

## Against the Grain

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# The DLB at Thirty

Matthew J. Bruccoli  
*Bruccoli Clark Layman*

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# The DLB at Thirty

by **Matthew J. Bruccoli** (President, Bruccoli Clark Layman; Phone: 803-771-4642; Fax: 803-799-6953)

The *Dictionary of Literary Biography* is the most comprehensive published literary reference work: 390 illustrated volumes covering world authors for all periods — 95,000,000 words.

The project was developed for **Gale Research** by **Matthew J. Bruccoli** and **C. E. Frazer Clark, Jr.** with the backing of **Frederick G. Ruffner**, founder of the Gale publishing organization. **Bruccoli** and **Richard Layman** are the Editorial Directors. The first *DLB* volume, *The American Renaissance in New England*, edited by **Joel Myerson**, was published in 1978. Twenty-three *DLB Yearbook* volumes were published between 1980 and 2002; and there are forty-six volumes in the on-going *DLB Documentary* series.

**Bruccoli Clark Layman** produces the *DLB* for **Thompson Gale** (now **Gale Cengage**) and has editorial authority for the volumes. The *DLB* volumes are stand-alones: except for a few two- or three-volume sets, each volume provides coverage of a genre or movement or period of literature. The intention from the start was to make it possible for libraries to purchase single volumes as needed. It has never been necessary for institutions to place standing orders for the entire *DLB* — although standing orders are welcome.



The editorial director of a literary reference book has no business trying to shape the canon. But he does it nonetheless because the selection of entries and the wordage assigned are personal decisions. The editors bring to the task their taste, judgment, standards, biases, values, and all of their reading experience. When **Dr. Johnson** was asked if his reports of parliamentary debates were fair, he replied that of course they were fair; but he made sure the rascally Whigs didn't get the best of it. His monumental *Dictionary* is personal and idiosyncratic. An impersonal reference book — outside of the sciences — isn't possible or even desirable.

The *DLB* inevitably reflects the convictions of the outside volume editors and contributors. **BCL** editing endeavors to impose an objective tone on the entries: first-person enthusiasms are tranquilized, and insightful lit-crit is purged. Writers I regard as over-rated or even worthless have been accorded the space their inflated reputations require. The function of the *DLB* is to record literary history — not remake it. Nonetheless, the authors I believe in get the best of it: thus the *Documentary* volumes for **James Gould Cozzens** and **John O'Hara**, both edited by me.

I don't edit or vet all the *DLB* entries, although I should. I work on the entries for the authors I care about as well as the

entries I'm uneasy about. In order to produce 390 volumes, **Richard Layman** and I have necessarily relied on in-house **BCL** editors and outside academic editors. Some 20,000 contributors have written *DLB* entries.

The *DLB* volumes are not written in-house; they are planned by outside editors who assign the entries. These volume editors are supposed to vet the entries and reject the hopeless ones or return the unsatisfactory ones for revision; but many of them accept everything that comes in. The pre-production vetting process occurs at **BCL**; about 25% of the entries are returned for revision and about 10% are killed. Some *DLB* volumes have been ghost-edited by **BCL** staff editors because the outside editors were irresponsible and failed to do their work. There have also been fakers who signed contracts and never delivered. They probably never intended to: they just wanted to talk about their work-in-progress or claim departmental credit for it. The abort rate for *DLB* volume editors and contributors has run 20%.

**BCL** does what it takes to publish trustworthy volumes. At least three months of in-house editing, revising, and checking every entry are required to make a volume publishable in *DLB*. Plagiarism is a steady concern. Publishing reference books and scholarly books requires doing the caring for people who don't care what they put their names on.

It gets harder every year to assign *DLB* volumes and to obtain publishable entries. Senior professors don't want to take on the work required. It doesn't pay enough, and they don't want to do it for the satisfaction of the work. Junior faculty are unwilling or unable to edit a *DLB* volume or write entries, because literary history is not "relevant." Relevant to what? These ill-trained or under-trained academicians want to commit lit-crit. During the thirty-year life of the *DLB*, at least three generations of graduate students have been damaged by emulating incompetent and undemanding teachers without professional standards. Students who do not learn to use reference books as undergrads and whose grad school mentors advise them that practicing "insightful" criticism is intellectually superior to, as well as much easier than, writing literary history are not likely to develop the capacity to write publishable *DLB* entries. The ability to write good reference-book material is not the best test of a scholar-teacher's competence: but it is one test. Literary history cannot be entrusted to the critics and the academicians who don't like books or literature.

The erosion of literary reference books required the collaboration of the librarians who have restyled themselves information scientists and have accordingly immunized themselves against contamination by books. They don't waste acquisition funds on volumes that have to be catalogued, shelved, and even evaluated by them. They aspire to reference rooms without reference books. 🍄

## Using Rare Books — Part 1 from page 71

**Dürer's *Apocalipsis cum Figuris*** (1498 [Apocalypse Illustrated]) — unsurpassed virtuosity in woodcuts as individual prints

**Holbein's *Les Simulachres & Historieés Faces de la Mort*** (1585 [True and Historical Views of Death]) — set a new standard for book illustrations

**Piranesi's *Vedute di Roma*** (1748-1778 [Views of Rome]) — the finest set of etchings

**Audubon's *Birds of America from Original Drawings*** (1827-1838) — the finest natural history illustrations created through the use of watercolored engravings

### Chemistry

**Lavoisier's *Traité Élémentaire de Chimie*** (1789 [Elementary Treatise on Chemistry]) — minimized the number of known elements through scientific analysis of compounds

**Dalton's *New System of Chemical Philosophy*** (1808, 1810) — determined relative weights for known elements and created a periodic table to show a system of relationships

### Correspondence

**Cicero's *Epistolae ad Atticum, Brutum, & Q. Fratrem*** (1562 [Letters to...]) — the

most substantial body of letters surviving from the Ancient World; important as history and literature and for its influence on the development of languages

**Pliny the Younger's *Epistolae*** (1476 [Letters]) — the only other substantial body of letters to survive from the Ancient World; reveals much about daily life and the practice of law

**Jefferson, Adams, and Adams' *Adams-Jefferson Letters*** (1959) — two friends and political adversaries explain themselves to one another

### Diaries

**Pepys's *Diary of Samuel Pepys...*** ed. By Richard Griffin Baybrook et al. (1899; 10 vols.) — first nearly complete edition of a diary written in the 17th Century and partially published in 1841; Pepys held a high position in the government of Charles II 🍄

**Gene Waddell is an architectural historian and College Archivist at the College of Charleston in Charleston, SC. He is author of *Charleston Architecture, 1670-1860* (Wyrick/Gibbs Smith, 2003) and of a forthcoming book on the Pantheon.**

And remember to read **Part 2** of **Gene's** list in an upcoming issue of **ATG**. — **KS**