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# Reference publishing.

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## Reference Publishing in Scotland 1880-2000

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Reference publishing is the term used to describe the publishing of a diverse range of products, including dictionaries, atlases, encyclopaedias, bibliographies, directories, guides and the many reference works aimed at the academic, educational and professional sectors. Such products – reference works are not necessarily produced in book form – are distinguished by the fact that they are not made to be read from the beginning to the end. The user – rather than reader – either turns directly to the entry that is useful at that moment or might browse through looking for an interesting entry. Neither are these reference works intended to be stand-alone products. Rather, they are intended to supplement other books or activities.

Scotland has had a long-standing tradition of publishing reference books, one of the most prolific publishers in this respect being W & R Chambers, now Chambers Harrap (see \*\*\*). The majority of companies involved in the field have been at least medium sized since reference publishing requires a good amount of investment before a profit can be realised. The production of any type of reference work requires time and money and the finished product may be aimed at a very specific market, to which it will need to be precisely targeted. Reference works often require the employment of specialists such as lexicographers or indexers, many of whom may be freelance staff. However, once a reference product has established itself as key in its field, up-dated versions can be produced periodically, thus maximising profits. For example, the medical publishers E & S Livingstone published the first edition of John Glaister's *Textbook of Medical Jurisprudence, Toxicology and Public Health* in 1902. The 13<sup>th</sup> edition was published in 1973, by then under the authorship of John Glaister Junior.

Reference works need to be objective and authoritative. Reputation and a strong brand which consumers trust are important, and also allow publishers to extend the product line with little additional marketing cost, thus the Chambers brand can support publications such as the *Chambers 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dictionary*, the *Chambers Thesaurus*, the *Chambers Biographical Dictionary* and Chambers Reference Online.

The period started with the removal from Scotland of one of the most famous reference works of all time. In 1870 the founder of A & C Black, Adam Black, retired. His retirement, according to Mumby, was largely due to his disapproval of what he deemed to be the extravagant plans being made by his sons for the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Copyright for the encyclopaedia had belonged to the firm since it had been purchased from Archibald Constable at the time of that publisher's failure. Despite Black's disapproval, his three sons managed to sell

half a million sets of the ninth edition, which appeared in 24 volumes between 1875 and 1889, although the company sold the copyright in 1897. Adam's last surviving son, James Tait Black, retired in 1899, by which time Black's had become a limited company and was firmly based in Soho Square, London, from where it published another famous reference work, *Who's Who*. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* may now be an American publication, but reference publishing is still a strength of Scottish publishing. It is the reference division of Collins which is the part of the HarperCollins conglomerate still based in Glasgow. Having merged with cartographic publishers John Bartholomew & Son Ltd, also part of the News International stable since 1985, the Glasgow branch is also home to Collins Bartholomew, publishers of data and mapping products. Many other Scottish educational, academic and professional publishers have produced related reference works at one point in their history. Before expanding into educational publishing in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, Blackie & Son published a series of reference works, mostly as subscription publications, for example, *The Imperial Atlas of Modern Geography* and *The Imperial Bible Dictionary*. Another educational publisher, Thomas Nelson & Sons, successfully published the *Nelson Encyclopaedia* in both the UK and United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the States the *Encyclopaedia* appeared as a loose-leaf publication, with subscribers receiving revision leaves several times a year to keep the contents up to date, while the UK edition was produced in 25 volumes at a shilling each. However, Combe suggests that the high investment required meant that publishers such as Edinburgh University Press and Homes McDougall scaled down their publishing of reference materials during the recession-hit 1980s and that by the 1990s there were few small Scottish publishers producing such works. One area where smaller presses have remained active in reference publishing, however, is Scottish-related publishing. During the 1970s and 80s Aberdeen University Press specialised in language-related reference works, such as *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* and *The Concise Scots Dictionary* – abandoned by Chambers and turned down by both Collins and Oxford University Press. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many of the smaller Scottish presses specialise in 'Scottish interest' reference publishing, for example Neil Wilson Publishing's *Glasgow Almanac* and *Jacobite Dictionary* or Luath Press' *Guides to Scotland*. In addition, many of the publications produced by bodies such as the National Museums of Scotland or the Scottish Record Office can be similarly described as reference works. Many of the products of specialist publishers, such as the legal publishers W. Green & Son Ltd, are also reference related. For example, *Scottish Current Law*, first published in 1948 or the *Parliament House Book*, which since 1982 has been produced as a looseleaf publication, enabling readers to update the contents frequently.

Reference publishing has always been at the forefront of the electronic revolution. Reference publishers were amongst the first to computerise the publishing process and have been pioneers in the production and distribution of their material in electronic form. During the late 1980s and 1990s many reference works were moved either online or onto CD-ROM, and the encyclopaedia market in particular became dominated by electronic products. Pang suggests several reasons for the almost complete shift from print encyclopaedias to electronic: more interactivity for the user; pricing – encyclopaedias have changed from expensive, one-time purchases to mass-market and much cheaper items – and bundling with personal computers. Sales figures of CD-ROM reference materials rose particularly sharply once they were ‘bundled’ with computer sales in order to advance the claims of technology companies such as Microsoft to being the standard and most comprehensive platform available.

21<sup>st</sup> century reference publishers are at the cutting edge of ‘information provision’ and are constantly challenged by the market for ever more practical information solutions. For example, Green’s now delivers its *Weekly Digest* by email to its subscribers. Reference publishers are now expected to add value to the information they provide and therefore need to work together with technology and communication companies to provide their customers with speedy, accessible and accurate information.

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