Editing The Universal Encyclopedia

The Editor in Chief of the Encyclopaedia Britannica *explains the economics and mechanics of encyclopedias as they impinge upon writing, revision, and freedom of intellectual development. The problem of "datedness" is analyzed via the history of the editions of the* Britannica.

by Harry S. Ashmore

I HAVE lately joined the company of encyclopedists after a career in daily journalism, a transition that seems to have astounded some of my former colleagues as well as those academics who look with suspicion upon editors who bear only honorary degrees. Yet my appointment, whatever else may be said against it, does no violence to the tradition of *Britannica*, the oldest and largest of the English language encyclopedias. For more than a century the chair I inherited has been shaped by the backsides of men who apprenticed in the newspaper shops of Great Britain and the United States.

This condition says something fundamental, but not always understood, about encyclopedias. The academic world is *Britannica's* primary resource, and most of its 9,000 contributors are scholars. But the encyclopedia is edited for laymen. It is conceived as a continuing link between the academic and lay worlds, a work of factual reference, certainly, but also a major instrument of popular education.

These two worlds provide a remarkable system of checks and balances for the editor who must operate somewhere between them. The layman who can't find the information he wants, or can't understand it when he does find it, has a justifiable complaint. The contributor who suspects a lapse of scholarship in the interest of popularization is capable of outrage, and likely to be highly vocal. Robert M. Hutchins, the chairman of *Britannica's* board of editors, has offered a neat summary of the encyclopedic dilemma: "A brain surgeon will not look up the articles on brain surgery in order to prepare for a prefrontal lobotomy. But if he has access to the set he will turn to the articles out of natural curiosity—and on the basis of his own expert knowledge he will form his judgment as to the quality of the remainder."

This is in fact a valid test, and one I recommend. If an encyclopedia deals competently with subject matter familiar to the reader it is a reasonable assumption that it will instruct him reliably in unfamiliar areas. It will not, of course, repeat all the expert knows, or needs to know. An encyclopedia is not, and should not be, a textbook—a fact which seems to elude the single-minded who fault the work for its failure to include esoteric matter of their specialized interest.

The Mechanics of Survival

Britannica, despite its size and resources, is constantly beset by limitations of time and space. Its 40,000,000 words, divided among 24 volumes, are under the constant ministration of a full-time editorial staff of more than 200, divided among the central operation in Chicago, the London office which also deals with Continental contributors, and a forward planning staff in Santa Barbara. The editors are supported by more than 200 academic advisers, plus standing committees at the Universities of Chicago, Oxford, Cambridge, London and Toronto.

The *Britannica* editorial operation, with an annual budget in excess of three million dollars, is far and away the largest and most ambitious of its kind. Actually, this complex information-gathering and processing organization is a comparatively recent publishing phenomenon, made necessary and possible by the great technological changes of this century.

When a "society of gentlemen" launched *Britannica* in Edinburgh nearly 200 years ago they could proceed at leisurely pace to assemble the necessary editors and contributors and turn out a volume at a time as copy came to hand. This process, indeed, provided the means for financing the pioneering work; the present trade term "subscription book" comes from the early practice of soliciting interested parties to sign up for the set in advance of publication and pay for each volume upon receipt. Until the publication of the fourteenth edition in 1929, *Britannica* followed roughly the same procedure, periodically assembling a temporary staff to bring out a new edition, keeping the set in print until it became hopelessly dated, and then starting all over again.