

Encyclopaedia Britannica at 250 – From Edinburgh to Chicago

Remarks of William J. Bowe

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The story of how Encyclopaedia Britannica came to be and how it became associated with Chicago for the last hundred years is a fascinating tale. My goal tonight is to give you a brief account of this. I'll then show you a short video shot when I retired from Britannica after 28 years as its General Counsel and Executive Vice President.

The “Natural History” of Pliny the Elder is generally considered the first encyclopedia. The 1st century Roman writer aimed to gather together all human knowledge. It was said that the only time his nose wasn't buried in a book was when he was taking a bath. In true Game of Thrones style, his survey of knowledge included magic and mythological beasts.

Today we have the ubiquitous Wikipedia. It often gets things right, though when Philip Roth wrote to correct an error about one of his novels, his correction was rejected because he wasn't considered sufficiently expert on the subject. When the New Yorker wrote a long article about Wikipedia it quoted one of its editors as an expert in theology and canon law. Wikipedia described him as a professor of religion at a private university. It turned out he not a professor, had no expertise in theology and canon law, had never received a PhD, and had never taught. He did get some stuff right in his editing. He often used *Catholicism for Dummies* as one of his resources.

In between Pliny and Wikipedia came the grand era of the printed encyclopedia. It began when a group of French intellectuals authored the *Encyclopedie* of 1751.

In the 18th and early 19th-century Scotland was characterized by an outpouring of intellectual and scientific accomplishments. As a prominent part of The Scottish Enlightenment, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was first published in Edinburgh in 1768. Its *1st Edition* contained alphabetically organized articles in three volumes. There is ample evidence that, as the years of editing work went by, the early grand ambitions of the editors to finish early were degraded by an increasing scarcity of time and capital. The evidence is in what the three volumes covered: A---B, C---L and (as the editors finally said the hell with it) M---Z.

When the first pages were published subscribers were scandalized by the explicit engravings of fetuses in utero in the article on midwifery. Notwithstanding that it was decreed by the Crown that they be torn out of every copy, many survived and this past

December 10th, the National Library of Scotland published a digital version of the 1st *Edition* on its website in honor of *Britannica's* 250th anniversary.

The eponymous enterprise Encyclopaedia Britannica later moved its headquarters to London and it was there that the American Horace Hooper laid the groundwork to become the U.S. publisher of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. He had visited London in 1897 and became convinced that the poorly performing 9th *Edition* (1875–89) of the *Britannica* could be saved by modern marketing methods. He bought the reprint rights and then persuaded *The Times* of London to advertise it in return for a portion of income from the sales. *Times* officials expected meagre financial results, but Hooper's reduction of the price and his institution of an installment payment plan greatly stimulated sales. A supplement to the 9th *Edition* then became the 10th *Edition*. Impressed, *The Times* made Hooper its advertising director in 1905.

Hooper left *The Times* in 1908 and, having returned to New York, set about the production of the 11th *Edition*. It was published in 1910 and 1911 in two blocks of volumes, instead of individual volumes appearing serially over a number of years.

Chicago's involvement with Encyclopaedia Britannica began a century ago during World War I, when the Chicago-based Sears, Roebuck & Co. started to sell the volumes through its extensive mail-order retail network. Two years after the end of the war, in 1920, Sears bought Britannica and saved it from bankruptcy. The Britannica's mission of disseminating knowledge fit in with the philanthropic beliefs of Sears's head, Julius Rosenwald. Rosenwald also founded the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago and helped establish schools for African American children in the South.

Within three years ownership of Britannica briefly reverted to Horace Hooper's widow, but Sears once again bought Encyclopaedia Britannica in 1928 in order to provide the significant financial backing that was required to issue a completely new edition. An update that was badly needed as the previous comprehensive edition dated from before the cataclysmic First World War.

With the headquarters of Britannica now moved to Sears's home of Chicago, the new 14th *Edition* that resulted from Sear's ownership was a vast undertaking, with some 50 associate editors and 45,000 articles written by 3,500 contributors, including Rosenwald himself, who wrote part of the article on philanthropy.

In 1932, University of Chicago graduate and Sears corporate Treasurer Elkan Powell became head of Britannica. He instituted a policy of continuous revision so that up-to-date sets could be bought every year. Previously, new information would not be included until another edition came out, which often took about twenty years. A *Britannica Book of the Year* began to be published every year as well. This helped keep sets that had been sold up to date by bringing people abreast of the past year's

events and breakthroughs. Powell also started door-to-door sales, sending out traveling salesman to offer sets to families on monthly installment plans.

Enter William Benton and Robert Maynard Hutchins. Both were sons of minister-educators and both members of the Yale Class of 1921. Fast friends all their lives, they were exceptional men and in later years helped connect the fortunes of Britannica to the University of Chicago in a unique and hugely profitable way for the University.

Hutchins for his part was so extraordinary that in 1927, two years after he had graduated from Yale Law School, he was made the school's dean. Before long Mortimer Adler, then a Columbia University philosopher professor, was guest lecturing Yale law students on the metaphysical and epistemological nature of evidence.

Not to be outdone in early achievement, that same year Benton founded the New York advertising firm of Benton & Bowles. The firm quickly prospered by reason of the its focus on placing advertising on what were then the new national radio networks.

In 1930, at the age of 30, Hutchins was named President of the University of Chicago. In 1936, being restless and now well off, Benton retired from Benton & Bowles and agreed to join his friend Hutchins as a Vice President at the University of Chicago.

On December 9, 1941, Benton on behalf of the University met with General Robert Wood, then head of Sears, at the Chicago Club to discuss Pearl Harbor and other matters. As it turned out, Britannica was one of the other matters that came up. When they parted, Wood had offered to give the Encyclopaedia Britannica to the University.

In February, 1943, the University of Chicago's trustees turned the offer down, famously saying that the business of the University was education, not the business of business. Having the means to do so, Benton stepped in and personally acquired the Company. In return for substantial royalties paid over the years to the University, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* title page noted that it was "edited with the advice of the faculties of the University of Chicago."

Hutchins retired as Chairman of Britannica's Board of Editors in 1974, succeeded in that role by Mortimer Adler. They had previously collaborated on Britannica's *The Great Books of the Western World* series published in 1952 and on the long in development *15th Edition of Britannica*.

Upon William Benton's death in 1973, a year before publication of the *15th Edition*, his will deeded Britannica to a foundation he had modestly named William Benton Foundation. Not surprisingly, the Foundation's sole beneficiary was the University of Chicago. When I joined Britannica in 1986, I served as Secretary of the Foundation when I became Britannica's General Counsel and later Executive Vice President.

Ownership of Britannica was transferred by the Foundation in 1995 to a Swiss resident, Jacob Safra. This brought an end to the 52-year tenure of the relationship between Encyclopaedia Britannica and the University of Chicago. All in all it was a pretty good deal on the University's side. In this period the University received over \$200 million from Britannica and the Foundation. This constituted one of the largest gifts in the University's history.

In the last four decades of its century-long association with Chicago, Britannica has had to change faster to keep up with the times. It published the first digital encyclopedia in 1981 and the first CD-ROM multimedia encyclopedia in 1989 (four years before Microsoft's *Encarta*). The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was the first encyclopedia on the Internet and publication of the 32-volume print set ceased forever in 2012.

Britannica today focuses on two main markets: casual and curious learners in the consumer market, and the global K-12 education market. Subscription and advertising revenues come from a variety of digital products leveraging its core, verified data sources, as well as proprietary semantic technology that surfaces unique relationships and uncommon insights for readers. In a hallmark of the digital age, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is published to institutional subscribers in three distinct reading levels. This makes the learning resource accessible at the most appropriate reading level for each and every student.

On the Britannica's 250th anniversary last December, Karthik Krishnan, the global CEO of the Encyclopaedia Britannica Group, reported that on the institutional side, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* today is present in multiple languages in 83 countries and reaches 150 million students. On the consumer front, he said that *Britannica* and its Merriam-Webster dictionary subsidiary generate over five billion page views a year across all platforms, making it a top-ten digital destination in the general reference category. This is distribution the print set managers back in the day could only dream of.

As a one-time President of both Merriam-Webster and Encyclopaedia Britannica Educational Corporation in the 1990s, I must say this warms the cockles of my heart.

On the north side of the Chicago River at LaSalle Street stands the landmark Reid-Murdoch building. Completed as a warehouse in 1914, the next year its basement served as the temporary headquarters for the 844 victims of the Eastland when the ship overturned across the River. In the second half of the 20th Century, it became a City of Chicago office building and housed our traffic courts. Repurposed for modern office use, in 2005 Britannica moved its headquarters there from the block south of The Cliff Dwellers at 310 South Michigan Avenue. This short video touches on some of building's history as well as some of Britannica's.