had dabbled in the professions of the church and medicine and spent quite some time in a debtors' sanctuary, plus a good deal more in any tavern where he could

get credit. His hobby was ballooning, and he made the first successful hot-air flight in Britain. Despite his failings and eccentricities, he was a brilliant editor and a fluent and facile writer.

The *Britannica* grew fast. The first edition sold some 3,000 copies. Twenty-six years later, the 18 volumes of the third edition needed a printing of 13,000 although the proprietors had to wait for profit from Volume I to finance the writing and printing of Volume II.

Americans could get the *Britannica* cheaper than the British, for as each new part appeared in Edinburgh, a copy was brought and put aboard a fast ship. Sometimes proof sheets were stolen. Of course, the dedication to George III and the title word "Britannica" were removed, and engravers substituted their own signatures for Bell's. The pirated set sold for a third of the cost of a genuine work, and hundreds of thousands were purchased. George Washington tried to win a set in a lottery, failed, and paid \$6 to buy one.

Financial problems had been plaguing successive owners for years when an aggressive, walrus-moustached American called Horace Hooper leased the selling rights for the *Britannica* and approached the London Times (which was also near insolvency) with a curiously un-British proposition. The Times was to be paid for running several hundred columns of flamboyant advertising, offering the encyclopedia at a nearly 60 percent price reduction, and keeping each one-guinea down payment as commission. A cautious 800 copies were reprinted, but two months after the start of the campaign, sales had reached 4,300. Although the purchasers of the cheap sets were delighted with their bargains, there was much displeasure among traditional readers of the dignified Times, many of whom had purchased their encyclopedias for the full price with no nonsense. A retired member of parliament wrote to Hooper: "You have made a damnable hubhub, Sir, and an assault on my privacy with your American tactics."

Undeterred, Hooper and the Times sold 100,000 *Britannica* sets in 10 years.

During the campaign, Hooper bought the whole concern, and before long the encyclopedia was being produced and edited in America, to the lasting horror of British users. But worse was to come: In 1920 Hooper sold out for more than a million dollars to Sears, Roebuck, who doubtless thought that reference books would be as easily sold as gingham dresses.

Sears lost \$1,800,000 within three years, sold the firm to Hooper's widow and her brother, then bought it back again. Two days after Pearl Harbor, the board chairman of Sears was lunching with William Benton, advertising executive and vice-president of the University of Chicago. "Bill," he said, "I'll give you the *Britannica*." After a year of negotiations, Benton, who failed to interest the university in acquiring full ownership, acquired the company under an arrangement that was to earn more than \$30 million in royalties for the university.

For those who wonder how the present 28,000-page work compares with William Smellie's paperback, E. B. published last November an exact facsimile of the first edition. It reads as a curious mixture of dictionary, gazetteer, and do-it-yourself manual. That first edition had 14 pages on "Electricity," a century before Edison made his lamp work. Smellie seemed uncertain if California (sic), "a large country of the West Indies," was an island or a peninsula. Virginia "may be extended westwards as far as we think fit." Andrew Bell's 160 copperplate engravings were exquisite; obviously he chose not subjects that *needed* illustration, but those that would be fun to do. Only six sets of the first edition are known to survive complete, for the 40-page article on "midwifery" was so realistically illustrated that George III is said to have ordered the offensive matter torn out.

New delights are found in every edition. "Balloon Tyler," in the second edition, wrote a splendid article on flying in which he suggested

that it would soon be as common for a man to call for his wings as for his boots. The ninth, nicknamed "The Scholars' Edition," is still considered by some connoisseurs to be unsurpassed. All sorts of familiar names spring up from the lists of contributors: Presidents Herbert Hoover and John F. Kennedy; Macaulay, whose articles on Dr. Johnson, Goldsmith, and John Bunyan appeared until recent editions; Houdini, who contributed on conjuring; Sir Walter Scott, on drama; Gene Tunney, on boxing; Lawrence of Arabia, on guerrilla warfare; Orville Wright, on his brother Wilbur. There are now more than 10,000 contributors, and the editor has a permanent staff of more than 200 to help him keep track of who is doing what.

Hundreds of articles must be revised annually. One literally earthshaking event caused last-minute revision in dozens of articles; enormous earthquakes under the Himalayas altered the lengths of dozens of rivers, even the heights of mountains. George VI's death entailed a

staggering number of revisions. Not only had there to be an article on the new Queen; every mention of "King's Counsel," "King's Cup," "God Save the King," and dozens of unindexed "Kings" had to be changed. Worst of all, the Queen Elizabeth who died in 1603 had to have a Roman "I" squeezed in after her name in 40 articles. The first use of the atom bomb necessitated an examination of 500 articles from "Alchemy" to "Uranium."

The editors compromise between British and American spellings. "Honour," "labour," and so on retain the "u" except in specifically American references such as "Labor Day"; in exchange, the British "ph" is not used in words like "sulphur." "Encyclopaedia" firmly retains the "ae" diphthong. The only visible difference between the two countries' editions is on the dedication page; in the British printing the reigning monarch comes *before* the American president.

The *Britannica* has had its share of criticism. In 1917, Willard Huntington Wright's

book *Misinforming a Nation* accused it of being "bourgeois, evangelical, chauvinistic, distorted, and unfair." Much later, physicist Harvey Einbinder spent five years investigating many editions before he published *Myth of the Britannica* in 1963. He criticized the *Britannica's* factual acceptance of many legends — Washington and the cherry tree; Paul Revere's ride to Concord; and the antiquity of Paul Bunyan, who was, says Einbinder, created by an imaginative adman in 1914. (All three items have now been corrected.)

Russians, Americans, Malaysians, and British have called the *Britannica* an anti-Russian, anti-American, anti-Malayan, and anti-British, respectively. The biggest complaint of all, as might be expected, has been on the topic of religion. At least once, the author of an article has been formally accused of heresy.

Small inaccuracies of fact are frequently spotted by the experts, and gratefully acknowledged by the editor. A date miscopied, a misprint

of "not" for "now," could wreak havoc on someone's Ph.D. thesis.

Quite often, someone writes into claim that he is the first person to have read a set right through (which no modern E.B. editor claims). As far as is known, the speed record is held by a retired minister, who took three years. Only one man claims to have read it twice — C.S. Forester, creator of *Hornblower*, who read two different editions. Perhaps no life has been more changed by perusal of the *Britannica*, however, than that of a bookbinder's apprentice who in the early 1800s chanced to read some loose pages of a primitive article on electricity. His name was Michael Faraday.

Sets have been delivered in crates on the heads of African porters, along Mongolian tracks by wheelbarrow, by camel through the Middle East. When Sir Ernest Shackleton's ship was crushed and abandoned in Antarctic ice in 1915, he and his men salvaged a volume of the *Britannica*. His diary records his reading of "As-

syria" and "Babylon" before the work was finally put to use for smoking, lighting fires, and other immediate needs.

Today, in all free countries of the world, some 3,000 men and women are constantly at work to push with all deliberate gentleness, the 36 million words that can, so it has been said, constitute "a man's sole library." E. B. men carefully guard the figures, but industry sources estimate the print figure at well in excess of 100,000 sets a year, 20 per-

cent exported, with Japan alone taking much of this.

The small paperback venture of 1768 has become, apart from governments, the world's biggest publisher of hardback books. Although the encyclopedia's ownership, editing, and printing are now set in Chicago, it has this year renewed one of its old links. The new editor-in-chief, Sir William Haley, was for 14 years editor of the *London Times*. — *By J. A. Maxtone Graham in the Think.*

### JUDGE'S QUALITIES

Four things belong to a judge; to hear courteously, to answer wisely, to consider soberly, and to decide impartially.

— *Socrates*