

Encyclopedia Britannica

It was reported in March of this year that the Encyclopedia Britannica will cease the publication of its iconic print edition. Before Wikipedia, before answers.com or any of the myriad “search engines” available with the click of a mouse, we had the Britannica. It was all in one, with the most complete information available on tens of thousands of subjects. It had been in continuous print since 1768, a full 8 years before the Declaration of Independence. It was generally considered the most scholarly of all reference materials. Their contributors included Nobel Prize winners and university professors. The EB website lists Albert Einstein, Marie Curie and Sigmund Freud as past contributors.

Word of the Britannica’s demise brought back distant memories of my first experience with Encyclopedia Britannica. That was in 1962, shortly after I had arrived in Pittsburgh, PA to attend the then Carnegie Institute of Technology (now know as Carnegie Mellon University). Graduate students received all kinds of solicitations in the mail. There was one from Encyclopedia Britannica. We did not receive pre-approved credit cards then, thank goodness. There was no email and the internet, newly invented by Albert Gore, hadn’t taken off. So I filled out the Britannica card and sent it.

Allow me to digress and tell you about the computers of that era. The school’s computer was at the top floor of the university’s library. It consisted of several large boxes each the size of a 20 cubic foot refrigerator. Its computing power was probably less than today’s laptop. To use the computer, you went to one of several punch card terminals located throughout the campus. You punched in your program (Fortran) then took the deck to the computer room and turned it over to an operator. You returned the next day to pick up the printed report. If you were sloppy, the paper would say “syntax error” meaning a typo or erroneous command. You had to start all over again or replace the offending code. If you hadn’t made any mistakes then you’d see the results. That’s the way it was during the dark ages.

The Britannica salesman came to our dormitory and started his spiel on the books. He was a young man, not much older than me, wearing a suit and tie. Back then the 24 leather bound volumes plus a case cost an astounding \$600 or about a month’s salary of an engineer. (That amount is based on my fuzzy memory; I wrote to the Britannica to ask but they couldn’t supply the answer.) Adjusted for inflation, that would be nearly \$5,000! My starting salary for the first job offer I received in late 1963 was slightly more than that. The last time I looked, a 1962 edition is available from eBay for around \$150. Of course there was a payment plan which I then signed up for. I think it was around \$25 a month. My intention in purchasing the Britannica was to send it to my nephews and nieces in Manila for their reference. Remember that back in pre-internet days, you had to visit the library to look at index cards for your subject. You would then borrow the book or books listed in the index card. My brother Toto’s children were starting kindergarten and first grade. My sister Tita’s children were older, but the younger girls were only around 7 or 8. My sister Charito’s oldest boys hadn’t started school yet. The encyclopedia would save the children a trip to the library. I doubt that their schools would have had the Britannica.

I shipped the books (I kept the bookcase) to my mother who kept it in the family library at their new home on Horseshoe Drive in Quezon City. I heard often from my siblings that our mother restricted the use of the Britannica since she wanted it to remain in pristine condition. I wanted my nephews and nieces to wear it out but of course mothers/grandmothers always have the last word. Today the set resides with one of my nephews in Quezon City. I sometimes wonder how many years it has been since anyone opened

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one of the volumes and turned its pages. Perhaps the “anay” or termites have turned it into a snack. I’m trying to find out.

There were serious attempts through the years to compete with the Britannica. There was Collier’s Encyclopedia which was around for almost a hundred years. How do I know about Collier’s? While in Pittsburgh, I was persuaded to sell Collier’s door to door on commission. It was a disastrous experience. The first time we went out there was a rainstorm. The sale’s manager’s car got stranded in a flood with the water covering the floor board. It was autumn and we had to wade in the cold water to push the car to higher ground. That was my first and last attempt at door to door sales. Colliers was followed by Microsoft’s Encarta, which became available as a CD-ROM. It was a giveaway when you purchased a Windows personal computer. Although backed by the software behemoth, Encarta lasted only sixteen years. A case study prepared by the Northwestern University business school indicated that Microsoft had attempted to purchase the Britannica but was turned down.

But the internet and Wikipedia sounded the death knell of Britannica’s print edition. A 32 volume leather bound book set looks (and smells) impressive in a library or office. But a \$200 smartphone with a data plan would provide access to virtually the same information from a number of online sources. The number of contributors for Wikipedia dwarfs EB’s by a ratio of 25 to 1. Let’s leave it to scholars to decide the better resource, the Encyclopedia Britannica or Wikipedia.

However, the Encyclopedia Britannica lives on, with an online edition and an app for tablets which I’ve installed on my iPad. A CD version costs only \$30 and the online subscription is \$70 annually. But if you need a physical book, you can purchase the 32 volume final print edition for \$3,995.

“Time and tide wait for no man.”