

THE SOCIETY'S DICTIONARY: ARTICLES AND EXCERPTS ON THE OED

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C. Brewer

COMMENTARY

1. INTRODUCTION

As will be well known to readers of this journal, the great *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) had its origins in the meeting rooms of the London Philological Society. Set up in the 1830s, the Society consisted of a number of scholars and gentlemen who met several times a year to deliver and discuss scholarly papers on a variety of languages and linguistic matters, including words and their meanings, spellings and etymologies, grammars and lexicons, and dialects and the relationship between languages (on the origins of the Society see [here](#)).

The germ of an idea for a new Dictionary of English, superior to all others, gradually swelled and took root in a number of the Society's meetings and discussions over the late 1850s. Some of these debates and plans were in turn recorded in the pages of its journal, *Transactions of the Philological Society*. Especially in the early days, a wealth of detail can be found in unexpected places in the *Transactions* volumes – an open letter from one member to another, or updates on the Dictionary's progress that are buried away in the hundred-page reports to the Society which were delivered as part of successive Presidents' annual addresses.

The present 'virtual' collection is a selection from the *Transactions* of articles, or excerpts from articles, which between them constitute an important, though occasionally fragmentary, narrative of the OED's progress from 1857 through to the twenty-first century.¹ From the start, it was recognized that the new dictionary was an enterprise of national significance, bringing honour and glory to the Society but also exacting a huge cost in time and labour. In 1881, the Society's President, the phoneticist A. J. Ellis, spoke of his hopes that he might see 'the first parts of this gigantic work flutter into life before I myself have fluttered out of it', guessing - rightly - that 'This Dictionary will probably be the work by which our Society will be best known to future ages' ('Tenth Annual Address of the President to the Philological Society, vol 18 (1881), 259-60). As these words indicate, the Society continued to feel a strong sense of responsibility even after

Oxford University Press took over the enterprise in 1879, and two of its chief editors - J. A. H. Murray and Henry Bradley - each served several terms as the Society's President. Ellis died in 1890 and achieved his wish, since the first installment of the Dictionary appeared in 1884, though it took another 44 years to complete the first edition, published to national acclaim in 1928.

The *Transactions* record the triumphs but also the disputes, difficulties and delays involved in the Dictionary's slow construction. Articles and extracts drawn from 1857-1887 give us snapshots of its progress and allow us to listen in on discussions of editorial policy and practice. Bulletins were never published regularly, however, and virtually cease after 1928. The latter part of the twentieth century saw three articles marking the OED's transition from Supplement through second edition into (long over-due) revision, while the twenty-first century has so far seen just two articles, presenting and exploring some of the ways in which the old Dictionary is being freshly recast, indeed re-born, in the third revision currently underway at Oxford University Press. The present volume serves a dual purpose: bringing to light the Dictionary's past from the Society's point of view on the one hand, while on the other, it is hoped, encouraging both lexicographers and dictionary users to reflect on the current progress and likely future of the Dictionary's progeny, the newly emerging third edition of the OED.

2. BEGINNINGS

Dictionaries had been considered by the Philological Society at various stages since its foundation, but it was in summer 1857 that we can first discern the clear origins of what was to become the OED. At the meeting of 18 June that year, the Society decided to set up a Special Committee to collect 'unregistered' words and idioms - i.e., those unrecorded in existing dictionaries of English. Recent discussions had focused on 'the present state of English Lexicography', and members had been reflecting on the shortcomings of both the two standard dictionaries of English, by Samuel Johnson and Charles Richardson respectively (Johnson's *Dictionary*, first published in 1755, had been frequently re-issued and updated since, while Richardson's work had appeared in various forms between 1818 and 1837). Neither of these two dictionaries, members felt, 'had any claims

to be considered as a *Lexicon totius Anglicitatis* [a complete dictionary of English]'. In consequence, 'the collection of materials towards the completion of [such a] truly national work would be an object well worthy of the energies of the Society.'² At this stage, the idea was to supplement Johnson and Richardson rather than replace them. The Special Committee, consisting of three members, was created in order to investigate the project and do its best to enlist help from the public, reporting back at the first meeting of the Society in the autumn.

The three individuals who constituted this new Committee were R. C. Trench, Herbert Coleridge, and F. J. Furnivall. Each was to play a significant (albeit very different) role in creating the new Dictionary. Trench, then Dean of Westminster, had become a member of the Society only that year, though he had already written extensively on language and language change. It was he who delivered the two seminal lectures to the Philological Society in November 1857, entitled 'Some Deficiencies in English Dictionaries', that established the case for the new project and have subsequently been seen as marking its true beginning (see Item 1 below). In 1859 Trench published *A Select Glossary*, supplying his entries with carefully sourced quotations some of which were gratefully borrowed by future Dictionary editors. But after 1863, when he was appointed Archbishop of Dublin, Trench faded from view so far as the Dictionary was concerned, his energies consumed by unsuccessful attempts to resist Gladstone's disestablishment of the Irish church.

Herbert Coleridge's part in the Dictionary was equally short-lived, and equally formative - though in his case it was early death from TB, not ecclesiastical preferment, that put an end to his involvement. His final stretch of illness was brought on 'by a chill caused by sitting in damp clothes during a Philological Society lecture. When he was told that he would not recover he is reported to have exclaimed, "I must begin Sanskrit tomorrow"'. Eighteen months

² Quoted from *Notes & Queries* 2nd Series 83 (1857), 81-84

(<http://nq.oxfordjournals.org/content/s2-IV/83/81.full.pdf+html>; subscription required). A fuller account of the origins and compilation of the first edition of the Dictionary can be found in the 'Historical Introduction' to the 1933 reissue of OED (Murray et al 1933), final volume (unnumbered), vii-xxvi.

later he was dead, 'working on the Dictionary to the last, with quotation slips and word-lists spread on the quilt of his bed' (Murray 1977: 136; cf. J. D. Coleridge 1861). That was in 1861, and he was only 31 years old. But he had already achieved a great deal to bring the work into existence, as testified by the material included in the present collection.

The third member of the Society's new committee, F. J. Furnivall, was a literary and linguistic jack of all trades possessed of extraordinary vigour and ebullience. Intimately involved with the Dictionary at all its stages up to his death in 1910, one of his most important achievements was to steer through its transfer from the Philological Society to Oxford University Press in 1879 and mastermind the appointment of J. A. H. Murray as chief editor, without which two manoeuvres the Dictionary project might have faltered and died.

The three men began by issuing a circular in July 1857, reproduced in the journal *Notes & Queries* and elsewhere, describing the Society's recent debate on dictionaries and appealing to members of the public to 'become collectors' of unrecorded vocabulary, dispatching the fruits of their investigations back to the Committee members.³ This appeal to the public was the first of many in the Dictionary's long history: throughout its compilation, it has been crucially dependent on volunteers to help read texts and record quotations of how words have been used at all periods of the language's history. Quotations form the evidential basis of the Dictionary and substantiate its claim to be the supreme authority on the vocabulary of English; more than five million were amassed for the first edition of OED, and the collection has grown enormously since then. Appeals to the public continue to this day and have been issued a number of times by the current OED (see [here](#)). Incidentally, the Special Committee's 1857 Appeal sparked off a tradition in *Notes & Queries* of articles from readers suggesting words and entries for inclusion and/or correction in the Society's Dictionary, one that also continues to the present day.

³ See reference in note 1 above and Gilliver 2011. The OED Online website has a facsimile of the first page of the circular at <http://public.oed.com/the-oed-appeals/history-of-the-appeals/> [accessed 22 Jan 2013].

But instead of reporting back to the Society in its November meeting, Trench delivered two lectures to its members. Subsequently published as a single article in one volume, they sold well enough to go into a second edition (1860) which was bound in the 1857 issue of the Philological Society's *Transactions* (published in arrears, as was often the case). This is Item no. 1.

Trench's famous article, widely recognized as the starting point of the OED, set out a full explanation of what was wrong with existing dictionaries of English and explained what was needed instead: a descriptive inventory of English vocabulary, full and uncensored, based on examples of usage recorded from their earliest occurrence onwards. Its cumulative effect, as Trench explains in his prefatory note on pp. 1-2, was to persuade the Society that it should drop the idea of a supplementary work and pursue a completely new dictionary altogether, a scheme naturally giving rise to the title '*A New English Dictionary*', the name by which the Dictionary was to be known for many years (on the subsequent adoption of the alternative title *Oxford English Dictionary* see Item 12, p. 1 below).

ITEM 1: ON SOME DEFICIENCIES IN OUR ENGLISH DICTIONARIES. [*Transactions of the Philological Society* \(1857\), Volume 4, Issue 2, pages 1-70](#)
[R. C. Trench. Published 1860](#)

As later reported by Herbert Coleridge (Item 2, p. 72), 'More than a year passed away in combating various difficulties, and it was not until August, 1858, that we [i.e. the Society] felt ourselves in a position to announce the plan of a New Dictionary as a certainty'. The Society then produced a formal *Proposal for a Publication of a New English Dictionary by the Philological Society* (1859) which articulated some of the main principles of the new work: that it should contain every word occurring in the literature of English, draw on all published books as its sources barring specialised scientific ones, record English vocabulary from around 1250 to the present (the first date was later pushed back to 1150), and include etymologies in its entries. Volunteer contributors – or 'collectors', to use the Society's own term - were asked to consult three 'Bases of Comparison' in order to help them identify which words should be noted: Coleridge's recently

compiled *Glossarial Index to the Printed English Literature of the Thirteenth Century* (1859), concordances to the Bible and Shakespeare, and an index of words in the works of Edmund Burke (though it seems this may never have been produced).

Any words which could not be found in these three authorities were ripe for inclusion in the Dictionary and were to be recorded as quotations from their original source - as were likewise any words now obsolete, so that the Dictionary could secure both the earliest and last examples of usage (*Proposal* 1859, 5-6, 8; the original 'Bases' were later expanded with additional published word lists by Coleridge and then, after his death, Furnivall). The *Proposal* set down a number of further 'Rules and Directions for Collectors' and ended with an eighteen-page book list of suggested quotation sources, divided into three chronological periods, specifying which had already been taken up by volunteer readers. It also printed a sample quotation slip so that readers could see exactly what they were being asked to do: set down the relevant headword at the top of a half-sheet of notepaper (roughly 6 x 4 inches), write out the quotation in which it occurred, and supply the name, date and page number of the quotation's source (a practice which continues to this day).

Proposal for a Publication of a New English Dictionary by the Philological Society (originally published in Vol 4 Part 2 of TPhS (following the revised text of Trench's 'On Some Deficiencies' and Coleridge's letter). London, 1859): accessible [here](#) (accessed 15 Nov 2013)

The response to the Society's various appeals and publications was evidently very good. Item 2 is an open letter (30 May 1860) to Trench from Herbert Coleridge, now appointed editor, in which he discusses the principles and progress of the embryo project, explaining that 'the theory of lexicography we profess' was that of the German lexicographer Franz Passow, who published successive editions of an important dictionary of classical Greek between 1819 and 1831. Coleridge summed this up in a single phrase: "every word should be made to tell its own story" - the story of its birth and life, and in many cases of its death, and even occasionally of its resuscitation' (72). He also reports on the

reading programme so far and is notably testy about the quality of the volunteer readers. At this stage, however, he is confident that 'unless any unforeseen accident should occur to paralyze our efforts,' the dictionary's first installment would be published in 'about two years'. An unforeseen accident was to occur all too soon: Coleridge died the following year, and as it turned out the first installment did not appear until 1884.

ITEM 2: APPENDIX: A LETTER TO THE VERY REV. THE DEAN OF WESTMINSTER. [*Transactions of the Philological Society \(1857\), Volume 4, Issue 2, pages 71-78*](#)

Herbert Coleridge

But issues of editorial principle and practice had begun to rear their heads well before Coleridge's death in 1861. As he described in his letter to Trench, Coleridge had drawn up a series of 'rules or canons' for the editors of the Dictionary as well as for the collectors, and these proved contentious. They were keenly debated over 1859-60, both by the Dictionary Committee itself and at Society meetings (Item 2, 77). An agreed set of guidelines was finally drawn up and published in 1860 (*Canones Lexicographi; or Rules to be Observed in Editing the New English Dictionary*), reiterating the aim of the Dictionary to be as comprehensive as possible ('under certain limitations') and proposing that it should also contain 'Vocabularies' of 'Technical and Scientific Terms' and 'An Etymological Appendix'.

The ideal of comprehensiveness was a particularly troublesome aspect of the proposed scheme. Including all words meant including undesirable ones too, and this idea upset some of the Society's members. Coleridge's own uncle, Derwent (son of S. T. Coleridge), delivered a paper to the Society on May 10 1860 - a few days before his nephew wrote his open letter to Trench - in which he argued that the new Dictionary should evaluate language, not just describe it (Item 3). The job of a lexicographer was to 'adjudicate, settling each point, as it occurs, under the guidance of his own observation, or more commonly of that life-long, unconscious induction, which amounts in a highly-cultivated native speaker'. In short, 'The office of a Dictionary . . . is eminently regulative... It

separates the spurious from the genuine' (155-6). But this call for adjudication on language usage was quite at odds with the historical function Trench had so clearly explained in his initial lectures: the central vision of the new Dictionary was that it should be a dispassionate record of all language, without judgement or censorship. The question as to what degree – if at all – the Dictionary should be prescriptive (i.e. set down rules for usage) and to what degree it should be descriptive (i.e. record how language was used in practice), has continued a thorny and complicated one ever since. See Items 13 and 19 below; also Brewer 2010.

ITEM 3: OBSERVATIONS ON THE PLAN OF THE SOCIETY'S PROPOSED NEW ENGLISH DICTIONARY. [*Transactions of the Philological Society \(1860\), Volume 7, Issue 1, pages 152-168*](#)

Derwent Coleridge

Herbert Coleridge himself had concerns about the Dictionary's proposed comprehensiveness. Compiling his *Glossarial Index to the Printed English Literature of the Thirteenth Century* as an aid for volunteer readers (see reference to Bases, above) may well have got him thinking in more detail than some of his fellow Society members about the nuts and bolts of making a dictionary, and Coleridge had clearly been reading through later literature too, including latter-day writers like Dickens and Carlyle, both of them eccentric users of language who coined many words. But should the Dictionary really include every word ever recorded? Several months later, at the meeting of 8 November 1860, Coleridge delivered a controversial paper suggesting he and his fellow editors should renege on this principle, relegating 'literary fungi' - his name for eccentric one-off coinages by writers like Skelton and Nashe, or Dickens and Carlyle - to a separate section of the work. At the end of Coleridge's article as reproduced here (43) is a note by Furnivall, reporting that the Society decided to stick to its guns notwithstanding its editor's advice: 'except in very special cases, *all* words should be admitted into the proposed Dictionary; ...though ... a discretion was reserved to the Editor to exclude some words... it should be exercised sparingly.' Furnivall's views were strikingly at odds with

those of the Coleridges but it was his that ultimately prevailed. As he wrote in a circular to Society members in 1862, 'We have set ourselves to form a National Portrait Gallery, not only of the worthies, but of all the members, of the race of English words which is to form the dominant speech of the world....Fling our doors wide! all, all, not one, but all, must enter' (Murray 1977: 193; the last phrases quote Tennyson's poem 'The Princess: A Medley' (1847), VI: 314-7).

ITEM 4. ON THE EXCLUSION OF CERTAIN WORDS FROM A DICTIONARY. [*Transactions of the Philological Society* \(1860\), Volume 7, Issue 1, pages 37-44, delivered 8 November 1860](#)

Herbert Coleridge

The Philological Society's *Transactions* now fall almost silent on the Dictionary for nearly twenty years. The problem was not only the death of Herbert Coleridge, but also the difficulty of keeping the project alive without proper funding and an institutional home. Furnivall took over as editor and must have seemed a good choice to begin with, as a charismatic and energetic individual however maverick and widely stretched (see Benzie 1983). Initially he provided reports on progress to the Philological Society which were distributed as circulars, but as progress faltered these petered out. Furnivall nevertheless created and maintained a network of sub-editors, to whom he delegated the job of coordinating and recording quotations for individual letters. In 1868 the *Athenaeum* reported that the project had run into the ground (16 May 1868, 698); in May 1874 the Society's President, A. J. Ellis, lamented its lack of direction, observing 'a Society is less fitted to compile a dictionary than to get the materials collected' and pointing out that they needed an editor who would devote all his energies to this task (unlike the much-preoccupied Furnivall, 'who wants as many arms as an Indian god to get through the ever fresh labours which he so enthusiastically initiates to further the study of our older literature'). 'Would that one of our own younger members...may also have the will, the strength, and the means' to achieve the task, Ellis exclaimed, dropping a heavy hint that the learned philologist Henry Sweet would be the man for the job (President's Annual Address for 1874, 354-6, *TPS* volume 15, issue 1, May 1874).

Shortly afterwards, Furnivall and others began the process of chivvying contacts and searching for a publisher. Initial discussions with Macmillan broke down, but in 1879, after tortuous negotiations, Oxford University Press contracted with the Philological Society to take over the project and J. A. H. Murray was installed as editor. The Philological Society retained its contract with the Press until 1900, when it surrendered its rights in the Dictionary in exchange for money to help publish the next few volumes of its *Transactions* (Murray 1977: 164-65). The title pages of the successive volumes of the first edition, however, continued to record the foundation of the Dictionary on the materials collected by the Society. Long after most other users had dropped the attribution, the Philological Society continued to refer to 'the Society's Dictionary', and up to 1982 printed a paragraph on the back cover of each volume of its *Transactions* referring to 'The Society's New English Dictionary on Historical Principles'.

3. REVIVAL UNDER J. A. H. MURRAY

J. A. H. Murray was a Scottish schoolmaster, largely self-taught, who had moved down to London in 1864 for the benefit of his first wife's health. After a brief spell at the Chartered Bank of India, he was appointed schoolmaster at Mill Hill School in 1870. During this time he developed his academic and intellectual interests by further study, chiefly in philological disciplines of one sort or another.

He became acquainted with Furnivall, produced several editions for Furnivall's Early English Text Society - an organization set up to publish Old and Middle English works, available only in manuscript, whose language could then be excerpted for the Dictionary - and wrote *The Dialects of the Southern Counties of Scotland*, which was published in 1872. By 1868 he had joined the Philological Society and in 1878 he served the first of several terms as its President. Murray's Presidential Address to the Society in May 1879 gave him the opportunity to update Society members on the momentous new developments in the Dictionary's progress. In the extract from this address reproduced here, Murray reports on the recent resuscitation of the work under his new editorship, including the negotiations with OUP, his own recent appointment, his work establishing the quotation stock so far amassed by the previous editors and sub-

editors, and the publication of an Appeal to the general public – immediately successful - to help fill the gaps in the collection. At this stage, the plan was to cover the entire alphabet in four volumes and complete the Dictionary within ten years; Murray reports that he has prepared a stretch of entries as far as *Aby* but recognizes that this is ‘a microscopic portion of the whole work’ (572). He also sets out some of the ‘Problems and Principles of Lexicography’ (573-85), including determining pronunciation and etymology, tracing the development of senses, and treating compound words.

The biography of J. A. H. Murray by his granddaughter (Murray 1977) gives a full account of Murray’s work on the Dictionary both in this early phase and throughout his life, and provides an unsurpassed biographical account of the man himself. For more on the 1879 Appeal, see Brewer 2000.

ITEM 5: “THE DICTIONARY IS NOW IN FULL PROGRESS”

EIGHTH ANNUAL ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT [J. A. H. MURRAY] TO THE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY. [*Transactions of the Philological Society \(1879\), Volume 17, EXCERPT ONLY: PAGES 567-585 OUT OF 561-624*](#)

*Note: p. 571, *Bases of Comparison*. Murray is referring to the ‘Bases’ established for readers in 1859-61; see account above.

By the following year Murray had made a great deal of progress, which he again reported to the Society in his Presidential Address. He explains that ‘every hour is consecrated’ to his role of editor of the Dictionary, and in summarising the scholarly business at the Society’s meetings over the year he makes it clear that he is regularly discussing editorial and other Dictionary matters with members, whether at a Society ‘Dictionary Evening’ or on other occasions (118-9).

His report proper begins on page 120 and covers *Readers and Reading* (including vital contributions from American volunteers, 121-25); lists of *desiderata* (words for which quotations were needed, 125-127); plagiarism in existing dictionaries and the consequent need to get quotations from examples of genuine language usage, not from word books (127-9); the work of the sub-editors and Murray’s processing of the dictionary slips he inherited with the project (129-131); the scope of the English language and the question as to how the Dictionary was to

establish its limits ('At which Englishman's speech does English terminate?'; 131-134); how to define the scope and remit of individual entries ('what is a *word*, and what is merely a *form*?'; 134-137); the importance of organizing entries by historical evidence rather than by details of grammar or by etymology (137-9).

ITEM 6: 'PROGRESS OF THE DICTIONARY'

'NINTH ANNUAL ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT [J. A. H. MURRAY] TO THE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY. [*Transactions of the Philological Society \(1880\)*, Volume 18, EXCERPT ONLY: PAGES 117-139 out of 117-76 total](#)

The next extract, from A. J. Ellis's Presidential Address to the Society (21 May 1881), gives us a good sense of the importance of the Dictionary to members, and praises 'the indefatigable exertions of Dr. Murray' whose name Ellis hopes will be better known than Johnson's, Webster's or Richardson's (260). Ellis introduces Murray's latest report (260-69), which begins with a quantitative account of books, readers, reading and quotations to date. Laid end to end, the quotation slips so far accumulated would extend 87 miles; 'mere cursory inspection' of them 'is the labour of many years' (this was the first of many such statistical calculations by Murray, regularly printed in the prefaces to individual installments once the Dictionary began to be published). Sub-editing of individual letters was advancing well. Murray is preparing samples for printing which he hopes will elicit comments on typography, the organization of material within each entry, and methods of indicating pronunciation, and he urges contributors to add as many quotations as they can as 'the general amassing of quotations must cease with the present year'. In fact, it was 1905 or so before the quotation gathering was largely complete.

ITEM 7: 'THE WORK BY WHICH OUR SOCIETY WILL BE BEST KNOWN TO FUTURE AGES'.

TENTH ANNUAL ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT [A. J. ELLIS] TO THE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY. [*Transactions of the Philological Society \(1881\)*, Volume 18, EXCERPT ONLY: PAGES 259-69 out of 252-321 total](#)

A briefer report appeared the following year, introduced as before by A. J. Ellis, who detailed the series of Society Dictionary evenings in which Murray had talked about some of the *A* words he was editing and had explained the pronunciation conventions he had now settled on. Murray himself announced the 'great fact' that 'the Dictionary is now at last really launched, and some forty pages are in type'. He begged for more help from members in collecting 'modern instances of all uses and constructions' of 'little words' - prepositions, conjunctions and particles - and in arranging and classifying slips in order 'to accelerate the final work of editing'.

ITEM 8: 'REPORT ON THE PRESENT STATE OF THE DICTIONARY OF THE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY BY DR J. A. MURRAY'. EXCERPTED FROM ELEVENTH ANNUAL ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT [A. J. ELLIS] TO THE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY. [*Transactions of the Philological Society* \(1884\), Volume 19: EXCERPT ONLY: PAGES 5-7 out of 1-148 total.](#)

1884 saw the publication of the first installment of the Dictionary, covering words beginning *A-ant*. Murray was again President of the Society, and he begins his annual Address with an apology for neglecting his Presidential duties, explaining that 'Since undertaking the Dictionary, I have felt constrained to say, under the attractions of many things which I should like to do, "Hoc unum facio"' (i.e., 'I make the Dictionary and that is all I do'). As all his members would have known very well, 'hoc unum' was a great deal, and Murray's account of the Dictionary for this year would have left them in no doubt of their editor's inexhaustible qualities of industry and perseverance.

Some of Murray's most famous remarks occur in this report. His sense that he was marking out new philological territory is expressed in terms that crystallize the changes in ideological and cultural attitudes that have taken place between now and then: 'I feel that in many respects I and my assistants are simply pioneers, pushing our way experimentally through an untrodden forest, where no white man's axe has been before us' (509). The metaphor of colonial occupation, rebarbative to modern sensibilities, was unexceptionable at the time, and a similar world view can be found in many of the definitions which OED has

subsequently had to revise and update (e.g. Murray's reference to 'superior blood or race' in the definition for *half-blooded*, to 'wild or savage races' in that for *hubbub*, or his fellow editor C. T. Onions's definition of *white man* as 'a man of honourable character such as one associates with a European (as distinguished from a negro)').

Murray continues his report with a memorable account of the process of sorting through quotation slips to identify their historical semantic relationships. 'Only those who have made the experiment,' he says, 'know the bewilderment with which editor or sub-editor...spreads [quotation slips] out on a table or floor...shifting them about like the pieces of a chess-board' (509-10) and discusses the difficulties of ascertaining etymologies of both native and non-native words (510-15). Time and experience has made Murray acutely aware of the insufficiency of their quotations, and under 'Reading and Subediting' (515-20) he observes 'for more than five-sixths of the words we have to search out and find additional quotations in order to complete their history and illustrate the senses; for *every* word we have to make a general search to discover whether any earlier or later quotations, or quotations in other senses, exist' (516-17). And he has realized how unhelpful it was for the original readers to search out unusual rather than usual words - and that 'earlier instances will, I doubt not, yet be found of three-fourths of all words recorded' (517).

Murray's robust criticisms of the reviews received by the first installment make entertaining and illuminating reading (520-30). He points out that critics tend to cancel each other out: literary reviewers think there are too many technical terms, 'men of science' think their own subject areas could do with more attention (523). Quotations from newspapers had been reviled, but Murray vigorously defends their usefulness (524-5). Note also Murray's tentative prediction that the Dictionary might be finished 'in 11 years from next March'; in fact the last installment was published in 1928, 44 years later.

ITEM 9: PUBLICATION AND RECEPTION OF A-ANT

'THIRTEENTH ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT [J. A. H. MURRAY] TO THE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY. [*Transactions of the Philological Society \(1884\), Volume 19: EXCERPT ONLY: PAGES 508-531 out of 501-527 total.*](#)

The 1884 report - followed by a long 'List of Readers and Books Read by them for the Dictionary' (pp. 601–42) - was the last major article to appear on the Society's Dictionary for some time. By January 1885, Murray was warning that original estimates of progress were mistaken. He had now arranged to resign his school teaching job at Mill Hill and move to Oxford to work full time on the Dictionary, but told the Society that 'to bring out two parts [of the Dictionary] a year, which the [OUP] Delegates expected him to do in future, he and his assistants would have to work three times as hard; in fact he did not see how they were to get through it at all without a good deal of volunteer work from outside (Monthly Abstract of Proceedings, Friday January 23 1885, vii, in TPS vol 20 Nov 1887).

The tone of subsequent reports, summarized in the *Proceedings* (published accounts of the Society's meetings, sometimes printed at the start of the *Transactions* volumes), was similar. The letter *B* was soon well in hand and many more assistants were working on the project. 1886 saw Murray complaining firstly of the trouble and waste of time involved in training new staff, and secondly that many books reported as being read by volunteers had been done so only carelessly or for isolated letters (Monthly Abstract of Proceedings, Fri Jan 22 1886, viii-ix, in TPS vol 20 Nov 1887). More interestingly, the following year Murray described how 'the main difficulty in the Dictionary work is to trace the history of the development of the meanings of a word, and get them into logical order'. They now had 4,000,000 quotations altogether, but analyzing these to ascertain 'chains of meaning' was taxing and time-consuming: 'You sort your quotations into bundles on your big table, and think you ar getting the word's pedigree riht, when a new sense, or three or four new senses, start up, which upset all your scheme, and you ar obliged to begin afresh, oftn three or four times' (Monthly Abstract of Proceedings, Fri Jan 21 1887, ix-x, in TPS vol 20 Nov 1887; Murray writes in a version of the reformed spelling that the Philological Society was advocating at that time).⁴ These summarized reports,

⁴ A useful outline of the Society's involvement in spelling reform can be found in note 49 of M. K. C. MacMahon's 'James Murray and the Phonetic Notation in the *New English Dictionary*', Item 14 below.

combined in Item 10, give an atmospheric sense of the practical and technical difficulties encountered in compiling the Dictionary and Murray's occasional irritableness in dealing with them. However, Henry Bradley (the 'Mr Bradley' mentioned in January 1886) had now started to help Murray with etymological and other tasks and in November 1887 became second editor of the Dictionary. Bradley had come to Murray's attention when he wrote a fine review of the first installment; he was a staunch and dependable collaborator whose relentless industriousness matched Murray's own (although Murray initially had reservations about his appointment, which had been foisted on him willy-nilly by OUP, anxious to increase the speed of production: Murray 1977: 62-4, 81-2, 257-8). A learned and scholarly man, Bradley made important contributions to a number of different fields, including textual and philological scholarship on the fourteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman* and other Old and Middle English works. Like Murray he served several terms as President of the Philological Society.

ITEM 10. SLOW PROGRESS: TRIALS & FRUSTRATIONS

[*Transactions of the Philological Society \(1887\), Volume 20, Issue 1*](#). Excerpts as follows from the first three items:

- (1) MONTHLY ABSTRACT OF PROCEEDINGS. (pages i-xxii): vii-viii (section entitled 'Friday, January 23, 1885')
- (2) MONTHLY ABSTRACT OF PROCEEDINGS. (pages ia-xlvi): viii-ix (section entitled 'Friday, Jan 22, 1886')
- (3) MONTHLY ABSTRACT OF PROCEEDINGS. (pages ib-xlv): ix-x (section entitled 'Friday, January 21, 1887')

After 1887, published reports stopped owing to lack of funds to print them in the *Transactions*. In 1892 they briefly resumed (see Appendix to Vol 22, Issue 1, Nov 1891, 261-278, which contains reports by both Bradley and Murray and includes disquisitions on spelling reform by Bradley and on etymologies by Murray) but thereafter there is silence. In 1891 OUP had appointed a third co-

editor, W. A. Craigie, who had published on Scottish and Scandinavian literature and folklore (the appointment again upset Murray; see Murray 1977: 282-3); in 1914 C. T. Onions, a long-term Dictionary employee, became the fourth editor.

Throughout his own long tenure - he was still working on the Dictionary just before he died in 1915 - Murray managed to keep lexicographical standards extremely high, despite constant pressure from the publishers to reduce the scope and ambition of the project. As new volumes appeared, the quality of the work increased rather than decreased: the later sections of the work tended to supply more quotations evidencing usage and more detailed analysis of the development of different senses of a word. Murray's insistence on quality was supported by public appreciation of the importance of the Dictionary. It was swiftly recognized that it was a work of unparalleled authority on the English language and was 'a wonderful storehouse of our native language', indeed 'not so much a Dictionary as a History of English speech and thought from its infancy to the present day' (see further Brewer 2007 2-4). Its status as a national monument probably strengthened the lexicographers' hand in negotiations on length and substance with the Press.

4. COMPLETION OF FIRST EDITION; FUTURE PROJECTS

1919 is the date of the next substantial article on the Dictionary to be printed in the *Transactions*, this time written by the third editor to join the team (in 1901), W. A. Craigie.⁵ Craigie was the speediest if not the best of the four chief

⁵ Craigie had previously delivered a 'Report on the Society's Dictionary, with Special Reference to the Letter *V*' (*Transactions of the Philological Society* 28 (1919): 15-18). <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/store/10.1111/j.1467-968X.1919.tb00938.x/asset/j.1467-968X.1919.tb00938.x.pdf?v=1&t=ho1lgrlf&s=53346aaa64c66b4aea845358302ff54b8223456d> Read to the Society on 13 April 1917, it explains that 'the progress of the Dictionary, already diminished by various causes, has during the past winter been still further reduced by reasons arising out of the War' - not only shortages of various kinds but also 'the loss of valuable assistants'. Despite these

lexicographers and he had by far the widest horizons. Now that the last few letters of the alphabet were in sight he was casting his eye towards further lexicographical prospects. He was also well aware of the inadequacies in period coverage of the work he and his co-editors had produced - inevitable inadequacies, given that their brief was to treat the whole history of the language rather than specialized portions of it. As Craigie points out, once the main Dictionary was complete, 'it would be a mistake to suppose that English lexicography has reached its ultimate goal' (6-7). His paper proposes a number of new projects to do better justice to the vocabulary of individual periods of the language: Old English, Middle English (1175-1500), Early Modern English (1500-1675), and what he calls 'Older Scottish'.

These ideas bore immediate fruit. In 1925 Craigie added a note to the article (10-11) to report that a Middle English Dictionary was already under active consideration by the Modern Language Association of America (despite Craigie's own earlier view that 'such a work can never be undertaken on practical grounds'), that compilation of materials for a dictionary of Older Scottish was well underway, and that a further scheme, for 'a real historical Dictionary of American English' had been taken up by the University of Chicago. The last scheme was being pursued by Craigie himself, who had caused a stir at Oxford by moving to a chair at the University of Chicago that very year, resulting in significant difficulties and delays in the completion both of the main Dictionary and of the one-volume Supplement (eventually published in 1933) on which he and Onions were already beginning work. *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles*, edited by Craigie and others, was published by the University of Chicago Press soon afterwards, in 1936, but the other projects were longer term. *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* produced its first installment in 1937 and its last in 2002, while the *Middle English Dictionary* was completed in 2001 at the University of Michigan. All these projects benefitted from the loan of large numbers of quotation slips passed on to their editors from

difficulties, 'the work continues to make progress', and Craigie supplies an annotated list of some of the more important of the words beginning with *V*.

the OED archives. Michigan also hoped to produce a Dictionary of Early Modern English, but despite stalwart work by first Charles Fries, then Richard Bailey - again aided by around 1.5 million quotation slips borrowed from OED - this project faltered and came to nothing. Virtually twice the original number of slips were returned to Oxford in 1997 for use in the current revision of OED for its third edition (information supplied by R. W. Bailey in personal communication; for an account of Fries and the Early Modern English project see Bailey 1985 and Adams 2008.). The first period mentioned by Craigie was the last to be tackled. Work on the *Dictionary of Old English* began in Toronto in the 1970s with the creation of a corpus of all extant texts, and letters A-G of the dictionary itself, 'the first chapter of the English language', can currently be seen online (see [here](#)).

ITEM 11: 'NEW DICTIONARY SCHEMES PRESENTED TO THE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY, 4th APRIL, 1919'. [Transactions of the Philological Society, Volume 30 \(1930\), Issue 1, pages 6-11](#)

W. A. Craigie

Next comes a brief article by C. T. Onions, who with Craigie was one of the two surviving editors to bring the first edition finally to completion in 1928 (Henry Bradley had died in 1923). Writing just after the publication of the last installment in April 1928, Onions explains the need for an immediate Supplement, given the length of time since the first volumes appeared and the consequent impossibility of keeping up with all the new words that had since appeared in the language. The extraordinary expense of time and money in creating the first edition meant that OUP was anxious to close the project down as soon as possible, however, so this ruled out 'anything like an attempt at a full supplement of addenda and corrigenda to the whole work'. It was not till the 1990s that it took the decision to embark on a full revision (see Items 17 and 18 below). As ever, Onions welcomes contributions to the Dictionary enterprise, asking particularly for examples of 'the colloquialism, the slang, the modern literary affectation, and the like, that constantly escape record, or, at least, are not infrequently in full blast for a decade before they are recorded by the chronologer of words and idioms' (5).

ITEM 12: 'REPORT ON THE SOCIETY'S DICTIONARY'. [*Transactions of the Philological Society, Volume 30 \(1930\), Issue 1, pages 1-5 \[read June 1 1928\]*](#)

C. T. Onions⁶

As Onions mentions, the completion of OED received full treatment in a special issue of OUP's house journal *The Periodical*, which can be read online [here](#). The celebration for the Supplement, accompanied by a re-issue of the first edition, was a smaller affair; see [here](#).

5. SECOND SUPPLEMENT & THE START OF HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP ON OED

After publication of the Supplement in 1933 the Dictionary files, books and remaining quotation slips were packed away. A skeleton Dictionary staff remained at the Press, which turned its attention to successive editions of the collection of smaller dictionaries - the *Shorter, Concise, Pocket, and Little Oxford Dictionaries* - which fed off the store of lexical evidence contained in the OED itself. But by the 1950s printing stocks of the OED were running low and the Press carefully debated whether to revise the original work or further supplement it. Deciding on the latter course, they appointed the New Zealander medievalist R. W. Burchfield, who had come to Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he became acquainted with C. T. Onions, who had a life fellowship there and was college librarian. (Fuller information about this stage of the dictionary's history can be found in Brewer 2007, chapters 3-4 and 6-7).

Like its parent dictionary, Burchfield's Supplement swelled beyond its originally planned size, and was eventually published not as one but as four large volumes (1972-86). These subsumed the material in the first Supplement - including almost but not all of the items recorded there, and often expanding its entries - and set out to record new words, and new senses of existing words, that had entered the language since publication of the relevant installment of the first

⁶ Onions delivered a further brief update on the Supplement to the Society in November 1930 ('Report on the Society's Dictionary', *Transactions of the Philological Society* Volume 31 (1931), issue 1, 16-18).

edition. In the course of gathering together and editing the quotation evidence, Burchfield worked closely over the first edition and tried so far as possible to preserve many of its distinctive characteristics. In an article published in the *Transactions* in 1973 he explained the principles and practice both of the OED and of his own work in treating what he called 'controversial' vocabulary.

Burchfield begins by excluding 'sexual words and colloquial and coarse words referring to excretory functions' from his definition of 'controversial vocabulary': they were controversial during the publication of the original OED, and hence some were omitted, 'but they are no longer so'. Despite this claim, such words continue to be controversial even today; it is only recently (since December 2010) that the OED has replaced a number of implicitly homophobic or euphemistic definitions. Indeed, some continue to be treated differentially forty years after Burchfield published his article: *twat*, for example, is still undefined, and instead the reader is directed to an eighteenth-century quotation which includes the untranslated words '*puendum muliebre*'. In fact, by 'controversial' Burchfield means words on the borderline between exclusion and inclusion, and often therefore not intrinsically controversial in the way sexual terms were and are. He discusses various issues of consistency relating to names for persons or places before moving on to explain some of the usage labels used in OED.

Usage labels occur in the Dictionary from the first installment onwards, but the OED has yet to produce a comprehensive account of its editorial policy here (see Item 19 below). Burchfield discusses the treatment of *hapax legomena* (i.e. words occurring just once) and rare terms (7-9), the application of the paragraph mark to identify various categories of 'catachrestic and erroneous uses' (9-12), his new policy on adding more examples of attributive and combinatorial forms (12-13), the treatment of trade-mark and proprietary terms (which could sometimes spark threats of litigation; 15-22), and racial and religious terms, including *Jew* (22-27). The last category was a particularly sensitive one and OUP had recently fended off a law-suit which had sought to show that OED's descriptive policy was an endorsement of racism (for a fuller account see Burchfield 1989, 109-15).

One of the interesting features of this article is Burchfield's ready display of inconsistency. He rightly defends the OED's descriptive policy on racist language, while at the same time acknowledging that its use of the paragraph symbol was 'straightforwardly prescriptive'. Where rare words were concerned, he emphasises that decisions on inclusion and exclusion in the original OED were necessarily inconsistent in the parent dictionary since they were dependent on readers' choices: 'If a reader made a slip for such an item it was likely to be included, with small regard for consistency in comparable words, or in words drawn from other writers, in other parts of the Dictionary' (7-8). He also points to inconsistency between his own Supplement volumes, explaining that volume 2, on which he was then working, would apply the various labels marking rare words 'more frequently' than in volume 1, in order to bring Supplement policy in line with the OED itself. Strikingly, Burchfield leaves out any mention of what would now be called 'World Englishes', i.e. non-UK English of varying degrees of naturalization in the language whose inclusion and labelling had always been a tricky issue. This is a category of English which he greatly expanded in the OED (see Weiner 1987, Brewer 2007: 197-200; a fuller account can be found in Ogilvie 2013, on which see Brewer 2013).

ITEM 13: 'THE TREATMENT OF CONTROVERSIAL VOCABULARY IN *THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY*. [*Transactions of the Philological Society, Volume 72 \(1973\), pages 1-28*](#)

R. W. Burchfield

In creating the second Supplement to the OED, Burchfield naturally looked back at the OED itself, and the process of historical recovery of the OED began to assume increasing importance as living memory of its editors and methods died. In 1977, scholarship on the OED moved into a new phase with the publication of K. M. Elisabeth Murray's *Caught in the Web of Words*. This best-selling biography of OED's chief editor, written by his grand-daughter, was based on a large collection of family papers later deposited in the Bodleian Library. It opened up archival studies of the Dictionary and enabled many different lines of inquiry into its history and compilation. One of the first studies to appear was

Item 14, an examination of Murray's theory and practice in indicating pronunciation in the OED which drew extensively on Murray's own correspondence, often with other members of the Philological Society such as A. J. Ellis and Henry Sweet. Much other archivally grounded research has emerged since 2000, beginning with Mugglestone 2000 and including Mugglestone 2005, Brewer 2007, and many individual articles in scholarly journals and collections. For a partial bibliography, see [here](#) (accessed January 2013).

ITEM 14: 'JAMES MURRAY AND THE PHONETIC NOTATION IN THE *NEW ENGLISH DICTIONARY*'. [*Transactions of the Philological Society, Volume 83 \(1985\), pages 72-112*](#)

M. K. C. MacMahon

6. SECOND EDITION AND DIGITAL FUTURE

The final volume of Burchfield's Supplement was published in 1986, by which time OUP had developed ambitious plans to transform the dictionary altogether. These fell into four stages. First, both the first edition and the second Supplement were digitized and the two texts alphabetically merged to produce the so-called second edition - 'so-called' because it was really a re-printing of existing material, much of it (especially that deriving from the first edition) significantly out of date, rather than a new edition proper in the sense normally implied by that term. Secondly, work began on new words which had entered the language since the relevant volume of Burchfield's Supplement had appeared, issuing in three printed volumes of *Additions* (Simpson and Weiner 1993; Proffitt and Simpson 1997). Thirdly, CDROMs of the second edition were produced, which made it possible for users to sift and analyse the vast quantity of data in the dictionary in systematic ways. For the first time, hitherto inaccessible information about the history and development of the English language could be brought to light - patterns of word-formation over time, relative lexical productivity of different periods of the language, relative lexical productivity of different authors and other quotation sources, and so on (see Brewer 2005-).

Fourthly, and most significantly, the Press decided to undertake a revision of the entire work. This was a project of major proportions, rivalling the

ambition of the original OED. The first stages of revision were published online in 2000, in a subscription site which can be accessed free by most UK public library users and is available at many universities and other institutions around the world ([OED Online](#)).

The remaining items in the present collection address different aspects of this most recent phase in the Dictionary's history. Algeo's review of the 1989 second edition of OED clear-sightedly addresses the drawbacks of this publication, and its regrettable re-packaging of 'old wine in new bottles' (see further Stanley 1990 and Brewer 1993). By contrast, Aarsleff's article, which follows hard on Algeo's heels in the same volume, begins by celebrating the positive aspects of combining original OED and Supplement(s). Aarsleff then explores the nineteenth-century beliefs about etymology - particularly those of Horne Tooke, who 'managed to reduce all words to sense impressions' - against which OED's originator R. C. Trench, a 'true prophet', fought a pitched battle. Trench's desire for a complete dictionary, although inspired by his religious and moral beliefs (e.g. that language was a 'moral barometer', p. 154), was nevertheless 'the soundest of lexicographical principles', and his popular writings helped to establish the theoretical and practical framework in which the OED's distinctive historical method was grounded.

The articles by Durkin and by Simpson et al point forward towards the twenty-first century OED, explaining the thinking behind the revision project and describing some of its notable features. These include the transformation of the etymological component of the Dictionary, the reliance of the new OED on the work on the language already carried out by the *Middle English Dictionary* and the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (as envisaged by Craigie in 1919, see Item 11 above), and the establishment of new reading programmes designed to supplement and extend the original ones by drawing on a wider range of documents (e.g. wills and inventories, legal reports, letters and diaries) by a wider range of authors (e.g. female writers, comparatively neglected by the first edition of OED).

These two articles document the start of one of the most significant humanities research projects of the early twenty-first century - though sadly the re-launch of the OED website in December 2010, which took down the

electronically searchable version of OED2, has made it impossible to identify the various changes now being made to the lexical record in any systematic and analytic way. Finally, Brewer 2005 takes up the issue of usage and correctness in the Dictionary. Focusing principally on some of the more eccentric features of Burchfield's Supplement, the article looks back to the early discussions of the work by the Philological Society as well as forward to their realisation in the ongoing third edition of OED. Taken together, the last three contributions give clear evidence that the latest transformation of this multi-faceted work is coming closer than ever before to fulfilling the ideal of a comprehensive, descriptive and historically based dictionary of English, as first put to the Philological Society by R. C. Trench in 1857.

ITEM 15: 'THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES: THE SECOND EDITION OF THE SOCIETY'S DICTIONARY'. [*Transactions of the Philological Society* \(1990\), Volume 88, Issue 2, pages 131–150.](#)

John Algeo

ITEM 16: 'THE ORIGINAL PLAN FOR THE OED AND ITS BACKGROUND'.
[*Transactions of the Philological Society* \(1990\), Volume 88, Issue 2, pages 151–161.](#)

Hans Aarsleff

ITEM 17: 'Root and Branch: Revising the etymological component of the *Oxford English Dictionary*'. [*Transactions of the Philological Society* \(1999\), Volume 97, Issue 1, pages 1–49](#)

P. N. R. Durkin

ITEM 18: 'The *Oxford English Dictionary* Today'. [*Transactions of the Philological Society* \(2004\), Volume 102, Issue 3, pages 335–381](#)

J. Simpson, E. Weiner, and P. Durkin

ITEM 19: 'Authority and personality in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

[*Transactions of the Philological Society* \(2005\), Volume 103, Issue 3, pages 261–301](#)

C. Brewer

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