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# THE DICTIONARY MAKERS

*President Andrew Jackson said he hoped never to meet  
a man so dull he could think of only one way to spell a word.  
But the establishing of the proper way to spell, and define,  
a word—the making of a dictionary—constitutes  
an anything-but-dull chapter in mankind's intellectual history. Here  
Anthony Burgess shows how we got from A to Z.*

BY ANTHONY BURGESS

**N**o reader or writer of any seriousness can do without a good dictionary. This, anyway, is the modern view. With some awe we have to remind ourselves that writers like Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton had no access to what we would call dictionaries. Spelling did not much worry them, as it worries a modern author who runs to his dictionary to check on difficult words like *hemorrhage* (my personal blind spot). Milton spelt in his own creative manner, preferring *mee* to *me* when he wished to be emphatic. Shakespeare went the free and easy Elizabethan way, leaving his own name to be juggled with in a variety of orthographical fantasies. With Chaucer the encoding of speech-sounds was logical and required no checking. As for meaning, an empirical consensus prevailed, with no tablet of the law to lay down definitions. The ques-

tion as to whether a word existed—that is, was authorized by some remote linguistic authority—never arose. If Shakespeare required a word and had not met it in civilized discourse, he unhesitatingly made it up. There was a fund of Latin and Greek (not that Shakespeare knew much of the latter) to be drawn on for what is called neologizing, as indeed there still is.

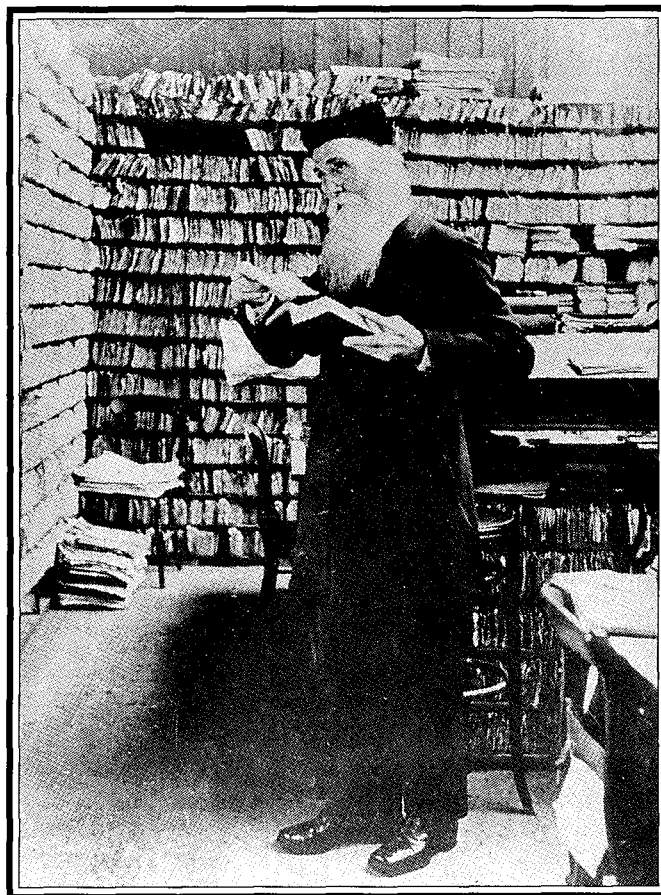
During the English Renaissance, attempts admittedly were made to line up the English vocabulary. Bilingual dictionaries—Latin-English, French-English, Italian-English—at least arranged it in alphabetical order. But the emphasis in the first solely English dictionaries was on very difficult words, as in John Bullokar's *English Expositor* (1616—just too late for Shakespeare to use) and Henry Cockeram's *English Dictionarie* (1623). These defined what could be called “inkhorn terms”—*commotrix* (“a maid that makes ready and unready her-

Mistris"), *parentate* ("to celebrate one's parents' funerals"), and *gargari* ("to wash or scowre the mouth with any Physicall liquor")—far too learned for everyday discourse. It was assumed that the consultant of the dictionary already knew the simple words.

**W**e are, of course, waiting for Dr. Samuel Johnson's magisterial work to appear (1750 onwards), but it is unwise to neglect the now-forgotten pioneer work in serious dictionary making upon which Johnson was able to build. Edward Phillips has 11,000 items in his *New World of English Words* (1658), but he was not sure whether to be a lexicographer or an encyclopedist. Until recently, it was not proper for a dictionary to deal in proper names, but Phillips includes, for instance, "California—a very large part of Northern America, uncertain whether Continent or island." In 1702, J. Kersey's *New English Dictionary*—"chiefly designed for the benefit of young Scholars, Tradesmen, Artificers, and the Female Sex, who would learn to spell truly"—brought the word count up to 28,000, and in 1721 Nathan Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* raised it to about 40,000. The question of word origin was, as the title indicates, now becoming important. Bailey's dictionary was the most popular before Johnson's: William Pitt the Elder is said to have read through it twice, as if it were a novel. This is a legitimate way to approaching a dictionary. If it is not too bulky, it makes a suitable bed companion for insomniacs. It may also cure insomnia.

In 1747, Samuel Johnson published *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*, in which he de-

clared his intent "to preserve the purity and ascertain the meaning of the English idiom." He implies profound prescriptivism—a dogmatic assertion of what is acceptable in speech and writing—and this is in keeping with the nature of the man himself, bulky, formidable, a convinced Tory and Anglican, and also immensely learned. Johnson, it was said, knew more books than any man alive. As the value of his *Dictionary* lies as much in its literal illustrations of usage as in its (occasionally quirky) definitions, the bookishness is the most important of Johnson's qualifications after those he shares with other lexicographers—energy, doggedness, and a clear brain. The astonishing thing about the making of the *Dictionary* is



James Murray, pictured here amid the 5,000,000 quotation-slips that, by 1898, he had collected for the Oxford English Dictionary.

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that it was a one-man effort. Jonathan Swift and others had cried out for an academy on the French model that could fix English forever in a pure mold. French academicians (40 of them) had been working for 40 years on the first definitive French dictionary. Johnson saw that committees meant dissensions and delays, that a dictionary, even one of 2,300 pages, was only a book, and a book was a thing that a writer wrote.

Johnson signed his contract for the enterprise in June 1746. The bookseller Robert Dodsley was to take charge of the printing and selling (there were no real publishers in those days) and undertook to pay Johnson £1,575 in installments. Out of this he had to pay assistants—six in number, five of them Scottish—and set up a work room, apart from buying books. The work was completed in 1755, having been printed at intervals from 1750 onward, a compendium of more than 40,000 words, their usage illustrated by more than 114,000 quotations dating from the Elizabethan age to his own time. If Johnson could not go earlier than the Elizabethans, this was because so few of the old texts were available to the inquiring scholar, being shut up in the libraries of the mansions of the nobility. Limited in time, he also limited himself in space, paying little attention to the development of English in the American colonies. He imposed no limitation on his prejudices, as is well known from definitions like that of *oats*—"A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people"—and *patron*—"One who countenances, supports or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery." Hating Bolingbroke, he could not keep him out of his definition of *irony*—"a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words: as, *Bolingbroke was a holy man.*" He made inexcusable errors, such as giving *leeward* and *windward* the same meaning. Be-

rated by a lady for defining *pastern* as "the knee of a horse," he offered no elaborate defense, merely saying: "Ignorance madam, pure ignorance." (One might add to that anecdotal snippet that Johnson had just beaten a young lady in a race over a lawn in Devonshire. The victory made him complaisant.) In defining *pension* he wrote: "In England it is generally understood to mean pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country." Though himself granted the modest affluence of a state pension, he never changed that definition.

Johnson's *Dictionary* remains a great work, but it had no hope of fixing the language and decreeing linguistic decorum. In Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair* (1848), Becky Sharp, a sort of new woman of the Napoleonic era, leaves Miss Pinkerton's academy for young ladies and throws away the copy of Johnson's *Dictionary*—that invariable gift to departing students—she has just received. It is not the least of her gestures in the direction of modernity. That great book now seemed to be a dog walking on its hind legs and, moreover, walking backward. It was not a dictionary for the scientific age that would start to bloom after Waterloo. Noah Webster in America (starting in 1828), Charles Richardson in England (1836–37), and Joseph Worcester (1846 and 1860), again, in America, were all to learn from Johnson what not to be—namely subjective and eccentric. But they were to learn too that no scholarly dictionary—as opposed to the pocket word-list you bought for a penny—could do its work without ample citation. That had been Johnson's real achievement. Richardson was so taken by this aspect of the *Dictionary* that he relied totally on citation, dispensing with definition. It is doubtful whether this can really be called lexicography.

The year 1876 was a momentous one for British lexicography, though the impulse that

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*Anthony Burgess is the author of more than 50 works of fiction and nonfiction. This essay is adapted from A Mouthful of Air by Anthony Burgess. Copyright © 1993 by Anthony Burgess. Reprinted by permission of William Morrow & Co., Inc.*

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made it so came from America. All the English-speaking world then had in the way of dictionaries (apart from Johnson's door-stop) was Webster, Worcester, and Richardson, and none of them was suitable for the age which had already seen Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) and Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867), to say nothing of the publications of the British Philological Society. Harper, the American publisher, wished to cooperate with the publisher Macmillan in London in the production of a new dictionary "like Webster, in bulk, and as far superior in quality as possible." Webster's dictionary, intended for the American people and establishing spellings that the Americans have used ever since, was no small achievement in 1828, but in the huge and authoritative edition of 1864 it was a masterpiece. So Harper's conception was bold enough. The fulfillment of the proposal depended on the finding of an editor (not a single polymath like Dr. Johnson) who could lash a team of lexicographers (subdefined by Johnson as harmless drudges) into doing the work not merely efficiently but expeditiously. There was only one possible man for the task, and he was James Murray.

**M**urray was the consummate example of the self-made scholar. Born near Hawick in Roxburghshire, his father a small tailor of Covenanter stock (a Covenanter was a person who upheld the National Covenant of 1638 or the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643 between England and Scotland, with the end of establishing and defending the Presbyterian faith). Himself a God-fearing, teetotaling, non-smoking, family-begetting, bizarrely learned teacher ("dominie" is a more fitting word for a Scot), Murray was at that time a master at Mill Hill School near London. This was a dissenting academy, that is to say, an establishment set up for pupils who were not baptized members of the Church of England. Great public schools such as Rugby, Winchester, Eton, and Harrow admitted Anglicans but no others. Murray was suffused by a passion for learning which, if it ever needed

justification, could find it in the duty to serve God through useful action and to honor him by trying to understand his creation. But Murray's temperament was naturally that of a man infinitely curious, especially about language. He seems to have had at least a theoretical knowledge of almost every language, living and dead. When the exiled Hungarian patriot Lajos Kossuth visited Hawick—a town passionate about national liberties—he was met not only by the town band but by a banner inscribed in Magyar *Jöjjön-el a' te orszagod*, meaning "Thy kingdom come." James Murray had been at work. He always learned his modern languages from translations of the Bible. He tackled a Chinese Book of Genesis as a boy, and he could still cite its characters in whitebearded old age. He was a man intended for whitebeardedness; he had a lot of the Old Testament prophet about him.

**B**rought up as he was on the English-Scottish border, he was struck while still a very young child by the failure of political boundaries to coincide with linguistic boundaries. Language was a continuum, in time as well as space. Old English still existed. Dialects were not "incorrect" speech but survivals of earlier forms of the language. He became—passionately, as with everything he did—a member of the movement dedicated to the study of the English language as a totality. There were great men in the movement, and they joined together to form the Philological Society. One of them, Henry Sweet, was transformed by George Bernard Shaw and, later, by the makers of *My Fair Lady*, into a world figure of romantic myth. Shaw admired him as a phonetician and was determined to make phonetics a subject suitable for popular drama. Sweet's nature belied his name. He had a right to be sour and prickly, especially in his attitude toward the scholarly establishment of Great Britain. Oxford and Cambridge despised the study of English. The new linguistic scholars were in a Catch-22 situation, for they could not propagate the new learning without a degree in it



had been left behind in an empty vicarage at Harrow. *H* was found with the American consul in Florence. Fragments of *Fa* were found in a stable in County Cavau, Ireland, but most of the slips had been used for lighting fires.

So little of the material inherited from the enthusiastic but slapdash Furnivall was of value that Murray had to start all over again, appealing for volunteer readers all over the English-speaking world, laying down rules of admirable clarity for the making of slips, and playing the dominie in letters of inordinate length to his colexicographers. Murray's children, who had fine old Anglo-Saxon names like Wilfrid, Hilda, Oswyn, Ethelwyn, Elsie, Harold, Ethelbert, Aelfric, and Rosfrith (there was a bow to Wales with Gwyneth), got their pocket money from slip sorting and, inevitably, acquired precocious vocabularies. In the Scriptorium the editor sat a foot higher than his fistful of assistants, doing with skill and delicacy the work he alone could do—contriving definitions of wonderful terseness, indicating pronunciation through a system that has only now, in the second edition, been replaced by the International Phonetic Alphabet, and demonstrating, by means of a brief historical procession of quotations, the semantic complex that we call a word. Despite his uprightness of life, reflected in a great chasteness of speech, Murray did not believe in omitting words because they were substandard or taboo. His approach to language was totally scientific: One could not apply moral judgments to words. But he yielded to the prejudices of the middle class, and nothing in the original edition of the OED could bring a blush to the cheek of innocence.

**T**he story of the setbacks, scholarly blindness, tyrannous demands, spurts of official indifference, and unworthy commercialism that beset the road from *A* to *T* (as far as Murray got) makes painful and infuriating reading, and it is best read in Elisabeth Murray's book on her grandfather, *Caught in the Web of Words* (1977). Murray's transfer of home and Scriptorium from Mill Hill to Oxford, as much in the hope of a university appointment as out of a fancy

A  
**DICTIONARY**  
 OF THE  
**ENGLISH LANGUAGE:**  
 IN WHICH  
 The WORDS are deduced from their ORIGINALS,  
 AND  
 ILLUSTRATED in their DIFFERENT SIGNIFICATIONS  
 BY  
 EXAMPLES from the best WRITERS.  
 TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED,  
**A HISTORY of the LANGUAGE,**  
 AND  
**AN ENGLISH GRAMMAR.**  
 BY SAMUEL JOHNSON, A.M.  
 IN TWO VOLUMES  
 VOL. I.

Cum tabulis animorum ceterisq; sunt bonis;  
 Auditis quatenus parum splendens habebim.  
 Et sine potestis erant, et hinc indeq; ferunt.  
 Verba movete loco; quanto usque succedit;  
 Et verborum sicut una perennis Velle;  
 Oportet deo quibus bonis erant, ante  
 Proferre in lucem speciosa verba libet.  
 Quae peris remota Clavibus, sicq; Vestigis,  
 Nam sua nomina praesert et dicitur veritas.

L O N D O N,  
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 For J. and P. KNAPTON; T. and T. LONGMAN; G. HITCH and L. HAWES;  
 A. MILLAR; and R. and J. DODDSEY.  
 MDCCLXXVII.

*Johnson's Dictionary, distinguished by its shades of definition, offered 124 meanings of the verb take.*

that Oxford would be more lexicographically nourishing than Mill Hill, is an episode in life wholly pathetic. But no less self-pitying character than Murray ever strode the new terrain of philology. Complaining to the cook that his porridge was (or were: "parritch" is a plural) "too waesh" or "too brose," shouting for his wife Ada (a heroine of the age) with "Where's my lovey?," stern but loving with the children, a great man to be with on holiday (he knew all about marine biology and could make a life-size Grendel out of sand), he is a supreme example of the virtues of the poor ambitious dissenting class. Samuel Johnson, poor, ambitious, but also Anglican and Tory, besides a hater of the Scots, would have entertained very mixed attitudes toward him.

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The study of language may beget madness. The rogue-god Mercury presides over philology as well as over thievery. It is true that Murray's preoccupation with the OED begot a kind of monomania, but it must be regarded as a beneficent or at least an innocuous one. It became hard for him to make aesthetic judgments on literature: Words kept getting in the way. Murray got into correspondence with Robert Browning but only to ask about the meaning of *apparitional* in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. When his son Oswyn later said how much he admired Browning's poetry, Murray's grave response was, "Browning constantly used words without regard to their proper meaning. He has added greatly to the difficulties of the Dictionary." He was conceivably thinking of that misuse of *twat* in *Pippa Passes*.

**M**urray died in 1915 at age 78. It took another 13 years—under first Henry Bradley, later William Craigie and Charles Onions (to whom the Murray children would derisively sing "Charlie Is My Darling")—to bring out the final volume. The work continues to be Murray's monument, a thing he never sought and did not want: "It is extremely annoying to me to see the Dictionary referred to as Murray's English Dictionary." He wanted anonymity:

I wish we knew nothing of Carlyle but his writings. I am thankful we know so little of Chaucer & Shakespeare. I have persistently refused to answer the whole buzzing swarm of biographers, saying simply, "I am a nobody—if you have anything to say about the Dictionary, there it is at your will—but treat me as a solar myth, or an irrational quantity, or ignore me altogether."

Since the death of Murray a great number of new technical resources have eased dictionary making—above all the computer—but the heroism remains, the sheer dedication and slog. *The Oxford English Dictionary* was, in its first form, a remarkable engineering feat, but, unlike the works of Brunel, it was seen from the start that it could never be finished. A dictionary is obsolete as soon as it appears, in the sense that it cannot keep up with the influx of new words into the language. It requires periodic supplementation, and the OED has had four massive volumes added to it, under the editorship of R. W. Burchfield. Thanks to the computer, it has been possible with great speed to incorporate these many additions into the existing body of the original work. In 1989 the second edition of the OED comprised 20 large volumes, but it by no means represents the totality of the English language, since about 400 new words come into it every year. Murray was selective in a way that the new lexicographers may not be, but the principle of selection remains. Some words—"nonce-words" (neologisms coined for a particular occasion but destined to die soon), trade names, cant, and terms heavily technological—present problems and require long discussion. The new OED is a liberal triumph that includes the taboo terms and all the slang and argot that formerly were reserved to specialist dictionaries.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* is perhaps too great a work, as well as too bulky, for the casual consultation of someone reading a book and finding a word he does not know, or wishing to be put right on a spelling or pronunciation. When you take down a volume of the OED, it is for deeper, wider instruction—of the sort we moderns need.

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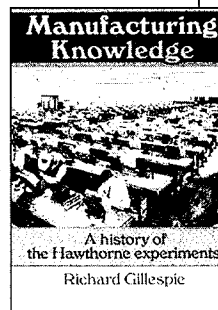
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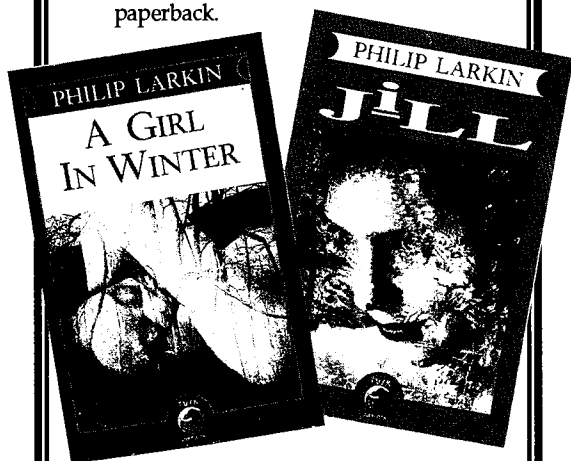


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