

AlbertMohler.com

Rest in Print, Britannica: An Elegy for an Encyclopedia



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And then they were no more. Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. announced Tuesday that it would no longer offer its venerable reference set in a printed edition. Western Civilization just took another hard blow to the chin.



“It’s a rite of passage in this new era,” said Jorge Cruz, president of the Chicago-based company. He went on to celebrate the new digital age. “Some people will feel sad about it and nostalgic about it. But we have a better tool now. The Web site is continually updated, it’s much more expansive, and it has multimedia.”

Bah humbug. I’ll admit that I am taking this personally. I own no less than four complete sets of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. I own a replica of the original 1768 edition, published in Edinburgh, Scotland. That work is a marvel in itself—a compendium of human knowledge in the Enlightenment Age. The work was patterned after Denis Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*, published just a few years earlier in France. The first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was a great success, even if King George III did order certain female anatomical drawings removed as obscene.

The 1911 edition is a monument of English-speaking civilization, printed on onionskin paper and set with elegant type. I once heard William F. Buckley Jr. describe it as the last great repository of human knowledge. This edition is not for the casual reader. It makes

significant literary demands of those who delve in. But rewards and riches are found within its blue-bound volumes. This edition reveals a world of monarchs and empires, published just a few years before that entire civilization crashed on the killing fields of World War I.

During the 1950s, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* became a fixture of middle-class America. Families aspired to purchase the set in all of its faux-leather elegance. Its presence in the home reflected the family's sense of cultural and intellectual aspiration. The cultural elites—the Updikes and Cheevers of the literary set—despised *Britannica* as hopelessly “middlebrow.” Nevertheless, their own adolescent children no doubt went to the *Britannica* when they needed to start a research paper. Where else would you go?

The latest edition of *Britannica* looks positively regal on the bookshelf. It is huge, elegant, heavy, and filled with authoritative information. Families once desired the printed edition with such fervor that they bought it on the installment plan, forgoing other purchases. Door-to-door salesmen took *Britannica* into the suburbs and out to the farms, selling knowledge—and a special bookcase for those who lacked furniture adequate to hold such a repository of knowledge. Door-to-door sales ended in 1996.

Trapped in the Library

The print edition of *Britannica* is now like a Mastodon trapped in the library—about to become extinct. We will be poorer for its absence.

Wikipedia is just a few clicks away, offering thousands of articles that *Britannica* would never touch. But *Britannica* was not meant to be a collaborative effort, with readers offering their own insights. *Britannica* spoke with an authoritative voice, its articles checked and rechecked. The digital edition of *Britannica*, we are told, will now be updated every 20 minutes. Am I supposed to be reassured?

I relate the following truth of my life with some trepidation, as I might as well entitle this essay “Nerds ‘R Us.” As a boy, I used to sneak a couple of volumes of the encyclopedia under the front seats of our family station wagon so that on vacation trips I could pull them out and lose myself in an education of articles, neatly arranged in alphabetical order. I would learn of Aardvarks and Aluminum, then turn to Australia and Augustine. I would luxuriate in its transmission of knowledge into my junior high brain, allowing me to forget for some moments that I was trapped in a car with siblings about to be car sick.

My guess is that, all things being equal, a boy my age riding along in the family's Prius this summer is more likely to be playing Angry Birds on his iPad. Left behind is the unexpected serendipity of reading about the mating habits of aardvarks. Is this progress?

Books in the Digital Age

On the very day of this tragic announcement, I was in a conversation with Robert Darnton, director of the Harvard University libraries. Darnton is a big believer in books, supervising the care and feeding of Harvard's 17 million volumes (and 400 million catalogued archival items). The topic of our conversation was the future of the book in the digital age. I now know that the timing of our conversation was roughly equivalent to discussing Japanese-American relations early in the morning of December 7, 1941. When the last existing sets of *Britannica* are gone, an entire age comes to an end.

Tora, tora, tora.

Darnton does not hate digital books, nor do I. In fact, he is an enthusiast about the explosion of reading in the digital age. But reading a physical book, with words printed on paper, is a different experience than reading on a screen. The experience of reading *Britannica* with a barfing brother in the back of the car is about to go the way of the station wagon—into the mists of history.

I admit to believing that this is a loss, even if inevitable. I also believe that the experience of reading the Bible on an iPhone is radically different from the experience of reading the Bible in printed form, feeling the texture of the book as our eyes take in the inspired text. The digital age brings wonders, but subtle dangers as well. Multimedia publishing can offer riches, but maybe some things are better received without digital sound and fury.

Then again, I am just happy to know that people are still reading. I know to be happy that young people are reading the Bible in any form, even squinting into their iPhones. I am glad that *Britannica* will at least survive in digital form, updated continuously.

But my heart is still with those stately books, and I find solace in remembering what it was like to lose myself in volume after volume of *Britannica*, one article at a time. Rest in print, *Britannica*.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

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