

Oxford English Dictionary News

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Editorial

Exactly 100 years ago, Oxford University Press approached the scholar William Little about the possibility of preparing an abridged version of the *OED*. When the *Shorter OED* eventually appeared in 1933, the editorship had passed to C. T. Onions, the fourth of the *OED*'s chief editors, who had been assisted by two of the longest-serving members of the *OED*'s staff.

Interchange of staff between the *OED* and the *SOED* has continued down to the present, and it is a pleasure to include here an article by the most recent arrival, Catherine Bailey, on the preparation of the new Fifth Edition of the *Shorter* (whose chief editor, Bill Trumble, also rejoined the *OED* team recently).

The other contributions to this issue offer two differing perspectives on the interaction between lexicography and poetry. It must be relatively unusual to

find two published poets among one's colleagues; but Giles Goodland and Jane Griffiths are not the first to combine the two interests. There have been poets on the staff of the *OED* before – and perhaps the most distinguished precedent of all is that of Samuel Johnson, who, writing of his lexicographical aspirations in the Preface to his 1755 *Dictionary*, described them as “the dreams of a poet doomed at last to wake a lexicographer”.

Peter Gilliver, Newsletter Editor and Associate Editor, *OED*

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The essence of the *OED*

On 26 September 2002, OUP will publish the Fifth Edition of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Until recently I was one of the editors at work on this revision of the 1993 *New Shorter OED*. The new edition has more than 3,000 new words added, updated quotation paragraphs, and a new (and even more user-friendly) page layout.

For those people unfamiliar with the *SOED*, the work aims to provide a third of the content of the *OED* in just two volumes. This is achieved in several key ways. Quotations are not provided for every sense (and for those quotations that are included, the bibliographic information is restricted to date and author); words and senses with no currency post-1700 are

omitted, unless they are found in works by a prominent author such as Spenser or Shakespeare; senses very close in meaning are conflated; and some of the longer etymological discussions have been shortened.

In editing the *SOED* text we focused first on the areas that would need the most work.



Our search for new material relied heavily on the 'drafting lists' compiled by the *OED* editorial group responsible for new words, and there were some long hours of painstaking work to filter out the most important new entries and senses to add. We were keen to add significant new items to our coverage of slang and the language of technology, for example, but careful to avoid the more obscure scientific terms which are included in the *OED* with only a single illustrative quotation.

The Dictionaries group of the Trade and Reference department (which is responsible for such titles as the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* and the *New Oxford Dictionary of English*) also compiles a list of 'new words suggestions'.

These are passed on by lexicographers and interested members of the public. The addition of such terms meant a great deal of hands-on research. Where the new entries prepared by the *OED*'s own team had required little more than adapting to the *SOED* style, the Trade and Reference suggestions had us searching through some of the dustier corners of the *OED* library (for the origins of the word *hijab*, for example), and surfing the internet for clues as to etymology, dates, and pronunciation (the Indian spice *ajowan* had me stumped for some time).

When we incorporated our findings into the existing *SOED* text, we were aware that the quotation paragraphs needed some attention too. Some were

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beginning to date a little; the most recent quotation being from Oscar Wilde, for example. Others were rather sparsely evidenced in earlier editions. We made an effort, too, to include quotations from many modern authors, leading to some interesting conjunctions: Stephen King rubbing shoulders with Shakespeare, Samuel Pepys fraternizing with Isaiah Berlin, and P. D. James followed by *Successful Slimming* magazine.

So what's new about the content? Since the 1993 edition of the *Shorter OED*, the Internet has formed, grown, and given rise to many new terms. The editors also chose important words and senses from the fields of fashion, food, commerce, the sciences, and world

slang. Nothing has been removed from the previous edition, the focus being on updating the text and bringing it into line with its big brother, the *OED*.

I have now been working for the *OED* for four months, and have recognized what good preparation my time with the *Shorter* was. While the presentation and style are a little different in places, the attention to historical detail and multiple avenues of research are just the same. I believe the Fifth Edition of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* will appeal greatly to those already appreciative of the *OED*'s merits.

Catherine Bailey, Senior Assistant Editor, *OED*



Giles Goodland

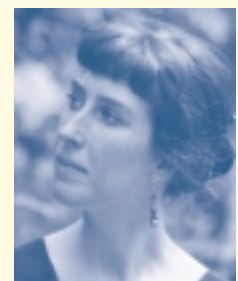
Two poets at work on the *OED*

I started writing poetry a few years before coming to work at the *OED*, so it is only a coincidence that my first pamphlet (*A to Yourself*, 1989) is

composed entirely of lines in alphabetical order. After I started working here I became intoxicated by the width and weight of the language, which seemed to connect with the sea and what the sea throws up for us.

Like Giles, I had long had a sense of a conflict of interests between working on the *OED* and writing poetry. It was something I quite

deliberately kept to the back of my mind, so when I was asked at a poetry reading last autumn whether writing and editing influenced one another at all, I was unprepared.



Jane Griffiths

The newsletter of the *Oxford English Dictionary*

Giles Goodland

I took a long break and walked around the south-west coast of England, composing from this my first book-length poem (*Littoral*, 1996), in which language was scattered like flotsam over my path.

For many years my task was to sort through the *OED*'s files of quotations, and this constant exposure to so many quotations from different contexts and sources made me feel that a long poem could be written composed entirely from other people's sentences. This thought was the starting-point for a long poem about the twentieth century (*A Spy in the House of Years*, 2001). This was a sequence of 100 sonnets, each made from 14 sentences that were written in a particular year. Almost without realizing it, I had duplicated the appearance of the *OED*'s quotation paragraphs, as if each year was a subsense of the huge and complex word that is the last century. Enjoyable in a way, revisiting libraries, trying to assemble each year into a kind of wholeness, sometimes trying to find just one statement that would make a year come to life. But at the end of this process (and the labour of proof-reading the whole thing), I felt that I preferred to use my own words.

Jane Griffiths

'Yes,' I found myself saying. 'It's my ambition to get the note "also with punning allusion" attached to every definition in the dictionary.'

Although I've probably added only half a dozen or so of these notes in the past eighteen months, I suspect the remark does pinpoint the difference between poet and editor. In writing poetry a word rarely means a single thing; just as it will have sound-associations with other words within the poem, it will have sense-associations that summon echoes of meanings other than the most immediate one. While I'm constantly aware of such echoes, I want to add to them, rather than draw on them passively; the final choice of words is an odd balancing act between ventriloquizing a number of existing senses and the implicit declaration, with Lewis Carroll's Humpty-Dumpty, that a word means 'just what I choose it to mean – neither more

Now that I have become an Assistant Editor at the *OED*, I have less time to reflect on the connections between poetry and lexicography; most of my mental energy is devoted to editing itself. It has become clear to me that a poet can't simply cherry-pick the most elegant but obscure words. Either poetry comes organically into the mind (inspiration), or it is built from some formal architecture that is given by tradition or invented for the occasion. In either case, working in such proximity to the raw material of poetry can be a hindrance. Inspiration is blocked by the knowledge that there are so many possible words we could use. Formal ideas become snarled up in the trickiness and slipperiness of words. A person can become too familiar with a word, too aware of all that it might mean.

However, at times, in the evening, at home while trying to write, I can forget what my job is, and if I am lucky I can write with a greater awareness of how language can be used in a poem. But these moments are – as the *OED* might put it – rare, perhaps obsolete.

Giles Goodland, Assistant Editor, *OED*

nor less.' Editing, by contrast, depends on a razor-blade separation of the senses, and on the definition of consensus usage.

Of course, both writing and editing depend on the ability to discriminate between senses. In editing, though, this is the end of the process; in writing it is a preliminary stage. This is why I'm delighted by any usage which challenges editorial principles, in particular by those recalcitrant words attested in figurative use before they appear in a literal sense. As an editor, I enjoy shaping such entries into an allowable form which nonetheless accounts for as many of the nuances of meaning as possible. As a writer, even in casting my net, all my sympathies are with the red herring.

Jane Griffiths, St Edmund Hall, Oxford (formerly Assistant Editor, *OED*)

Words and phrases covered in the September 2002 *OED Online* update could help you to...

...monitor a monarch's modest monetary modernization...

...momentarily mobilize molecules of molten molybdenum...

...monitor a mixture of modular mnemonics...

...mock a mobster's moll modelling moccasins...

Project news

OED's past and present on the Web

The *OED Online* web site has for some time offered a window on the past, in the form of a section (<http://www.oed.com/public/archive>) devoted to some of the more important printed documents relating to the Dictionary's history, including the paper "On Some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries", given by Richard Chenevix Trench in 1857, which is generally regarded as having led directly to the inception of the Philological Society's *New English Dictionary* (as the *OED* was originally known). This section of the web site will be expanded during the autumn to include several more historical documents (in facsimile), including the "Appeal to the English-Speaking and English-Reading Public" issued by the Philological Society in 1879 following the appointment of James Murray as Editor of the Dictionary, and an early invitation to American

readers to help with the collection of the quotations on which the Dictionary was based.

Also during 2002, and largely unnoticed, the *OED* itself has begun to include quotations found on the Web as evidence in its entries. The first batch of such entries, published in June, included quotations from web sites such as *www.secret-passage.com* (for the rare word *miserabilistic*), and newsgroups such as *sci.chem* (for *miscoloration*). While of course there are cases where a word's first known occurrence is in an online source, the Web has also proved useful as a source of evidence that words which have not been found in conventionally published sources are in fact still in use: for example, both *miscoloration* and *miserabilistic* would have required an 'obsolete' label were it not for these postdatings from the Web.

In memoriam

In June we heard the sad news of the deaths of two scholars whose lexicographical work was (and remains) influential both generally and in relation to the *OED*. Harry Orsman was the editor, among many other works, of the *Dictionary of New Zealand English* (Oxford University Press, 1997), the standard guide to the history and usage of New Zealand English. Many years ago, Harry donated copies of much of his material to the files of the Supplement to the *OED*: the 89 illustrative quotations in the Second Edition of the *OED* that are taken from Acland's *Early Canterbury Runs* (for example) will all have come from Harry's material,

as will many of the quotations with which we illustrated other New Zealand terms.

In the same week came news of the death of Dr Peter Wexler. Peter had first contacted the *OED* in the 1960s with suggestions for the Supplement, and more recently had been reading historical texts – mainly from the Early Modern period – for *OED3*. His tally of contributions amounted to over 60,000, targeted in areas (such as the history of science) where it was known there were gaps in the Dictionary's coverage.

John Simpson, Chief Editor, *OED*

Appeals

Words or phrases which appear on the Appeals List are those currently being drafted or revised for the *OED* for which the documentary evidence is incomplete. Often these are slang or colloquial items which cannot be researched in specialist texts and are most likely to be found by a general reader in non-specialized or popular literature.

Usually the appeal is for an earlier example than our current earliest (e.g. 'antedate 1970' for a word for which our earliest example comes from 1970), but sometimes the appeal is for an interdating where there is a large gap in the *OED*'s quotation evidence (e.g. 'interdate 1589-1910'). Occasionally we ask for a postdating (e.g. 'postdate 1875'), if an editor feels that an item being revised is still current but has failed to

find any recent examples through the usual avenues of research.

monocleid (adjective: *locked with a single key*) postdate 1870 (also as a noun)

nibbly (adjective: *suitable for nibbling*) antedate 1978

nutty (adjective: *crazy*) any examples

objection! (used as an exclamation) antedate 1977

outie (noun: *kind of navel*) antedate 1973

scag (noun: *poor or scruffy person*) any examples

texting (noun) antedate 1982

treacle tart (noun) antedate 1919

wazzock (noun: *stupid or annoying person*) antedate 1988

wonga (noun: *money*) antedate 1989

Please send submissions to oed3@oup.co.uk

Interesting antedatings

Revision of the entries in the September 2002 *OED Online* update has revealed an earlier origin than previously thought for many words, including:

mixed blessing (antedated to 1897 from 1933)

moaner (1628 from 1927)

mobster (1735 from 1917)

modern (c1485 from 1500)

molecular (1770 from 1823)

momentary (c1460 from 1526)

momentum (pre-1150 from 1699!)

momma (1803 from 1884)

Quotable quotes

Thought-provoking snippets from the *OED* quotation files:

fluid definitions...

1855 C. A. Bristed in *Cambridge Essays*, In America it [the word *creek*] is invariably used to designate a small river, except when it happens to be used to designate a large one.

...feeling off-colour...

a1722 E. Lisle *Observ. Husb.* (1757), They have a distemper in Leicestershire frequent among the calves, which in that country they call the black-legs... It is a white jelly settling in their legs, from whence it has its name of black-legs.

...and an early grunge band?

1908 *Practitioner* June, The important group of Seborrhoeic Dermatitis and the Seborrhoeids.



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