



"Analog Google" for the Georgians and Victorians

Reference Books for Home and Business

BY DAVID A. NORRIS

NOWADAYS, ONE MIGHT CHECK ONLINE TO FIND ANSWERS TO questions; confirm facts; or get instructions on, say, fixing a computer problem or replacing a leaky faucet. Misplaced your calculator? No problem: there are plenty of online calculators available. A century or two ago, our ancestors could have made do with a little home library. With some carefully chosen volumes, one could almost have a virtual "Wikipedia" where the names of current members of Congress; the current king of Hanover or Bavaria; or the area of the state of Ohio, were at one's fingertips. Other books had multiplication tables, so wholesale merchants or shopkeepers didn't have to take time to work out complex figures – or risk making a math error on an expensive business deal.



A 19th century store interior. (Library of Congress.)

For centuries, almanac readers followed the course of the moon, stars, and planets through almanacs. Many early U.S. farmers timed their planting, harvest, or timber-cutting with the phases of the moon. Times of sunrise and sunset were also useful. Printed almanacs added tips on farming and household matters, and then brought in current information such as postage rates or the names of senators and congressmen.

Some British and U.S. almanac publishers altered their format, to expand their publications to include regularly updated information on current politics, geography, commerce, and world events.

Londoners Robert and James Dodsley introduced the *Annual Review* in 1758. Within a short time, the *Annual Review* (also known by other titles such as *Dodsley's Review*) was widely quoted and writers of all sorts used it as a source to confirm current information on politics, geography, and even celebrity doings. The old editions, available at various places online, are still very useful for finding dates and quick information on events of the French and Indian War, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution and Napoleonic eras. Publication in hardback and online continues today, and current and past editions are available through many libraries.

Similar classic British publications include *Whittaker's Almanac* and *Hazell's Annual Cyclopaedia*. U.S. equivalents include the *American Annual Register of Public Events*.

Other useful periodicals that covered current events and history include the *Gentleman's Magazine* (1731-1907) and *The London Magazine, or Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer* (1732-1783).

The original Ready Reckoners appeared in the late 1700s. They allowed shopkeepers and merchants to calculate without an adding machine, using printed multiplication tables. For instance, say you sold 75 items at one penny three farthings apiece. Instead of working it out by hand (and