

The *Oxford English Dictionary* –

The Ultimate Testament to the

Living Language

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Historical Paper

The English language is a growing lexicon that changes and evolves. With diverse speakers and numerous dictionaries, the meaning of words can easily become distorted. The many understandings and meanings of words were a problem that plagued the minds of lexicographers and speakers in Victorian England. There was no thoroughly standardized reference or history for every English word. In 1884, a lexicographical project began its long trek through the history of the language with a thoroughness and accuracy unknown in any prior dictionary. This was a turning point for English speaking people providing a new perception of their lexicon. Indeed, the creation of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* contributed to growing British national pride and influenced a nation by defining the English language in a scientific and historical manner.

Victorian Britain's strong sense of nationalism was the primary source of momentum for the *OED*. During this era, Britain expanded as an industrial superpower with the strongest navy and "... a quarter of the world's peoples [bowing] down in abjectness and supplication before Her Majesty."¹ In addition to worldly prestige, England went through a period of learning and enlightenment. Full of national pride, British citizens made advancements and extended their influence through, "...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..."² Yet, out of all these accomplishments, none seemed to focus on the words of the people. English continually spread geographically and encountered new words through its steadily rising global status in trade, law, and international politics.³ Without a precise record of English, it was increasingly difficult to clearly define the language. It was imperative that England "...equip itself with a great national dictionary testifying to its historical claim on language, culture, and nation, as an encoding of its sacred trust."⁴ Nineteenth century

British embraced the idea. As stated in a Victorian essay, *Culture & Anarchy*, the need for a supreme source of English was a nationally felt hope.⁵ Fueled by this desire for language stability, several attempts were made “... for bettering the English language, for giving it greater prestige both at home and abroad.”⁶ However, it would not be until the creation of the *OED* that England did its language justice.

The *OED* was a well thought-out endeavor started by a club, a man, and his paper. The Philological Society was an organization begun in 1842 to “...investigate the Structure, the Affinity and the History of Languages.”⁷ Besides the research and debate common in society meetings, the members often concerned themselves with the current state of language. In the summer of 1857, a committee formed to combat the “...worry that had begun to evolve from decades of undefined uneasiness...that the dictionaries then currently in print were just not good enough.”⁸ Dean Trench, a crucial part of the newly formed committee, soon greeted the society with a paper titled *On Some Deficiencies in Our English Dictionaries*. In it, Trench pinpointed the flaws with previous lexicons:

I. Obsolete words are incompletely registered.... II. Families or groups of words are often imperfect.... III. Much earlier examples of the employment of words oftentimes exist than any which are cited.... IV. Important meanings and uses of words are passed over.... V. Comparatively little attention is paid to the distinguishing of synonymous words. VI. Many passages in our literature are passed by, which might be usefully adduced in illustration of the first introduction, etymology, and meaning of words. VII. ...our Dictionaries err in redundancy as well as in defect....⁹

Trench explained that correcting these flaws was possible in an entirely new dictionary. Most important to him was the idea that the dictionary be strictly a record of words and not eliminate or change meanings.¹⁰ It was to be a comprehensive dictionary and an egalitarian work “...involving in the making of the lexicon the very people who spoke and read the language...” – a truly innovative method.¹¹ The Philological Society eagerly commissioned what would be the

pride and joy of lexicography and etymology. However, the members were not only motivated by personal passion for words, but (as the Prime Minister of 1928, Stanley Baldwin, remarked in a speech at the celebration of the *OED*'s completion) "...the desire to record and to safeguard and to establish for all time the manifold riches of the English tongue."¹² The Society knew a dictionary was the perfect addition to British pride. It accepted the project for England because of its "...humanist tradition, with its interests in philological detail and historical accuracy, and an Enlightenment feeling for bringing a system to the knowledge of the world, [and] with a Victorian ambition for scale."¹³ Theirs would be a national icon as monumental as trains and penicillin.

As the project developed under the guidance of its early editors, the *OED* gained growing support from the public. In 1859, the Philological Society issued an appeal asking for volunteers to help with the process of recording words and phrases from numerous written sources.¹⁴ Many people were thrilled by the idea of a nationally significant dictionary and volunteered to collect materials. In fact, the project was well underway in 1880, and the number of volunteers "... had risen to 750, and in 1881 it was upward of 800."¹⁵ Such involvement meant the *OED* was certainly a social change for the English-speaking public.¹⁶ The documentation of their language's identity would add a new element to everyday British life, allowing them to use and reference a common resource that united the nation through language. However, production of this public marvel required a new, uniquely talented leader. This was the *OED*'s most famous editor, James Murray, whose credits included "... 'the typographical distinctions...'" of the work and the invention of "... a new level of system and detail in English lexicography as part of a Victorian passion for bringing order and design to seeming chaos..."¹⁷ Murray's contribution to the *OED* was invaluable. Much of his design remained in *OED* production. He devoted his life to

its progress, setting up a thorough process, increasing its volunteer outreach, and working with the Oxford University Press.¹⁸ First and foremost, “Murray was a dedicated descriptivist, not a prescriptivist,” which meant that he kept the *OED* purely comprehensive and historical by not being selective about words.¹⁹ This approach to the project made the *OED* revolutionary in the world of dictionaries. After hard work and editing, the first section of the dictionary, published in 1884, unleashed a national sensation of accomplishment and awe “...at the elegance, detail, and accuracy of the text.”²⁰ English-speakers more and more recognized the Dictionary as a topic of national interest. By 1884, it was “...a daily source of enlightenment and satisfaction to an incalculable number of readers.”²¹ The Philological Society’s original concept slowly came to fruition. In reaction to the accuracy of the compilation, the *OED* gained respect from the British and nurtured their growing recognition of the Dictionary as the authority in reference books.

The *OED*’s procedure set it apart from other dictionaries and established a new standard in dictionary evolution. The first step was to collect and organize alphabetically the millions of ‘slips’ sent in by volunteers.²² Through this process, the staff grouped cards together for each word. Next, a sub-editor “...arranged them according to the different senses of the word, and drafted provisional definitions of these senses.”²³ An editor’s assistant received the refined bundle of slips. The assistant then investigated the word through serious analysis of understandings and spelling, carefully traced the quotations by chronology, selected quotations for each sense and time period of the word, and finally composed a refined definition.²⁴ The meticulous selection of quotations was the most definitive part of the process. Each was “...drawn from a huge variety of sources – literary, scholarly, technical, popular – and represent authors as disparate as Geoffrey Chaucer and Erica Jong, William Shakespeare and Raymond Chandler, Charles Darwin and John Le Carre.”²⁵ Drawing from a wide variety of writing led for

a better representation of what it meant to speak English. By having the select quotations organized chronologically, the assistants proved the *OED* “... a comprehensive authority on the history of English from 1150 to the present day... [which] crucially affected literary and linguistic understanding of how English has changed and developed....”²⁶ The head-editor scrutinized these quotations and other aspects of the research, looking for any flaw or missed usage. He made sure the word reached its highest perfection before handing it over to the press for publication. Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin praised this kind of dedication and study, remarking that the editors:

...have defined, they have pronounced, and they have illustrated all the words in our language. They have uncovered their origins; they have dissolved their metaphors; they have unwrapped and exposed mummies, and they have laid bare in their work the soul of England and the mind of our people for a score of generations....²⁷

The combination of quotes, dedicated researchers, and an advanced scientific process justified the *OED*'s reputation as the most historical and comprehensive dictionary of its time. As remarked in the *OED* Preface of Re-issue in 1933, “...the historical treatment of every word and idiom” meant “...a revolution in the art of lexicography.”²⁸ The *OED*'s assemblage and inventive process became the archetype for future dictionaries and delineated the English language.

In April of 1928, England witnessed the birth of a multi-volume, completed *Oxford English Dictionary*. Its final publication ushered in a pride of English that resonated with the public and changed the way British understood their language. “Nearly fifty years ago, Oxford embarked on the compilation of the greatest Dictionary the world has ever seen; everyone knew that the time would come ...when the completion of this vast enterprise would be celebrated,” remarked Sir William Jackson Pope, Prime Warden of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths and a long time supporter of the *OED*.²⁹ He was not the only Englishman who waited with

anticipation for this event. The public cherished "...its enormous range, unparalleled historical depth, detailed etymologies, and inexhaustible supply of illustrative quotations..." making it "...the most venerated and most beloved English-language reference ever compiled."³⁰ Indeed, it was its accuracy and academic excellence that made it so renowned. It became the model for all significant lexicographical work.³¹ In addition to its status in the world of academia, it also became the perfect source for the everyday person. It was the go-to resource "...of the scholar who [wished] to study some Chaucerian word or phrase, and of the man in the street who [wished] to know the origin of current terms."³² England grew intensely aware of the practical uses of the *OED*, and used the media to encourage the public to take advantage of the source. One such promoting publication, the *Asiatic Review*, stated, "It is not so much a Dictionary as a History of English speech and thought from its infancy to the present day."³³ Beyond the scholars and the public, the *OED* gained popularity with particular fields of study. Members of Parliament quoted the Dictionary when dealing with controversy or issues of justice and the *British Medical Journal* referenced it often.³⁴ The completion of the first edition was an ultimate testament to historical English. Yet, there was more work to be done; "[one] of the infuriating marvels of the slippery fluidity of the English language is that for all of its 1,500 years of history it has been changing, enlarging, evolving..."³⁵ True, the *OED*'s legacy lived on in the speech of English-speaking people everywhere, but it took lexicographers' continuous documentation of the living language to avoid the deterioration of definitions.

The evolution of English requires constant revision of the *OED*. Using the concepts behind the original project as a creed of lexicographical standards, Oxford University Press (OUP) publishes many dictionaries that up-hold the national pride and ultimate authoritative position inspired by the First Edition *OED*. The 150 titles that make up this enterprise sell

“...five million books a year.”³⁶ Now, the OUP has everything from dictionary supplements to the full Second Edition to online databases and a CD-Rom version. The Second Edition in particular is a huge milestone for the Oxford family. In 1989, the “...Second [Edition] of the *OED* was published in print..., but – most significantly for what was then a massive database – it was published from tagged, machine-readable text.”³⁷ This use of technology allows the Oxford dictionaries’ prevalence to grow and reach more eager English-speakers. The online version of the Second Edition exists as of the 21st century “...along with the revised and new entries which are added to the site each quarter and form the basis of the growing new Third Edition.”³⁸ With the release of a CD-Rom in 1992 and further improvements to their online website and database, the *OED* continues its reign, growing with the very culture that helped create it.³⁹ The most current venture is the Third Edition with “...the first revised entries...in the letter N, the second letter (after M) to receive a thorough updating.”⁴⁰ This project is in constant motion, and so is other research. There was a reemergence of great excitement for the dictionary in a recent *Wordhunt*, a program instituted by the OED and BBC to encourage the word-lovers of today to step into the role of the early lexicographers and find quotations for new words.⁴¹ The public, in true nationalistic spirit, received the program with enthusiasm. In response to the appeals, eager English-speakers “...enrolled themselves as valuable unpaid contributors, a notable example of wholly beneficent continuity with the past.”⁴² This modern show of nationalism and pride in the English language shows the *OED* is thriving. In a sense, the Victorian spirit of improvement and exploration is present in current research.

These modern applications demonstrate the long-lasting impact of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It was a turning point for the national pride of the British, who saw it as an ultimate testament to their academic achievement and global power. The *OED* enabled them to go from

linguistic confusion to a communicative power. As revealed by involvement with the project and reactions to its publication, this democratic work became a symbol of the people who were indeed the source of every word. Just as the nation created the living lexicon, the Dictionary shaped the way English-speakers understood their language. Its legacy lives on in homes and public institutions, forever a model of nationalism and scientific application. The greatest resource of its time, the *OED* was a turning point that defined a nation and a language, giving meaning to words and to what it meant to speak English.

Notes

1. Simon Winchester, *The Meaning of Everything: the Story of the Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 42.
2. *Ibid.*, 43.
3. Simon Winchester, *The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: First HarperPerennial, 1999), 86-87.
4. John Willinsky, *Empire of Words: The Reign of the OED* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 26.
5. *Ibid.*, 190.
6. Winchester, *Professor and the Madman*, 87.
7. Winchester, *The Meaning of Everything*, 36-37.
8. *Ibid.*, 38-39.
9. Richard Chenevix Trench, D.D., *On Some Deficiencies in the English Dictionary* (London: John W. Parker, West Strand, 1860), 3.
10. Lynda Mugglestone, *Lost For Words: The Hidden History of the Oxford English Dictionary* (New haven; CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 6.
11. Winchester, *The Meaning of Everything*, 44.
12. The R. T. HON. Stanley Baldwin, P.C., M.P., "The Prime Minister" (1928), speech, (Speeches Delivered in the Goldsmiths' Hall, London, June 6, 1928), 5.
13. Willinsky, *Empire of Words*, 191.
14. Jennie Price, Senior Editor, OED, "Do Not Play Scrabble With These People," *History Today* 53, issue 6 (2003): 8. <http://www.historystudycenter.com> (accessed October 14, 2012).

15. Humphrey Milford, "The Making Of The Dictionary," *The Periodical* XIII, no. 143 (1928): 7.
16. It was then known as *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* as it was not yet worked on at Oxford.
17. Willinsky, *Empire of Words*, 35.
18. Milford, "The Making Of The Dictionary," 4-5. The Oxford University Press would eventually claim ownership of the dictionary, giving it its name.
19. Jack Lynch, *The Lexicographer's Dilemma* (New York: Walker Publishing Company, Inc., 2009), 159.
20. John Simpson, "The OED and Innovation," *OED* website, <http://public.oed.com/about/the-oed-and-innovation/> (accessed December 12, 2012).
21. Milford, "The Making of the Dictionary," 25.
22. Sir William Craigie, *The Oxford English Dictionary: A Short Account with some Personal Reminiscences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1928), 3.
23. Ibid.
24. Milford, "The Making of the Dictionary," 15.
25. Oxford University Press, "One of the *Weekend Wall Street Journal's* Five Best Books in the English Language," *Oxford University Press: The Oxford English Dictionary: John Simpson*, <http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/Reference/EnglishDictionaries/?view=usa...> (accessed December 10, 2012), 1.
26. Charlotte Brewer, "Examining the OED – About the Project," OED website, <http://oed.hentford.ox.ac.uk/main/content/category/11/41/152/> (accessed October 14, 2012).
27. Baldwin, "The Prime Minister," 6.

28. Charlotte Brewer, *Treasure-House of the Language: the living OED* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 127.
29. Sir William Jackson Pope, K.B.E., L.L.D., D.S.C., F.R.S., “The Prime Warden” (1928), speech, (Speeches Delivered in the Goldsmiths’ Hall, London, June 6 1928), 22.
30. Oxford University Press, “Weekend Wall Street Journal,” 1.
31. Simpson, “The OED and innovation,” 1.
32. Sir William Craigie, *The OED*, 4.
33. Milford, “The Making of the Dictionary,” 25.
34. *Ibid.*, 25.
35. Winchester, *The Meaning of Everything*, 238.
36. Willinsky, *Empire of Words*, 12.
37. Simpson, “The OED and innovation,” 2.
38. Price, “Do Not Play Scrabble With These People,” 8.
39. Simpson, “The OED and innovation,” 2.
40. Price, “Do Not Play Scrabble With These People,” 8.
41. Brewer, *Treasure-House*, 256-257.
42. *Ibid.*

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Baldwin, The Rt. Hon. Stanley, P.C., M.P. “The Prime Minister.” speech, *Speeches Delivered in the Goldsmiths’ Hall, London, June 6, 1928.*

Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister of England in 1928, commemorates the completion of the first edition of the *OED* in this speech. It is a key example in my paper of national pride in the project and social change. Just as Baldwin is a representative for his people politically, his praise for the *OED* reflects the enthusiasm of the public.

Craigie, Sir William. *The Oxford English Dictionary: A Short Account with some Personal Reminiscences.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1928, 3-4.

This pamphlet, written by one of the Dictionary’s editors, is useful in my report as an insight into the process of the *OED*’s compilation. Because it is written by an editor of the Dictionary, the source holds special relevance when documenting facts of method and production.

Milford, Humphrey. “The Making of the Dictionary.” *The Periodical* XIII, no. 143 (1928): 4-25.

The Periodical, the OUP’s official journal, is a crucial part of my research, and I reference it often to establish first-hand facts about the happenings of the dictionary. Published in February of 1928 as a preface to the *OED*’s distribution in April of that year, the source lays out the history of the dictionary from the idea to the completion. I draw from the facts it presents to form independent ideas on the authority of the *OED*.

Pope, Sir William Jackson, K.B.E., L.L.D., D.S.C., F.R.S., “The Prime Warden.” speech, *Speeches Delivered in the Goldsmiths’ Hall, London, June 6, 1928.*

Sir William Jackson, Prime Warden of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, was a keen example of nationalism as witnessed by the public. The Company of Goldsmiths, in particular, was of huge support to the Dictionary early on, as they donated a large sum of money to the project. I would be remiss not to include a statement from such a sponsor.

Trench, Richard Chenevix, D.D. *On Some Deficiencies in the English Dictionary*. London: John W. Parker, West Strand, 1860.

I am excited to use this primary source because it is, in a sense, the essence of the OED's purpose: to soar above the flaws and discrepancies of past dictionaries and become an ultimate lexicographical authority through its documentation of the language. If not for Trench's paper on the subject of past lexicons, it may have been that the *OED* would not exist. I use this to explain the need for a dictionary and to pinpoint the flaws in its contemporaries.

Secondary Sources

Brewer, Charlotte. "Examining the OED-About the Project." *OED* website. <http://oed.hertford.ox.ac.uk/main/content/category/11/41/152/> (accessed December 12, 2012).

This article by Brewer (an established authority on my topic) briefly summarizes some major points of the Dictionary's history and is useful for a fundamental phrase that aids my idea formulation.

Brewer, Charlotte. *Treasure-House of the Language*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

This book gives me special insight into some modern views of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I use it to present modern examples of the *OED*'s growth and living relevance with its users.

Lynch, Jack. *The Lexicographer's Dilemma*. New York: Walker Publishing Company, Inc., 2009.

This source is particularly useful in describing James Murray. It also stands as a great volume for background research and a look into the values of the *OED*.

Mugglestone, Lynda. *Lost For Words: The Hidden History of the Oxford English Dictionary*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

This is an eloquently written and well researched source that I use to validate the historical accuracy of the *OED*. Though I did not quote it much, this book (and another one by Mugglestone) is of great use to me in the basic understanding of my topic.

Oxford University Press. "One of *the Weekend Wall Street Journal's* Five Best Books in the English Language." *Oxford University Press: The Oxford English Dictionary*. <http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/Reference/EnglishDictionaries/?view=usa...> (accessed December 10, 2012).

This web article offers accolades that again support the authority and nationalism of the *OED*. It is an unusual find but a very beneficial document. Because it is an actual, modern review of the *OED* by an American newspaper, I feel it gives insight into public opinion.

Price, Jennie, Senior Editor, OED. "Do Not Play Scrabble With These People." *History Today* 53, issue 6 (2003): 8.

Despite this article's humorous title, it holds serious content that is both informative and constructive for my paper. Its existence exemplifies public support and the lasting legacy of the

OED's social change. I choose to list it as a secondary source because of its publication for the 75th anniversary of the *OED* and its look back at the subject with a more recent view.

Simpson, John. "The *OED* and innovation." *OED* website. <http://public.oed.com/about/the-oed-and-innovation/> (accessed December 12, 2012).

From the official *OED* website itself, this article demonstrates the adaptations the Dictionary goes through to morph with and embody the living language that gives it drive. Its summarization of the editions, supplements, and innovations the Dictionary makes is advantageous to my report.

Willinsky, John. *Empire of Words: The Reign of the *OED. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.**

This is my favorite secondary source. It gives me one of the best overviews of the *OED* from start to finish and offers key quotations to backup my claims on nationalism, academic prowess, and other important aspects of the dictionary. Willinsky's admiration of the *OED* is a valuable asset to my paper.

Winchester, Simon. *The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Simon Winchester takes a more creative writing style when recording the life of the *OED*. In addition to simply enjoying his wordage, I find his statements and research valuable to my report. I often pull from *The Meaning of Everything* (the better, in my opinion, of his two books) to further my findings and support my concepts on Victorian Britain.

Winchester, Simon. *The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*. New York: First HarperPerennial, 1999.

This book, also by Winchester, is of indispensable value for similar reasons. I use it because of its validity and creative and informational approach. This book is the inspiration for my interest in the OED and my selection of a turning point in history.

Personal Communication

**Hunt, Beverly. Oxford English Dictionary Archivist at the Oxford University Press.
December 2012 to January 2013.**

I was directed to Ms. Beverly Hunt after a letter I wrote to the head archivist at the OUP, Mr. Martin Maw. Ms. Hunt's specialty is the *OED*. She assumed the role of my personal correspondent, and I maintained active correspondence with her to aid in my research. She was very helpful and gracious to donate her time to a fifteen-year-old's research report. She sent me photocopies of four incredible sources (including *The Periodical*) which could only be accessed in the Oxford University Library. I feel it appropriate to cite her assistance in my bibliography (even though I did not interview her or use a statement from her) because of her enormous contribution to my efforts.