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 978-0-521-88674-1 - Dictionaries in Early Modern Europe: Lexicography and the
 Making of Heritage
 John Considine
 Excerpt
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

THIS HEROIC AND INDEED HERCULEAN
 WORK: DICTIONARIES AND THE HEROIC

In the 1550s, the son of the best lexicographer in Europe was writing the introduction to his own first dictionary – a collection, with commentary, of all the Greek words used in the works of Cicero, which would be published under the title of *Ciceronianum lexicon graecolatinum*. His name was Henri Estienne, and the *Latinae linguae thesaurus* edited by his father Robert was the definitive dictionary of the Latin language. Robert had for some years been working on an enormous dictionary of classical Greek, and Henri explained that his dictionary of Cicero’s Greek was intended to make a small contribution to this great undertaking, ‘this heroic and indeed Herculean work’.¹

Nearly two centuries later, another dictionary preface was being written. This time, the dictionary was of a whole language rather than one writer’s usage, and of a living language, Irish, rather than a classical one. It was called *The English Irish dictionary* in English, the language of its definitions, and *An focloir bearla Gaoidheilge* in Irish. The dictionary would be published in Paris, and would be used by the clergy and clerical students of the Irish College there, and no doubt by those of some or all of the thirty or so other Irish colleges of continental Europe, whose students would return to Ireland to serve a people some of whom spoke no English.² Work had been done on it by Hugh MacCurtin (Aodh Buí Mac Cruitin), hereditary ollave, or praise-poet, to the chiefs of the clan O’Brien, and author of a celebratory account of Irish antiquity and an Irish grammar.³ The preface appears to

¹ H. Estienne, *Ciceronianum lexicon graecolatinum* sig. **3r, ‘in heroico illo ac plane Herculeo opere’.
² See Simms, ‘The Irish on the Continent, 1691–1800’ 644–6.
³ For MacCurtin, see Ó Cuív, ‘Irish language and literature, 1691–1845’ 394 and 396–7; the books are MacCurtin, *Brief discourse in vindication of the antiquity of Ireland* and MacCurtin, *Elements of the Irish language, grammatically explained in English*.

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have been by MacCurtin's senior collaborator, Father Conor O'Begley, although its argument is reminiscent of MacCurtin's preface to his grammar. Its author writes as follows:

That a people so naturally ambitious of Honour and so universally covetous of Glory, as several generous BRITISH Historians have described the IRISH to be, can so strangely neglect cultivating and improving a Language of some Thousands of Years standing may seem very surprising to all learned Foreigners, and I believe will do so to the IRISH, themselves, when they recover out of their Error, and take a little time to consider how much they deviate, in this particular, from the Practice and Policy of their Ancestors, and how inexcusable they are for neglecting so sacred a Depositary of the Heroick Atchievements of their Country.⁴

Estienne and O'Begley, far removed as they were in time, had a number of points in common. They were, for instance, both exiles from their own countries, the Irishman O'Begley writing in France and the Parisian Estienne writing in Geneva. They both reinvented their names to reflect the cultural concerns that also informed their lexicography, Henri Estienne classicizing to Henricus Stephanus and Conor O'Begley Hibernicizing to Conchobhar Ó Beaglaoich. They both worked on languages which they could speak, but which they perceived to be undervalued or endangered. And – the point that matters most here – they both made an association between dictionaries and the heroic. Estienne saw his father's work on his dictionary in progress as 'heroic and indeed Herculean'. O'Begley saw the dictionary that he and MacCurtin had made as giving access to language that was a treasury of 'Heroick Atchievements'.

The association between dictionaries and the heroic which Estienne and O'Begley both made is to be found again and again in post-medieval writings on lexicography. David Garrick boasted in 1755, on the completion of Samuel Johnson's dictionary of English, which Garrick supposed to be superior to the dictionary of the Académie française, that 'Johnson, well arm'd like a hero of yore Has beat forty French and will beat forty more', and these words were much reprinted.⁵ In the next century, a correspondent of Joseph Wright's admired the 'heroic exertion' of his work on the *English Dialect Dictionary*, adding: 'When I told my

⁴ MacCurtin and O'Begley, *English Irish dictionary* sigs. ā2r–v; cf. MacCurtin, *Elements of the Irish language* sig. A4r, 'how strange it seems to the world, that any people should scorn the Language, wherein the whole treasure of their own Antiquity and profound sciences lie in obscurity'.

⁵ Garrick, 'Talk of war with a Briton'; for printings, see Knapp, *Checklist of verse by David Garrick*, item 220.

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wife she said “I don’t know how he has done it – what a brave man!”⁶ The association is a double one: dictionaries have repeatedly been presented as heroic works and their makers have been characterized as heroes.

This is at first sight somewhat counter-intuitive. Dictionary-making is not a conspicuously heroic business, as I know from personal experience. I took great pleasure in my work as a full-time lexicographer in the 1990s, but I certainly, and rightly, had no sense of myself as a heroic figure as I worked. A visitor to my place of work, one of the greatest lexicographical centres of the late twentieth century, the main office of the Dictionary Department of Oxford University Press, might at first glance have mistaken it for one of the offices of an insurance company. It was, as I remember it, a room in which a hundred or so men and women sat at desks partitioned off from each other by low dividers covered in a greyish fabric, busy with data entry or other paperwork, or making photocopies, or conferring with each other, or eating sandwiches. The air quality was not very good; there always seemed to be a telephone ringing somewhere; periodically a hundred or so workstations beeped one after the other as a group e-mail circulated. Nor was this, except with regard to its size, an unusual workspace for dictionary-making. The dictionary room at the top of Samuel Johnson’s house in eighteenth-century London, or the sixteenth-century publishers’ *officinae* in which dictionaries like Robert Estienne’s *Latinae linguae thesaurus* were made, appear also to have been cluttered, busy, unheroic.

Johnson himself summed up the paradoxical relationship between the lived experience of dictionary-making and the association of dictionaries with the heroic when, in his own dictionary, he called the lexicographer a ‘harmless drudge’. On the one hand, that sounds like an entirely fair description. It has been taken at face value. On the other hand, *drudgery* was a word that Johnson used to express scornful irony, comparing ‘the charming Amusement of forming Hypotheses’ with ‘the toilsome Drudgery of making Observations’ in his life of Boerhaave, writing in the *Plan of a dictionary* that ‘the work in which I engaged is generally considered as drudgery for the blind’, commenting sarcastically in the *Adventurer* on ‘the low drudgery of collating copies, comparing authorities, digesting dictionaries’, and remarking in the preface to the dictionary itself that Learning and Genius do not bestow so much as a smile upon ‘the humble drudge that facilitates their progress’.⁷ Johnson’s

⁶ R. Oliver Heslop, letter to Joseph Wright of 14 June 1895, quoted in E. M. Wright, *Life of Joseph Wright* 376.

⁷ Samuel Johnson: ‘Life of Dr. Boerhaave’ 115; *Plan of a dictionary of the English language* 1; *The adventurer* 232 (no. 39, for 20 March 1753); *Dictionary of the English language* sig. A2r.

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definition both acknowledges the possibility of seeing lexicographers as drudges and expects the intelligent reader to see them as something much more like heroes.

This book originates in an attempt to understand the association between dictionaries and heroic narratives. Doing that may incur the reasonable suspicion of practising lexicographers: the response of some of my former colleagues at the *Oxford English Dictionary* to the original sketch from which this book arose was, more or less, that they were painstakingly engaged in exact and fully documented scholarly research into language, and that heroic narratives really had nothing to do with their work. I do not want to denigrate the integrity, accuracy and completeness that characterize the best post-medieval dictionaries. Nor do I want to underestimate the traditional histories of lexicography that trace the influence of one dictionary upon another, or describe the minutiae of dictionary-making. I want instead to propose some new contexts in intellectual and cultural history for the history of lexicography.

The idea that dictionaries have the sort of imaginative qualities that characterize poetry or fictional narrative has certainly been proposed before, albeit rather casually. The novelist and journalist Arnold Bennett described the *Oxford English Dictionary*, of which he had been buying each new part as it was published for forty-odd years, as ‘the longest sensational serial ever written’. Elizabeth Lea, as she then was, writing to Joseph Wright before their marriage, told him that the *English Dialect Dictionary* was ‘really more poetical than any other work of the age’. Eric Partridge, writing in his memoir *The gentle art of lexicography*, recounts the doubtless apocryphal story of the old lady who, having borrowed a dictionary from the library under the misapprehension that it was a novel, remarked on returning it that it was ‘A *very* unusual book indeed – but the stories are extremely short, aren’t they?’⁸

I want to respond to perceptions like these of dictionaries as narrative or poetic or indeed sensational, and to argue that, notwithstanding the misgivings of my former colleagues, many dictionaries can be read as, to some extent, works of the imagination, and as presences in the imaginative lives of their readers. Rather than documenting early modern lexicographers’ debt to the dictionaries of the Middle Ages, for instance, I want to look at the place of early modern dictionaries in the imaginations

⁸ Arnold Bennett, ‘Books and persons’ column in the *Evening Standard*, 5 January 1928, reprinted in Mylett, *Arnold Bennett: The Evening Standard years* 115; Elizabeth Lea, letter of 17 June 1896, in Wright, *Life of Joseph Wright* 230; Partridge, *Gentle art of lexicography* 14.

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of their makers and readers. I want to ask why lexicography was a heroic matter to a number of its practitioners. I want, in other words, to think about the kinds of anxiety and pride and imagination and love that inform dictionaries.

FAR MORE THAN A MERE RECORDING OF
WORDS: DICTIONARIES, THE HEROIC AND HERITAGE

One way to begin to address the questions about the social and cultural history of dictionaries outlined above is to examine the possibility that Estienne and O'Begley were both saying something interesting and profound about lexicography when they associated it with the words *heroicus* and *heroic*. The argument of this section is that they were. On the one hand, dictionaries have much in common with those kinds of writing which are more usually called heroic, or which take the heroic as their subject. This is O'Begley's point: the dictionary orders a treasury of heroic achievements. On the other hand, the makers of dictionaries are often seen as heroic figures. This is Estienne's point: the dictionary-maker is a hero, another Hercules.

Neither Estienne nor Begley meant to call lexicography heroic in the sense 'courageous'. This has been done. Just as the correspondent of Joseph Wright's who referred to his 'heroic exertions' went on to say that he had been described as 'brave', other admirers of Wright's referred to his 'courage' and 'pluck'.⁹ Other examples could no doubt be adduced. The idea that lexicography calls for a kind of moral courage is, however, vague. Its weakness becomes apparent when a statement like the following is considered: 'Indeed linguists afford some notable examples of heroism if heroism may be said to include pioneering sometimes in perilous isolation and under risk of derision. Henry Sweet and the Grimm brothers were perhaps heroes in this sense, and the Russian linguists who fell foul of Stalin.'¹⁰ This is true, but it is too general to be of interest. Although linguists, and among them lexicographers, have certainly been known to show great moral courage, so have the members of many other professions: that point does not make a specific association between dictionaries and the heroic. What Estienne and Begley meant starts to become clearer when some instances of the Latin word *heroicus* which Estienne applied to his father's work are examined.

⁹ Wright, *Life of Joseph Wright* 377 (quoting a letter of the early 1890s from an unnamed American), 394 (quoting a letter of 11 January 1896 from F.J. Furnivall).

¹⁰ Williams, 'George Borrow: The word-master as hero' 117.

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The earliest extant occurrences of *heroicus* are in Cicero, who referred in *De natura deorum* to the wicked Medea and Atreus as *heroicae personae*, ‘characters of heroic legend’. A little earlier in the same book, Cicero had written that one of the several solar deities known to the learned was said to have been born at Rhodes *heroicis temporibus* ‘in the heroic period’.¹¹ He was here evidently not using *heroicus* in the sense that *heroic* has in modern English: he had no intention of associating either a dubious solar deity or two of the villains of Greek myth with courage. His point was that they could be located in a distant time, in which a number of exemplary and foundational stories, often peopled by larger-than-life characters, were set. Ulysses and Nestor had, Cicero said elsewhere, lived in that time: they were wise men *heroicis aetatibus* ‘in the heroic age’.¹² One of the greatest early modern philologists, Joseph Scaliger, likewise suggested that the period at the beginning of Greek history, the records of which mixed historical and legendary material together, should be called *heroicum* rather than *mythicon*.¹³ That same distant time is called heroic in early uses of the word in other languages. For instance, the first occurrence of Italian *eroico* documented in the *Grande dizionario italiano* is a reference to the ‘eroici tempi’ in which meritorious persons such as Codrus, Cyrus or Charlemagne came to be venerated as heroes.¹⁴ Similarly, the first occurrence of *heroic* in any variety of English is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in the dedication of a political text called *The complaynt of Scotland*, written in Middle Scots in 1549. Addressing Mary of Lorraine, widow of James V, the author said that

your heroic virtue is more to be admired than was that of Valeria, the daughter of the prudent consul Publicola, or of Cloelia, Lucrece, Penelope, Cornelia, Semiramis, Tomyris, Penthesilea, or of any other virtuous lady whom Plutarch or Boccaccio has described.¹⁵

Here, *heroic* describes a kind of virtue manifested in ancient narratives, which, in an early modern high culture that traced many of its institutions to the ancient world, were to some extent foundational narratives

¹¹ Cicero, *De natura deorum* 3.71 and 3.54. ¹² Cicero, *Disputationes tusculanae* 5.7.

¹³ Scaliger, *Thesaurus temporum* (1606), quoted and discussed Grafton, ‘Tradition and technique’ 26.

¹⁴ Davanzati, ‘Orazione in morte del granduca Cosimo primo’ (1574) in *Opere* II:463, ‘Così naturalmente ancora si facevano i re di quegli eroici tempi, quando i popoli eleggevano spontaneamente colui che gli avanzasse di meriti o di virtù sue o de’ suoi maggiori, come fu Codro in Grecia, Ciro in Persia e poi Carlo in Francia.’

¹⁵ Wedderburn [?], *Complaynt of Scotland* I, ‘Your heroyque vertu, is of mair admiratione, nor vas of valeria the dochtir of the prudent consul publicola or of cloelia, lucrecia, penelope, cornelia, semiramis, thomaris, penthasillie, or of ony vthir verteouse lady that plutarque or bocchas hes discriuit.’

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for that culture. But heroic virtue is not, for the author of the *Complaynt*, confined to the remote world of antiquity; it can be re-enacted now, and in this case its present enactment even surpasses the past. Similarly, in Shakespeare's *The first part of Henry the Sixth*, there is a reference to the 'Heroick Lyne' of the sons of Edward III of England and their progeny.¹⁶ Here, as in the Scots example, the heroic belongs in the past – the word describes the ancestors of men living in the time of the play – but also in the present as descended from that past, for the heroic line still flourishes, embodied in its living representatives. The heroic world is that past world on which the present is founded, and which informs or is re-embodied or emulated by the present.

This helps to explain what Conor O'Begley meant by 'Heroick Atch-ievements', and to suggest why there really is an important association between lexicography and the heroic. Begley's argument was that language makes a link between the present and the foundational past of any culture, the past to which its larger-than-life predecessors belong, the heroic past. Its distance from the observer may vary greatly, from the gulf of time between Cicero's contemporaries and the solar deity born in the heroic age to the century or so between the lifetimes of Edward III and Henry VI. What defines it is not this distance but its difference from the present, and its place in the cultural ancestry of the present. The people of the heroic age are the forerunners of the living, its institutions are the forerunners of living institutions and its language is connected with living language.

The connection between the living and the heroic age is one of inheritance or heritage. Inheritance may be a matter of literal genealogical descent from a heroic person or family, for instance the descent from Edward III which is so important in Shakespeare's history tetralogies, or the descent from Trojan colonists which was so widely claimed in Europe in the medieval and early modern periods. A theme that will recur in this book is the relationship between lexicography and family background, as in the cases of Robert Estienne, his son Henri and Henri's grandson Meric Casaubon – or as in that of the new edition of Francis Holyoake's Latin–English dictionary by his son Thomas, 'heir not only to the legal rights and material inheritance of his father, but to his industry and erudition', and indeed heir to the dictionary too, 'which his dying father gave to him as one of his charges'.¹⁷ Another, related to it, is the sense that

¹⁶ Shakespeare, *First part of Henry the Sixth* in *Works* sc. 13 (11. v in other editions), TLN 1031.

¹⁷ Thomas Barlow, epistle 'lector benevolo' in Holyoake, *Large dictionary* sig. A2r, 'non tantum juris ac patrimonii, sed industriae ac eruditionis paternae haeres' and sig. A2v, 'Lexicon a Parente editum (quod etiam in mandatis sui dedit moriens pater)'.

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the lexicographical work of one generation is inherited from the one before it. A number of early modern dictionaries can be surveyed together as links in a chain of inheritance, as in the case of the first wordlists of Old English: from Laurence Nowell to John Joscelyn, from Joscelyn to Sir Simonds D'Ewes, from D'Ewes to William Somner and into the web of filiations from one seventeenth-century antiquary to the next.¹⁸ A third theme, related to the previous two, is the relationship between lexicography and material inheritance, particularly the inheritance of land, as in the cases of Sir Simonds D'Ewes and of Sir Henry Spelman and his heirs. Finally, although dictionaries are not autobiographies (the claim has, incidentally, been made by Anthony Burgess with reference to Johnson's *Dictionary*), one of the stories to which the lexicographer can hardly help alluding, more or less fully and explicitly, is that of his or her own life.¹⁹ The lexicographer becomes part of the story that she or he tells, and thus becomes not only the transmitter of a heroic heritage but heroic in his or her own right. The same may of course be said of other scholars who recover ancient texts: for instance, a student of the literary historian W. P. Ker wrote: 'We came to look upon Ker as an epic hero . . . whose unfaltering guidance led us and allowed us to share in the voyage to the enchanted places of the mind.'²⁰

The word *heritage* calls for further consideration. It unites the themes of this book very helpfully, but, by using it, I do not want to claim that this book makes a specialized contribution to the academic discipline called 'heritage studies'. I want to use the word flexibly and non-technically, in the range of senses suggested by, for instance, its excellent definition in the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*: 'things such as works of art, cultural achievements and folklore that have been passed on from earlier generations; a nation's buildings, monuments, countryside, etc., esp. when regarded as worthy of preservation; . . . that which is or may be inherited; inherited circumstances, benefits, etc.' The distinction between *heritage* and *history* in David Lowenthal's *The heritage crusade and the spoils of history* is stimulating. Lowenthal's argument there is that *heritage* is not simply a name for the cultural monuments of a nation or a people; it is, rather, the product of a particular kind of creative relationship with the past:

heritage is not an inquiry into the past but a celebration of it, not an effort to know what actually happened but a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day

¹⁸ For antiquaries' filiations, see Parry, *Trophies of time* 6.

¹⁹ Burgess, 'The *OED* Man' 1094, answered by Walker, 'Johnson's Dictionary'.

²⁰ Quoted in [MacCunn and MacCunn], *Recollections of W. P. Ker* 30.

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purposes . . . The historian, however blinkered and presentist and self-deceived, seeks to convey a past consensually known, open to inspection and proof, continually revised and eroded as time and hindsight outdate its truths. The heritage fashioner, however historically scrupulous, seeks to design a past that will fix the identity and enhance the well-being of some chosen individual or folk.²¹

In so far as a heroic age is an age in which the foundational myths of a culture are located, it is also an age in which the heritage claimed by a culture is seen as having its wellspring. The heroic achievements of the Irish people which O'Begley saw as stored up in their language are the heritage of speakers of Irish. Once a heritage has been identified, it may help to unite the people who lay claim to it, and there is therefore a sense in which questions of heritage and questions of community bear reciprocally on each other. The 'spurious past' concocted by ancient Greeks as they reflected on 'fossils and landscape . . . ruins and relics' is discussed by Sir John Boardman in his *Archaeology of nostalgia*, with the conclusion that it 'played an important part in the Greeks' own creation of national identity and pride'.²²

Dictionaries have sometimes been records of the emerging sense of identity of particular speech-communities or reading communities, groups defined by use of a common spoken language or by commitment to the study of a common body of texts. These communities are often ill-defined, and an individual may belong to more than one.²³ By no means are they always nations, and this is not a book about nationalism: the members of a speech-community may constitute a nation, but they may also spread over several nations, or be a minority in one nation, or both. The members of a reading community – the Latin-reading commonwealth of the learned, for instance – may have quite a strong sense of collective identity while remaining physically scattered. One particular kind of reading community which will appear from time to time in this book is the group of people who work together, in one place or as a network of correspondents, to make a dictionary. So, for example, James Murray remarked in his presidential address to the Philological Society in 1880 that readers from the United States had contributed very helpfully to the project that would become the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and went on to say 'that I find in Americans an ideal love for the English language as a glorious heritage, and a pride in being intimate with its grand memories, such as one does sometimes find in a classical scholar in regard

²¹ Lowenthal, *Heritage crusade* x–xi. ²² Boardman, *Archaeology of nostalgia* 190–1.

²³ See Burke, *Languages and communities* 5–6.

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to Greek, but which is rare indeed in Englishmen towards their own tongue'.²⁴ In such a case, the dictionary may help to define two communities, that of its contributors and the larger one whose language it documents.

The consideration of heritage and community in linguistic terms is important. Certain objects, including buildings, and certain places are indeed tangible embodiments of heritage, an important theme of Lowenthal's book.²⁵ But objects and even places are vulnerable to time and fortune, in a way in which less tangible items of cultural heritage are not. Names may outlast the things named, and songs may outlast their subjects; moreover, words and tunes are portable. So, a concern with heritage that leads to the valorization of certain places and antiquities and to the collection of culturally significant objects may also lead to the valorization and collection of words, music, traditional knowledge and other intangibles. 'Folklore,' as Lowenthal reflects, 'the authentic voice of unlettered ancestors, became a prime facet of 19th-century patrimony, folksong an agent of chauvinism.'²⁶ There, the word *authentic* is charged with irony: the oral and customary traditions covered by the term *folklore* are not always as immemorial as those who value them like to believe. Traditions may be invented, as in the cases discussed in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's famous collection *The invention of tradition*; the dividing line between 'oral' and 'literate' culture, between folklore and learning, is permeable.²⁷

The collection of information about heritage might, in early modern Europe, belong to aristocratic culture, as in the case of the collection of genealogical information, an enterprise in which tradition was often manufactured by venal heralds and eager clients.²⁸ An interest in heraldry might be accompanied by an interest in lexicography, as in the cases of Sir Henry Spelman and Charles du Cange. Legal history might likewise be directed primarily to questions of landholding, a matter of most interest to the landholding classes. But it might also lead to a discovery of popular heritage, for customary law such as the common law of England or that of the *pays de coutumes* of early modern France was regarded as by definition the creation of the people rather than of nameable legislators; J. G. A. Pocock remarks of it in his classic *The ancient constitution and the*

²⁴ Murray, 'Ninth annual address' 123. ²⁵ Cf. also Boardman, *Archaeology of nostalgia* 45–126.

²⁶ Lowenthal, *Heritage crusade* 63.

²⁷ On oral and literate cultures, see esp. Fox, *Oral and literate culture in England, 1500–1700*.

²⁸ See, e.g., the examples in Edelman, *Attitudes of seventeenth-century France toward the Middle Ages* 51–3, and cf. Lowenthal, *Heritage crusade* ad indicem s.v. *genealogy*.