

REVIEW

The making of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. By PETER GILLIVER. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xvii, 625. ISBN 9780199283620. \$65 (Hb).

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Peter Gilliver's book on the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) traces the genesis of the *OED* and its history over the next century and a half. This work is erudite, massively learned, and meticulously documented and, by some magic instilled into it, both informative and entertaining. The reader will come away with a greatly enhanced respect for the *OED* and all its manifold excellences and perceived faults, and those of its many successors, having seen in detail the human effort, skill, sacrifice, drama, and the relentless drive for excellence that have gone into its pages since its official inception at the Philological Society in 1857.

The book traces the history of this ground-breaking dictionary, beginning with the ideas and influences that fed into its conception, through the generations of editors who created it, the many people who worked for it and supported it, the vicissitudes which beset it, including deaths, the loss of data, precarious negotiations with the publishers, the struggle to contain the mountains of data within agreed page limits, the vagaries of readers supplying quotations, lack of resources and unsatisfactory working conditions, and so on. We meet the tireless and dedicated James Murray, the energetic but irascible Frederick Furnivall, and a host of other characters who demand our understanding and respect. Lexicographers may perhaps be drudges, but dull they are not. The book ends with the present state of progress toward the third edition of the *OED* as it deals with a rapidly changing technological world and new lexicographical challenges.

G's claim on the first page of the preface that his being an insider and a working lexicographer is of some advantage is amply justified at every turn in this book; indeed, we might realistically claim that this perspective is a fundamental animating principle of this work, giving as it does an empathy for and intimate understanding of the demands involved. G does not specifically point out, as well he might, that he is also a long-standing employee of the Oxford University Press (OUP), and hence not simply a lexicographer; this gives him a still more nuanced view of the tensions between the publisher and its employees and representatives and the dictionary and its lexicographers.

It is no mean feat to digest the multitudinous minutes of meetings, letters, records of negotiations between the OUP delegates, the dictionary editors, and various other interested parties—in short, a mass of minutiae—into a readable and even suspenseful narrative, but G has pulled it off admirably. The richness of documentary material that underpins this book is remarkable.

G has a long and complex story to tell, and he keeps strictly to it, ignoring the obvious temptation of allowing other narratives to intervene. For example, regarding the now well-known and unfortunate history of Dr. William Minor and his immensely valuable work for the *OED*, only the latter gets some brief attention (see Winchester 1998). The fascinating details of the life and extramural activities of the irrepressible Frederick Furnivall are likewise eschewed. Even his relentless formation of and work with learned societies to provide printed text for the dictionary, while discussed, are not overly stressed.

A somewhat questionable omission was Murray's conflict with C. A. M. Fennell; Murray laid anxious charges of plagiarism against the editor of the *Stanford dictionary of anglicised words and phrases*, published in Cambridge in 1892. G mentions this at slightly more length, but omits any consideration of Sarah Ogilvie's research on the justice of these claims (Ogilvie 2013). This seems odd, given that her book is referred to several times for other matters, and this imbroglio raised in a very specific form the more general question of the place and treatment of foreign words and 'denizens' in the dictionary—always a problematic issue.

The story of the dictionary (and the dictionaries it spawned) becomes very complicated, especially as it moves into the mid-twentieth century, but G again explicitly rejects the temptation to

cover the many other Oxford dictionaries (480). There are moments when the sheer weight of names and shifting positions and responsibilities as staff come and go becomes burdensome, but G's management of this mass of detail overall is firmly controlled and his text is always readable.

The text is interspersed with thirty 'capsules': short, separately marked sections usually of a page or less, which deal with particular words. These are listed in the forematter and are often prefaced by some general comment on lexicographical principles and methodology. They make enjoyable and informative breaks from what is, after all, a very long history; this may be a better way to deal with words of interest but little immediate relevance to the narrative than to try to combine them into what would inevitably be a somewhat bitty chapter of its own, clearly distinct from the historical narrative. To mention a couple of examples: first, *agreeance* is discussed on p. 574. Nowhere is the insider's view of the *OED* history more obvious and indeed more insightful than in this capsule, which offers not an external, linear view of the final edited version of the word's history, but an account of how that history was constructed during the research and editing process, showing how the data came to be obtained, how it was dealt with, and why the word is no longer regarded as obsolete. G's intimate understanding of the lexicographical process is critical. Another example is the capsule for *bondmaid* on p. 199, an opportunity to discuss a word that Murray had overlooked as, to his chagrin, his meticulous method of accounting for dictionary slips had failed him for once.

G's relatively objective and evidence-based account of the *OED* does serve to reset some established views, such as the extremely positive perspective on Murray's role during the crisis with the press in 1892–93 (pp. 226–29) espoused by Elisabeth Murray in her widely acclaimed account of her grandfather, *Caught in the web of words* (1977), in which he heroically resisted both the delegates and the Philological Society. G is less inclined to demonize the delegates and the press. Another is the generally appreciative attitude toward Robert Burchfield's role as editor in starting the lexicographical effort afresh while preparing his supplements. Recent comment elsewhere has not always been kind to Burchfield; witness the fuss in the media over the removal of many foreign and regional words in his second supplement following the appearance of Ogilvie's book. G's clear view of the value of Burchfield's work is timely.

A few minor quibbles. It was sometimes hard to see why a lengthy footnote could not have been retained in the running text (for example, footnote 9 on p. 112). It also might be worth considering, should there be a second edition, adding as an appendix the list of editors and parts of the *OED*; there is simply a reference to 'McMorris (2000)' at present (589). Scholars would surely find this convenient. Additionally, one expects old photographs to be variable in quality, but the uniform drabness of the illustrations is somewhat disappointing.

This book, despite G's mentioning at the outset that there are other histories of the *OED* (ix), is much more focused and substantial than its putative rivals, which concentrate for the most part on particular aspects of the dictionary, such as its citations (Willinsky 1994) or its proof sheets and editorial practices (Mugglestone 2005). The splendid achievement of this book will, despite the fact that new information will inevitably be found and new theories be propounded, deservedly stand as the definitive history of the *OED* for many years to come.

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