

Encyclopaedias

Autor(en): **M.S.**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Librarium : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Bibliophilen-Gesellschaft = revue de la Société Suisse des Bibliophiles**

Band (Jahr): **8 (1965)**

Heft 3

PDF erstellt am: **09.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-388034>

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ENCYCLOPAEDIAS

To bibliophiles and encyclopedia-lovers alike Mr. Robert Collison has rendered an invaluable service in composing his "Encyclopaedias: Their History Throughout the Ages" (Hafner Publishing Company, New York/London, 1964). Only one who may have tried to make his own way through the maize—largely uncharted as an entity until Mr. Collison's effort—of the history, ancient, medieval and modern, of encyclopedias and lexicography of all kinds can fully appreciate the huge and painstaking labor that this book represents. It is a bibliographical study of the first order; and it is more—a keen appraisal of the problems besetting encyclopedia-making, of all its possibilities as well as of its inherent limitations. In contrast to numerous other writers about, and critics of, encyclopedias in general and of certain encyclopedias in particular, Mr. Collison is so completely aware of these limitations—to a large extent beyond control and remedy by even the best intentioned and most capable of encyclopedia-makers—that wherever he is critical, he is so by implication and by silence rather than by outright, smart and smarting condemnation. This does not mean that he does not have a clear image of what might be the ideal encyclopedia. Without such an image in fact his study would not be as valuable as it is, for even the most tolerant critic must have and apply some ideal of his object by which to measure the concrete realizations at hand. In the case of encyclopedias more even than of other forms of literature the degree of merit is the degree of approximation to, rather than realization of, the ideal. Having recognized the claim to perfection or demand of perfection in encyclopedias as based on illusion, Mr. Collison is not as ungenerous as some other writers are in giving praise where praise is due.

His interest in the as yet non-existent ideal encyclopedia can be observed in his Introduction, where he mentions H. G. Wells's

"World Brain", that series of speeches and essays published in 1938 in which "the seventy-year-old genius pointed out that there is a need for a new type of encyclopedia to cope with the intellectual and practical needs of the twentieth century", an idea which was subsequently developed by Reginald Smith in his "Towards a Living Encyclopedia; a Contribution to Mr. Wells's New Encyclopedism" (1948). Such recent proposals as made by Messrs. Wells and Smith do not invalidate, but rather assimilate, far earlier thoughts produced on the subject, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Scientific Method", which Mr. Collison adds in an appendix to his book.

The value of Mr. Collison's work is enhanced by his including Arab and Chinese references in addition to all possible Western. The encyclopedic study and recording of the universe is thus revealed, as it should be, as a general human and cultural concern, not restricted to any one civilization, and the possibility and desirability of mutual acquaintance and exchange, so much an issue in our time, is thus automatically suggested.

What great libraries the world over did Mr. Collison not visit to assemble his truly amazing record? The overwhelming majority of the works he lists are no longer in print, and many of them preceded the printing press. Priceless exemplars are locked away in well-guarded museum and library closets and must be inspected there. This writer was sorry to learn from her bookseller that Joseph Walter's 1952 edition of Herrade de Landsperg's *Hortus Deliciarum*, "probably the first"—should Mr. Collison not have added—and only?—"encyclopedia compiled by a woman", and that in the twelfth century! is "épuisé, pas de réédition prévue". This is just one of the many books Mr. Collison's stimulating treatment makes one want to see and, if possible, to possess. *M. S.*