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978-0-521-55869-3 - The Story of Webster's Third: Philip Gove's Controversial Dictionary and Its Critics

Herbert C. Morton

Excerpt

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I

# The Best of Times and the Worst: A Prologue

Every other authour may aspire to praise; the lexicographer can only hope to escape reproach, and even this negative recompense has been yet granted to very few.

Samuel Johnson, Preface to *A Dictionary of the English Language*

In the autumn of 1961 the publication of a new American dictionary touched off the stormiest controversy in the annals of lexicography. It was later described as “a literary scandal of the kind until then monopolized by Paris.” It began quietly before the dictionary went on sale and gathered momentum in the press during the ensuing months. Lengthy indictments, derisive and angry, appeared later in the *Atlantic* and the *New Yorker* and were met with indignant point-by-point rejoinders. The debate went on for years in scholarly and professional journals, with occasional outcroppings in the media and books.<sup>1</sup>

At the center of the controversy was an unlikely target, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged*, the eighth edition in a direct line of descent from Noah Webster's pioneering work of 1828, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*. The lineage was highly respectable, and though dictionaries are sometimes controversial, the subject matter was certainly not the stuff of the great publishing battles of the past, which were more often provoked by disputes over religious questions or freedom of speech. Furthermore, the work that it succeeded, the Second Edition of 1934, was the best-known and most widely used unabridged dictionary of the English language in the United States and perhaps the world. *Webster's Second*, as it was known, was more than respected. It was

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accepted as the ultimate authority on meaning and usage, and its preeminence was virtually unchallenged in the United States. It did not provoke controversies; it settled them.

What happened between the Second and Third Editions – in the making of dictionaries and the attitudes of dictionary users – to account for such a difference in reception? Even now it is difficult to disentangle all the factors – the lexicographical issues, the ideological antagonisms reflecting the cultural and social tensions of the early 1960s, the widespread ignorance about language and about dictionaries, the competence and fairness of the critics, and the misleading publicity material issued by the publisher to capture attention in the press. Moreover, it was the Merriam company's misfortune that the dictionary appeared at a critical time in the battle between linguists and humanists within university departments of English. Humanists resented what they regarded as the exaggerated claims of superiority by linguists; they had found philology comfortable, but structural linguistics seemed scientific and hostile. Linguists were offended by the refusal of literary scholars to recognize the contributions of linguistic research. It was clear, as the controversy grew in intensity, that the central issue was not merely the dictionary itself, though it was that primarily; it was also what the critics thought the dictionary symbolized. At stake, so it was made to appear, was the preservation of the English language and the survival of deeply rooted cultural traditions: *Webster's Third* was portrayed as a threat to both, and its editor, Philip Babcock Gove, bore the brunt of the attack.

PHILIP GOVE, like the dictionary itself, was an unlikely target. A New Englander by descent, upbringing, temperament, and choice, he was born in New Hampshire in 1902 and attended local schools and Dartmouth College. He was an enthusiastic outdoorsman from boyhood on. He was conservative in his political and social views and believed in hard work and the power of research and reason to solve problems. After graduate school, he taught college English for fifteen years and spent a year in London and Oxford on a scholarship; he served as a naval officer during World War II and returned to New England in 1946. He spent the last twenty-five years of his working life at the G. & C. Merriam Company in Springfield, Massachusetts, where he became editor in chief of Merriam-Webster dictionaries.

In coming to lexicography in midcareer, Gove at the age of forty-four was following a path taken by many dictionary editors before him. Noah Webster was forty-two in 1800 when he began working on his *Compendious Dictionary*. James A. H. Murray, editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, was forty-two when he changed course, and Samuel Johnson, the great eighteenth-century writer and lexicographer, was thirty-seven. All learned their craft on the job, as others have done since. Robert W. Burchfield recalls that he never wrote a definition before he became editor of the supplement to the *OED* in 1957. He had “glossarial experience,” as he put it, and had assisted in the preparation of the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, but he felt totally at a loss about how to proceed with the making of a dictionary.<sup>2</sup>

Gove was hired as an assistant editor in 1946 on the strength of enthusiastic recommendations from his mentors at Harvard and Columbia universities, where he did his graduate work. He had been an outstanding student, and although his teaching career had been undistinguished, his strengths as a researcher and his interest in dictionaries made him a good prospect for the Merriam staff. He was painstaking, self-assured, and used to working things out on his own. Soon after his arrival at the Merriam company, he knew that the work suited him. He liked it and he was good at it. Five years after he joined the staff, he was put in charge of the making of *Webster's Third*.

He drove himself hard, with a firm sense of purpose, and was equally demanding of the staff. He combined a manager's grasp of the full picture with a scholar's attentiveness to detail. He put his faith in planning and rational decision making, perhaps to a fault; he sometimes seemed to assume that a good plan ensured a good outcome. Some professional staff members found him difficult to approach and autocratic, indifferent to the opinions and concerns of others. Thus, he had his critics. But he had admirers and supporters as well among the editors and company officers who recognized his capabilities and commitment. Secretaries and assistants usually thought him gentlemanly and considerate, though somewhat intimidating.

THE DICTIONARY – containing a hundred thousand new words or additional meanings of old words – required ten years to complete. When the first copies arrived from the venerable Riverside Press of

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Cambridge, Massachusetts, in early September 1961, Gove looked them over with a great sense of relief, satisfaction, and pride. He had often told his family that he had the best job in the world, except for the presidency of Harvard. At this happy moment, with the “Big Book” at last in hand, he might not have conceded any exceptions.

For more than a century, successive editions, published and promoted after Webster's death by the G. & C. Merriam Company, fended off strong challenges from distinguished rivals in the highly competitive market for dictionaries. The Third Edition began as a reworking of the Second, which was getting out of date after an era of rapid change in the English language. Unprecedented advances in science and technology and changes wrought by the Depression and World War II had greatly expanded the vocabulary and introduced new patterns of expression. The editors were able to draw on the vastly enlarged Merriam citation files for additions to the vocabulary list and for evidence on which to base definitions and usage notes. More than 6 million examples of how words were used, four times as many as were available for the 1934 edition, were contained in the files. Along with other reference works available to the staff, they provided an unmatched inventory of the English language as it was being used in the United States in the mid-twentieth century.

The new edition was distinguished further, in Gove's view, by a more rigorous application of the policies that guided the Second Edition and by many innovations for which he could claim at least partial credit. Indeed, for a collective work, on which a staff of seventy collaborated and which drew on the knowledge of hundreds of consultants, it reflected his hand to a surprising extent.

IT WAS CLEAR even to a very private man like Philip Gove, who exercised his authority more by memo than by personal intervention and did not mix easily with his staff, that the publication of a new unabridged called for a staff celebration – not a perfunctory reception or public dinner but something more intimate. The logical site was his home, the Old Patrick farm, where he and his wife, Grace, had lived since moving to Massachusetts. It was located in the town of Warren, about twenty miles east of the Merriam offices in Springfield. The two-story wood frame Georgian house, with the only hipped roof in Warren, was recognized as a historic landmark.<sup>3</sup>

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Philip and Grace had been delighted, at first sight, by the property itself and the view it afforded. Moreover, from Philip's perspective as a commuter, the location was ideal. For the drive from home to work in the morning, the sun would be at his back, and it would be at his back again for the return drive in the evening – a triumph of forethought over one of the small but vexing problems of life; it was a triumph that gave him particular satisfaction.

The farm was far enough from the office to offer Philip a sense of escape, yet not so distant that it made daily commuting a burden. After a tiring day at his desk, the scenic drive home and the prospect of unwinding on the farm revived him. Philip told visitors, who joined him in admiring the splendid view from his house, that this was what helped him keep his sense of balance.

THE ENTIRE EDITORIAL STAFF was invited to the publication party. Gordon J. Gallan, president of the Merriam company, was invited too, but he told Gove, "It's your day," and declined to attend.<sup>4</sup>

For most of the staff and their spouses, the trip to the farm was their first. A few had visited it when the Goves were new arrivals – in the days when Philip used to bring fresh eggs and vegetables to the office to sell. But the Goves did not entertain much after their children were grown. H. Bosley Woolf, Philip's closest associate (and later his successor), was an exception. He was an occasional weekend guest and usually spent the night at the farm after he and Philip returned from evening linguistic meetings at Yale University. Philip was generally viewed as a remote figure. Staff members found it hard to reconcile their impression of him as the proper and studious editor with the stories they heard of him as a working farmer who raised cattle and planted fields of corn and hay, whose farming methods, fastidiously sensitive to environmental concerns, won a state environmental prize, and who took his vacation every year during the haying season so that he could harvest and bale the crop himself to feed his cattle or to sell.

Arriving late on a lovely Saturday afternoon in September, the guests found their host atop the hay wagon, which was set up as a bar, jovially handing out drinks. He was dressed in overalls and a work shirt and seemed utterly at ease – a striking contrast to their reclusive boss in the staid environment of G. & C. Merriam Company. His son,

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Norwood, a physicist, who had driven up from Oak Ridge, Tennessee, was on hand with his wife, Ruth, and their children. The Goves' youngest child, Doris, a high school senior, was also there. Susan Rudolph, an older daughter, had been unable to attend with her family.

At dusk, dinner was served on the porch – chafing dishes with lobster Newburg, platters with hot vegetables, and a tomato and watercress salad. The vegetables and tomatoes, grown naturally without chemical fertilizers, had been freshly picked from Grace's garden. A puppet show followed, written by Grace, with taped music and lyrics by Norwood. Many of the insider jokes went over the heads of the guests, but the performance was in the spirit of the occasion. The evening ended on a high note with the presentation of a dictionary to every staff member, each copy inscribed by President Gallan in his crabbed, backslanted style.

NOTHING IN THE EVENTS of the splendid day, or of the preceding fifteen years, prepared Philip for the tempestuous intellectual and social controversy that was to follow. The battle preoccupied him for the next five years – and left him little peace for the rest of his life.

The dictionary was criticized for abandoning all recognized standards of grammar and usage – for “surrendering to the permissive school” that was the vogue in child rearing and was taking over the schools. It was attacked for eliminating biographical and geographical information and other encyclopedic material in order to make room for new words and examples. “Think if you can,” thundered one critic, “of a dictionary from which you cannot learn who Mark Twain was . . . or what were the names of the apostles.”<sup>5</sup> The Third Edition was ridiculed for quoting politicians, entertainers, and other nonliterary people to illustrate the meanings of words, instead of relying exclusively on great writers. “Three shows a day drain a girl” – a quotation attributed to Ethel Merman – was considered outrageous, though none of the critics argued that the quotation failed to make unmistakably clear the meaning of the word *drain* in this context; they merely objected to the quoting of a musical comedy star.

Among the more extravagant reactions was a charge that the dictionary was Communist-inspired; another was a scheme for buying out

the Merriam company, junking the Third Edition, and beginning afresh on a fourth edition that would truly carry on the Webster tradition.

There were some well-founded criticisms; the dictionary had its faults. But the attacks that were most inflammatory and that gained greatest attention were usually facetious, mean-spirited, monstrous exaggerations, or wrong on their facts, mistakenly attributing to Gove the invention of policies that had guided the Second Edition and that had been established lexicographical practices for a century. Others treated a reasonable difference in judgment as evidence of anti-intellectualism or subversive intent. Nonetheless, underlying the arguments was a fundamental disagreement on the nature and role of dictionaries. It was summed up at the time as the difference between “descriptive” and “prescriptive” approaches to language.

Critics of the Third Edition believed that it was the responsibility of a dictionary to serve as a standard of correctness, to tell users what was right and what was wrong, according to principles that had been laid down by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century grammarians. Gove said that the job of the dictionary was to describe how people used language, not how they should use it, echoing the views expressed by Dean Richard Chenevix Trench in two famous papers on the deficiencies of English dictionaries. The papers (both read to the Philological Society in November 1857) greatly influenced the planning of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and English lexicography generally. Trench spelled out what the “true idea of what a dictionary is.” He described it as “an inventory of the language . . . all the words good or bad.” He called the lexicographer “an historian [of the language], not a critic” and explicitly warned his colleagues against repeating the mistake of the French Academy, which had sought to fix the language and prescribe a standard of correctness for the nation. Trench also expressed himself strongly on what a dictionary should contain and what it should omit, views that influenced Gove’s approach to deciding what the scope of the Third Edition would be.

As a shorthand simplification, the disagreement could also be viewed as the difference between *dictionary makers*, who take their guidance from the way language is spoken and written, and *dictionary users*, who hanker for an authority to answer their questions according to rules governing the proper use of language. However it is per-



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ceived, the controversy over the descriptive and prescriptive points of view is still alive, though it is characterized by less polarized positions and more instructive discussions than it was in the 1960s.

GOVE TRIED TO ANSWER the attacks in the *New York Times* and elsewhere when they began to appear in the fall of 1961. His case was defended with particular effectiveness by two professors of English at Northwestern University, both Rhodes scholars – Bergen Evans and James Sledd – as described in Part III. Evans, a popular commentator on language and usage, was given equal space in the *Atlantic* to answer Wilson Follett's provocative attack, "Sabotage in Springfield," which set off a fresh outburst of hostile reviews of the dictionary when it appeared in January 1962. Sledd answered Dwight Macdonald's critique, which was published in March in the *New Yorker*, and he showed himself to be Macdonald's equal as a polemicist and his superior in his knowledge of dictionaries. But whereas Macdonald reached the large and influential audience of the *New Yorker*, Sledd could not find a comparable forum, and his reply appeared at last in the obscure proceedings of the Ethnology Association, which had given him a platform at its annual meeting. Later he was invited by Professor Randolph Quirk to University College, London, to explain to British linguists and grammarians why a dictionary that seemed such a splendid achievement to them was reviled in the United States. In late 1962, a year after the dictionary was published, Sledd and Wilma R. Ebbitt of the University of Chicago edited and published a harvest of news stories and reviews, pro and con, *Dictionaries and THAT Dictionary*; it included an exchange of views between Macdonald and Sledd and the articles by Follett and Evans.<sup>6</sup>

GOVE NEVER DOUBTED the merits of his work and was deeply troubled and hurt by the tone of the attacks. He had expected criticism from informed reviewers on matters where there were legitimate differences of opinion – and he encountered it, even from his strongest supporters. He had not expected to be judged primarily by detractors who had little understanding of the nature and history of dictionaries and who were intent on turning a debate about lexicography into an ideological war.



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Had he lived a few years longer (he died at seventy in 1972), he might have felt vindicated. Although there are still editors, writers, and others who echo the attacks of the early 1960s, or who remain convinced that *Webster's Third* is a poor dictionary and that Gove was misguided, the place of the Third Edition as an important achievement in the history of lexicography is firmly established, notwithstanding its imperfections.

In some ways the controversy was a preposterous episode, as much a part of the sociology of human behavior as of the history of language and lexicography. But it is as a window on differing perceptions of the nature of language and the role of the dictionary that the episode, still largely unexamined, offers its greatest interest and most useful insights.

THREE MAJOR THEMES are intertwined in this account. One is biographical and historical – the role of Philip Gove and the traditions of the Merriam-Webster dictionaries that he inherited and on which his views were imposed. The second is the task of dictionary making – which is essentially a description of what the Third Edition was intended to achieve by recording the expansion of the language and changes in usage over more than twenty years and by revising the definitions, etymologies, pronunciations, and so on. It shows the similarities and differences between the Third Edition and the Second and the changes that were introduced to reflect developments in the language and in attitudes toward language. The story of dictionary making sets the stage for the blow-by-blow account of the controversy. Without some familiarity with these two underlying themes of historical change and the practice of lexicography, today's reader would be no better prepared to understand the dictionary war than were readers three decades ago.

The third theme is the chronicle of the controversy itself – a narrative of how the battle unfolded as it moved from the media accounts to the evaluations of practitioners and scholars. The battle lines are drawn over the role of the dictionary, the policies of *Webster's Third*, the ideological gulf between defenders of the dictionary and its detractors, the split in ranks of the once-united departments of English, and the commercial intrusions that affected the fortunes of the Merriam company. The story concludes with an effort to sort out the

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various themes and conclusions in the context of the 1960s and in the light of today's practices and attitudes.

In its full sweep, the story illuminates conflicting views about lexicographical practices and the role of dictionaries as does no other episode in the history of American lexicography. That is its enduring value. If some issues have faded away, others are as relevant as ever in the war of words that continues over dinner tables, in classrooms and the media, and in the writings of experts.