1 Entering the *OED*

I thought, imagine if I could help get one word in the dictionary.
Mr Chris Collier, Reader for the Oxford English Dictionary
(and contributor of more than 100,000 quotations), Brisbane, Australia, 2006

In 2001, after ten years of writing dictionaries in Australia, I found myself walking through the cobbled streets of Oxford, England, to start a new job at the mother of all dictionaries: the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). I knew that there was no dictionary in the world that matched the *OED* for size and scholarly authority. I would share responsibility for words entering English from languages outside of Europe: it was the opportunity of a lifetime for any lexicographer, regardless of provenance.

I walked through the imposing stone arch of the majestic headquarters of Oxford University Press (OUP) into the front quad with its fountain and ancient oak tree. I had read *A Room of One's Own* so I knew not to walk on Oxbridge grass, but what I did not know was that you also should not smile at people who walked past you, and certainly not say 'g'day' if you had not met them before. There were many Australian mannerisms I would learn to control over the coming years while working on the *OED*, but this first day I was too excited to realise how 'colonial' I seemed to my new work colleagues. As soon as I met the Deputy Chief Editor – an elegant and handsome Englishman who had worked on the dictionary since coming down from Christ Church, Oxford, at the age of twenty-one, the same age I had started working for Oxford Dictionary in Canberra – he greeted me with the unforgettable 'Oh you're Australian.' I knew what he meant, and I was determined to show him that, once we entered the silent zone of the *OED* offices (there is no speaking in the office; if you want to speak you must go into a small glass booth) and started editing the actual text, there would be no difference in the quality of my work and that of any other editor on the floor.

The open-plan office was huge: seventy people in all, consisting of a team of forty editors who wrote the dictionary, an IT team of ten who supported the complex computer system, and twenty readers and typists who spent all day sorting and typing out quotations which were later reviewed by editors who used them to tease out a word's pronunciation, provenance, meaning, and use

Figure 1.1 The modern *OED* office, with its open plan. (Credit: S. Ogilvie)

over time. Although full of people, the office was completely quiet, and its glass and metal fixtures gave it a modern feel. The environment was nothing like the photographs I had seen of the *OED* in the nineteenth century in which James Murray (1837–1915) stood in his pokey Scriptorium surrounded by a thousand pigeon holes, each of which was crowded with 4 × 6-inch 'slips' of paper that recorded each entry of the dictionary (Figure 2.6), or indeed the other office in the regal, sandstone-columned Old Ashmolean building in Broad Street which housed Henry Bradley (1845–1923) and his team (Figure 1.6). In comparison, this modern office was large and sterile, despite the efforts that editors had made to brighten their desks with plants and fluffy toys (Figure 1.1).

At first, I found myself gravitating to others at the Press who had an accent, and it seemed everyone I met had a quirkiness that I found intriguing and irresistible, like the middle-aged gentleman on the reception desk, called a 'porter' in Oxford, with his handle-bar moustache and northern accent. He put me at ease immediately on my first day. Upon hearing my accent, he launched into a short history of falconry in Australia – he had gone to Australia to fly birds (who on earth goes to Australia to fly birds, I thought?). He was the first of many people I would meet at the Press who were world authorities on obscure topics. My favourite was Dave, who had written the science entries in the *OED* for twenty years. I was told he had camped on the shores of Loch Ness building a submarine. Dave not only specialized in English folk music but also real ales, and most Fridays over the coming years he and fellow lexicographer Mike would teach me everything they knew down at the Old Bookbinder's Arms.

Near the Press, surrounded by small terrace houses that were once the brothels of Jericho, this small, white pub was the traditional watering hole for the binders of the Press who for centuries drank there each day after work. Small and smelly, with a fireplace and sticky carpet, it had been featured in an episode of the TV detective series *Inspector Morse*, but other than that no one seemed to know about it. The Bookies became our escape each Friday afternoon, the place where we would unwind over a pint of Old Speckled Hen. Our conversation drifted from topics as disparate as the longest letters in the Chinese alphabet (Mike edited the famous *Oxford Chinese-English Dictionary* so was able to assert authoritatively that in the Pinyin Chinese writing system the largest letters are S, X, Y, and Z, as opposed to C, S, and P in English); to global inconsistencies in naming species of beetles and the difficulties this posed for disambiguation in dictionaries (entomology was one of Dave's many specialisms). The borrowing of foreign phrases in English was my own specialism. I would always have a new discovery to share with Mike and Dave, such as the expression *the mother of all* . . . which was a calque (direct translation) from Arabic *'umm al-ma'arik*, 'the mother of all battles', made famous by Saddam Hussein in the first Gulf War. At the *OED*, I had found soulmates and fellow editors who shared my own passion for the words we worked on and were just as enthusiastic to share their discoveries as to hear mine.

When I began to work there, we were revising the third edition of the *OED* (*OED3*). There had only been two editions previously – the first edition (*OED1*) published in 1928 and the second edition (*OED2*) in 1989 – and the second edition was not really a revision of the first edition but rather a combination of the first edition with various addition and supplement volumes.[1] The new third edition entailed the first thorough revision and re-editing of the original first edition of the dictionary, and therefore involved the re-working of some words or 'entries' that had remained untouched since the nineteenth century.

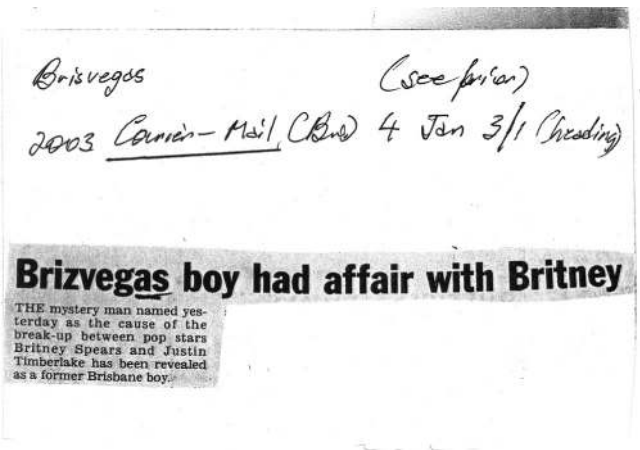
Generally the length of time since the word was last edited was directly proportional to the time needed to edit it because more citations had to be found, and given the mixed editing history of entries in *OED2* there was no telling how long each entry would take to edit for *OED3*. Although our bundles of slips were tied together according to each word or entry, an editor generally thought according to each sense, or individual meaning, of a word or entry. Some senses would take days to sort out, others mere minutes, and there was little way of guessing whether a sense might be 'quick'. Of course entries with multiple senses generally took longer as a whole, but the time spent on each sense of a word would vary: words with a single sense might take much longer to edit than one sense of a word with multiple senses. One colleague spent more than three months on the entry *put* while another laboured for two months on the word *party*. More recently, it took an editor nine months

to work through the 645 senses of *run* which took over from the word *set* (579 senses, yet to be revised) as the largest entry in the dictionary.

I specialized in foreign words borrowed into English (known as 'loan-words') from languages outside of Europe and words from varieties of English around the world (known as 'World Englishes'). Many of my 'non-European' words had not been in English long enough to develop multiple senses, so I was often spared the difficult task of teasing out the finer nuances of meaning that separated multiple senses of a word. Although non-European words were generally single senses and therefore shorter than other entries, they were not necessarily quicker to edit because the task of tracing its etymology, finding written evidence in overseas sources, and checking the etymology and definition with a language specialist was all time-consuming. Some of the words had entered the language recently because of world affairs, and were new entries that needed drafting from scratch, such as *Talibanization* and *Talibanize* which were lexicalizations of *Taliban*, the fundamentalist Islamic movement that governed Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. Other words with a much longer history in English entered so long ago, via explorers and missionaries who spoke Germanic or Romance languages, that most of us would never think of them as 'foreign' words. For example, the word *chocolate* came from Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, in 1604 via the Spanish Jesuit missionary Jose de Acosta. *Sugar* (1299) and *magazine* (1583) came from Arabic via Romance languages, and *coffee* (1598) came from Arabic via Germanic languages.

My work on words of the world called for knowing a little about a lot of languages, ranging from Sanskrit to Hebrew and Arabic, to the languages of the Amazon or Aboriginal Australia. Over six hundred languages are currently mentioned in the etymologies in the *OED*. Backed up by the support of language specialists around the world, I worked on all aspects of these words, describing how they entered the English language – their pronunciation, spelling variants, and meaning – as well as finding written quotations that illustrated their use in English contexts.

The biggest challenge and thrill for every *OED* editor is finding the first instance of a word in print. This involves scouring old texts for the first appearance of a word. The *OED* uses electronic corpora for this process, but also employs teams of people who sit each day in the Bodleian Library, British Library, Library of Congress, and major libraries in Toronto, New York, Boston, New Haven, and Riverside, California, reading old books and manuscripts for 'first quots'. It also relies on members of the public who send in quotations from books, magazines, and journals they have read. The reading programme has an eclectic collection of readers who specialize in words from particular genres and subject areas, and send in quotations on topics as varied as politics, surfing, pornography, or needlework.


Brisvegas (see prior)
2003 Courier-Mail (Bne) 4 Jan 3/1 (Reading)

Brizvegas boy had affair with Britney

THE mystery man named yesterday as the cause of the break-up between pop stars Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake has been revealed as a former Brisbane boy.

Figure 1.2 One of Mr Collier's slips showing the use of the word *Brizvegas* in Brisbane's *Courier Mail* newspaper with his annotations. (Credit: ANDC)

The *OED* and its 'satellite' national dictionary centres around the world have always depended on the contributions of the public.[2] We had a similar system in Australia, and one of the greatest contributions of the past few decades came from a man in my hometown of Brisbane. When I first worked on Australian Oxford dictionaries at the Australian National Dictionary Centre in Canberra, it was my job to open the bundle of quotations that Mr Chris Collier collected and sent each month. There was a veil of mystery surrounding Mr Collier, as no one had ever met him or heard his voice, so the only clues to his identity lay in the hundreds of 4 × 6-inch slips of paper he sent. Each bundle of slips was oddly wrapped in old cornflake packets, with bits of dog hair (or so we hoped) stuck to them. On each slip, he had cut out and glued a quotation, all of which had one thing in common: they were from the same source, Brisbane's main newspaper the *Courier Mail*. The year was 1990, and I vividly remember opening Mr Collier's packages, eager to see the words he had trawled that month: *comfort food, pooper scooper, environmentalism, fast-tracked, gurgler* … there were hundreds of them (Figure 1.2). You can imagine my surprise, then, when on my first day at the job in Oxford, I was asked whether I knew Mr Collier. He had also been sending quotations to the *OED* all these years, and his reading of the *Courier Mail* had provided first quotations for the words *seajack* (1975), *petrolhead* (1980), *off-the-plan* (1986), *Neutralysis* (1989), *kit-off* (1992), and *Mad Max* (1996). We had no knowledge in Australia that Mr Collier had such an international reputation, and over the coming years I would learn that he was one of hundreds of devoted international readers who had contributed to the *OED*.

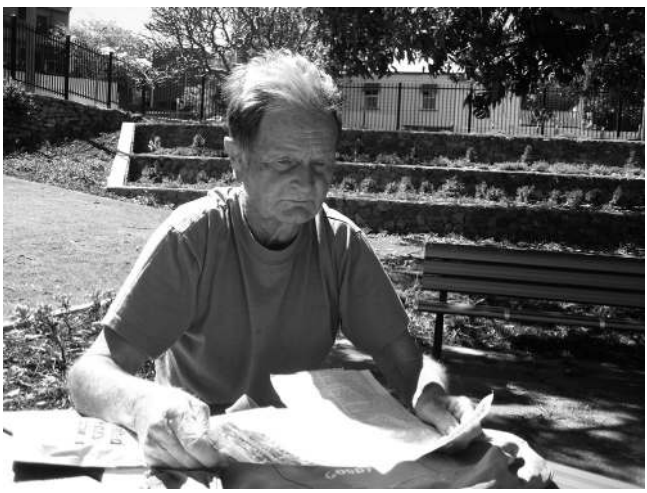


Figure 1.3 Mr Chris Collier, an Australian reader for the *OED* who contributed over 100,000 quotations. (Credit: S. Ogilvie)

Most of these contributors remain faceless, if not nameless, but I made a point of meeting Mr Collier in 2006. I wanted to put a face to this faithful dictionary contributor and to find out more about him, but it was not easy to track him down as he only ever provided a postal box return address. On a trip to Australia to write a high school dictionary at the Australian National Dictionary Centre, I asked the staff about Mr Collier. I knew he was still sending quotations to Oxford, but was he still sending them to the Centre in Canberra? Oh yes, his collecting is as prolific as ever, I was told. As though he had heard my enquiry, the Centre soon after received a telephone call from Mr Collier! For the first time we were able to hear his voice, and I asked if I could come to Brisbane to meet him.

In September 2006, I met Mr Collier at a place of his choosing: a park behind the Paddo Tavern in the Brisbane suburb of Paddington, his 'office' as he put it (Figure 1.3). In his mid seventies when I had met him, Mr Collier had moved with his family to Paddington from Victoria when he was three years old. He was educated at the Milton State School, and spent most of his life working in the Queensland Patents Office. In 1975, he read an article in the *Courier Mail* about the then Chief Editor of the *OED*, the New Zealander Robert Burchfield (1923–2004), who was calling for public contributions to his Supplement volumes of the *OED* (Burchfield's *Supplement*). 'I thought, imagine if I could help get one word in the dictionary', Mr Collier told me. And so began the obsession that occupied him every day since. He supplied an average of 250 quotations every month, and sent more than 100,000

quotations in all. Not all of these have gone into the dictionary, of course, but it has meant that Brisbane's *Courier Mail* is the 584th most frequently quoted source in the *OED*, with more quotations than Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Winston Churchill, the *Book of Common Prayer, Daily Mirror*, or *National Geographic*.[3] Was there any chance of him coming to Oxford to see first-hand the work of the editors of the *OED*? 'No way', he replied, 'I couldn't face all the *Courier Mails* waiting for me on my return. I am going to be at Paddington for the rest of my days.'

And indeed Mr Collier did live alone in the same Paddington house his entire life. His collection of movie posters and words from the *Courier Mail* eventually took over his living quarters. 'He was the local naturist and a hoarder', explained his neighbour of forty-six years. 'Eventually there was only a single, narrow track through the house with piles of paper and newspaper lining each side.' Aged seventy-nine years old, Mr Collier went in to the Royal Brisbane Hospital on 20 June 2010 for a heart operation. He died on the operating table. His funeral was attended by his neighbours, none of whom knew the extent of his contribution to English scholarship.

Quotations like those submitted by Mr Collier are vital to any historical dictionary such as the *OED*. They tell lexicographers important things: who first used the word, where in the world it was first used, where its usage spread, and how it has been used since. The quotations for words of foreign provenance in particular show how and when a word starts being assimilated into English; in early quotations the word might be italicized, in inverted commas, or followed in the sentence by an explanation of its meaning, then – over time – the explanation is usually dropped, and finally it appears in roman type with no special treatment.

My etymological work on these words meant that most of the obscure dictionaries housed in our own little *OED* library were usually sitting on my desk. It also involved reading original diaries of explorers and early word lists compiled by missionaries. For example, I traced the word *Nootka* (the name of a Native tribe of North America on Vancouver Island) to Captain James Cook's *Journal*. The word seemed to have been misunderstood by him to be the local Native American people's name for the bay where they lived, whereas it may actually have been the Nootka word for 'to circle about', referring to a circle dance that was being performed to welcome Cook's party, or perhaps indicating that his ships should circle about to come into the harbour.

My work on the non-European words was backed up by a large group of about two hundred language specialists around the world to whom I could send my entries for checking. A hundred years ago, Murray was able to use Royal Mail to connect to the rest of the world: he would write by hand and wait for a reply from the consultant by Royal Mail. Thanks to email, our Khoekhoe specialist in Namibia often responded more quickly than

our Tocharian specialist situated in Oxford. Every entry therefore passed through many hands over many months, years, or decades, before it was finally published. And it took quite a bit of evidence for a new word to get in the dictionary. We hesitated to state an official policy for new words, but usually a word only got admitted if it appeared in written texts more than five times over five years, and preferably in a variety of sources (i.e. not just newspapers but also magazines and books). It was important to discern if the word was a mere fad word that would die out after several months. Once a word entered the *OED*, it never left, so it was important for the word to show signs of longevity. If a word became obsolete, we would place a small dagger sign beside the headword in the dictionary but the actual entry would never be deleted from the text (this policy distinguishes the *OED* from most smaller dictionaries which are continually adding and deleting words in order to appeal to current markets).

Just as interesting as the words I edited were the people I worked with. Lexicographers have a reputation for being nerdy, conscientious, and borderline obsessive-compulsive, but that is a bit harsh. The diverse range of experiences and talents of this group of seventy people was particularly fascinating. Divided into four subgroups according to the kinds of words we edited, the most senior staff (Chief Editor and Deputy Chief Editor) sat at one end of the huge open-plan office followed by the bibliography group, the general words revision group, the science group, the etymology group, and a small band of IT specialists. Because I edited all parts of my non-European entries, my words did not go to the etymology group, and because my words spanned all types, including scientific and new words, I did not really belong to any one group. I spent the first couple of years sitting near the senior staff and later moved to sit with the new words group which was where the young and hip lexicographers tended to work. Young and hip for lexicographers may have its own definition, but each group certainly had its own character. The bibliographers tended to be older, more sensible, librarian types who knew their field better than anyone else in the world. Most of them had worked on the *OED* since the 'Burchfield days' of the 1970s and 1980s, and were more than happy to answer any question an editor had relating to an incomplete cited quotation or published edition. Most of them had started as library researchers or 'library checkers' who provided editors with information on the larger context of a quotation within a text or checked dictionary quotations for correct publication dates and page numbers. This is meticulous yet vital work that sometimes highlights errors in the editor's work such as a quotation that actually does not exist in the cited title or a previously misunderstood quotation that has led to a word being ill-defined.

The general words revision group and the science group were both mixes of all ages, and magnets for eccentric characters, including one who wore a

different kilt for each Scottish feast day and would sometimes email me in Klingon, the language of *Star Trek* (we bonded early on about Klingon morphology because I was familiar with the grammar of Mutsun, a Native language of North America upon which Klingon was based). Many of the lexicographers sang in the Oxford Bach Choir and the OUP choir, some were Morris dancers in their spare time, and others followed their individual passions in the Bodleian Library after work each day. I would often bump into colleagues in the Bodleian Upper Reading Room who were researching for their own pleasure the history of Celtic ship names or the life of J. R. R. Tolkien before Bilbo. The editors in the etymology group were often from Scotland and Germany, places with universities that still taught philology. This eclectic mix of educational backgrounds and personal interests led to the *OED* submitting a very strong team for the 2004 series of *University Challenge: the Professionals*, an adaptation of the long-running BBC TV quiz, for members of professions and institutions rather than students. A bus load of lexicographers carrying mascot dictionaries and OUP teddy bears went to Manchester for the filming and to support our team, which made it to the final but narrowly lost to the British Library.

Positioned at the opposite end from the senior staff, the IT group was the generic prototype of pony-tailed, fast-talking techies surrounded by empty coke cans and crisp packets. The only difference was that these folks knew an adjective from an adverb, and created their own digital avatar alter egos out of historical *OED* lexicographers using 3D virtual worlds such as Second Life. I knew that the eating of junk food had a long tradition at the *OED* because I sometimes came across old slips in the archives that were written on the back of recycled chocolate wrappers. One of the early editors, Arthur Maling (b.1858), who had worked on the *OED* for thirty years after graduating in mathematics at Cambridge in 1886, had a habit of reusing waste paper of his own as slips, most of which were chocolate wrappers (his favourite brand seems to have been Harrod's Finest Mocha) (Figures 1.4 and 1.5).

Most of my colleagues at the *OED* had degrees in English literature or history, but there were also a couple of mathematicians and biologists. I was surprised to learn that I was the only linguist, and the Chief Editor jokingly explained that he liked it that way because linguists thought too much about things (the implication being that they would take too long to edit an entry).

We all got to know each other even though we sat each day in a silent zone. Silence is the golden rule at the *OED*, with several posters pinned on walls saying 'silence please'. And *everyone* obeys. If you want to speak, then you must go into one of several glass cases reserved for the purpose. Getting phone calls became tricky. Not only did the ringing sound distract others and prompt several dirty looks but I would then have to speak to the person, and over time my friends knew to stop ringing me since I could

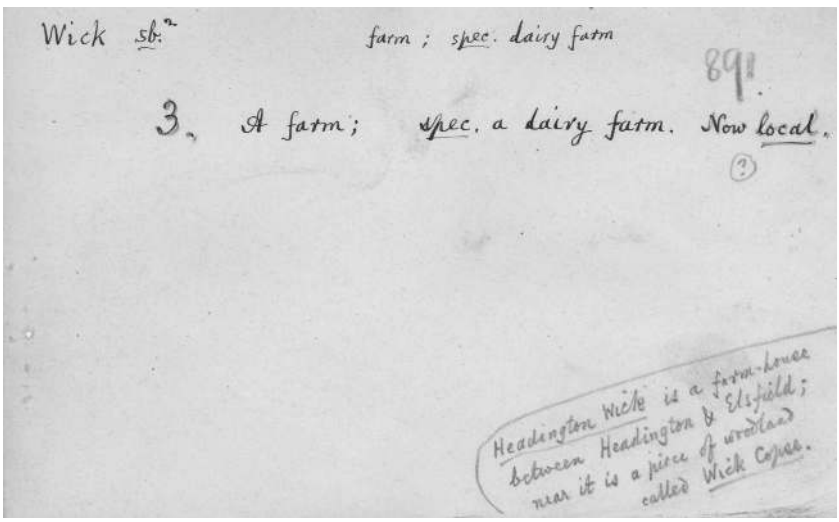


Figure 1.4 One of Arthur Maling's slips written on recycled chocolate wrappers. (Credit: OUP)

Figure 1.5 The reverse side of Arthur Maling's slip for *wick* showing one of many recycled chocolate wrappers. (Credit: OUP)

never say more than a whispered 'yes' or 'no'. My supervisor sat opposite me, our desks touching, but if I wanted to ask her a question I had to email her or save it for our weekly meeting in a glass case. This was a shock for me, as the office environments at the Macquarie Dictionary in Sydney and