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The Meaning of Everything

*The Story of the
Oxford English Dictionary*



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Taking the Measure of It All



The English Dictionary, like the English Constitution, is the creation of no one man, and of no one age; it is a growth that has slowly developed itself adown the ages; its beginnings lie far back in times almost pre-historic. And these beginnings themselves, although the English Dictionary of today is lineally developed from them, were neither Dictionaries, nor even English.

(James Murray, 'The Evolution of English Lexicography', 1900)

I. The Making

The English language—so vast, so sprawling, so wonderfully unwieldy, so subtle, and now in its never-ending fullness so undeniably magnificent—is in its essence the language of invasion. It was always bound to be so: geology and oceanography saw to it that the British Isles, since long before their populated time, were indeed almost always islands, and the ancestors of all who ever lived there first arrived by sea from beyond, bringing with them their customs, their looks—and their languages.

Of the gigantic amassment of words that make up the stock of the English language—the 414,825 that were discerned and

discovered and catalogued in time for publication in 1928 of the first edition of the great Dictionary that is the subject of this story, the hundreds of thousands that had already been listed in Webster's wildly successful American dictionary, together with the scores of thousands that have been found or created in the decades since—the huge majority were conceived or otherwise made whole through the good offices of outsiders, visitors, or invaders.

Of those settlers about whose language we know something, the Celts—who came from gloomy forests and swamps in the upper valleys of the Danube—are generally counted as the first. They swarmed westwards across Europe some time during the Bronze Age; about 500 years before the birth of Christ they settled themselves, among other places, on the cliff-protected fortress of the rainy and foggy islands that lay off the continent's north-western shores. Those that settled in the generally more climatically benign southern half of the islands called themselves Britons—a name from which in time was to come the British Isles, and, indeed, Britain.

Here they created for themselves some kind of home and civilization, and they spoke languages that have left precious little trace on modern English, but which are preserved as the basis of such Welsh, Cornish, Scots Gaelic, and Irish as is still spoken today. There are a very few words—*brock*, for badger being one, *combe*, meaning a deep valley, and which appears in some English village names and in contemporary Welsh, another, *torr*, a mountain peak—which seem to have survived, at least among those who speak preciously or somewhat pedantically today. Some Celtic place names—*London*, *Dover*, and *Kent*, the rivers *Thames*, *Exe*, and *Wye*—exist today as well. Late in their history the Celts borrowed—probably; there is still debate among etymologists—a small number of words, such as *assen* for ass and maybe the word *cross*, from visiting Christian missionaries. But generally their

linguistic role in the speech and writings of future English generations was fairly minimal; shortly after the beginning of the Christian era any idea that Celtic British might have a long-term linguistic influence was brushed aside: thousands of well-armoured and tactically adept legionnaires swept ashore and, before the language had the chance properly to take hold, promptly placed all south Britain under the colonial suzerainty of Rome.

The Romans remained in Britain for the next 400 years. By the time they left in AD 409, to attend (in vain) to the fate of their fast-crumbling Western Empire in Europe (Rome would be sacked by the Goths a year later, and the Empire would die after only seventy more), Britain had been under their military and cultural influence for very nearly the same amount of time as separates us today from the Renaissance. The Romans did leave something of an imperial linguistic legacy: by the time the next flotilla of invaders reached the shingle beaches of what is now East Anglia, a language had already taken root in the southern isles of the British archipelago that was a mixture, on the one hand, of the early Celtic dialects (or British, as some might call it) and, on the other, of that language which many English schoolchildren would recognize all too glumly as that still used today in texts like Caesar's *Civil War*, *Book Two*.

The Latin-based hybrid tongue of the Roman-Britons that, had it remained unsullied by what happened next, might well one day have stood alone as the language of the islands, then dominated. In all but the most remote mountain valleys of Wales and Cumberland, and in those still more isolated Scottish glens where the much-feared and wildly painted Picts held sway, a form of language that would have been understood both by the subject natives and by the governors and legates who directed them and the soldiers who policed them was widely spoken. Had the events of the fifth and sixth centuries never taken place, Britain's linguistic evolution might have been much the same as that which was

suffered or enjoyed by the similarly Roman-colonized peoples of Spain or France.

But in fact it was all to turn out very differently—and that was because, in the middle of the fifth century, the longboats of a score of entirely new and unanticipated invaders and settlers slid up from the east onto the beaches of southern and eastern England, where there are now such counties as Yorkshire, Norfolk, Essex, Kent, and Hampshire. The flimsy craft that had made it across the heaving grey waters of the North Sea had all set out from the ragged, north-jutting Baltic peninsula of what is now known as Denmark. The invaders themselves had an easy time of it; the Romans had gone, and the remaining Celts were in no position to mount much of a defence. They were in consequence to be swiftly dominated by the newcomers, invaders who were linguistically of Germanic stock—Teutons. But though the invaders arrived at more or less the same time, they were not all the same people. Some, to an extent indicated by where their longboats had been launched, were Frisians, other were Jutes, still other Saxons, and—most importantly for the naming of both the English nation and the language that resulted—some of them were called Angles.

We know something of their arrival. Hengist and Horsa, for instance, were—according to legend—two Jutish brothers who landed at Ebbsfleet on the muddy Isle of Thanet in the mid-fifth century, established with their compatriots a series of settlements in Kent, Hampshire, and the Isle of Wight, and set about decades' worth of slaying every Celt they encountered. The Saxons did much the same, landing in 477 in East Anglia and spreading themselves south and westward, pushing the Celts relentlessly westward to Wales and Cornwall and the Scottish borderland. And the Angles, who arrived from Denmark at a series of landing places just to the north of the River Humber

in 547, established a kingdom in what is now Northumberland. The Venerable Bede, writing in Latin from his monastery on Tyneside two centuries later, captured something of the ferment of the time:

In a short time, swarms of the aforesaid nations came over the island, and they began to increase so much that they became terrible to the natives themselves who had invited them. Then, having on a sudden entered into league with the Picts, whom they had by this time begun to expel by force of arms, they began to turn their weapons against their confederates ...

The consequence may have been bloodshed and turmoil, and the slaughter may have lasted for a very long and wretched time; but it left the makings of the first building blocks of what was to become today's English language. It also left a small number of names that are distinctly recognizable today. For example, the Teutons called the Celts *wealas*—foreigners—and it is from this word that we get the modern name *Wales*. The Celts first called their new oppressors *Saxons*, then *Angles*: King Aethelbert was known as *rex Anglorum*, the country became known as *Anglia*, and the words *Engle*, *Englisc*,¹ and *Englaland* all slowly crept into common currency, until by the eleventh century the nation in the making was formally known as *England*.

Not that the people were by then speaking or writing anything that would be very easily recognizable as English. Their language used to be known as Anglo-Saxon; nowadays, in an effort to promote the notion of English as an ever-evolving language, it is more generally called Old English. It was written—at least in its earliest incarnation—in runes, the writing system of intersecting straight lines that had been imported by the invaders. (Three of the runic letters—those corresponding to present-day B, H,

1 The -e sound was pronounced as -sh.

and R—look almost identical to the current capital letters. The rest are easily decipherable, but unlike anything written today.) The more sophisticated writers of Old English (such as those in Northumbria) used a system that is now called *futhorc*, the acronym (much like the word *alphabet*) for the first six letters of their 31-letter alphabet (with *-th*—known as the *thorn*—being elided into a single symbol).

The vocabulary of Old English—with its total lexicon amounting to perhaps 50,000 words—depended to some degree on borrowings from the available languages that were already being spoken in the British Isles. These were items that came either from the vanquished Celts—a tiny number of their British words (*crag* and *dun* and the aforementioned *brock*, *combe*, and *torr* among them) still surviving today—or some couple of hundred words coming from the Latin of the departing conquerors (although in most cases these words appear to have been borrowed on the continent before the Anglo-Saxons came to Britain). A fair number of these words—*gyse*, *cattle*, *weall*, and *straet*, meaning *cheese*, *cat*, *wall*, and *street* in Old English respectively—still exist, albeit in modified form, in today's modern word stock. But for the most part, Old English was a tongue that grew out of its own resources, and these resources reflected in large measure the Germanic origins of the new settlers.

Not a few romantics in modern times have touted the notion of the Teutonically inspired Old English as being the purest form of English ever written and spoken. Dickens, Hardy, and Gerard Manley Hopkins were enthusiastic backers of this idea; in more recent times George Orwell was a great supporter too, and publicly yearned for English to be purged of all its Latin, French, Greek, and Norse loans, and to be centred around and dominated by the short, simpler words that were of an undeniable 'Anglicity'—what some call the 'common words' of the English

language. He keenly wanted English, as the sixteenth-century humanist John Cheke had once written, to be 'written cleane and pure, unmixt and unmangled with borrowings of other tungen'.

The Dorset dialect poet William Barnes, much taught at my own Dorchester boarding school, went rather further by creating his own vocabulary of new words, all of them rooted firmly in his beloved Anglo-Saxon. A small number of these—his preference for using *faith-heat* for enthusiasm, *word-strain* for accent, and *wheelsaddle* for bicycle—achieved some success and are to be found in occasional popular use. But given the multiplicity of loanwords on offer, many of them exceedingly pretty to look at and to say, his success in going retro was not quite what he would have liked.

The grammar of England's post-Roman times—of which we know something from studies of great epic poems like *Beowulf*, or the story of the shepherd-turned-poet Caedmon, as told by the Venerable Bede, or the famous *Colloquy* written by the eleventh-century Abbot of Eynsham, Ælfric—has a relict Teutonic feel about it. The order of words in a sentence, the inflections at the ends of words signalling the task they perform, both present a language steadily evolving into something very different from Latin, something that approaches the modern idiom but which has much remaining in common with the manner of speech in the north Germany of the time: '... then arose he for shame from the feast,' Ælfric writes, 'when he this answer received.'

The vocabulary, though, is much more familiar to our modern ears. A raft of pronouns and prepositions—*us*, *for*, *to*, *him*, *in*, *he*—are there in Old English, to languish unchanged for more than 1,000 further years (not, however, that their meanings were always identical to the sense the words possess today). A number of verbs have the same or a quite similar look and sound: *singan* for sing, *stod* for stood, *ondswarede* for answered. *Ingang* and *utgang* are not

dissimilar to the Eingang and Ausgang one might see today in Frankfurt railway station.

And in *Beowulf* a large number of all words in the text are complex combination words, known today as kennings. One such is *beadoleoma*, which means sword, but which translates literally as a combination that will be well known to fans of *Star Wars*, 'battle light'. There are in addition some 50 words in Old English which signify the sea—most of these are kennings, and they include handsome and poetic combinations such as *hwaælweg* (whale-way), *drenflod* (drowning-flood), and *streamgewinn* (waters-strife). None survives today, more's the pity. Nor do either *waegflota* or *waeghengest*—wave-floater or wave-steed—by which the Old English meant what we today call a ship.

The reign of Old English was to end in the twelfth century; but before it did so, two more linguistic invasions took place, enriching yet further—with words from Latin and from Norse—the steadily swelling vocabulary of the islands.

New Latin words entered the lists between the eleventh and twelfth centuries, largely as a result of the proselytizing work of Christian missionaries (all of them Latin-speaking) who, some long while earlier, had flooded across the British Isles, eager to save souls. They claimed to be bringing 'the Word'; to a remarkable and unforgettable extent, but somewhat at a variance from what they intended, so they did.

Religious words, not surprisingly, make up a goodly proportion of the list. Although a trinity of key words that attest to the very heart of belief—*God*, *heaven*, *sin*—are actually of Germanic origin, Latin-originated words first recorded either in the eleventh century or some while later—many coming into Middle English through French—and dealing with churchly mechanicals, are there in abundance: *abbot*, *alb*, *anchorite*, *angel*, *antichrist*, *canticle*, *chalice*, *cloister*, *font*, *idol*, *martyr*, *pope*, *priest*, *prophet*, *psalm*, *relic*.

But God was not all: visitors from the Continent over several centuries brought with them the names of plants, fruits, and trees hitherto entirely unfamiliar to the islands: *cedar*, *cucumber*, *fig*, *ginger*, *laurel*, *lentil*, *lovage*, *radish*; and they told of exotic animals quite unknown to the Teutonically-influenced Britons—*elephant*, *leopard*, *scorpion*, *tiger*. The fact that *dirge*, *marshmallow*, *periwinkle*, and *sock* also quite probably entered the islands at around this time and probably from the same ultimate source might seem at first blush slightly more perplexing, except that the visitors probably sang in a dull monotone, knew more than a little of the local botany, and wore soft foot-coverings to protect them against the raw English winters—and moreover had names for them all.

New Norse words were introduced in a far less congenial fashion. The Vikings began raiding and pillaging England in the eighth century; the Danes did much the same a century later, first ruling all of north-east England under terms of a treaty to which they submitted the weakling English, then in 991 going further and seizing the English throne, running all England's affairs for the next 25 years. Along with making mayhem in, or a fiendom out of, England, both sets of northern adventurers introduced into English hundreds of their own words—many that turned out to be of the most profound importance and yet, in terms of their exoticism and interest, among the most prosaic in the tongue.

Both, *same*, *seem*, *get*, *give*, *they*, *them*, and *their* all stem from these northern, ice-bound people too. *Skirt*, *sky*, *scathe*, *skill*, and *skin* employ a well-known two-letter Scandinavian beginning. And we can somehow understand that the gloomy antecedents of Ibsen would have given to English the likes of *awkward*, *birth*, *dirt*, *fog* (perhaps), *gap*, *ill*, *mire*, *muggy*, *ransack*, *reindeer*, *root*, *rotten*, *rugged*, *scant*, *scowl*, and *wrong*. There is rather less obvious connection with *cake*, *sprint*, *steak*, and *wand*—though these jollier words did indeed come from the

Norsemen too. As did *Thursday*—or rather, it was modified by them, since an earlier version of the day that honoured Thor did in fact appear in Old English itself.

But for all this, Old English was first and foremost a home-grown language—by far its greatest component being the Teutonic stock of words gifted by the Jutlanders and Frisians and Angles who began to drift into the population in the wake of Hengist and Horsa. The total accumulation of Latin and Norse loanwords (and a triflingly small number of probable French lendings, too—among them words like *prison*, *castel*, and *prud*, which equate to today's *prison*, *castle*, and *proud*) amount to no more than three per cent of Old English's word stock; Germanic words account for almost all the rest. And though we glibly say that the language as written and spoken 1,000 years ago is recognizable to the modern ear—it is certainly more so than the Celtic of the very early British—the numbers suggest otherwise: something like nine out of every ten of the Old English words have since fallen into disuse. It was really not until Old English began to transmute itself into Middle English that we start to see and hear and read something that is a simulacrum of what we see and hear and read today.



It was the invasion of the Norman French that changed everything. The defeat of King Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 resulted in the installation of a dynasty of French kings on the throne in London (the first, the Hastings victor William I, actually spending very little time in England), and for the next 300 years the French held sway over almost all areas of English power, government, and culture. Norman French became the language of England's administration and of the country's politer forms of

intercourse. Old English came briefly to be despised, regarded haughtily as the language of the peasant and the pleb.

And yet, though much changed, Old English did in fact survive. It survived in a way that the British of the Celts did not manage to survive the Germanic invasion six centuries before. After a century-and-a-half of linguistic mystery when no one is certain quite what happened to the language, Old English lived on, transmuted itself into what is now called Middle English, adopted thousands of new loanwords from the French and became stronger by doing so (doubling its word stock in no time at all, to the 100,000 or so words of the twelfth-century lexicon), and finally emerged, fully established, to be displayed to greatest advantage for all time in the writings of that most impressive of the early figures of English literature, Geoffrey Chaucer.

Since this chapter aimed principally to explain (or remind those who know) about the origins of the English vocabulary, and about the means that have been sought to catalogue and enumerate its complicated immensity, it is unhappily (because it is so fascinating) of little relevance to write much about Chaucer's literary achievement, or about the sheer beauty and staggering accomplishment of his poetry and prose. He tells us how the English men and women of the fourteenth century spoke to one another; he tells us how they cursed and complained and questioned and told each other jokes; he ranges in his interests from the highest-flown kind of rhetoric to the most banal of domestic chit-chat. It is the quantity, the breadth, and the assortment of his writings that elevate him above all others of his time; and more's the pity that we cannot linger here to revel in his legacy.

Chaucer's vocabulary, reflective of all that was said and written around him, shows clearly the great measure of change that by his time had come upon the language. In the 858 lines in his *Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*, for example, there are almost



500 French (or rather, Norman French) loanwords. Historical studies suggest that by 1365, some 300 new French words were being incorporated into English every year. But it must be stressed that it was not that French was being spoken; the English language, reviving itself from its mysterious dark age, was including and assimilating new French-originated words, speakers and writers using them as replacements for words that had vanished during the time when spoken and written French did dominate the nation's language.

And so we find, for instance, words (from the Norman French—and in many cases, of course, ultimately from the Latin or the Greek) of administration and law—*accuse*, *adultery*, *chamberlain*, *crime*, *decree*, *duke* (though not *lord*, *lady*, *knight*, or *earl*, which are all home-grown Old English, displaying Orwell's favoured Anglicity), *inheritance*, *larceny*, *libel*, *messenger*, *pardon*, *parliament*, *reign*, *revenue*, *sue*, *treasurer*, *trespass*, *verdict*, *warrant*, and *warden*. There are religious words, inevitably—*cardinal*, *choir*, *saint*, *virgin*; there are French words for foodstuffs—*beef*, *pork*, *sausage*, *sugar*, *tart*; for fashion—*broidery*, *brooch*, *chemise*, *petticoat*, *satin*, *taffeta*; for science—*gender*, *geometry*, *medicine*, *plague*, *pulse*, *stomach*, *surgery*; and for the home—*blanket*, *closet*, *pantry*, *porch*, *scullery*, *wardrobe*. There are, besides, a slew of phrases still familiar in Modern English: *have mercy on*, *take leave*, *learn by heart*, and *on the point of*, for example,² all have their origins in this wonderfully energetic period in English linguistic history.



² The phrase *to look up*, as in *to look something up in a dictionary*, does not, however, come about in this way, though it sounds as though it might. It did not appear until 1692, when an Oxford historian named Anthony Wood wrote the phrase in a book called *Life, from 1692 to 1672, written by Himself*.

And then came William Caxton, and with him the very beginnings of Modern English. It was in 1474 that, having learned the techniques of printing from the master craftsmen of Cologne, this 50-year-old Kentish businessman set himself up in Bruges and created, on a wooden press of his own making, the first ever book to be printed in English, *The Recuyell of the Histories of Troye* (which, in addition, he had translated from the French—*recuyell* meaning, essentially, compilation). The reception of this 700-page work convinced him: he had no doubt at all now that the new technology which he had mastered in Europe, if taken back home to England, would have an incalculable effect both on society at large and on the nature of the language that people would read from his printed books and papers and pamphlets, and which in turn they would come to speak.

And so two years later he came to London, and established his own print shop and publishing house beside Westminster Abbey. From the hands of Caxton and his apprentices came some 103 printed works³—one edition of Chaucer's *Boethius* and two of the *Canterbury Tales* among them. Moreover, the books that he made were (as Caxton was not shy of advertising) available to almost all, for the simple reason that they cost almost nothing to produce. Compared to the laborious and costly hand-copying of manuscripts, the books and pamphlets that were now being turned off his creaking wooden presses were inexpensive in the extreme. 'If it plesse any man ... to bye ...', announced one of Caxton's printed flyers, '... late hym come to Westmonester ... and he shal have them good chepe.' What more eloquent declaration could there ever be of the lasting benefits of printing?

With the advent of printing, as exemplified by Caxton's house,

³ Caxton's first London book was *The Dictes or Sayings of the Philosophers*, translated from the French (by Earl Rivers, a well-known gallant famous for his duel with a figure known as the Bastard of Burgundy) and published in 1477.

came a greater awareness of the multifarious dialects in which English was then both spoken and written, and the beginnings of a feeling that there should be a standard written form of the language. A famous story relates to Caxton's own puzzlement over the word 'eggs'—should he use the northern form, *eggis*, or the southern version, *eyren*? It took many years before questions like this were fully answered—a question over the use of apostrophes, for example, never being fully answered to this day.



Any remaining hopes, nurtured as they were by a small corps of romantics, that the language might still be shorn of all its non-Germanic words and returned to the purity of its ancestry were to be dashed during the two centuries that followed the Caxton revolution—the Renaissance. With the furious development of science, arts, exploration, and travel, the language became ever more steadily enriched—unkinder souls might say polluted—by an almost uncountable mass of newly imported words from abroad. The size of the lexicon had doubled in the years after the Norman invasion; in the Renaissance it doubled again, such that by the beginning of the seventeenth century there were reckoned to be at the very least 200,000 knowable words waiting to be used.

The conventional sources—Latin, Greek, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and French—supplied many of them; but now, with the wanderings of the fleets and their inquisitive occupants producing words from all over, the English vocabulary was enhanced not merely by the usual suspects but by words from India and Turkey, Arabia and Malaya, Japan and the native peoples of North America, and 50 other countries besides.

Some of the more romantically inclined writers of the day

despised the trend—John Cheke, for example, was still vainly wishing for a return to his 'clean and pure tunge'. On the other hand some modernists, like the author and diplomat Sir Thomas Elyot, positively craved foreign words, as though they were plagued by some curious lexico-xenophilic sickness. Elyot was on intimate terms with King Henry VIII (the monarch loaned him books from the royal library, to help with a Latin-English dictionary he was then compiling), and was said to be a brilliantly skilled translator, widely travelled, and a hugely competent linguist. He wished above all to have his native English 'augmented' and 'enriched' with new words from around the world, to describe and define all the wondrous new objects and ideas that the Renaissance was bringing in its wake. And by and large, he got his way. The purists, never a formidable army at the best of times, were during the Renaissance being routed. English in the sixteenth century was getting larger and larger, and by doing so was fast strengthening itself for its unanticipated role as the coming language of the world. Analyses suggest that between 1590 and 1610 around 6,000 new words were being added to the lexicon every year—more than at any time in history (save possibly, we feel intuitively, for today).

There are far too many words newly introduced in the Renaissance to be listed here, in a short book which is simply the story of one dictionary, and is by no stretch of the imagination a dictionary itself. But sometimes the loveliness of the assemblages are just too beguiling to pass up: so it is pleasing to note that during the 200 years following Caxton, English welcomed from abroad such words as *anonymous*, *atmosphere*, *catastrophe*, *criterion*, *delirium*, *enthusiasm*, *fact*, *idiosyncrasy*, *inclemency*, *lunar*, *malignant*, *necessitate*, *parasite*, *pneumonia*, *sculptor*, *skeleton*, *soda*, *vicinity*, and *virus* (all from either Latin or Greek); *battery*, *bayonet*, *chocolate*, *confront*, *docility*, *grotesque*, *moustache*, *passport*, *tomato*, and *volunteer* (from or through the good

offices of the French); *balcony*, *cupola*, *ditto*, *granite*, *grotto*, *macaroni*, *piazza*, *sonata*, *sonnet*, *stanza*, and *violin* from Italian; *anchovy*, *armada*, *armadillo*, *carnibal*, *mulatto*, *Negro*, *sombrero*, and *yam* from or via either Spanish or Portuguese; and a gallimaufry of delights from some 50 other contributing tongues, including *amok*, *paddy*, and *sago* (from Malay), *caravan*⁴ and *turban* (Persian), *kiosk*, *sherbet*, and *yoghurt* (Turkish), *raccoon* and *wampum* (Algonquian), *cruise*, *frolic*, and *yacht* (Dutch), *knapsack* (Low German), as well as *gum* from Hindi, *ketchup* from Cantonese, *sofa* from Arabic, *shogun* from Japanese, *sheikh* from Arabic, and *trousers* from the Gaelic spoken by the Irish.

Shakespeare—as vital a purveyor of what would go on to become Modern English as William Caxton had been two centuries before him, and as were the various great English bibles produced shortly after him—was the first to employ a great many of these words. By doing so he offered actors the chance to enrich the language of those who came to see his plays. In *Othello*, for example, the Moor entreats the Duke of Venice to offer his wife Desdemona ‘Due reference of place and exhibition, With such accomodation and besort as levels with her breeding’, and thereby offers the first known usage (*Othello* was published in 1604) of the word *accommodations*. Likewise, when Antonio and Bassanio’s friends are chatting in the opening scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, Solanio gives us the first use of the word *laughable*—‘they’ll not show their teeth in way of smile Though Nestor swear the jest be laughable’. *Laugh* itself is a word from the widely approved Old English; in 1596 Shakespeare added the Norman French

4 The word *caravan*—meaning a travelling company—is of course connected to the name of the Inns—the *caravanserais*—in which the travellers stayed. The distance between two caravanserais—a day’s travel, in other words—is known by the Turkish loanword *menzil*.

5 *Besort*, now obsolete, meant ‘suitable company’. Shakespeare uses it again, as a verb, in *King Lear*, but afterwards it seems to lapse. Incidentally, the earliest print of the play spells *accomodation* with a single ‘m’, the bane of many a bec.

suffix *-able*, and lo! the combination still exists happily today, four centuries later.

(It has to be said that Shakespeare did advance the cause of a number of words—like *besort*—that never made it, or which staggered along lamely for only a short while. Among those he used, but he almost alone, were *soilure*, *torrive*, and *vastidity*, which mean, as one might expect, staining, twisted, and bigness. In these cases, and a score of others, his clever Latinate constructions fared rather less well than the simpler old synonyms from northern Europe. But he also gives modern readers such hyphenations as *baby-eyes*, *pell-mell*, and *ill-tuned*, and dozens of insults that employ the word *knave*—of which *whoreson beetle-headed flap-ear’d knave* (from *The Taming of the Shrew*) has become a minor classic.)

And since Shakespeare—and since William Hazlitt and Jane Austen, since Wordsworth and Thackeray, the Naipauls and the Amises, and the fantasy worlds of the hobbits and Harry Potter, and since science and sport and conquest and defeat—the language that we call Modern English has just grown and grown, almost exponentially. Words from every corner of the globalized world cascade in ceaselessly, daily topping up a language that is self-evidently living, breathing, changing, evolving as no other language ever has, nor is ever likely to.

A glance at any map will suggest hundreds upon hundreds of constructions and imports that we now know to be more a part of today’s English than they ever were of the native tongues where they were first born. *Glasnost* and *perestroika*, for example, are firmly ensconced in the English vocabulary now, despite their being utterly unfamiliar outside their native Russia before 1989. *Anorak*, from Greenland, is a word which, when introduced, described a foul-weather garment; it has since become used (though only in Britain) as a term of disapprobation, describing someone seen as rather too interested in a subject most reasonable people would

think of as wholly boring. *Sauna, dachshund, ombudsman, waltz, cobra, bwana, ouzo, agitprop, samovar, kraal, boondock, boomerang, colleen, manga, kava, tattoo, poncho, pecan, puma, piranha*—the list of foreign borrowings introduced over the past two centuries is near-endless. The 200,000 words that could be counted in the lexicon at the close of the Renaissance have in the centuries since tripled, at the very least, and the rate of expansion of the planet's most versatile and flexible vocabulary seems in no danger of slowing.

2. The Measuring

And yet, and yet. Until the very beginning of the seventeenth century, a time when the English language could quite probably number fully a quarter of a million words and phrases and those individual items of vocabulary that are known as lexemes among its riches, there was not a single book in existence that attempted to list even a small fraction of them, nor was there any book that would make the slightest attempt to offer up an inventory.

No one, it turned out, had ever bothered. No one had ever thought of making a list of all the words and noting down what they seemed to mean—even though from today's perspective, from a world that seems obsessed with a need to count and codify and define and make categories for everything, there seems no rational reason why this might have been so. That no one cared enough about the lexicon to make a list of what it held seems barely credible. It was as though the language that had been developing over the centuries had created itself invisibly, had somehow crept silently over the minds and manners of all those who spoke and read and listened to it, and never in such a demonstrative or showy way as to make any speaker or listener or reader aware that it actually was an entity, that it was something that could and

should be measured, enumerated, catalogued, described. English seemed to most of its users to be somehow like the air—something that had always been there, to be as taken for granted as the very atmosphere itself, inchoate and indefinable, and thus somehow not amenable to proper measurement or systematic knowledge. It was a thing simply to be felt, breathed, and uttered—and never something so base as ever to be studied, annotated, or counted.

To those of us who reach for a dictionary or a thesaurus at the first moment of literary puzzlement, the lack of any such book must have been an inconvenience, to say the least. And yet it was an inconvenience suffered in silence by the best of them, and for a very long time. William Shakespeare, for example, had no access to a dictionary during most of his writing career—certainly from 1580, when he first began, it was a quarter of a century before any volume might appear in which he could look something up. We have already seen how frequently and flamboyantly Shakespeare contributed words to the language (*dislocate, divide, and submerged* are three more to add to those above); but to do so he had, essentially, either to find such words in other writings, note down words or expressions that he heard in conversation, or else invent or conjure words out of the thin air.

That is not to say there were no reference books available at all. In the late sixteenth century bookstore tables were weighed down with all manner of missals, biographies, histories of the sciences and of art, prayer books, Bibles, romances, atlases, and accounts of exotic travel. Shakespeare would have had access to all these, and more. He is known (from a careful statistical examination of his word usages) to have used as a crib a *Thesaurus* edited by the Bishop of Winchester, one Thomas Cooper,⁶ and probably

6 The tiresome making of this book once exasperated the 'utterly profligate' Mrs Cooper so much that she tossed the entire manuscript into the fire—prompting her impatient husband simply to sigh wearily and begin compiling his book all over again.

also a volume called *The Arte of Rhetorique* by Thomas Wilson. But that is all: neither Shakespeare, nor any of the other great writing minds of the day—Francis Bacon, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, John Donne, Ben Jonson—had access to what all of us today would be certain that he would have wanted: the lexical convenience that went by the name that was invented in 1538, *a dictionary*.

The 1538 creation was not, however, for the purposes of most English writers, of any real convenience at all. It was a book that had been edited by Sir Thomas Elyot—already famed as an enthusiast for all words foreign—and it was, like all such volumes before, a translating dictionary, in this particular case offering words in Latin, with their English equivalents, and vice versa. It offered no sense of the meaning of the words—just their equivalence in another tongue. No one had by then come up with the idea of what we now know a dictionary to be: a list of English words in (most probably) an alphabetical order, with the meanings and perhaps the various senses of each listed, and perhaps some guidance as to the spelling, pronunciation, and origin of each word as well.

A man named John Withals took a hesitating few steps towards the ideal, producing twenty years after Elyot a Latin–English vocabulary book in which the words were organized into categories. He collected together words that had something to do with *skie*, for example, or *four-footed beasts*, *parties of housinge*, *instruments of musick*, and the names of *Byrdes*, *Byrdes of the Water*, *Byrdes about the house as cockes, hennes etc*; of *Bees*, *Flies and Others*. The usefulness of such a book is now self-evident: rather than merely offering a means of translating one word into another language, Withals's small volume classified them, and by doing so reminded readers of, let us say, the names of birds, nudging them towards improving their knowledge. Can't remember the name of a bird between *strike* and

tem? In Withals there is *swallow* and *swift*—and at a stroke his book becomes, if little else, an aide-mémoire. He called it *A Shorte Dictionary for Yonge Beginners*: it became a standard school textbook and was wildly popular, remaining in print for more than 70 years, at least until 1634.

The longevity of Mr Withals's book hints at the growing popularity of this entirely new trend in seventeenth-century publishing. There was evidently a pressing need for a change towards volumes that had utility *in English alone*, and not merely as vehicles for the use of another language. It was a need that was occasionally voiced publicly, as on stage in *The Duchess of Malfi*, when John Webster had the Duchess's brother Ferdinand exclaim, after puzzling over the word *lycanthropia*, 'I need a dictionary to't!' On a more scholarly level the drumbeat of need was signalled too: as when the newly appointed headmaster of the Merchant Taylors' School, Richard Mulcaster, declared: 'it would be a thing verie praiseworthy ... if som one learned and as laborious a man, wold gather all the wordes which we vse in our English tung ... into one dictionarie.' Mulcaster promised that he would gather up and deliver one, but never did; nor did his fellow grammarian William Bullokar. Nor did anyone else.

Until finally, in 1604, *some one learned* did go out gathering, and eventually produced what the entire literary universe was apparently baying for. This historically important (but otherwise generally unremembered) figure was a schoolmaster from Oakham in Rutland called Robert Cawdrey, and he offered—by courtesy of his publisher, 'Edward Weaver, of the great north door of St. Paul's'—a slender octavo book of 120 printed pages entitled *A Table Alphabeticall, conteyning and teaching the true writing and understanding of hard usuall English words, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greek, Latin or*

7 A psychiatric condition in which the sufferer imagines himself to be turning into a wolf.

French, &c. The book had gathered up 3,000 of these 'hard words', and had been particularly edited, Cawdrey stated on his title page with all the magnificent carelessness of the times, 'for the benefit and helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskillful person'.

The book was by today's standards more a synonymicon than a true dictionary—it offered very brief (often one-word) glosses, rather than true definitions. So *abbreviat* was 'to shorten, or make short' and an *abettor* was simply 'a counsellor'. Moreover, the words with which Cawdrey had chosen to enlighten England's 'Gentlewomen and unskillful persons' were the improbably contrived portmanteau words—the so-called inkhorn terms—with which the loftiest members of London high society liked to pepper their salon conversations in the hope of sounding more erudite and cultured than perhaps they actually were. He lists for their assistance words like *bubulicite*, *sacerdotall*, *archgrammatician*, and *attemptate*—all of them extravagances now mercifully gone the way of the doublet, the ruff, and the periwig. Just as his readers would likely have no interest in serge, black bread, or objects carved in deal, so Robert Cawdrey has no interest in the commonplace words of the time—and so his *Table Alphabetically*, while its publication marked a pivotal moment in lexical history, was in fact a work of very limited utility, and barely comparable with what would come in its wake.

But for all its shortcomings, Cawdrey's was the first *monolingual* English dictionary ever made, and in its wake—because of the need expressed by Mulcaster and Bullokar and Webster—came a huge number of others,⁸ as though a floodgate had suddenly been cranked open. In the early days of the century most of these, too, dealt with difficult words, as though their easier kinsmen

8 One of them was made by John Bullokar, said perhaps to have been the 'chylde' of the grammarian William Bullokar, though no one seems certain.

A Table Alphabetically, containing and teaching the true writing, and understanding of hard usuall English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latins, or French. &c.

With the interpretation thereof by plaine English wordes, gathered for the benefit & helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskillfull persons.

Whereby they may the more easilie and better vnderstand many hard English wordes, vvhich they shall heare or read in Scriptures, Sermons, or elswhere, and also be made able to vse the same aptly themselves.

Legere, et non intelligere, negligere est.
As good not read, as not to vnderstand.

AT LONDON,
Printed by I. R. for Edmund Wea-
uer, & are to be sold at his shop at the great
North doore of Pauls Church.
1604.

The beginning of it all: the first true English-only dictionary, published 'for the benefit of Ladies...or other unskillfull persons'—by the Coventry schoolmaster Robert Cawdrey, in 1604.

somehow did not require explication. One of these, however, Thomas Blount's famous *Glossographia* of 1656, does begin to get to grips with the fantastic complexity of ordinary English, as the author made clear in his 'Note to the Reader':

Nay, to that pass we are now arrived, that in London many of the Tradesmen have new Dialects; The Cook asks you what Dishes you will have in your Bill of Fare; whether Ollas, Bisques, Hatchies, Omelets, Bouillons, Grilliades, Ioncades, Fricasses; with a Haugoust, Ragoust etc. The Vintner will furnish you with Montefiascone, Alicante, Vornaccia, Ribolla, Tent, etc. Others with Sherbert, Agro di Cedro, Coffia, Chocolate, etc. The Taylor is ready to make you a Rochet, Mandillion, Gippon, Justacor, Capouch, Roqueton or a Cloke of Drap de Bery, etc. The Shoemaker will make you Boots, Whole Chase, demi-Chase, or Botlines, etc. The Haberdasher is ready to furnish you with a Vigone, Codeck or Castor, etc. The Seamstress with a Crabbel, Toylet etc. By this new World of Words, I found we were slipt into that condition which Seneca complains of in his lifetime; when men's minds begin to endure themselves to distike, whatever is usual is disdain'd: They affect novelty in speech, they recal oreworn and uncouth words; And some there are that think it is a grace, if their speech hover, in thereby hold the hearer in suspense, etc.

Perhaps today we are uncertain how to eat *Ioncades* (a junket) or have forgotten that a *Mandillion* is a kind of overcoat and a *Castor* is a hat fashioned from beaver fur. But these were not hard words, of the kind Cawdrey sought to explain—these were the jargon of trade and fine living, and in publishing them Blount tells us somewhat more about the language of the day than did most of his counterparts. Moreover, he offers citations for some words—and he makes an observation that, we now know, underpins the entire story of the book that this account celebrates: he realizes that he is indeed a lexicographer, and that the task of such a specialist is one that 'would find no end, since our English tongue daily changes habit'.

For that reason alone, Thomas Blount, barrister of Worcestershire, Catholic to the core, wealthy and leisured and a linguist of considerable talent, deserves to be remembered: not as the father of modern dictionaries maybe, but as the lexicographer who saw the light—who realized the ceaseless magnitude of the task (if it were ever to be undertaken) of gathering together all of the thousands upon thousands of ever-changing words with which generations of invaders and wanderers had littered and seasoned the peculiarly English means of saying things. To remark that English lexicography is like herding cats, as the saying has it, is only the half of it.

But the word-herders then began in earnest, however difficult the task. After Blount there was Milton's nephew John Phillips, who put out another 11,000-item 'long hard word' dictionary two years later. He had countless fights with Blount (mainly over allegations of plagiarism, to which all dictionary editors—who are bound to use earlier dictionaries to make sure they've left nothing out of their own—are prey); and in 1706 (ten years after his death) his work was expanded into a 38,000-word monster, a volume which counts as one of the first true lexicons to break out of merely listing inkhorn words for the benefit of society dandies. John Kersey, who edited the new sixth edition of Phillips, called it *The New World of Words: or a Universal English Dictionary containing—and after listing, once again, the inclusion of hard words from a variety of languages, added, splendidly, that these would be found together with a brief explication of all terms that relate to the Arts and Sciences, either Liberal or Mechanical, viz.*

Grammar, Rhetorick, Logic, Theology, Law, Metaphysics, Ethicks, Natural Philosophy, Law, Natural History, Physick, Surgery, Anatomy, Chymistry, Pharmacy, Botanicks, Arithmetick, Geometry, Astronomy, Astrology, Cosmography, Hydrography,

Navigation, Architecture, Fortification, Dialling, Surveying, Gauging, Opticks, Calopticks, Dioptricks, Perspective, Musick, Mechanicks, Statics, Chirumancy, Physiognomy, Heraldry, Merchandise, Maritime and Military Affairs, Agriculture, Gardening, Handicrafts, Jewelling, Painting, Carving, Engraving, Confectionery, Cookery, Horsemanship, Hawking, Hunting, Fowling, Fishing etc.

The mould had now been broken. Over the coming half-century there were to be dozens of new dictionaries published, as a craze for consumable lexicography swept across England like a hurricane. The names of those who made them have long since vanished from all worlds save those of collectors—names like Nathaniel Bailey and Francis Gouldman, B. N. Defoe, James Manlove, J. Sparrow, Thomas Dyche, Francis Junius, and Edward Cocker. Their creations grew steadily larger and larger as the size of the language became ever more fully realized; and by the middle of the eighteenth century, with dictionaries containing 50,000 or 60,000 words thundering from presses up and down the country, it was abundantly clear that the craft of the lexicographers who made them was no longer an idle occupation of the leisured dilettante, but an entirely professional calling.

The phrase 'according to Cocker', which was heard around this time, was invested with a meaning which flatters the profession to this day. It means reliably or correctly or according to established rules. It was to be the dictionary-makers' equivalent of the more widely known games players' phrase, 'according to Hoyle'. It made lexicography a respected way of life.

And then came Samuel Johnson, 'the Great Cham of Literature', and with him, the turning point. It was Tobias Smollett who coined the name—meaning, essentially, a figure of authority and autocratic self-confidence—and applied it to the bookseller's son

from Lichfield in Staffordshire, the schoolteacher turned journalist and parliamentary sketch-writer and wanderer and conversationalist who would become one of the towering figures of English letters. The magisterially famous Dr Johnson created his great dictionary in 1755—in two volumes, in scores of editions, the book that all educated households possessed and took down whenever anyone asked simply for 'the dictionary', set the standard for the following century, and some still think for all time, of just what an English dictionary should be.

It is important to reiterate in this context that Johnson's work set standards for all future *English* dictionaries. For the way that English had developed, and the way that in the eighteenth century it was coming to be recognized at home, was profoundly different from the way that other languages were then being seen, and were being recognized and then collated and corralled into dictionaries elsewhere. The point is an obvious one: but it bears repeating, as it underlies—indeed, is vital in every way to—the making of the book that plays the central role in this story.

For English is not to be regarded in the same way as, say, French or Italian, and in one crucially important way. It is not a *fixed* language, the meaning of its words established, approved, and firmly set by some official committee charged with preserving its dignity and integrity. The French have had their Académie Française, a body made up of the much-feared Forty Immortals, which has done precisely this (and with an extreme punctiliousness and absolute want of humour) since 1634. The Italians have also had their Accademia della Crusca in Florence since 1582—since long before, in other words, there was even a nation called Italy. The task of both bodies was to preserve linguistic purity, to prevent the languages' ruin by permitting inelegant importations, and to guide the public on just how to write and speak. The two bodies were established, in short, to prescribe the use of the language. No

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.

Qui talis animus eruditus fuit huius:
 Audibile quocunque patrum gloriabatur labellum,
 Et sine positae error, ac laetitia insignis fuisse,
 Quamvis nonnulli nonnulli nonnulli nonnulli
 Et reddunt adhibere penitentiis. Velle.
 Obstantia de pado hanc erant, neque
 Proferret in hanc speciebus vocabula rursus.
 Que pedit animus. Quamvis nonnulli nonnulli
 Nonnulli nonnulli penitentiis et debetis velle. H. B.

LONDON,

Printed by W. STRAHAN,

For J. and P. Knapton; T. and T. Longman; C. Hitch and L. Hawes;

A. Millar, and R. and J. Dodsley.

MDCCLV.

For more than a century after its publication in 1755, Samuel Johnson's massive work was *the* dictionary, essential to the library of every educated household.

such body has ever been set up in England, nor in any English-speaking country.⁹

And though George Orwell might have longed for an Anglo-Saxon revival, though John Dryden loathed French loanwords, despite Joseph Addison's campaigns against contractions such as *myn't* and *won't*, and although Alexander Pope pleaded for the retention of dignity and Daniel Defoe wrote of his hatred of the 'inundation' of curse-words and Jonathan Swift mounted a lifelong attempt to 'fix our language forever'—no critic and advocate of immutability has ever once managed properly or even marginally to outwit the English language's capacity for foxy and relentlessly slippery flexibility.

For English is a language that simply cannot be fixed, nor can its use ever be absolutely laid down. It changes constantly; it grows with an almost exponential joy. It evolves eternally; its words alter their senses and their meanings subtly, slowly, or speedily according to fashion and need. Dictionaries that record and catalogue the language thus cannot ever be *prescriptive*; they must always be entirely *descriptive*, telling of the language as it is, not as it should be. Samuel Johnson's majestic *Dictionary of the English Language*, published first in 1755 and remaining in print for well over the century following, is a classic of this kind. It is as full a record as Johnson and the six serving men who worked with him as amanuenses for six years in cramped rooms near Fleet Street could determine, of the entire assemblage of words that were employed by all who lived in the realm—the words used by the learned, the nobly born, the doctor, the dandy, and the divine and, most important of all, the

⁹ Except South Africa, which has its own 'English Academy' based in Johannesburg, charged with promoting 'the effective use of English as a dynamic language'. The French and Italians would deny the use of the word 'dynamic', urging upon their respective peoples the need for linguistic stability and an abhorrence of change.

words used by the common man of the street, the slum, the farm, and the field.

(There has long been a running argument over whether Johnson himself ever thought it desirable to fix the language in the aspic of his authority. The current view is that at first he did—that he initially espoused the conservative views of Swift and Addison and their like, and had half a mind to make a dictionary that laid down rules, just as an Academy might. In his Plan for the dictionary, written in 1747, he said he wished 'to preserve the purity and ascertain the meaning of our English idiom'. But halfway through the task he realized that, in dealing specifically with the endearingly unruly monster that was English, this simply was not possible. He then, perhaps reluctantly, fell in with the dictum laid down by a predecessor lexicographer, the former Surrey ploughboy and inventor named Benjamin Martin, twenty years before Johnson began his monumental work:

The pretence of fixing a standard to the purity and perfection of any language is utterly vain and impertinent, because no language as depending on arbitrary use and custom, can ever be permanently the same, but will always be in a mutable and fluctuating state; and what is deem'd polite and elegant in one age, may be counted uncouth and barbarous in another.

And Johnson agreed. Whatever he had said in his Plan of 1747, he was not to repeat in his Preface of 1755. His aim in making the great dictionary was, he then admitted, not 'to form, but to register' the language. In this way a whole new way of dictionary-making, and an entirely new intellectual approach to the language, had been inaugurated.)

The approach that Johnson took was not to decide for himself what words meant, not (to reiterate the point) to *prescribe* how they should be used—but instead to let the printed record of

centuries-worth of writing and literature illustrate how words had actually been used in the past, and tease from the record the variety of historic meanings, from the time each was invented and first introduced, and as their various senses shifted like silverfish over the succeeding centuries. 'When I took the first survey of my undertaking,' he wrote in his famous Preface,

I found our speech copious without order, and energetick without rules: wherever I turned my view, there was perplexity to be disentangled, and confusion to be regulated. Having therefore no assistance but from general grammar I applied myself to the perusal of our writers; and noting whatever might be used to ascertain or illustrate any word or phrase, accumulated in time the materials of a dictionary which, by degrees, I reduced to method.

This was a method which Johnson perhaps honoured more in the breach than the observance. But it nonetheless set the pattern for all the best dictionaries for all time to come: no better means has ever been developed for producing as near as possible a complete record of a language.

There are essentially three sources for the words that are to be put into a new dictionary. There are those to be found in existing dictionaries (a fact which caused scores of earlier dictionary makers to cry plagiarism whenever an unusual word found in one book was then found in another published subsequently). There are words which are heard in conversation. And there are words that are to be found by a concerted trawl through the texts of literature. Johnson leant heavily on this third source—only, as it turns out, not heavily enough. For he took the unilateral decision—to save himself time and money—only to read the books that had been published since 1586, and the death of Sir Philip Sidney. *Beowulf* and the *Canterbury Tales* were not to be considered; none of the works from Caxton made it into Johnson's

lists; Bede's writings were not included; nor was Domesday Book; neither were the Bibles of Wyclif and Tyndale. A mere century and a half of English literature was to provide the wellspring for his book: not a few have since expressed surprise that, despite so limited a source, so very many words made it in at all.

There were, in the end, 43,500 of them, supported by 118,000 illustrative quotations (a good number of which were amended by Johnson if he didn't like the originals). The headwords were listed alphabetically in a book that was printed in a first edition of 2,000 copies, and sold for £4 10s. od. a copy—a good deal of money for 1755. Realizing this, Johnson produced a second edition in 165 weekly parts, at sixpence each. This did the trick; by the end of the century every educated household had, or had access to, the great book. So firmly established did it swiftly become that any request for 'The Dictionary' would bring forth Johnson and none other. One asked for The Dictionary much as one might demand The Bible, *Hymns Ancient & Modern*, or The Prayer Book.

Examined with the steely-eyed rigour of today, there are in Johnson eccentricities in abundance. Some of his definitions are infamously political, like 'Oats: A grain which in England is generally given to horses, but which in Scotland feeds the people'. Some were reckoned libellous, as 'Excise: A hateful tax levied upon commodities, and adjudged not by the common judges of property, but wretches hired by those to whom excise is paid'. Not a few were self-effacing, like 'Lexicographer: A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words'.¹⁰

Others were simply frightful, entries that breached the lexicographer's guiding principle that in writing a definition, no word

¹⁰ He did not, however, venture anything quite so cynical as Ambrose Bierce's later definition of the word *dictionary* in his own classic work *The Devil's Dictionary: A malvolent literary device for cramping the growth of a language and making it hard and inelastic.*

may be used that is more complex or unfamiliar than the word being defined—which was very much not the case with Johnson's definition of 'Network: Any thing reticulated, or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections'. Small wonder that Johnson collected some harsh critics—like Thomas Babington Macaulay, who was to curse him as 'a wretched etymologist', and another, who wrote that 'Any schoolmaster might have done what Johnson did. His Dictionary is merely a glossary to his own barbarisms.'

Dr Johnson was sufficiently brazen and self-confident not to have been distressed by such carping. But he must have taken some pleasure in hearing that his book attracted the prurient as well as the pedant. On being accused, by a genteel society lady, of failing to include obscenities in the book he replied, in a mixture of the caustic and the sardonic: 'Madam, I hope I have not daubed my fingers. I find, however, that you have been *looking* for them.'

As the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth so the number of new dictionaries multiplied, each one larger and more comprehensive and more authoritative than its predecessors. Perhaps the most notable was the formidable *American Dictionary of the English Language*, edited by the 'short, pale, smug and boastful' schoolmaster from New Hartford, Connecticut, Noah Webster.

This 'severe, correct, humourless, religious and temperate' man had already enjoyed extraordinary popularity with his earlier books—his first spelling book became the best-selling volume in the United States, exceeded only by the Bible, and in its heyday it thundered off the presses at the rate of more than 500 copies an hour. As a result the word *Websterian*—meaning 'invested with lexical authority'—rapidly entered the language, making its first appearance in print in 1790 (as it happens, a full year ahead of the

A DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE:

INTENDED TO EXHIBIT
I. THE ORIGIN AND THE AFFINITIES OF EVERY ENGLISH WORD, AS FAR AS THEY HAVE BEEN ASCERTAINED,
WITH ITS PRIMARY SIGNIFICATION, AS NOW GENERALLY ESTABLISHED.—
II. THE ORTHOGRAPHY AND THE PRONUNCIATION OF WORDS, AS SANCTIONED BY REPUTABLE USAGE, AND WHERE
THIS USAGE IS DIVULGED, AS DETERMINABLE BY A REFERENCE TO THE PRINCIPLE OF ANALOGY.—
III. ACCURATE AND DISCRIMINATING DEFINITIONS OF TECHNICAL AND SCIENTIFIC TERMS, WITH NUMEROUS
AUTHORITIES AND ILLUSTRATIONS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
AN INTRODUCTORY DISSERTATION
ON
THE ORIGIN, HISTORY, AND CONNECTION OF THE
LANGUAGES OF WESTERN ASIA AND OF EUROPE;
AND
A CONCISE GRAMMAR, PHILOSOPHICAL AND PRACTICAL, OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

By NOAH WEBSTER, LL.D.
NEW YORK, 1828.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

* He that values to be credited among the benefactors of posterity, must add, by his own toil, to the acquisition of his sciences.—Bentley.

REPRINTED BY E. H. BARKER, Esq., of *Thetford, Norfolk*.
FROM A COPY COMMUNICATED BY THE AUTHOR, AND CONTAINING MANY MANUSCRIPT CORRECTIONS AND ADDITIONS.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

PUBLISHED BY BLACK, YOUNG, AND YOUNG,
FOREIGN BOOKSELLERS TO THE KING,
2 TAVERSTOCK STREET, COVENT GARDEN.

MDCCKXXXII.

similarly freighted eponym *Johnsonian*). And when, in 1828, and after fifteen years of solitary work, Webster completed his dictionary,¹¹ it was almost double the size of Johnson's, with 70,000 headwords, 1,600 pages, and a preface declaring the book's solemn determination to fix and purify a language that Johnson—with his inclusion of vulgarisms and other low words—had in Webster's view dared to cheapen and to coarsen.

Despite the rivalry between the two men, between their two books, and between the two languages, the value and scale of both Johnson's and Webster's work is unchallenged. And since Webster was the larger, more comprehensive, and editorially less eccentric of the pair of books, it goes without saying that even while Johnson remained in print, Webster fast became the gold standard of the lexicographers' art, and sold almost as well in England as it did back home in America.

There was one final attempt to better even these. Charles Richardson, a schoolmaster from Clapham, published in two volumes *A New Dictionary of the English Language* in 1837—and he did so by employing what, by the developing standards of the day, was a most curious style. He almost entirely did away with definitions—but instead showed how each word had been used by illustrating usages with quotations. He decided that there had been four distinct linguistic eras in the story of English; the first ran from 1300 to the accession of Queen Elizabeth I in 1558. The second ended with the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660. The third and shortest period closed with the reign of the first Hanoverian monarch, George I, in 1714. And the fourth period extended into the nineteenth century—more precisely, to 1818, when Richardson's

11 Webster finished his work while in Cambridge, in England—something of an irony, considering that he was a keen opponent both of Johnson and the notion that England was the fount of all authority over a new language—*American English*—that Webster, with vocal defiance, considered entirely separate.

Noah Webster created—entirely alone—his wildly popular *American Dictionary of the English Language* in 1828. For years afterwards this huge volume—defining twice as many words as Johnson—even outsold the Bible.

dictionary began to appear, in parts, as contributions to the multi-volume *Encyclopaedia Metropolitana*.

Richardson endeavoured to show, for all words he included, quotations from each of the periods during which the word was known to have existed. He felt that only thus—by depicting a word's history, its *biography*—could the dictionary user have full and familiar knowledge of how best to employ the word himself. He considered definitions by and large to be irrelevantly prescriptive: far better to show how others had utilized the word than to insist on how it should be utilized in future. It was an approach—dictionary-making based on what were to be widely called 'historical principles'—that won Richardson a deserving place in the canon of lexicographers: and it was an approach that was eventually to inform, in all its essentials, the making of the greatest dictionary of them all.

3. The Mission

And yet none of these volumes was truly good enough. Not one of them—not Johnson, not Webster, not Richardson—ever did the English language justice. Nor did any of the dictionaries, so far as the growing army of nineteenth-century philologists felt, contain all the words that made up English in its entirety. To be sure, no one could be certain just how many words were in the language. But there was a feeling abroad that the total had to be very considerably more than the 80,000 or so (Webster had listed 70,000) that even these skilled lexicographers were managing to come up with.

At first this feeling was ill defined—no more than a vague unease. But in the early summer of 1842 came the beginnings of a formal acknowledgement of it. A wealthy Oxfordshire landowner and Anglo-Saxon expert named Edwin Guest—his financial

condition underlining the assertion that what was to follow would be the work, initially, of men who were both learned *and* *leisured*—established what was to be called the Philological Society. He did so with other luminaries—most notably Thomas Arnold of Rugby School and Hensleigh Wedgwood, grandson of the potter Josiah, and one of the most notable etymologists in the land. The purpose of the Society—which exists still—was to 'investigate the Structure, the Affinity and the History of Languages'. Its first paper, which reportedly stimulated animated discussion among the members, was a classic of arcane enthusiasm: 'The dialects of the Papuan or Negrito race, scattered through the Australian and other Asiatic islands.'

Over the coming years the energies and fascinations of the Society turned steadily towards English. In the very early days a most curious parallelism developed between philology and, rather curiously it would seem today, the science of geology—with both rocks and the language thought to have a divine origin. Once Charles Lyell had published his *Principles of Geology* in 1830, though, it started to become evident and more widely accepted that the earth might not, after all, have been fashioned by God—and that being so, there was a period when the study of the language alone was thought divinely blessed, a science 'beyond the domain of matter'. Until more sensible ideas prevailed some while later, the geological metaphor was still employed to describe the nature of English—such as in this description by William Whewell, a founding member of the Philological Society and Master of Trinity College Cambridge.

The English language is a conglomerate of Latin words, bound together in a Saxon cement; the fragments of the Latin being partly portions introduced directly from the parent quarry, with all their sharp edges, and partly pebbles of the same material, obscured and shaped by long rolling in a Norman or some other channel.

But although dictionary-making and geology long enjoyed a curious affinity, philology itself was eventually freed from what its adherents found a frankly rather weird association—an association born out of the belief that both sciences gave support to the words of Genesis and the orthodoxy of Christianity. Fifteen years after the Society's founding, though, such philosophical wanderings had rather diminished, and the Society was busily discussing such more obviously secular matters as 'Diminutives in *lef*', 'On the word *inking*', and 'On the derivation of the word *broker*' (this last discussion led by Hensleigh Wedgwood). There were papers also on the complexities of some foreign tongues—on 'The Termination of the Numeral Eleven, Twelve and the equivalent forms in Lithuanian', for example, and a spirited piece on the Tushi language, which is (or was) apparently well known in the Caucasian hill town of Tzowa, and which might be regarded today as a somewhat tricky tongue for beginners, given that the Tushi for the number 1,000 is the sonorous complex form of words *sac tqauziqa icaiaq*.

In June 1857, while the members were gamely pausing to learn Tushi counting (*cha, si, xo, ahaw pxi, jetc* ...), three of their number—Herbert Coleridge, Frederick Furnivall, and the Dean of Westminster, Richard Chenevix Trench—set about discussing their principal concern about the English language. It was a worry that had begun to evolve from decades of undefined uneasiness, such that now at last it was a settled concern: that the dictionaries then currently in print were just not good enough. William Whewell had mentioned such a thought back in 1852, when he was still gripped by the idea that English had been handed down from the clouds. Five years later, and under the guidance of the holy *xo*, the ideas began swiftly to coalesce.

The Philological Society, these three men supposed, would be the body best suited to remedy the situation. And as that summer

of 1857 began so they decided that their best contribution to philological inquiry would be to establish a Committee to ascertain just what words might have been left out of the English dictionaries. They would call it the Unregistered Words Committee, and its members would go out of their way to scour the literature and read newspapers and popular journals and listen to song scores and to conversation, and thereby add significantly, it was hoped, to the understanding and inventorying of the total stock of English words.

The first report of this Committee was to be announced five months later, at a meeting of the Society due to be held on Guy Fawkes Day, Thursday, 5 November 1857. There was much anticipation. Philology is by reputation a somewhat arid calling; but on that Thursday night there was a buzz of excitement from the members who filed in through the cold and foggy gloom into the London Library—a body which had long hosted the Society, in an unheated upstairs room in the premises still occupied, at the north-west corner of St James's Square.

So it was to general surprise and initial dismay that members were informed that the Report would not in fact be read that night. In its place one member of the Committee, the eminent divine Dean Trench, soon to be Archbishop of Dublin but at the time Dean of Westminster,¹² would present the first part of a paper. It was to be called 'On Some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries'.

This was the paper that finally brought substance to what had hitherto been a half-formed presentiment. This was the document which at long last defined the problem that had long nagged at the serge-clad shoulders of a score of wordsmen. This was the

¹² He was a brilliantly polymathic figure. He was also lame after breaking both knees—not through an excess of piety, but from stumbling down the gangplank of the Kingstown packet.

presentation that was to set in train the events that would lead, inexorably, to the making of the dictionary that all since Stanley Baldwin have considered to have—or which has long striven to have—essentially no deficiencies at all.

The audience, all men, most of them middle-aged, most of them resplendent in frock coats or in the astrakhan-collared capes and greatcoats and silk scarves and top hats that had comforted them against the cold yellow November fog, listened attentively to the grave Doctor as he enumerated the problems. There were, in essence, seven.

Obsolete words, for a start, were not fully registered in any dictionary thus far published. Secondly, families or groups of words were only capriciously included in these same dictionaries—some members of families made it in, some did not. Then again, such histories of words as were included in dictionaries rarely looked back far enough—the cited earliest appearances of many words was all too frequently given as far more recent than their actual inauguration, because the research had been performed too sloppily. Fourthly, important meanings and senses of words had all too often been passed over—once again, the research had too often been too perfunctory. Little heed had been paid to distinguishing between apparently synonymous words. Sixth, there seemed to be a superabundance of redundancy in all previous dictionaries—too many of them were bloated with unnecessary material, at the expense of what was really wanting. And finally, much of the literature which ought to have been read and scanned for illustrative quotations had not been read at all: any serious and totally authoritative dictionary had perforce to be the result of the reading and scanning and scouring of *all* literature—all journals, magazines, papers, illuminated monastic treatises, and volumes of written and printed publicly accessible works great, small, and impossibly trivial.

No, nothing that had so far been made was good enough. What was needed was a brand new dictionary. A dictionary of the English language in its totality. Not a reworking of the existing mis-formed and incomplete works; not a further attempt to make any one of the past creations somehow better or more complete; not a supplement, as the Unregistered Words Committee planned to publish. No, from a fresh start, from a *tabula rasa*, there should be constructed now a wholly new dictionary that would give, in essence and in fact, the meaning of *everything*.

Whatever this was, it had to be a book—an enormous book, quite probably, though not even Dean Trench was bold enough to hazard a guess as to how enormous—that did its level best to include the totality of the language. And by that was meant the discovery and the inclusion of every single word, every sense, every meaning. The book had to present a complete inventory of the language—such that anyone who wanted to look up the meaning of any word must be confident of finding it there, without a scintilla of doubt.

Moreover, the book that Dean Trench had in mind must, he said, be sure to present (unlike Richardson's) an elegantly written and carefully thought out definition, an exquisite summation of every single sense and meaning. It had to offer every variant spelling of every word ever known, as well as its preferred present-day spelling. It had to explain, in detail and as comprehensively as could be ascertained, every single word's etymology. It had to show how best every single form should be pronounced.

And it had to offer up—Dean Trench here returning to Richardson's 'historical principles'—a full-length illustrated biography of every word. The date of each word's birth had to be determined, and a register of the ways in which it grew and evolved and changed itself and its meaning over the years and decades and centuries after its first making. And this should generally all be

accomplished without passing judgement on how the word was used—for, said the Dean, now warming to his theme, it had to be understood that 'a dictionary is an historical monument, the history of a nation contemplated from one point of view—and the wrong ways into which a language has wandered may be nearly as instructive as the right ones'.

The audience must have been startled, perhaps not a little overwhelmed, at the breadth and magisterial challenge of the project that Dean Trench had in mind. This was to be an inventory of *all* known English words? The meanings and senses were those to be found from the close reading of *all* of known published English literature? At first blush it seemed too mighty a project for anyone to imagine, let alone to contemplate. And yet as the Dean explained matters in more detail—and as he unveiled his principal idea for the making of something better than all that had gone before, something that he planned to call *The New English Dictionary*—so the men in their leather chairs began to nod their heads in agreement.

Yes, they began muttering to one another—this dictionary idea sounded like a scheme that was on just the titanic scale which Victorian Britain seemed these days to be taking in its stride. Was Britain not at the time unquestionably the most powerful nation on earth? Did her navies not sail unchallenged in every ocean between the Poles? Did not a quarter of the world's peoples bow down in abjectness and supplication before Her Majesty?

And was there not in addition something *muscularly Christian* about the language that was spoken? (Dean Trench was quite certain that there was.) Might it not be that making an inventory of the language, and by so doing asserting and underlining its greatness, would not just help the English language around the globe? By thus extending its usefulness and ubiquity it would not only spread English influence abroad, but spread the influence

of the Church of England into the darkness of the native world as well. Victorian Britain, however absurd and jingoistic it may look through today's more critical lenses, represented an attitude suffused with near-absolute self-confidence and greatness of ambition. It existed at a time of great men, great vision, great achievement—and armed with hopes and intentions spiritual, moral, and commercial, there was almost nothing that it could not do.

Huge ships, immense palaces, bridges and roads and docks and railways of daunting scale, brave discoveries in science and medicine, scores of colonies seized, dozens of wars won and revolts suppressed, and missionaries and teachers fanning out into the darkest crannies of the planet—there seemed nothing that the Britain of the day could not achieve. And now, to add to it all—a plan for a brand new dictionary. A brand new dictionary of what was, after all, the very language of all this greatness and moral suasion and muscularly Christian goodness, and a language that had been founded and nurtured in the Britain that was doing it—the idea seemed no more and no less than a natural successor to all of these other majestic ventures of iron and steam and fired brick. Yes, the men upstairs in the London Library said, with a growing hubbub of enthused excitement—it could be done. Moreover it should, it must, and it would be done.

To soothe any lingering doubts about the practicality of the project, Trench finally pulled the rabbit from his hat. He second-guessed his audience when he asked, rhetorically: How shall all these books, in which the meanings of all words resided, be read? This was his reply:

In that most interesting preface which Jacob Grimm¹³ has

¹³ Of fairy-tale fame—Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm wrote sinister children's stories as well as dictionaries.

prefixed to his own and his brother's German dictionary, he makes grateful and honourable mention of no less than eighty-three volunteer coadjutors, who had undertaken to read for him one or more authors, and who had thrown into the common stock of his great work ... the results of their several toils. It is something of this common action which the Philological Society has suggested to its members. It entertained, also, from the first a hope, in which it has not been disappointed, that many besides its own members would gladly divide with them the toil and honour of such an undertaking.

An entire army would join hand in hand till it covered the breadth of the island ... this drawing a sweep-net over the whole extent of English literature, is that which we would fain see ...

And all saw that this, at a stroke, was indeed a most brilliant plan. The English-speaking peoples of the world would *themselves* be asked, begged, cajoled, pleaded with, and otherwise persuaded to join in concert, with the idea of listing the entirety of their very own language. A task which might take one man 100 lifetimes could take 100 men just one, or 1,000 men just a few years. To ask 1,000 to take part should not (the muttering, nodding, clubbably chattering philologists were saying as they filed back out into the fog) be an outlandish notion. This dictionary could well work. It might be three or four volumes in length. It might take five years, or seven, or even ten. But it could be done. Of that, at long last there now was no longer any doubt.

Moreover, by involving in the making of the lexicon the very people who spoke and read the language, the project would be *of the people*, a scheme that, quite literally, would be classically *democratic*. The book that Dean Trench had in mind was not the prescriptive invention of one man, nor even of a small number of men, nor of a committee. It would instead be a descriptive creation from all men; it would reflect the people's words and the

people's uses of them, and so be in yet more ways unlike any other dictionary ever made. It was a quite astonishing and revolutionary dream.

All that remained to lift this project from the idylls of drawing-room conversation and lecture-theatre dialogue to firm and effective action was a plan. As it happened, one was to come about in very short order.

A year after Dean Trench's speech, the Society passed a formal resolution to the effect that *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* was to be undertaken; a year later still the plan was devised, printed, and published. In the early summer of 1860 the Rules for the making of the great book—the *Canones Lexicographici*—were published too—giving instructions for attending to the minutiae that lay ahead.

The plan was for a very different book from that which was eventually to be created. The first idea was for a dictionary in three parts, with Part I containing most words, Part II holding technical words and proper names, and Part III the etymologies of all the words contained in the first two parts. But whether or not that plan was adhered to, the moment it was published, and a road-map for the journey had been officially made, so the boiler then fired; the steam-pump turned; the gearwheels meshed, and the whole laborious and pioneering process of making the dictionary to end all dictionaries was finally set in motion.

It was 12 May 1860—and though most of those involved thought their work would come to fruition within the following decade, it was in fact to be 68 years and three weeks from that starting date before the great work finally saw the light of day. The Rules were in place, the team was assembled, and now, that late spring day, the clock had finally started ticking.

2

The Construction of the Pigeon-Holes



I believe that the scheme is now firmly established ... and I confidently expect ... that in about two years we shall be able to give our first number to the world. Indeed, were it not for the dilatoriness of many contributors, I should not hesitate to name an earlier period.

(Herbert Coleridge, first editor of
The New English Dictionary, 30 May 1860)

The great fact ... is, that the Dictionary is now at last really launched, and that some forty pages are in type, of which forty-eight columns have reached me in proof.

(James Murray, third editor of
The New English Dictionary, 19 May 1882)

Almost 22 years separate this pair of laconic announcements, more than two decades dividing wish from fulfilment, man's hopeful proposal of the plan from cool disposal of it by God or the Fates. Those who were so eagerly hoping for the Dictionary to

appear were obliged to endure what was, by any standards, a long, long wait. The first years of the project were, in short, a most frustrating time. They were years marked by periods of hesitation and uncertainty, by outbursts of anger, threats of abandonment, frustrated argumentation, and (in one case) untimely and inconvenient death. Only in the later years, once a proper sense of organization had finally gripped the near-founding project, were there any signs of progress and real achievement.

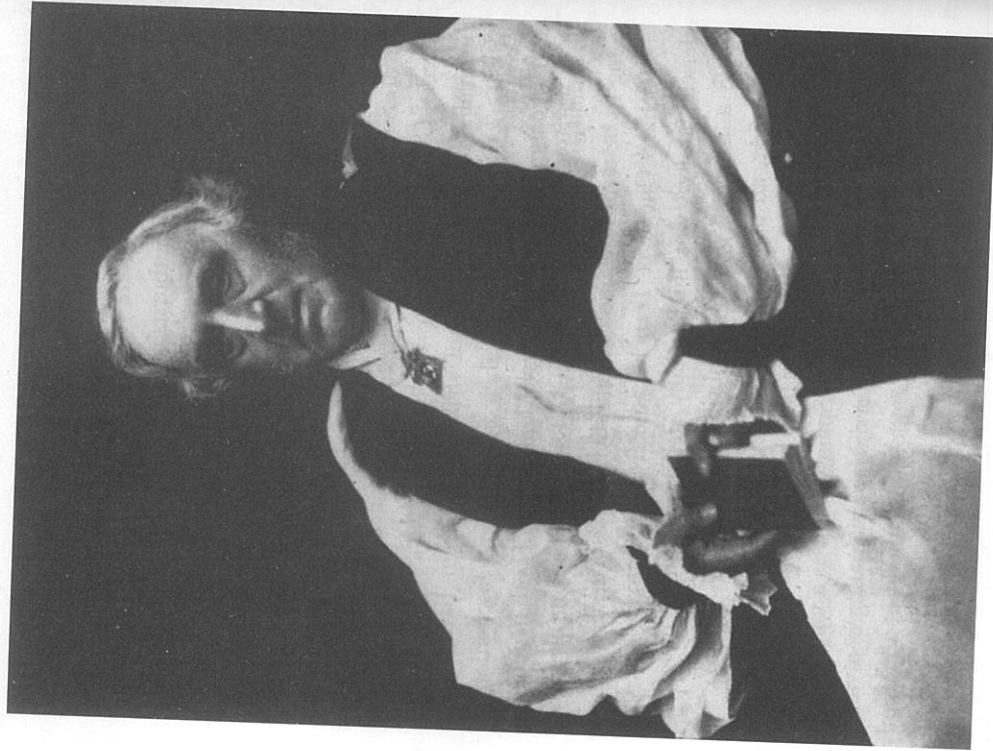
What in those early years was familiarly known as 'the Philological Society's Dictionary' had in essence three founding fathers—Chenevix Trench, Herbert Coleridge, and Frederick Furnivall. They were men of strikingly different backgrounds and attitudes, united only by their fondness and fascination for the language;¹ their variety of styles lent much, of both benefit and disbenefit, to the early workings of what, it fast became clear, was going to be a most formidable enterprise.

Richard Chenevix Trench came from a distinguished Irish clerical family,² was intellectually stellar enough to have been made a member of the Cambridge Apostles at Trinity, and was, at first, an unstinting admirer of Spanish literature. While still a youngster he seems to have been briefly infected with a heady sense of idealism: he fitted off to Spain to fight as a volunteer for the liberal insurrectionary Jose Torrijos, participating in a valiant attack on Cadiz—returning to London unscathed but apparently deeply embarrassed. It was, so far as one can tell from his admiring biographers, the only time in his life that he displayed the merest trace of foolhardiness, levity, or frivolity.

As his family expected of him, Trench promptly entered the

¹ They had already spent time together as members of the Unregistered Words Committee, itself a precursor to the dictionary project.

² The distinction only slightly dimmed over time: one descendant went on to become Provost of Eton, another (known to me) the manager of an oyster bar in Hong Kong.



In 1857 the Dean of Westminster, Richard Chenevix Trench, set in motion the making of an entirely new kind of English dictionary with a powerfully critical speech to the Philological Society, saying the existing volumes were just not good enough.

Church of England on his return home, and casting all romantic notions aside for good, duly progressed up the ecclesiastical ladder with efficiency and dispatch. He first became a deacon at Norwich Cathedral, went briefly back to Ireland to help famine victims as a curate in the parish of Cloughjordan, Co. Tipperary, then took up the post of curate in Colchester, and subsequently became perpetual curate of Curbridge, in the see of Winchester. It was during the six years that he spent here in Hampshire that he developed his reputation as a scholar, a liberal-minded reformer (becoming a fast friend of William Wilberforce, the great anti-slavery campaigner), a poet and—most significantly in this context—a philologist. He lectured widely on the nature and origins of the language, and, being a quick study, published three popular and well-regarded short books during the 1850s, *The Study of Words*, *English Past and Present*, and *A Select Glossary*.³ After a curiously extended delay he joined the (by now fifteen-year-old) Philological Society in 1857—having been elected Dean of Westminster the year before—and for a while ran the Unregistered Words Committee for the Society from his official residence just beside Westminster Abbey.⁴ He then, as already mentioned, gave the two-part

³ The Glossary 'of English Words used formerly in Senses different from their Present' makes for a charming read. We find a slightly regretful tone, as in Trench's remarks about the word *Orient*: 'This had once a beautiful use, as clear, bright, shining, which has now wholly departed from it. Thus, the "orient" pearl of our earlier poets is not "oriental" but pellucid, white, shining. Doubtless it acquired this meaning originally from the greater clearness and lightness of the east, as the quarter whence the day breaks.'

⁴ Trench arrived to find that his house, still known today as Dean's Yard, was—according to a grumble from his wife, Mary—filled with 'dead things' bones'. The previous Dean had been William Buckland, later to be the first professor of geology at Oxford, and an insanely eager palaeontologist. Buckland was notorious also for trying to eat specimens of every living thing, in his later years declaring mole to be the nastiest, followed by bluebottle. As if the disagreeable relics of Dean Buckland were not enough, Trench soon found that the purities of his Abbey in mid-Victorian times were no better than a slum—'one reeking and irreclaimable centre of filth and misery'. His work on collecting words for the new Dictionary had perforce to begin under somewhat uncongenial circumstances.

lecture on the shortcomings of existing dictionaries at the London Library in November 1857, which set in motion the plan for creating the great new replacement. Once the Society agreed on the idea, he promptly formed two committees—one on etymology, one on word history and literature—and for a while ran these, also, from Dean's Yard.

But before long the relentless press of his diocesan work proved too time-consuming, and within a few short months he told his colleagues that he could no longer continue: from henceforward, he said, work on the new book would continue under the editorship of Herbert Coleridge—and all correspondence on the matter would pass to him, at his elegant four-storey pale yellow mansion on the east side of Regent's Park, Chester Terrace. There have been many addresses associated over time with the making of the Dictionary: No. 10 Chester Terrace, London NW, is in all probability the one that most properly can lay claim to being its birthplace.

The man who was technically the book's first editor, Herbert Coleridge (though he is rarely identified as such in most of the official publications), was far from being a middle-aged divine: at the time of the founding of the Philological Society he was just twelve years old, and when Trench made his Guy Fawkes Day speech, a mere 27. He had been elected to the Society that same February, swiftly impressing all around him with his curiously precocious erudition: he won a stunning double first degree in classics and mathematics at Balliol College, he had become a bachelorette, he was quite ostentatiously obsessed with the byways of philology, most notably with the finer points of Sanskrit, the languages of Norway and Finland, and the dialects of Iceland. He had a small annuity, which allowed him to indulge his philology more keenly than his law.



The first editor was Herbert Coleridge, only 27 years old, a grandson of the poet. He was a scholarly and sickly figure, and had sent the first sample pages to press when he caught a chill and died, a year into the project.

As soon as he had won entry to the Philological Society Coleridge started writing papers for its well-regarded *Transactions*—a first essay on the nature of the diminutive formed by the addition of *-let* (he wondered why, for instance, a small river was called a *rivulet*, and not a *riverlet*), and another on the Latin words *ploro* and *exploro*. His very evident erudition (and the fact that he was the grandson of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge) attracted Dean Trench's attention; and when Trench felt pressed by his churchly duties to bow out of the day-to-day running of the project, it was to the ever-eager young man that he first turned. Such files as the Unregistered Words Committee had collected were promptly shipped from Dean's Yard to Chester Terrace, and the dictionary work began anew, under the captaincy of a younger man.

Younger, but not fitter, Herbert Coleridge turned out to be a sickly figure, plagued by what was once called consumption but which nowadays is more generally known as pulmonary tuberculosis. The image of him that filters down through the years is of a workaholic, rarely straying from his chambers, poring unhealthily over his correspondence, his lists of words and his organizational plans, while he coughed and vomited and wheezed and in alarmingly short order grew ever weaker and weaker.

His accomplishments made under these trying circumstances, though they are widely forgotten today, are far from trivial. With the help of a committee he drew up the *Canones*—the Rules—by which the three-part dictionary he envisaged might be created. He divided the books that were to be read into three groups—those appearing between 1250 and the publication of the first English New Testament in 1526; those published between 1526 and Milton's death in 1674; and those printed between then and 1858, when the project was formally set under way. He also found in the famed Nicholas Trübner a printer and

publisher⁵—a rather premature arrangement, even the most optimistic might think—who would be able to perform the intricate work that a dictionary, with its countless typefaces and foreign languages and phonetic alphabets, required.

In addition Coleridge organized the first small army of volunteer readers—he wrote around to schools and universities and members of the Society and their friends, and within a year managed to find no fewer than 147 men (and a small number of women) who happily agreed to help find quotations showing a variety of words in contexts that the editor should find illustrated their various meanings and senses. But their ardour quickly cooled. Of these first 147, the editor reported dejectedly in May 1860, only some 89 were still working—the early enthusiasm of the other 58 (he dismissed them as 'hopeless') had clearly evaporated.

Coleridge was brutally frank about the quality of the survivors, and coldly invoked a lexicographical version of the triage: Class I, into which he placed some 30 men, were 'first-rate'; fifteen belonged to Class II, being only 'of inferior merit'; and the other 44 were lumped into Class III, 'not having produced sufficient work to be able to judge'. But matters looked up again when Coleridge found an American, the Honorable George Perkins Marsh of Burlington, Vermont, who readily agreed to mastermind a transatlantic search for illustrative quotations of wanted words. He impressed Coleridge as first-rate from the very start.

Marsh was himself was a fascinating character—a Puritan aristocrat, wealthy from his dealings in wool and railways, fluent

⁵ Trübner—his firm survived until 1892, and is now subsumed into Routledge & Kegan Paul—was the son of a Heidelberg goldsmith who became the publishing friend to a score of struggling scholars. Trübner 'est une bouche d'or' it was said—and for his kindness he was awarded chestsful of honours, including the Lion of Zähringen, the White Elephant of Siam, and Crown of St Olaf of Norway. His firm published for the Royal Society their famous report on the eruption of the volcano Krakatoa. He was never, however, to publish a single page of the Dictionary, other than by way of experiment and specimen.

in twenty languages, sent as a diplomat to Istanbul, in later life a renowned environmentalist, and for all his career sufficient of a scholar to have Coleridge select him, from all the Americans that he knew, to be the ideal leader of the dictionary effort in America. By the time Marsh died in Florence in 1882 it was said that he had assembled a large group of distinguished Americans to help him with the project—fulfilling Coleridge's early promise that the title of an *English* dictionary was 'no longer strictly applicable', since the book could now include linguistic peculiarities from well beyond Albion's shores. Little remains to record how much effort Marsh actually made, though the fact that American contributions to the later development of the Dictionary have always been prodigious, suggests that he did leave a legacy of some kind.

Coleridge also made the very first list of words that he thought should be included—he took the material, the illustrative quotations that had been sent in by his 89 volunteer readers, to Chester Terrace, and arranged them alphabetically, according to the words to which they referred. He called these organized lists his 'basis of comparison'—since he would read through the various quotations and compare the way that the target word was used in each of them, so that he could compare their various meanings and senses and find out for himself which were essentially the same and which were different, and if different, whether profoundly or subtly so. It was by way of this non-judgemental, descriptive, and manifestly non-prescriptive way that meanings were eventually discerned, and the definitions written.

It is perhaps easiest to explain by offering an example.

Because of some gaps in the early archives of the Dictionary, it is difficult to be certain which submitted quotations were actually worked upon by Herbert Coleridge himself. We do know that he worked for more than a year on words that began with the letters A to E, and that to a lesser degree he began to sift through words

beginning with the letters F to L. Within that first group we know also he asked Messrs Trübner to prepare some sample pages (somewhat prematurely, critics said), the most successful apparently being those for the words between *Affect* and *Affection*. It might be worthwhile looking here.

Some few of the words in the sample pages—*affectationist* for example, 'one who indulges in affectation or artificiality'—have only a single meaning. But most of the other words have many more meanings—as, for instance, the word three further down the alphabetical line, *affected*. By reading the quotations submitted by volunteer readers for this one word, any good lexicographer who was working on proper historical principles would be able to recognize and discern several different shadings of meaning.

For instance, a quotation (and these that follow were indeed all received at Chester Terrace, and were eventually included in the Dictionary) such as 'He is too picked, too spruce, too *affected*, too odd', which comes from Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, suggests the meaning 'full of affectation; non-natural or artificial in manner; pretentious; affecting airs'. On the other hand, if the editor found, as in Milton's 1649 work *Eikonoklastes*, the phrase 'A work assigned rather than by me chosen or *affected*', he would know that affected here meant something quite different—in this case, 'sought after, aimed at, desired'. And yet again, if another volunteer reader found in the *Daily Telegraph* and submitted to Coleridge a report allowing that 'the accused was mentally *affected*, her father and three of her aunts having all been insane', he would recognize a third meaning, 'tainted, distempered, diseased'.

This is not to say that an editor, having read these three quotations, would instantly come up with three meanings for the word. He would want many more quotations—five or ten at the very least—to confirm that one meaning was indeed different from another, that each of them had some persistence in the literature,

and was not just the result of carelessness, or a malapropism. Which is why the work of a lexicographer is, as Samuel Johnson had famously said, so much harmless drudgery.

A microscopically close reading of all the literature would thus throw up as many meanings as were ever intended for any particular word (there are a total of eighteen definably different meanings and senses for *affected*)—whereupon Coleridge, or his successors, would make note of them, ponder the best way of writing a definition for each, gather in the etymologies and variant spellings and pronunciations, and have everything laid down in type, before moving on to the next word (in this case, *affectedly*).

To reiterate: Coleridge saw as his principal job the discovery of as many historically recorded uses as he and his volunteers could find of each of the words destined for the Dictionary; and from the comparisons he made of how each word had been used over time, he would work out which meanings were which, and arrange his dictionary accordingly. Moreover Coleridge, just like his colleagues⁶ and successors, and in deference to the ideas of Dean Trench and to the *Canones* he and his committee had written, stuck gamely to the basic principle of the project: that the more quotations that could be found, the more easily the subtle differences between the (possibly) myriad usages and meanings of any single word could be identified. This is how historical dictionaries are made: not as difficult a task today, perhaps—but Coleridge and those around him were pioneers, and every step of the process was new to him and to all who tried to help.

6 One colleague was his uncle Derwent Coleridge, a cleric and schoolmaster whose appetite for language was formidable: as the *Dictionary of National Biography* (*DNB*) has it, 'he could read Cervantes and Alfieri as easily as Racine and Schiller, and was well acquainted with Hungarian and Welsh poetry. Of the latter he was intensely fond. He could also read not only Arabic and Coptic, but Zulu and Hawaiian.'

To help him in arranging the words and the quotation slips⁷—the crucially important pieces of paper that would be the project's building blocks—Coleridge had a carpenter build for him, in oak, a small suite of pigeon-holes, to hold and permit the alphabetical arrangement of the various quotation slips that his volunteers sent in. The arrangement which he designed was six square holes high, nine across—giving him a total of 54 pigeon-holes, with some 260 inches of linear space that were thought sufficient to hold comfortably between 60,000 and 100,000 of the slips. No greater number could Coleridge ever imagine his having to deal with. When they were all filled with quotation slips, he was heard to tell his fellow philologists, then and only then would it be time to start proper editorial work on the big dictionary.

Herbert Coleridge was a steady and a Christian man, and he had well-developed—but, as it happened in the end, lexicographically quite unacceptable—views on the kinds of word that should *not* be in the Dictionary. He asked the Philological Society, for example, to exclude mock words like *devilship* since in this one case 'it was never intended by its author for general circulation or adoption'. The Society members politely disagreed, and voted that such words should indeed be placed in the book (*devilship* is there, with a quotation, and not a humorous one, from 1644), and that only laboured and unused puns like *hepistle* and *shepistle* should be proscribed. (Both are rightly absent, though *herstory*—the feminist equivalent of *history*—is first quoted⁸ from 1970.)

In mid-April 1861 he asked Trübner to print a few pages as specimens—the page that showed the words *Affect-Affection* was

7 His rules laid down a fixed design for the slips—they should be exactly half a sheet of writing paper in size, the headword should be at the top left, the quotation from each cited author should be written below, and there should be a separate slip for each quotation.

8 It appears first as a component in the acronym WITCH—'Women Inspired To Commit Herstory'.

regarded as the best. When he was halfway through working on a second 'basis for comparison', of those words beginning with letters between E and L, he was caught in a sudden spring rainstorm as he walked to St James's Square. He sat damply through a meeting of the Philological Society, and the next day, being thin and frail, caught a chill. He was taken back to his rooms, his friends watched aghast as the chill turned to consumption, and on the quintessentially English date of 23 April—both the Feast of St George and the birthday of Shakespeare—he died. He was just 31 years old.

It is said that his final words were 'I must begin Sanskrit to-morrow'. This seems a charming but somewhat improbable suggestion, given the section of the alphabet upon which he was working and the nature of the work he was bent on completing. But the story remains, indicative of the young man's learning, but hardly a memorial to his work on the book. The only other memorial (his plan for a three-part dictionary did not survive him, nor did his plans to have Messrs Trübner be the publishers, and his idea of having quotations going back only to 1250 was abandoned too, with the present Dictionary sporting illustrations from as far back as the ninth century) was the handmade set of 54 oaken pigeon-holes. These are still in existence, dusty and neglected in a museum in Oxford. Their dimensions proved woefully inadequate, and they were soon to be replaced by a set more than 40 times as large (and yet which in due course themselves proved to be just as niggardly too).

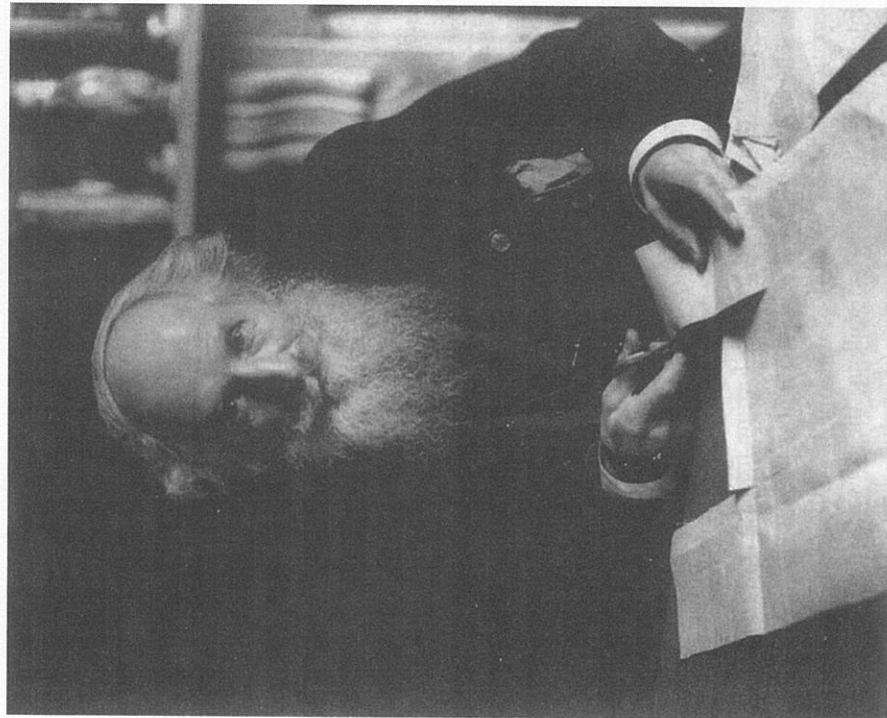
Herbert Coleridge had found it difficult to imagine that he would ever need to find room for the 100,000 quotations that he thought were likely to be used as the basis for the Dictionary. In the event, his successors had recourse to use the better part of six million, and no set of pigeon-holes known to man could ever have accommodated all of them.

Two years after Coleridge's death, Dean Trench returned to Ireland to take up the post of Archbishop of Dublin. The inchoate dictionary project, then no more than a barely formed mess of papers and file folders on a dead man's desk, was then handed over to the third member of the founding trinity—an amazing scholar-gypsy of a man who would be intimately associated with the project for the next half century, but whose early involvement led very nearly to disaster and abandonment.

He was Frederick James Furnivall, and though perhaps the most anodyne remark ever made about him was that 'to tobacco and alcohol he was a stranger through life' he was an eccentric of the fullest flower—or, as the *DNB* puts it with exquisite tact, he 'showed a characteristic impatience of convention and an undisciplined moral earnestness'. His long life was frequently mired in scandal, he was a man given to the oddest of short-lived enthusiasms. Of all the leading players in this saga, the boisterous Frederick Furnivall remains among the most colourful, most memorable, and deservedly best loved.

His critics—and they were legion—made much of the fact that his father ran (and made a fortune from so doing) a private lunatic asylum in Egham, in Surrey. He was an indifferent mathematics student at Cambridge, and is best remembered there and later for his fondness for sculling, the solitary sport he always thought far superior to rowing (though he had made the Trinity Hall rowing club's first eight), and which he pursued as a hobby all his life. He then became a student at Lincoln's Inn, and in due course (and without much enthusiasm) he became a lawyer.

But his first passion remained sculling. He was sufficiently dedicated to the sport, and with his inherited fortune insulating him from the need to pay too much attention to legal work, that he took time to design a special outrigger for his boat, to form sculling clubs, to inveigh against clubs that forbade working men from



Coleridge was succeeded by the scandalous, irrepressible but entirely lovable Frederick Furnivall, whose caprices and poor judgement very nearly caused the collapse and abandonment of the entire enterprise.

taking part, and, most vocally of all, to protest against the then general ban on allowing women on the water. He was inordinately fond of the ladies; and in his middle years he liked to recruit pretty waitresses from the Aerated Bread Company's teashop in Hammersmith with a view to teaching them the delights of his chosen sport. There are sepia photographs of him grinning impishly, surrounded by a group of very well-proportioned (and evidently rather cold) shopgirls in their close-fitting sculling tops, and others of him speeding along the river, a pretty girl behind him, with his long white beard flowing in the wind, the two of them a picture of goatish contentment.

One of the girls, an Oxford Street waitress named Blanche Huckle, from whom (after racing up the stairs two at a time 'like a young boy') he invariably ordered 'weak coffee, rusks and butter', wrote in a memorial volume published after his death, that 'Turney' was 'one of the kindest gentlemen I have ever met'. He would regularly 'invite several of us girls to a picnic up the river', she added, and he would bring presents to the café, most often 'two pairs of stockings for each of us'.

Such images led many to suppose Furnivall a bit of a rascal—and indeed, he confirmed his membership of a flexible moral universe by committing the doubly unpardonable sin of first marrying his very young lady's maid, Lizzy Dalziel, and then, after she had borne him two children and had become, as he saw it, 'indolent and dull', cruelly abandoning her. He left her, when he was 58, for a girl 37 years his junior, his dazzlingly pretty and intellectually vibrant 21-year-old secretary named Teena Rochfort-Smith. So appalled was one correspondent on receiving word of this affair that 'he immediately stuck stamp-paper over the signature of the writer who gave him the news'. *Vivat, Victorial!* (Sadly, fate saw to it that Teena was not able to bring Furnivall happiness for very long. She was burned to death in Goole, in Yorkshire, after a flaming



Frederick Furnivall loved two things as much as the English language—the company of pretty young women and the noble watersport of sculling. He managed to combine both passions by establishing a Ladies' Sculling Club in Hammersmith, West London, and appears well contented among its membership.

match-head broke off while she was trying to destroy some letters. It was a scant two months after her lover had obtained a formal separation from his wife.)

This extraordinary, 'embarrassing but unembarrassable' man—'[this] kind, selfless, patriotic humanitarian ... [this] dedicated literary detective, collating, annotating, transcribing, deciphering and editing so that all Englishmen might read the literature of their noble forefathers ... [this] volatile, impulsive, meddling, cantankerous literary warmonger ... [this] undiplomatic, unconventional individualist in corduroy trousers and pink-ribbon tie', as a biographer put it—promptly took on the work that Coleridge's death had bequeathed to him. Technically he was a practising solicitor—though far more interested in philosophy, socialism, and girls—and so at first all the dictionary work was passed from Chester Terrace first to his law office on Ely Place, and later to his house in St George's Square, off Primrose Hill. In May 1862—a year after Coleridge's death—a friend⁹ recorded meeting Furnivall at work:

Found him in a strange dingy room upstairs; the walls & floor and chairs strewn with books, papers, proofs, clothes, everything—in wondrous confusion; the table spread with a meal of chaotic and incongruous dishes, of which he was partaking, along with 'Lizzy' Dalziel, the pretty lady's maid whom he has educated into such strange relations with himself, and for whose sake he has behaved so madly to Litchfield & others of his best friends; & her brother, a student of our College. After the meal, which lasted from 7 to 9, all four of them set to work, arranging and writing

⁹ The friend was the poet Arthur Munby, whose own sexual eccentricities became known only after his death in 1910. He was powerfully attracted to rough, strong, dirty women, and he married his own servant, Hannah Cullick, delighting in her covering herself with dirt and soot as, perfectly willingly, she cleaned the household chimneys entirely naked. Much of his poetry extols the virtues of manual labour and working women.

out words for the *Philological Dictionary*, of which Furnivall is now Editor in place of poor Herbert Coleridge. 'Missy', as F. calls the girl, is his amanuensis and transcribes: takes long walks too with him and others, of ten and twenty miles a day; which is creditable to her; and indeed she seems a quiet and unassuming creature.

There is no doubting either Furnivall's genius, his energy, or his scholarship. He was blessed with friends who luxuriated in his many talents: Alfred, Lord Tennyson was close, as were Charles Kingsley, John Ruskin, William Morris, and Frederick Delius. And the banker-writer Kenneth Grahame, who shared Furnivall's enthusiasm for sculling, eventually succeeded in writing his friend into *The Wind in the Willows*, a book which Furnivall had encouraged him to write. He cast him as the Water Rat, a cunning and ever-keen creature imbued with a properly rattish pedantry. 'We learned 'em!' says Toad. 'We taught 'em!' corrects Rat.

But what was seriously wanting in Furnivall, in his now enforced role as dictionary editor, was any sustained sense of organization or self-discipline. He was dedicated and enthusiastic, true; and there was much early optimism about his appointment. 'I am very glad you are able to undertake the dictionary,' wrote Hensleigh Wedgwood, still stunned by Coleridge's early death, 'which must otherwise have gone to pot.' Elisabeth Murray, the granddaughter of the man who would eventually succeed Furnivall, admitted the man's 'impressive' sustained enthusiasm—but at the same time she could see that his was a much misdirected enthusiasm, and that he was sorely lacking both in patience and in an acknowledgement of a great need—extraordinary in a dictionary-maker—for accuracy.

His problem, so far as the Dictionary was concerned, is perhaps best illustrated by his indefatigable and inexplicable need to found societies. Between 1864 (when he should have been hard at

work on the book) and 1886, he founded no fewer than seven of them: the Early English Text Society, the Chaucer Society, the Ballad Society, the New Shakspeare Society (whose members clung to the old spelling of the Bard's name), the Wyclif Society, the Browning Society, and the Shelley Society. His involvement with the Philological Society began early on in his life, in 1847, not long after it was founded. He became its joint secretary in 1853—and later, as mentioned, one of the trinity of good men on the Society's Unregistered Words Committee.

In addition to all of the duties and responsibilities that stemmed from so much belonging, Furnivall was a deeply committed socialist and (until his later agnosticism set in), a somewhat enthusiastic Christian, and a keen believer in the right of blue-collar labourers to enjoy the benefits of a full education. His involvement with the London Working Men's College, which had been set up to take care of such needs, took up much of his time as well. He took up long-distance cycling, and would spend weekends touring southern England with his new labouring friends. He fought gamely against any injustice he perceived was visited on workers—on one occasion leading a deputation of angry ballast-heavers to Downing Street, and on another selling some of his own books to help pay the legal fees of some vexed wood-cutters.

And if all this were not enough diversion, Furnivall also managed to get himself involved in a series of the most dreadful spats and arguments, fights that would have sapped the energy of many a lesser man. The most celebrated of these fights was with the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne. It all began in 1876 with a technical dispute over the metre of lines in a play, *Henry VIII*, that had once been loosely attributed to Shakespeare. It smouldered for some years, then burst out into the open, and in a torrent of abuse: Swinburne called Furnivall 'the most bellicose bantam cock that ever defied creation'; Furnivall countered by accusing the

poet of having 'the ear of a poetaster, hairy, thick and dull', and played with the origins of his name, restyling him as 'Pigsbrook'. Swinburne in turn looked up the origins of Furnivall's name, and rendered it into 'Brothel-dyke', and his gatherings 'Fartiwell and Co.' or 'The Shitspeare Society'. This undignified feud lasted for six miserable and exhausting years (great fun for all spectators, of course). It stirred up tidal waves of a lasting enmity directed at both men. And it must have had a singularly damaging impact on Furnivall's more important tasks.

The inevitable consequence was that under Frederick Furnivall's direction, work on the Dictionary in the years following Coleridge's death, stalled, stalled, and then very nearly died itself. Furnivall was 36 when he took over the job. He assumed it would take him until he was just over 40 to complete it. And so he began in earnest, assembling yet more reading lists, gutting yet more books for quotations, taking on new armies of volunteers: 'Fling our doors wide!' he wrote, exhorting readers to send in ever more, 'all—not one, but all—must enter!'

He next arranged (once Tribner had lost interest, or the firm's contract had lapsed, or both) for the much-revered house of John Murray¹⁰ to agree to take on the task of publishing the book. He tried to persuade the firm of his seriousness of purpose by proposing they first publish a Concise version of the book, which, he promised, could be ready in three years or less. In addition he hired a new rank of employee—the sub-editor, he was called, a fairly new term borrowed from the newspaper industry—who would undertake (without pay: Furnivall was at first most persuasive) the lexicographical grunt-work that Furnivall regarded himself as too grand to perform.

¹⁰ Still admired today, as since 1768—though lately subsumed into the embrace of the Hodder Headline group.

But despite the burst of initial enthusiasm, little was to come of anything. The *Concise English Dictionary* never got out of the starting gates—John Murray called Furnivall a 'h'arbitrary gent', and pulled out of talks. Volunteer readers, infuriated by Furnivall's short attention span and his caprices of fascination, began deserting the programme in droves. Sometimes it was simply Furnivall's irascibility that scared them away. 'Next time,' he wrote to one, testily, 'will you be good enough to copy out each passage on a separate half-sheet of notepaper? All your former ones I shall be obliged to have cut up and pasted on larger pieces of paper.' (At least this particular volunteer did not commit what some—though not Furnivall—regarded as the heresy of cutting up the books he was reading, and pasting the quotation onto the slip. Many was the time when sub-editors would receive slips with valuable sixteenth-century black-letter cuttings stuck onto them, evidence of a book now ruined by lazy lexicographic vandalism.)

But sub-editors too, daunted by the huge number of quotation slips that had arrived by the sackful during the volunteers' more productive days, started abandoning ship as well. And though Furnivall did, as he had promised, successfully oversee the making of the third part of the Basis of Comparison, for the letters M to Z, it was not long before the Philological Society itself began to get cold feet too.

A steadily decreasing official enthusiasm for the project begins to make itself evident in the Society's journal, the *Transactions*, as the years of Furnivall's editorship continued. In the beginning the journal's pages were filled with exuberant and confident reports of the 'tremendous progress' and 'great strides' and 'significant achievements' that were being realized by the project's managers, as quotation slips were being solicited, shades of meaning determined, definitions written, entire letters ticked off the list. But slowly, towards the end of the 1860s, the purpose begins to falter.

The year-end assessments of progress became shorter, their language less robust, the show of optimism less evident. By 1872 Furnivall was forced to report to his masters that 'progress in the Dictionary has been so slight that no fresh report in detail is needed'.

Books and papers held by the volunteers—many of them had been sent volumes from the Philological Society's library, which they would use to do their research—were now being returned by readers too exasperated, weary, or disenchanted to go on. Before long the lobby of Furnivall's house at No. 3 St George's Square was 'cumbered with boxes and bundles of every size and form'; in 1879 more than two tons of papers were sent in as the wholesale abandonment of the project proceeded. Moreover, it was now clear that other disenchanted volunteers had simply left their papers and their books where they stood—had consigned them to lumber rooms, taken them away on holiday and left them behind in faraway hotels and boarding houses, dumped them in rubbish bins, lost them. By the mid-1870s, the work of thousands had been dispersed across half the world like wind-borne pollen: if the project ever were to be revived, it would take an immense amount of diligent searching to bring it all together again.

But it was worse than that. A terminal crisis was looming. 'The general belief', wrote an editor at the *Athenaeum*, 'is that the project will not be carried out.' If the great dictionary project was to continue, it would require the appointment of a far more organized, less volatile, and better-tempered leader at its helm.

The Society was already recognizing this as early as 1874, when its President, the mathematician Alexander Ellis, wailed that he thought the body 'less fitted to compile a dictionary than to get the materials [for it] collected'. Then again a year later the sub-editor who had worked on the letter F (and who

had supervised a second series of specimen pages, on the words *Fa*¹¹ to *Face*), the Reverend George Wheelwright, suggested, in a briskly worded pamphlet, that Furnivall make up his mind about the future of the scheme.

He should, the cleric said, promptly find a new editor, assure everyone that they were not on 'a Fools chace which should end only in a general fiasco', and by so doing bring to an end 'the intolerable suspense under which we all groan'. Wheelwright had spent ten years of his life dedicated to the Dictionary: he was not about to see it fail without someone, somewhere, making an effort to save it.

As early as 1871—three years before his Society became publicly exasperated, four before Wheelwright's outburst—Furnivall himself had come to appreciate how hopeless he was at running the project, and had tried to find a replacement. He knew he had lost sub-editors who had initially agreed to supervise the words beginning with the letters A, I, J, N, O, P, and W—leaving fully one quarter of the alphabet uncovered—and he wrote that he was now bound to look 'for a fresh editor for the whole work'.

He had first approached Henry Sweet, a notoriously rude phonetician who was later used by George Bernard Shaw as a model for Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion*—later the play and film *My Fair Lady*. But Sweet had turned him down flat. Furnivall then approached Henry Nicol, another eminent and rather calmer philologist, who was amenable to the idea, and rather flattered. But when he looked at the size of the task ahead he reminded himself that he was chronically unwell, and in any case too busy with other tasks—and so Furnivall had to look elsewhere.

It was fully four years later that he at last came upon the man

11 *Fa* has four meanings—versions of the words *faul*, *foe*, *foe*, and *fall*, and the fourth note of the octave in the sol-fa system.

who would pull the project back from the brink, and propel it to its ultimate success. It began with a chance remark made to him at a Philological Society meeting. It ended with Furnivall concluding decisively that the man who had made the remark would, could, and indeed should be the ideal candidate for the post of new editor. He began immediately to work 'like a busy spider', as he later put it, spinning the web that would eventually ensnare his candidate and keep him tightly enmeshed in the Byzantine complexities of the English language for the rest of his days.

The man was James Augustus Henry Murray. What he had said to Furnivall, when he learned of the difficulties the Secretary was having in finding a new editor for the Dictionary, was simple, no more in essence than, 'I rather wish I could have a go at it.' He had not intended the remark to be taken seriously. After all, he was no more than an amateur philologist, interested in whiling away his evenings musing on the origins of dialect. He was 38 years old, a former bank clerk who was by now employed rather more happily as a teacher at the Mill Hill School in north London. He was a lowland Scot, a linen draper's son, from the Teviotdale village of Denholm, near Hawick, in Roxburghshire. He had been brought up in rural isolation, his family unmoneyed, his life unsophisticated, his future unpromising. 'I am a nobody,' he would write in later years, when fame had begun to creep up on him. 'Treat me as a solar myth, or an echo, or an irrational quantity, or ignore me altogether.'

But there was no ignoring him, for James Murray was in all ways—and in particular, in intellectual ways—unforgettably remarkable. He was remarkable even in an age that produced a disproportionate share, or so it seems today, of exceptionally clever men. He has a reputation still as a towering figure in British scholarship. He was Calvinist in his spiritual outlook, polymathic in his interests and his competences, forbidding in his

appearance—a fiery red beard lent him the air of faint bellicosity—and he was all too casually aware of the combined effect that these formidable attributes of looks and brains had on those around him. He radiated a magisterial air of righteous authority—rather, as it turned out, as the dictionary that he would make would also radiate in its own time.

And he, at long last, was the man who would make all the difference.