

The Tuesday Essay

After the fact

Alan Bradley, the Canadian author of the bestselling Flavia de Luce mysteries, on his love for out-of-date almanacs, yellowed dictionaries and other ancient repositories of arcane data

Alan Bradley

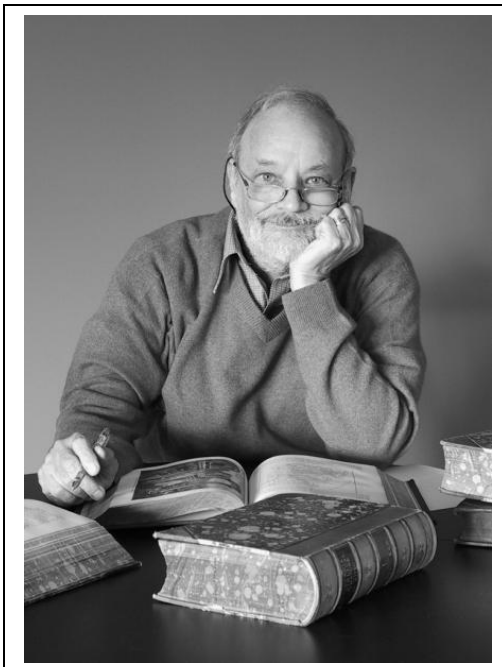
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If you're like me, you sometimes awaken in the night wondering at what time, in the days of King Edward VII, the London, Brighton, and South Coast Railway's earliest train left Brighton for London.

Or whether vinegar should be served with salmon.

In either case, the answer is no farther away than my bookshelves, where *Bradshaw's April 1910 Railway Guide* nestles cheek-by-jowl with *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*. *The Modern Eclectic Dictionary of the English Language* is at much at home at my breakfast table as the tea and toast.

My appetite for superannuated reference works was whetted when I was a child, and my mother was given as payment for sewing a party frock a 12-volume set of the *Century Dictionary*. Its pages were endearingly stained and dog-eared, and they seemed, at least to me, to contain all the wonders of the world. Who knew, for instance, that a nepheloscope was a device for viewing the upper strata of the atmosphere?



Alan Bradley with some of his ancient dictionaries.

Yet in spite of its promise, that beloved set of black books seems to have gone the way of all household reading matter of the day, and was probably dumped, unnoticed, into the rubbish during one of our household moves. Although I now own a later edition of the *Century* in which all of its more than 7,000 pages (plus a bursting supplement) are gathered together into a single corduroy binding, it doesn't possess anywhere near the same sober and magisterial air as the original.

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Over the years, I've managed to gather a rather modest but good collection of retired texts, including *Hazell's Annual* for 1908, several *Whittaker's Almanacks* from the early 1950's and (shades of Agatha Christie!) an *ABC Railway Guide* for October 1946.

Not long ago, friends presented me with a 29-volume set of the 11th edition of the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* ("marred as it is by the sensationalism of the popular plates", according to the wizard Merlyn in T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*. Marred or not, this lovely *Britannica* with its delicate onionskin pages now has pride of place on the shelf above my 24-volume edition of the *Britannica* published in New York in 1929.

These, then, are some of the things I cannot do without. But why this fascination for outdated facts?

For the writer of mystery fiction, a healthy curiosity is not only desirable, it is essential. The need to know peculiar truths is paramount. In his poem *The Raven*, Edgar Allan Poe, the father of detective fiction, admits to poring over "many a curious volume of forgotten lore," and so, I like to think, does every follower in his footsteps.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle made Sherlock Holmes hoard stacks of "commonplace books," which were anything but. Even Hercule Poirot had his upstairs library of "little grey cells."

Sadly, a collection like mine can never be complete: rarities such as Victorian copies of *Kelly's Post Office Directory* continue to elude me, as does an early *Wisden Cricketer's Almanack*.

I have searched in vain for complete sets of the massive *Oxford Dictionary of the English Language* (I have the two-volume micro-type edition, which doesn't quite count) and that landmark of British industry, *The Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by Virginia Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen and later by Sidney Lee.

To others, they are perhaps no more than old paper. To me, they are priceless.

Oh, yes – about that train to Victoria and the vinegar: The answers, respectively, are 5:20 a.m. and no, never, under any circumstances, as it spoils the taste and colour of the fish.

You have been warned.

Alan Bradley is the bestselling author of "The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie." His new Flavia de Luce mystery, "The Weed That Strings the Hangman's Bag," is being published this Saturday, March 13.