

Words of the World

Most people think of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) as a distinctly British product. Begun in England 150 years ago, it took more than 60 years to complete, and when it was finally finished in 1928, the British prime minister heralded it as a ‘national treasure’. It maintained this image throughout the twentieth century, and in 2006 the English public voted it an ‘Icon of England’, alongside Marmite, Buckingham Palace, and the bowler hat. But this book shows that the dictionary is not as ‘British’ as we all thought. The linguist and lexicographer, Sarah Ogilvie, combines her insider knowledge and experience with impeccable research to show that the *OED* is in fact an international product in both its content and its making. She examines the policies and practices of the various editors, applies qualitative and quantitative analysis, and finds new *OED* archival materials in the form of letters, reports, and proofs. She demonstrates that the *OED*, in its use of readers from all over the world and its coverage of World English, is in fact a global text.

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Words of the World

A Global History of the
Oxford English Dictionary

Sarah Ogilvie



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For Jane Shaw

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Every word should be made to tell its own story – the story of its birth and life,
and in many cases of its death, and even occasionally of its resuscitation.

Herbert Coleridge (1857), Editor from 1859 to 1861 of the dictionary that
became known as the *Oxford English Dictionary*

Preface

Most people think of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) as a distinctly British product. Begun in England one hundred and fifty years ago, it took more than sixty years to complete, and when it was finally finished the British Prime Minister heralded it as a ‘national treasure’. It maintained this image throughout the twentieth century, and in 2006 the English public voted it an ‘Icon of England’, alongside marmite, Buckingham Palace, and the bowler hat.¹ Central to the rhetoric of *OED*-as-national-treasure is the collection of eccentric lexicographers who devoted their lives to the giant text. We have inherited the picture of a handful of devoted Englishmen huddled in a cold, damp Scriptorium on Banbury Road, Oxford, wrapping their legs in newspaper to keep warm. Scholars and the media never fail to focus on the nineteenth-century editor of the *OED*, James Murray (1837–1915), who laboured on the dictionary for nearly forty years and died on the letter T without knowing whether the whole dictionary would ever be finished. We are presented with a story of uncompromising persistence and dedication to produce a multi-volume dictionary of unrivalled scholarly rigour which future generations would hail as the definitive record of the English language.

All of this is true, except for the bit about the *OED* being a distinctly English product. The making of this dictionary was a transnational effort, and if you look closely at its pages you discover a distinctly international dimension. Not only were some members of the small band of Englishmen in the Scriptorium actually Scottish, not English, but they were supported by hundreds of men and women from around the world. The *OED* text was created by the work of hundreds of contributors worldwide. It is a distinctly global product, in a sense the original Wikipedia, coordinated by Royal Mail. What’s more, Murray intended it to be so.

He reached out for words beyond the shores of Britain and was helped by hundreds of dedicated readers and editors around the globe. He actively sought the assistance of these men and women; he saw their words – loan-words (words borrowed into English from other languages) and World Englishes (varieties of English spoken around the world) – as legitimate members

of the English language and wanted to include them in his new dictionary. Murray's actions and policies were criticized in his day, but he continued throughout his career to rebel against his critics.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, when the British Empire was reaching the zenith of its power, confidence, and size, Murray enlisted the help of people not only within the empire but also beyond it, creating a network that was truly global. He was fascinated by the differences that were emerging in the English language and wanted his dictionary to reflect and record the developments he witnessed. Contrary to what recent commentators have assumed, Murray was far from the Anglocentric Oxford don who merely wanted to preserve the 'Queen's English'. Instead, he was an outsider within Oxford who was excluded from university life and was never made a Fellow of an Oxford college. He saw himself as an innovator, a self-proclaimed 'pioneer' whose lexicographic efforts to describe global English were undeniably breaking new ground. In order to accomplish his aims, he corresponded with a global network of hundreds of collaborators who read local World English texts and sent words and quotations for inclusion in his dictionary. He formed transnational relationships by exchanging letters and books with contributors in regions as dispersed as Ceylon, Mexico, and New Zealand.

Over time, as small portions of the *OED* were gradually published, critics (both inside and outside his workplace) recognized the prevalence of non-British words in the dictionary and urged Murray to stop including them because, as one reviewer put it, 'there is no surer or more fatal sign of the decay of a language than in the interpolation of barbarous terms and foreign words; if a great dictionary is to be regarded as a treasury of the language it should give no currency to false and fraudulent issues'.² Murray answered his critics the way he knew best: by refusing to change his policy and by defiantly continuing to include words of the world. Although using the language of imperial exploration, Murray was nonetheless clear about his global lexicographic identity from the earliest days. He wrote in 1884 (while still editing the letter A), 'I feel that in many respects I and my assistants are simply pioneers, pushing our way experimentally through an untrodden forest, where no white man's axe has been before us.'

It was true that no one had written such a comprehensive dictionary of English before Murray and his team, and no one has since. However, the full extent of the dictionary's original scope – its generous inclusion of words from outside Britain – has never been fully appreciated. In fact, it has even been misunderstood and misrepresented – especially in the past forty years – by scholars and journalists who, on the basis of little evidence, have criticized Murray and the early editors of the *OED* for neglecting vocabulary from outside Britain. In contrast, these critics have praised a later *OED* editor,

Robert Burchfield (1923–2004), for his inclusion and treatment of loanwords and World Englishes.

This book challenges this narrative. Until now, no one has investigated the actual text of the dictionary to assess whether these generalizations are correct. By using a combination of statistical, textual, contextual, and qualitative analyses to compare versions of the *OED* from its inception until 1986, I discovered that the inverse is true.³ There was no smooth story of progress within the *OED* text from imperialism to postcolonialism, in which coverage of words from outside Britain improved over time. Rather, I found that the early editors were less conservative in their policy and practice with regard to loanwords and World Englishes than usually assumed. And I found that the later editor, Burchfield, was less the champion of these words than he or others have claimed. The coverage of the dictionary has never been insular, and the story of Burchfield's pioneering efforts to open up the dictionary to the Englishes of the world in the third quarter of the twentieth century does an injustice to its editors from 1884 to 1933.

This book provides new insight into the coverage of words from outside Britain in the first edition and Supplement volumes of the *OED*, and the decision-making processes behind the lexicographic practice; it analyzes the relationship between editorial policy and lexicographic practice; and it demonstrates that it is in the slippage between policy and practice that a lexicographer's attitudes towards culture and language can often be found. In addition, a more nuanced picture of the *OED* editors emerges when the first edition of the *OED* is compared with a competitor dictionary, the *Stanford Dictionary of Anglicized Words and Phrases* (1892), and when Burchfield's *Supplement to the OED* (1972–1986) is compared with the dictionary upon which it was based, the *1933 Supplement*. More than a history of one of the greatest books ever written, this book takes as its starting point the actual dictionary text, surveying its treatment by the dictionary creators and using that as a window into the attitudes and lives of its makers – both those in Oxford and those continents away. This is the story of the global *OED*, its makers and its text.

ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://www.icons.org.uk>.
- 2 'The Literature and Language of the Age', *Edinburgh Review*, April 1889 p. 348.
- 3 See Coleman and Ogilvie (2009) for more on this method of dictionary analysis.

Acknowledgements

The process of writing this book opened many new worlds to me, for which I am very grateful. There were several unexplained discoveries that I made in the archives and in the dictionary itself, and my efforts to solve these mysteries took me to unexpected places: to a park in Brisbane, Australia, where I met one of the *OED*'s most prolific contributors; to a cemetery in Wolvercote, outside Oxford, where I identified the tombstone of James Murray beside that of his best friend James Legge; and to a large, rambling house in north Oxford where C. T. Onions had lived until his death in 1965. Onions ended up being a central character of the book, and I got to know his elderly daughter Elizabeth, who passed away while I was writing this book, and his son Giles, who had lived in the family house for more than eighty years. They both shared memories of growing up in literary Oxford, as well as Giles' experience of reading for Burchfield's *OED Supplement*, which all deserve a book of their own.

First and foremost I must thank my colleagues at the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). Although I still consult for the dictionary from amidst the fens in Cambridge, I do miss sitting with them in the large open-plan office and eating together each day in the OUP cafeteria. My years at the *OED* provided me with the best possible lexicographic training, and I must thank my colleagues, especially John Simpson and Edmund Weiner, for their guidance, inspiration, and advice over the years. This book has been improved by the advice and comments of many people, most notably Charlotte Brewer, Peter Gilliver, Terry Hoad, Sidney Landau, Rod McConchie, Sara Miles, Lynda Mugglestone, and Jane Shaw. I am indebted to others who commented on earlier drafts of chapters, especially Michael Adams, Dianne Bardsley, Paul Bogaards, Julie Coleman, David Cram, Victor Flynn, Bill Frawley, and Aditi Lahiri. These colleagues and friends devoted many hours to read and correct the text at several stages; they encouraged my scholarship and shared their ideas, but of course ultimately all opinions and errors in this book remain my own.

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