

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Dictionary of National Biography. Oxford University Press.

Reviewed by Roy Johnson

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The Dictionary of National Biography is something of a literary institution. It was begun by Sir Leslie Stephen (Virginia Woolf's father), and its editorship has since passed through various distinguished hands. And now the encyclopedia of the "Great and the Good" (or just the well-known) makes its debut as a beermat-sized disk. Oxford University Press has attached a search engine to its database, and entries can be summoned by name, keyword, and subjects, using the usual AND, OR, and NOT Boolean operators. The search engine itself works fine—but what about the content? The CD-ROM claims to include concise biographies of "persons living in the British Isles," though strangely it includes Boris Karloff [latterly a U.S. resident] because William Henry Pratt (the real name of the man with a bolt through his neck) turns out to have been born in Camberwell, and educated at Merchant Taylors. Most of the entries are amazingly old. The biographical note on John Donne dates from 1888 for instance, though others are more up to date. Details of Winston Churchill (Nobel prize for literature, you will recall) are as "recent" as 1981. OUP has not done much to provide added value, so far as its archives are concerned. There are no pictures, even though the title

page gives references to "likenesses." These references turn out to be simply hyperlinks in the text, at a given mention of a painting. The text is murderously unparagraphed, and I would strongly recommend increasing the default font size by a couple of points, otherwise you'll go blind. Recovering the main article on Tennyson took twenty seconds from a standing start—only to discover a bibliographic note claiming, "the only complete and authoritative life of Tennyson is that by his son [...] published in October 1897," which is likely to alarm serious researchers. And that's where the problem lies. Since the product is aimed at "college libraries, history departments [and] journalists," it will be unlikely that any of them would be satisfied with such out-of-date information. The accompanying booklet does admit that the DNB "reflects the work of the previous century: a monument of Victorian scholarship but increasingly a primary source rather than an up-to-date reference book." Potential users are nevertheless likely to imagine it as such, and they might be forgiven for feeling miffed after parting with 50 pounds. This really is recycling a database with a naked commercial purpose. Maybe OUP could print a warning on the box.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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