

Oxford English Dictionary News

SERIES 2 NUMBER 24
MARCH 2003

Editorial

Readers of *OED News* will be well aware of the international nature of the *OED*. This applies not only to the range of varieties of English covered, but also to the geographical spread of places where work on the Dictionary goes on.

This international dimension runs through the articles in this issue of *OED News*: Madeline McDonnell and Abigail Zitin give some vivid recollections of their first year working in the offices of the *OED*'s North American Editorial Unit in New York,

while David Shirt offers some entertaining reflections on his work revising our coverage of the names given to birds throughout the English-speaking world.

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

Muffies, moreporks, and ooaas: a foray into the world of bird names

The popular names of birds form a significant proportion of the entries and senses in the *OED*: sorting them out is one of the more interesting, and challenging, aspects of editing entries for the Third Edition.

During the nineteenth century dialect glossaries were produced for many regions of the British Isles, and hidden among them are a wonderful variety of local and mostly long-forgotten names for birds. One warbler, the whitethroat, has no fewer than ten local names in just the letter M of the *OED*, many of them referring to the bird's white throat: *mealy-mouth*, *miller*, *mocker*, *muff*, *muffit*, *muffy*, *muffy whey-beard*, *muffy wren*, *mufty*, and *muggy*. The Old English name *wren* was used for a variety of small songbirds: the 'willow wren', 'golden-crested wren', and 'jenny wren' were all well-known to my mother as names of the willow warbler, goldcrest, and (common) wren. The name *jenny wren* was one of a number that had acquired a familiar epithet; in the case of the robin

redbreast it was only the epithet 'Robin' that survived, and in *jackdaw* and *magpie* the current names have incorporated the epithets 'Jack' and 'Maggie' respectively.

However, not all bird names refer to real birds! In 1590 Spenser used the phrase 'the mounting lark' in apt reference to the skylark's song flight, and this remained popular in poetry for many years. In about 1730, however, someone felt that 'mountain lark' sounded better, and this too was adopted by poets. A new species had been invented, but the name didn't see the light of day in the real world until it was used for quite a different bird in North America in the twentieth century. Read about this curious tale in *OED Online*!



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A number of bird names have survived from Old English, and for a thousand years there was little ambiguity about such names as *gannet*, *heron*, *bittern*, *lapwing*, *swallow*, *starling*, *crow*, *rook*, and *raven*. With the blossoming of natural history in the nineteenth century writers chose the names which were felt to be most apt, sometimes inventing what were once disparagingly called 'book names' but which have often become the standard names of today. Exploration in new areas of the world yielded many new birds that were related to more familiar ones, so the old names were used with a descriptive epithet. In the New World the (common) wren is just one of many wrens, so it came to be known there as the winter wren. Names of this kind were also applied to birds which proved to be unrelated to the 'genuine' article. Thus we have the well-known robin of North America, and a mushrooming of wren and robin names in the Antipodes.

Birds such as the cuckoo, curlew, chiffchaff, and kittiwake will obligingly tell you their names. So do the chickadee, kiskadee, dickcissel, and bobolink in North America, and the bokmakierie and piet-my-vrou in South Africa. (I have noticed, however, that the great tit will untruthfully shout 'blue tit, blue tit!'.) Similar sounds can speak of quite different birds: the peewit of Britain is the lapwing, the peewee of

Australia is the magpie lark, and the peewee of North America is a tyrant flycatcher. Nocturnal birds have particularly distinctive calls: the poorwill, whippoorwill, and chuck will's widow are all North American nightjars, and the boobook (or mopoke, morepork) is an Australasian owl.

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A childhood spent partly in the South Seas has left me with a fascination for a group of bird names that owe nothing to the Anglo-Saxons, and the Maori and Hawaiian languages are especially prolific. In New Zealand the bellbird (a honeyeater) is variously called the korimako, makomako, moki-mok, and moko-moko, while the tomtit is called the miromiro in North Island and ngiru-ngiru in South Island. Island birds, however, are sadly prone to extinction, and their names can follow their

owners into the history books. In Hawaii there were several kinds of oo (also honeyeaters), one of which had tufts of yellow feathers that were once used for making ceremonial cloaks. The last of the oos died out on the island of Kauai as recently as the late 1980s. It rejoiced in the name of *ooaa*, which is probably my favourite bird name! I have drafted a new entry for this word, and look forward to its appearance in *OED Online* next year.

David Shirt, Senior Editor (Science), *OED*

Lex in the City: reflections on a year in the North American Editorial Unit



When I tell acquaintances that I live in New York City, cries of 'How glamorous!' unfailingly follow. My new friends seem to expect the life of a young woman living in Manhattan to mirror that of Carrie Bradshaw, the alluring protagonist of the popular TV programme *Sex and the City*.

I'm expected to follow in the stiletto heels of that (in)famous TV drama's befurred, cosmo-swilling crew. Alas, I am

inevitably a disappointment to these admirers; for I came to New York not to linger over the pistachio-encrusted sea bass of the latest celebrity chef, but rather to ponder North American language and usage as one of three lexicographers working for the *OED*'s

North American Editorial Unit. And, while I hate to disappoint, there is no way around it: champagne-fizzed evenings will not be followed by breakfasts of white truffles and afternoons at Barneys – not on my lexicographer's salary. My mornings, afternoons, and evenings will be spent in an office suited for the serious study of lemmas – secluded, snug (not to say cramped), my desk laden with computers and tiny, scrawled-upon citation slips.

Australian fauna and flora feature prominently in the March 2003 *OED Online* update:

mulga (a kind of shrub or tree), **mulloway** (a fish), **Mullumbimby couch** (a kind of sedge), **mulgara** (a kind of marsupial), **munyeroo** (a succulent plant), and **murnong** (a plant with an edible root).

The newsletter of the *Oxford English Dictionary*

While my failure to personify the quintessentially fabulous, young New Yorker troubled me upon my arrival in the city, I was more worried by fears that I was not qualified to perform the work that brought me there. I, a lexicographer for the *OED*? How would I – clad in denim rather than tweed, accustomed to drinking frappuccinos rather than Earl Grey – be able to contribute to such a profoundly British text? I felt inadequate on all levels – I would be neither an authentic New Yorker, nor a true *OED* lexicographer.

Having laboured at both tasks for a little over a year, however, I am pleased to say that my feelings of inadequacy have proved largely unfounded. I've discovered that I can be a sophisticated New Yorker precisely because I am a lexicographer; likewise, I make a valuable contribution to the *OED* in part because I live in New York. Surprisingly, my work has enabled me to acquaint myself with the seductive idiosyncrasies of the life of a New York insider, while my exposure to these idiosyncrasies has given me new insight into an as yet uncovered lexicon.

The existence of the *OED*'s North American Editorial Unit ensures that American terms are edited by lexicographers familiar with the particularities of American English and its dialects. Such particularities in language often arise from a need to reflect particularities in culture. No culture is more rife with such particularities than New York's. For example, the quantity of bagels consumed each Manhattan morning defies belief. A plethora of bagels demands an abundance of topping-types. Most Americans are familiar with lox, but, for the New Yorker desiring

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something similarly salmony, but with a slightly less salty flavour, there is a version of the lightly cured fish called 'nova', a term the *OED* had failed to define until NAEU discovered its omission. Indeed, the foodie capital of the country, if not the world, has proved an ideal place to be a lexicographer. How better to determine that 'bubble tea', which I defined last January, does not necessarily contain tea, than by perusing Chinatown menus containing the term, and sampling the beverages described? When

working on an entry for *Key lime pie* in April, consultations with three different 2nd Avenue bakers proved invaluable. One used Key lime juice in his pie, another the juice of Tahiti limes. One topped his pie with meringue, another with whipped cream. All insisted their creations were to be called by no other name than *Key lime pie*. Free samplings of these decidedly 'Key lime' pies helped me determine the proper adjective with which to describe a typical pie's flavour. (I settled on 'tangy'.)

In the end, though I still refuse to wear tweed, I am certain that I would not be qualified to define many of the terms I am assigned were I not living in Manhattan. Moreover, when asked for details of my exciting life in New York, I now reply without pause, 'Ah yes, the "urban jungle" – it is a life of "tasting menus" and "dotcommers", "hostile takeovers" and "hot tubs", "white pizzas" in "Little Italy" washed down with "macchiatos", "power shopping" followed by "buyer's remorse", "artsiness" and "garmentos"! After all, I – or one of my colleagues at NAEU – put those terms in the dictionary!

Madeline McDonnell, Assistant Editor, *OED* (North American Editorial Unit)

'So how long have you wanted to be a lexicographer?' asked Jesse Sheidlower, the Principal Editor of the North American Editorial Unit, while interviewing me for the position I now hold.

Knowing myself to be a lousy liar, I told the shallow truth: I had wanted to be a lexicographer since I'd read the want ad he placed in the *New York Times*. Remarkably, my opportunism didn't seem to count against me: I have learned in the year that I've worked here that a good lexicographer is a kind of opportunist, in the sense that she must be able to touch down on a subject she may know nothing about, swiftly avail herself of whatever resources are

available, and emerge with a sleek and authoritative definition. While I have learned most of the skills of my job from lexicographers so experienced they often speak in what sounds like definition text, there's a sense in which the best tutors are the words themselves. Each word or phrase under scrutiny instructs by means of its idiosyncrasies, its challenges



Words and phrases covered in the March 2003 *OED Online* update could help you to...

...munch a multitude of mouth-watering mushrooms... ...mourn a Muscovite murdered with a musket...
...catch mumps from a multilingual mountaineer at the movies... ...muse on the movability of a Muslim mountain...

to standard defining style, its ambiguous or metaphorical uses in citations. We at NAEU encounter an unusual amount of variety in our work since we draft entries for so-called 'high-profile new words' across the alphabet: not for us the strictures of being moored in a large entry such as *move* or *much* for weeks or even months at a time.

I began working as a lexicographer in an anxious time, so perhaps it's not strange that one of the first words assigned to me during my training was the then-ubiquitous *weaponize*. I knew I was out of my depth when I found my first quotation for the participial adjective *weaponized* while searching an online database of academic journals: it appeared in a declassified U.S. Military Intelligence document drafted in 1956. My task involved deploying my own (blissful) ignorance of nuclear weapons and germ warfare in order to tease out the lexical features that delimit different uses of the word, noticing, for example, that governments *weaponize* intransitively by adding nuclear devices to their arsenal. If something is (transitively) *weaponized*, however, it's likely to be a technical rather than a political feat: the mounting of a warhead on a missile, say, or the engineering of a virus to ensure its infection of a population.

Did I mention emotional detachment as an important job qualification for the lexicographer? Happily, 'high-profile' does not often mean 'the lead story on the evening news'. Such was the case when I found myself defining the comparatively untopical phrase *peaceable kingdom* under the tutelage of Associate Editor Peter Gilliver during his visit to New York last spring. When I plugged the phrase into our standard online library search engines, I discovered its repeated appearance as a chapter heading in nineteenth-century American editions of the Bible, but it never appeared in the text itself. It wasn't until Peter and I ventured into OUP's in-house library in search of reference books on American religious traditions that we found our Rosetta Stone, in a monograph on seventeenth-century Quaker pacifism: a document called the Rhode Island Testimony, dated 1675, declared 'the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is come near in us...and in this his peaceable Kingdom we live'. For the Rhode Island Quakers (or, in official dictionary parlance, the Religious Society of Friends) the peaceable kingdom was the realization of scriptural prophecy, particularly (as they imagined it) in an idealized view of life in the 'New World' – all the more so, perhaps, given that 1675 saw the outbreak of the bloody conflict between Indians and colonists known as King Philip's War. (Subsequently, we found a slightly earlier citation in a translation of the writings of Hendrik Niclaes, founder of a radical



Protestant sect called the Family of Love, which seems to have had ties to the Quaker movement.) The Testimony's utopian declaration would find its visual counterpart in the early nineteenth century, in a series of more than a hundred allegorical paintings by the American Quaker artist Edward Hicks. In the paintings, as in the Biblical verse, animals both savage and domestic – 'the calf and the young lion and the fatling together' – sit contentedly against a pastoral backdrop of virgin forest; in the background, William Penn negotiates a treaty with a cohort of Native Americans. In the later part of the twentieth century, some Canadians adopted the phrase as a moniker, perhaps recognizing that their neighbors to the south had long ago forsaken any claim on providential pacifism. In this year of 'daisy cutters' and prospective 'regime changes' (both expressions I have also defined for the *OED* in recent months), a few days' respite in the peaceable kingdom was certainly welcome. Opportunism? Well, there's nothing wrong with that, is there?

Abigail Zitin, Assistant Editor, *OED* (North American Editorial Unit)

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.

Please note: it is generally safe to assume that examples found by searching the Web, using search

engines such as Google, will have already been considered by *OED* editors.

nickable (a.: stealable) antedate 1989

nippy sweetie (n.: drink of spirits; sharp-tongued person) antedate 1985

nippy sweetie (n.: sharp-tasting sweet) antedate 1987

ooyah! (int.: expressing pain) antedate 1959

open (v.: to perform before the main act or event; as in 'the new band were signed to open for the Beach Boys') antedate 1969

overcast (n.: in shipbuilding) any evidence (other than for the expression *overcast staff*)

overmourn (v.: mourn excessively) interdate 1650-1998

overshot (a.: drunk) postdate 1942

overtop (prep.: over the top of) antedate 1978

patio rose (n.: miniature variety of rose) antedate 1981

Please send submissions to oed3@oup.co.uk

Interesting antedatings

Revision of the entries in the March 2003 *OED Online* update has revealed an earlier origin than previously known for many words, including:

mournful (antedated to *a*1425 from 1542)

moussaka (1862 from 1941)

moviegoing (adjective) (1922 from 1946)

mujahidin (1885 from 1958)

mumble (noun) (1653 from 1902)

murkiness (*a*1425 from 1813)

muscle (*a*1398 from 1533)

Quotable quotes

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

an exacting study...

1988 P. Gay *Freud*, His search for the gonads of the eel helped to school Freud in patient and precise observation.

...a procedure everyone knows...

1946 *Nature* 20 July, The mobilization of lipochrome..in the serum of oestrogenized or actively laying fowl must..be familiar to all who have prepared phospholipid extracts from the sera of such birds.

...and some medieval dope?

1304 in N. S. B. Gras *Early Eng. Customs Syst.*, Pro i pakett' canabi.

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