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From the Reference Desk

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From the Reference Desk

Column Editor: **Tom Gilson** (College of Charleston) <gilsont@cofc.edu>

Our fascination with biography appears unending. While Emerson may have overstated the case when he said, "there is no history; only biography," it is often the individual who shapes events or strikes the defining chord of collective experience. Therefore, it is understandable that reference librarians are continually asked for information about great statesmen, brilliant inventors, famous celebrities and notorious gangsters. Fortunately, a few high quality biographical references have recently been published to help feed our patrons' appetites. The most significant biographical set to be released in a number of years is the **1999 Dartmouth Award-winning American National Biography** (1998, 0195206355; \$2500). This remarkable 24-volume set is published by Oxford University Press and brings to fruition a project first discussed more than a decade ago. It was conceived as a replacement for the venerable *Dictionary of American Biography*, and the fact that it succeeds in its mission is a testament to its accomplishment. Nearly 17,500 biographical sketches are contained in these twenty-four volumes reflecting the "growth of new fields of study, such as the history of African Americans, women, immigrants, workers and others." Just as in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, the person has to have died to be included. However, the definition of "American" is broad and includes men and women "whose significant actions occurred during his or her residence within the United States or whose life or career directly influenced the course of American history." Thus people as diverse as **Winston Churchill** and **Neal Cassady** find a place in this set. The essays range from 750 to 7,500 words in length depending on the significance of the person being discussed.

Generally, the writing is factual and straightforward, while still holding the reader's interest. Each entry is signed by the contributor, and has a brief bibliographic essay including primary and secondary sources.

The set is

thoroughly indexed with subject and contributor indexes, an index by place of birth, both inside and outside the United States, and my favorite, an index of occupations and realms of renown. The occupations include everyone from racehorse breeders to librarians and harmonica players to geophysicists. In short, these 24 volumes have all you would expect from a top-notch reference. Scholarly, well-written articles, useful bibliographies and a rich and thorough set of indexes are the hallmarks of this work. But, *American National Biography* is also a vivid reminder of the richness of the American experience. People from every walk of life have had a telling influence on our history and culture. Athletes, explorers, politicians, artists, musicians, publishers, critics, physicians, scientists, soldiers and scholars have left their imprint, and they are all covered in this set.

American National Biography is more than an updated version of the *DAB*, it is a necessary improvement. The new set is more diverse and inclusive, reflecting current perceptions of American history. The contributions of women, African Americans, Native Americans, as well as various immigrant groups are well represented. General editors **John Garraty** and **Mark C. Carnes** are to be congratulated for their meticulous attention to current scholarly standards both in terms of content and quality of research. While the price is steep, *American National Biography* is one of those reference sets that will become a standard over time. Most public and academic libraries will want it in their collections. Those who would like a closer look can find an outline of the contents and some sample biographies at the *ANB* Web site, <http://www.oup-usa.org/ANB/>.

The month of April saw music lovers everywhere celebrate the one-hundredth birthday of **Duke Ellington**, so the appearance of this reference seems both timely and fitting. The *International Dictionary of Black Composers* (1999, 1884964273; \$270), edited by **Samuel A. Floyd, Jr.** and published by Fitzroy Dearborn, is a two-volume set which contains biographical sketches and critical comment on Ellington, as well as 184 other black composers worldwide. While the majority of the biographies cover composers of popular and vernacular music, significant attention is paid to classical composers, with over 45% of the entries dedicated to their lives and works. This emphasis is purposeful. It reflects the editors' conviction that it is "rare indeed that black composers

of music for the concert hall get significant public notice." *The International Dictionary of Black Composers* does its best to rectify this situation by including entries on both, the better known classical composers like **William Grant Still**, and **Samuel Coleridge-Taylor**, as well as the contemporary, but less famous like **William Cedric Banfield** and **Alvin Singleton**. Women composers are also recognized with essays on composers like **Undine Smith Moore**, **Philippa Duke Schuyler** and **Florence Price**. The selection of popular and vernacular music composers varies, ranging from blues great, **Blind Lemon Jefferson** to the "Godfather of Soul," **James Brown**; from legendary jazzman, **John Coltrane** to gospel pioneer **Thomas Andrew Dorsey**; and from reggae's **Bob Marley** to the creator of ragtime, **Scott Joplin**.

Each entry contains a biographical sketch, list of compositions, bibliographies listing writing about and by the composer, and a critical essay that focuses on major works. A number of entries also contain the location of principal archives related to the composers. Each entry is signed and there is a thorough list of contributors and their qualifications. I have only one suggestion for possible improvement. The use of "see also" references to composers within similar musical genres, or the inclusion of an index by musical genre, would help tie the set together, and assist readers in quickly surveying and linking related composers. While there is always second-guessing about who should be included in a work like this, the *International Dictionary of Black Composers* is unique and important. It offers a scholarly and serious treatment of an area of biography often neglected. Each composer is given a fact-laden biographical treatment along with a thorough analysis of artistic achievement not readily found elsewhere. Most academic libraries supporting music programs, as well as public libraries with commitments to a strong music collection, should give this two-volume set serious consideration.

Published chronologies are surging to the fore, at least at ABC-CLIO. The four-volume *Chronology of World History* (1999, 1576071553; \$375) and the single volume *Chronology of World Slavery* (1999, 0874368847; \$99) are both new and welcomed additions to their catalog. When I showed a somewhat cynical colleague the flyer on the *Chronology of World History*, his sarcasm got the best of him (especially after

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he saw the price) and he remarked, "Are they kidding, you can get that stuff for free on the Web." Then it was my turn to be cynical, but after searching around a little on the Web, I discovered that he was not totally wrong. There is a good site at **HyperHistory Online** (<http://www.hyperhistory.com>), but that is more of a timeline with links to some useful text. In any case, **HyperHistory** only covers the last few centuries. There is also **Any Day in History** (<http://www.scopesys.com/anyday>) which allows you to type in any day of any month and it will tell you who was born and who died on that day, as well as some of the major events that occurred. Overall, these Web sites are fine for some ready reference questions, high school timeline assignments, or a sports argument at the local tavern. But as a serious reference source for use by scholars and students that gives both specific dates as well as places events in historical context, they are not in the same league as the *Chronology of World History*. In looking for the dates of the so-called "Rape of Nanking" in which more than a quarter million Chinese were murdered by the invading Japanese army, I tried all three of these sources. **Any Day in History** made no mention of it (and besides, to make use of this Web page, you have to already know the date). **HyperHistory Online** made mention of the Japanese invasion of China and the seizing of Peking, Nanking and Shanghai, lumping it all in a timeline from 1934-1938. But by looking in the index to volume four of the *Chronology of World History* under the modern spelling Nanjing, I was led to a number of pages where it was referenced. The "Rape of Nanking" (or Nanjing) was at its height from Dec. 5-13, 1937. I also learned that in the same month, Japanese planes sank the **US gunboat Panay** off the coast of China, Italy withdrew from the **League of Nations**, political parties were banned in Brazil and a new Irish constitution came into force.

If the *Chronology of World History* has no equal on the Web, the same can be said of print resources. The four volumes of the *Chronology of World History* have a total of over 70,000 entries. As a point of reference, **James Trager's People's Chronology** (1995, 0805037314; \$45) has about a third that number. Although I must admit Trager's book is more fun to read, the entries in *Chronology of World History* are very straightforward and factual. Each volume is arranged by year and then subdivided by four major categories that in turn are divided into sub-categories. The four major categories include Politics, government and economics; Science, technology and medi-

cine; Arts and ideas; and, finally, Society. There are also interspersed throughout each volume "Special Features" which are mini-chronologies of important events, topics and people ranging from Early medicine to Space exploration; the Gallic War to Vietnam; the Fronde to the American Civil Rights Movement and **Leonardo da Vinci** to the **Beatles**. As impressive as all this is, there are some puzzling omissions. Looking for the date of the **Dred Scott** decision, I looked in the index to volume three and saw a reference to **Dred Scott** that led me to information about his birth. It also mentioned that he was the subject of the **Supreme Court** case "which took place in 1857" (no specific date). I doubled checked the section on 1857 and found no mention of the case. Searching in Trager's *People's Chronology*, I found the date (March 6th) along with a brief explanation. What is the moral to this story? Something you already knew. No single reference source is perfect, so hold on to your other chronologies. Each volume of this set has its own general index as well as separate title index. While these general indexes are essential and prove very useful, the inclusion of more subcategories leading to specific pages would enhance their value. The editors might have also cross-referenced variant spellings, i.e. "Nanking see Nanjing." Although it has a few flaws, the *Chronology of World History* is the most comprehensive work of its type currently available, and is worth consideration by libraries with need for a full-blown chronology of world history. The price will give some librarians pause, especially if they have found sources like the *People's Chronology* and Simon and Schuster's *Timetables of History* by **Bernard Grun**, (1991, 067174271X; \$21) adequate. As usual, intensity of need will be the deciding factor.

The *Chronology of World Slavery* (1999, 0874368847; \$99) is actually a complementary volume to a previously published ABC-CLIO reference set entitled the *Historical Encyclopedia of World Slavery* (1997, 0874368855; \$195). Both authored by **Junius P. Rodriguez**, these two references offer the reader a comprehensive look at an inhumane institution that has plagued mankind since the beginning of civilization. For its part, the *Chronology of World Slavery* makes it abundantly clear that slavery has been with us "throughout history" and that it knows no boundaries and is present in cultural history worldwide. The very arrangement of this reference book mirrors these two elements of slavery. It is divided into seven major sections: Ancient World, Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, United States and Contemporary History. Within each of these categories, evidence of slavery

is offered, sometimes dating from thousands of years before the birth of Christ. But perhaps the most disturbing section is that on contemporary slavery. From Korean women taken into sexual slavery by the Japanese military in World War II, up through the murder of **Iqbal Masih** in 1995 for protesting the enslavement of children in Pakistani carpet mills, this work amply chronicles the existence of slavery in the present day. The *Chronology* has a number of cosmetic features including maps, illustrations, and photos. However, the most important additions to the chronology itself are informative sidebars that highlight specific issues and historic figures. Two other elements of this work also stand out. There is a "documents" section that includes 80 historic documents related to slavery from the **Code of Hammurabi** to a 1995 Brazilian government document that recognizes the current existence of slavery in that country. Following this section, there is an impressive, forty-six page bibliography. And, of course, ending the book, there is an index that provides access to specifics. Libraries that already own the *Historical Encyclopedia of World Slavery* will definitely want to add this complementary volume. However, this reference will stand on its own merits and other libraries in need of a worthy chronology on this important topic should consider it.

The *Encyclopedia of Fable* (1998 1576070263; \$65) is a single volume encyclopedia from ABC-CLIO's Literary Companion series. It is another product of **Mary Ellen Snodgrass'** reliable scholarship. Ms. Snodgrass is responsible for others in the series and this volume should prove as useful as her previous efforts. Of the sixty-eight entries in the encyclopedia, many are biographical and critical discussions of fabulists ranging from **Aesop** to **Richard Adams**, the **Brothers Grimm** to **Beatrix Potter** and **Joel Chandler Harris** to **Zora Neale Hurston**. Major subgenres like exemplary tales, cruelty jokes and the pourquoi story are covered as are identifiable group traditions like the African, Celtic, Hispanic, Jewish, Greek, African-American and Oriental. There are also articles on definable time periods like medieval, Renaissance, and the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Intended for both students and scholars, the writing is clear but treats its subject seriously. The general reader will find this encyclopedia helpful, but it will be put to best use by those somewhat familiar with fable as a literary form. Luckily, Snodgrass includes a thorough entry on the genre itself, which is well worth reading for background. She also adds a chronology, a list of major authors, and bibliographies of primary and secondary sources. An index and "see also" references help lead readers to spe-

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cific information and related articles. Depending on collection needs, this book may be equally at home in circulation.

There is another new title on Jack W. Plunkett's growing list of business resources. Plunkett's *Energy Industry Almanac* (1999, 0963826883; \$149.99) is both easy to use, and contains a fair amount of information. The only problem is that it is expensive and the information can be found elsewhere. As with many of Plunkett's publications, the real strength is packaging. Industry almanacs are this publisher's bread and butter, and they have got the formula down pat. In Plunkett's *Energy Industry Almanac*, the energy industry is broadly defined and includes everything from oil refineries to electrical utilities and coal production to pipelines. The core of this book is the data listings for the "Energy 400" (actually 392 companies are covered here, which Plunkett readily admits). Each listing contains basic information like address, phone, fax and some Web page addresses, the names of chief officers and the company's main business types. Sales and profit rankings within the industry group are included, as is a narrative offering a brief analysis of the company's growth plans. While this information is conveniently displayed on one page, much of the same information and more can be obtained from standard sources like *Moody's*, *Standard and Poor's* and *Value Line*. In fact, the information in these sources is usually more in-depth. Other sections of the book, i.e., major trends, the industry outlook, careers in energy and most of the tables and charts seem to be reprints from government sources. However, few direct citations are given, so it is hard to tell exactly where the information is coming from.

This reference book is a testament to good packaging and convenience. It brings together focused, useful information and provides easy access to it in a single volume. However, the editors should be more up front about the sources of their information. Reprinting and repackaging government reports and sections from the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* are okay, but it would be helpful to have them cited properly. But, the main problem I have with this book is the price. Much of the information here is free from the government or available in other sources. While utility and convenience are valuable, the price for this book is way too steep, especially considering that many libraries already have this information in some form and there are other series that offer similar information more cheaply. Check out the *Dun and Bradstreet/Gale Industry Reference Handbook* series. (See the reviews below.) Of course, it is up to

the individual library whether the content is worth the cost. As always, choice is dependent on need and expected use.

Another publisher adept at gathering, editing and reprinting government information is Bernan Press. The recently published *Education Statistics of the United States* (1999, 0890590664; \$59) is a good case in point. While much of what is published here is available in the government's *Digest of Educational Statistics*, especially the state level tables in part C, it is not a mere reprint of the *Digest*. There are useful sections of this book taken from other sources. Part A, thoroughly and clearly aggregates statistics on dropout rates, enrollment and employment status by age, while Part B is an extensive section on educational attainment which is a reprint of a March 1997 *Current Population Survey* from the **Educational and Social Stratification Branch of the Bureau of the Census**. Part D gathers a variety of statistics from the *National Center for Educational Statistics' Common Core of Data 1995-1996*, which presents them by state and county for the entire country. *Education Statistics of the United States* is a nicely edited and handy collection of government published statistics. Students and other researchers will find it useful, and comparatively speaking, it is reasonably priced. Academic libraries supporting education programs will want to consider adding it to their collections.

The Gale Group, the granddaddy of creative repackagers, jumps into the fray with two more titles in their *Dun and Bradstreet/Gale Industry Reference Handbook* series. The first one centers on the chemical industry. The full title is *Dun and Bradstreet/Gale Industry Reference Handbook: Chemicals* (1999, 0787638390; \$99). Usually Gale repackages their own work, but here they have teamed up with Dun and Bradstreet to produce three of the ten chapters. These chapters are some of the more helpful ones, in that they provide the company directory (they look like briefer versions of entries from the *Million Dollar Directory*), financial norms and ratios, as well as company rankings by performance indicators. The data here is organized by SIC code number, however the editors provide an appendix that gives the reader a guide to SIC/NAICS conversion. There is also an explanation of how to decipher the

industry norms and ratios which comes directly from *Dun's Industry Norms* and *Key Business Ratios*. The remaining chapters discuss industry statistics, mergers and acquisitions, relevant associations, industry consultants and trade information. All of this information is taken from Gale publications like the *Encyclopedia of Associations*, *Manufacturing USA*, the *Encyclopedia of Business Information Sources*, *Trade Shows Worldwide*, and the *Consultants and Consulting Organizations Directory*. An introduction clearly explains all this and points out which resources were used for each chapter. There is also a useful industry overview and a brief list of further readings.

Not all of these Dun and Bradstreet/Gale handbooks discuss manufacturing, and the second title I want to talk about covers one of the biggest service industries in the country. The *Dun and Bradstreet/Gale Industry Reference Handbook: Health and Medical Services* (1999, 0787636207; \$99) is in its second edition. It follows the identical organization outlined above, except instead of excerpting from the Gale publication *Manufacturing USA* for its statistics, it uses their *Service Industries USA*. The major difference between these handbooks is the industry

sector covered and what makes this book interesting is that the health care industry happens to be one of the economy's most dynamic sectors. The editors have chosen eighteen different SIC codes to define the health and medical services industry. They range from home health care to medical laboratories, psychiatric hospitals to dental offices, nursing care facilities to optometry clinics and kidney dialysis centers to residential care providers. The industry overview essay does a nice job in giving the reader a sense of the industry as a whole, discussing background and history as well as current conditions and industry leaders. Librarians familiar with the sources used to compile these books will be comfortable with the overall high quality of the content, as well as the layout and presentation of the material here. But it depends on the individual library as to whether these references are a good, or questionable deal. If a library does not own many of the sources excerpted here, these books are well worth the price. You are getting focused, authoritative and comprehensive information from two dependable publishers. But if the library owns most of these sources, can they afford to pay for the same information in the more convenient guise of a single volume handbook? Is the editing and repackaging worth the additional cost?