

Wikipedia Fulfills the Encyclopedia's Sinister Potential

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WIKIPEDIA
The Free Encyclopedia



by Bruce Bawer

[*All the Knowledge in the World: The Extraordinary History of the Encyclopedia*](#)

By Simon Garfield

(William Morrow, 400 pages, \$30)

In one after another of his books, Simon Garfield has played the role of a jaunty, joking tour guide, taking readers on a cheerful swing through whatever topic has caught his notice:

in *Just My Type* (2010), he showed them around the world of printers' fonts; in *On the Map* (2012), he led a peregrination through the field of mapmaking; in *Timekeepers* (2018), he headed up an excursion into the realm of clocks, watches, and time itself.

Garfield's newest dose of wit and whimsy is *All the Knowledge in the World: The Extraordinary History of the Encyclopaedia*, which I snapped up in the hope that it might be at least a fraction as diverting as an earlier text about reference works by a Brit named Simon – namely Simon Winchester's terrific *The Surgeon of Crowthorne: A Tale of Murder, Madness, and the Love of Words* (1998), which, after crossing the Atlantic, acquired the more explanatory title *The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*. I lucked out: this is indeed a neat little romp – one whose chapters, in tribute to the organizing principle of the genre under scrutiny, are in alphabetical order. (Garfield, by the way, prefers the spelling *encyclopaedia*, but considers *encyclopædia*, with the “a” and the “e” smooshed together, a bridge too far.)



You want fun facts? They're here in abundance. For example, a 1789 work known colloquially as *Dobson's* was America's first major encyclopedia – but, unbeknownst to enthusiasts who hailed it as an intellectual and cultural triumph for the young nation, 95 percent of it was lifted verbatim from the third edition of the *Britannica*. I thought I knew a lot about Samuel Taylor Coleridge, but I never knew that his disdain for the *Britannica* led him to publish a competitor, the *Metropolitana*, which Garfield calls “earnest and exhausting.” Nor was I aware that the founders of Wikipedia had gotten their site off the ground by copying onto it pretty much the entire (no longer copyrighted) contents of the 11th edition of the *Britannica*.

What is an encyclopedia's ultimate purpose? Whom is it for? The first modern ones, published in Europe in the 1700s, were aimed at the *beau monde* – aristocrats, academics, professionals, and other elite types who wanted a university-level library in a single set of volumes. Later publishers targeted ordinary men and women who might want a handy source of general information. Still later, encyclopedia salesmen (that much-maligned tribe to which Garfield pays a good deal of attention here) guilt-tripped parents with the claim that having a set of *Britannicas* or *Americanas* or *World Books* would help improve their kids' grades and career prospects.

Then there's the question of scale: what's the ideal size for an encyclopedia? At one extreme you have the 11,095-volume, 917,000-page *Yongle Dadian*, compiled by thousands of scholars under the direction of the 15th-century Chinese emperor Zhu Di (it's good to be the emperor!), and the 10th-century Byzantine *Suda*, which contains 30,000 entries and, thanks to a massive worldwide translation project, finally appeared in English in 2014. Toward the opposite end of the spectrum, there's the one-volume *Columbia Desk Encyclopedia* (launched in 1935) and, even more modest, the *Hutchinson Pocket Encyclopedia* (1948), in which Canada gets just a few more lines than Albert Camus.

There's another important question: in a rapidly changing world, for how long can a printed encyclopedia be considered reasonably up-to-date? Yes, the major modern encyclopedias regularly put out new editions. But how new are most of them? In a 1964 bestseller, *The Myth of the Britannica*, one Harry Einbinder pointed out that some articles in the 1963 *Britannica* hadn't been revised in 74 (!) years. In the late 1800s, two Belgians sought to overcome the updating problem with an encyclopedia that took the form of a set of loose cards, the number of which eventually grew to three million.

This reminds me of a medical encyclopedia my father owned in

the 1970s: instead of being a bound book, it consisted of hundreds of sheets of paper in three or four jumbo-size ring binders. Every month, he'd receive in the mail a few dozen new pages that reflected the latest medical research and that were to be inserted into the book at specified locations while other pages were to be removed. It was a clever idea, but not exactly attractive to already overworked practitioners. I'm sure that encyclopedia ceased publication decades ago. I wonder how long it lasted.

Connoisseurs of encyclopedias consider the 11th edition of the *Britannica*, issued in 1910–11, the apex of the art – in Garfield's words, "arguably the most varied and robust popular encyclopaedia ever made." Consider this partial list of contributors: Cecil B. DeMille on movies, J.B. Priestley on English literature, T.E. Lawrence on guerrilla warfare, Gene Tunney on boxing, Konstantin Stanislavsky on theater directing and acting. Among the 11th edition's distinctive qualities, Garfield observes, is its "imperial tone." That tone came to it naturally: it hit the stores when the British Empire was at its self-confident height, just before the First World War destroyed everybody's certainties about everything. And certainty, as one realizes over the course of Garfield's book, is at the heart of encyclopedia-making. What to include, what to exclude? How many words does a given topic deserve? In a society that's sure of itself, decisions about what matters, and how *much* it matters, and about what's good or bad, are relatively easy to make.

Which is not the same thing as claiming that encyclopedias are, or ever have been, objective. Nonsense: inevitably, they reflect their editors' preoccupations and prejudices. At every turn, the illusion of sober objectivity conceals a lively subjectivity; behind the masquerade of lavish inclusiveness and perfect proportionality lie unacknowledged principles of exclusion and bias. And thus was it ever: Diderot's encyclopedia (1751) devoted only 17 lines to Denmark, a mere

three-fifths of a column to England, and no less than “four double-columned pages” to Geneva. No question, the man had a lot to say about Geneva. The lefty novelist H. G. Wells, for his part, felt in the late 1930s that mankind’s only hope lay in a tendentious “World Encyclopedia” that would be used to shape the decisions of governing elites and to teach the rabble to think more like, well, H. G. Wells. The more one reads about Wells’ plans for the planet, the more one is reminded of (eek!) Klaus Schwab.

If the *Britannica* reached its zenith in 1910–11, it made its sharpest turn in 1974. Like Gaul, its 15th edition, released that year, was divided into three parts: a one-volume “Propaedia,” described by the publishers as a “preamble or antechamber to the world of learning”; a 10-volume “Micropaedia,” for “ready reference”; and a 19-volume “Macropaedia,” which offered deeper takes. The boast was that it represented “the largest single private investment in publishing history.” Maybe so, but it didn’t exactly take the public by storm: as Garfield writes, its “fabulously complex system” was painfully “overthought,” the “Micropaedia” was packed with interminable articles on “hard-to-grapple topics,” and the book, as a whole, felt all too often like something “written by a committee ... devoid of character or warmth.”

And then the Information Age began, and within a couple of years the whole business had gone down in flames. Microsoft’s *Encarta* (1992), a cutting-edge encyclopedia on CD-ROM, hastened the print encyclopedia’s demise – then perished itself, less than two decades later, by which time CD-ROMs seemed as ancient as runes. Which brings us to Wikipedia. If H. G. Wells’s plan for a “World Encyclopedia” hinted at the encyclopedia’s sinister potential, Wikipedia has fulfilled it. With six million articles in English and millions more in over 300 other languages, Wikipedia is the largest and most influential encyclopedia in human history, but despite its claim to be rigorously unbiased, any of its articles that

remotely touch on contemporary political and cultural issues are certain to be agitprop.

Systematically, it whitewashes leftists and smears conservatives; it enforces orthodoxies on topics ranging from climate change to transgender ideology; and it excludes undesirable material through a cynical process of classifying left-wing legacy media as “reliable” and right-wing online media as “unreliable.” But you wouldn’t know any of this from Garfield. Ignoring Wikipedia cofounder Larry Sanger’s sensational dismissal of it, two years ago, as a useless fount of left-wing propaganda, and putting behind him his own recognition that encyclopedias of old invariably reflected the received opinions (however bigoted and ignorant) of their own times, Garfield contends, incredibly, that Wikipedia may well be “the most eloquent and enduring representative of the Internet as a force for good.” He appears to be absolutely smitten with the thing, to the extent that he seems totally blind to its colossal drawbacks. In short, an unpleasant end to an otherwise charming and sensible tour.