

Jewels in the Crown

Dictionaries legitimate words, which often as not are the bastard offspring of couplings between a culture's experience and imagination.

GREGORY FREEMAN peeks between the sheets for a glimpse of the *Oxford English Dictionary's* development.

PROUD OF THE LATEST addition to my library, I laid down the *Oxford English Dictionary Supplement* (1933) with a thud on the table before my visiting aunt.

"A supplement to the dictionary isn't really what I had in mind for bedtime reading!" she exclaimed.

But really, it is interesting.

Oxford dictionary-making did not end in 1928 with publication of the 125th and final fascicle and completion of the first edition. It continued with the *Supplement*, declared "the final crown of the work" by Oxford University Press secretary Robert W. Chapman and fraught with difficulties as two editorial teams on either side of the Atlantic—Charles T. Onions in England and Sir William Craigie in the United States—struggled to put together a single volume of additional material. They attempted in vain to give the printer John Johnson the agreed number of slips per week, but on November 21, 1933, the Goldsmiths' Company—a major financial contributor to the sixth volume—held a luncheon in London to celebrate completion of the *Supplement*.

Half a century had passed between the issue of the first fascicle in 1884 and the first supplement. Here we find Americanisms, missed words, new words, jargon and slang. Words such as *airplane*, *automobile*, *battle-cruiser*, *blimp*, *cinema*, *crossword*, *deck-chair*, *defrost*, *highball*, *motor-boat*, *movie*, *Nazi*, *radio*, *slap-stick*, *stink-pot*, *talkie* and *television*. And there were further typographic words added: *Baskerville*, *Caslon*, *colour-type* and *bold-face*.

Two formats of the *Supplement* were printed in 1933. The first format was uniform with *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, the dictionary's first edition. The second was

uniform with a reissue of the original edition, now officially renamed *The Oxford English Dictionary* (the name was printed as early as 1895 but not used on title pages until 1933).

A paper-covered copy was given free to subscribers of the principal dictionary who had paid in full; one could otherwise purchase a cloth-bound copy for 5 guineas (£5, or about £300 today). The text bodies of the two *Supplement* formats are the same, including the pagination that ends with K and begins anew with L, yet the Historical Introduction in the former, where we find Tolkien's name, was moved to the first volume of the reissue.

The reissue of 1933 had no additional words outside of the *Supplement*. Why would another printing of the full dictionary be needed so soon? The question is easily answered by physically examining the bound first edition of *A New English Dictionary*. Author Simon Winchester truthfully calls the set "shelf-bendingly huge."

On St. George's Day last year, April 23—a day I chose specifically to honour Herbert Coleridge, effectively the dictionary's first editor, who died on April 23, 1861—I received the first edition, with title pages dated 1888 to 1933, into my own collection. Before setting the dictionary on the shelf, I weighed the set, carefully piling the volumes on the scale at home. The 13 massive volumes weighed in at 72 kilograms (160 lb.). The individual volumes are very heavy, between 5.5 and 8 kilograms (12 and 17 lb.) each, and also of very unequal thickness, measuring 5.8 to 11.5 centimetres.

Handling any volume of this set has been a tricky compromise. In looking comparatively at the reissue, one notices immediately that the necessary partitions of the first edition were

eliminated for 1933, so each volume is numbered (1 through 12) and each volume's thickness is a close 6 to 8 centimetres. The paper used in making the reissue was greatly thinned and the margins were trimmed, so the bulkiest volume is a mere 3.8 kilograms (8 lb.) and the dictionary on whole is at least *sixty pounds* lighter than its predecessor, using the same fonts.

It was also cheaper: while the first edition cost a prohibitive 50 guineas (approximately £3,000 today, or \$4,750), the reissue cost only 20 guineas (£1,200 today) for the same text in a handier format that takes less shelf space. The reissue was a triumph. Without these streamlining measures, the dictionary would have been doomed to sit on very few shelves altogether. (I have not been able to discover how the reissue was printed by John Johnson; however, Beverley Hunt, archivist at Oxford University Press, told me she found in the records some mention of electroplates for the *Supplement*.)

Editor Charles Onions says in his preface to *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (SOED), "For those who possess the great Oxford Dictionary the 'Shorter' will serve as a key to its treasures, for those who do not it will form the only possible substitute." His words remained true for decades. Originally referred to as the *Abridgement*, the *Shorter*—in just two volumes—was first published in February 1933, the most comprehensive of all auxiliary OED formats until 1971, when the micrographic *Compact* with magnifying glass was produced.

The *Shorter* was begun in 1903 by William Little, of whom next to nothing is said; he toiled until his death in 1922, abridging the OED presumably from the proofs as they were issued. By the time of his death, he had accomplished A through T as well as V, "entirely without assistance," in Cornwall. The colourful Henry W. Fowler was approached to condense the letters U, X, Y and Z. He was very reluctant (as usual) to take up lexicography but he got on with it; in the meantime, Little's work was revised and the OED army trudged through W. A total of 40,000 sets were produced in 1933–34, costing just 3 guineas (£180 today) per copy.

Before doing research for this article, I had thought the *Shorter* did not contain entries

from the *Supplement*. Then one day I came across *Canuck* in it and in the *Supplement*, yet not entered in the principal dictionary, which forced me to compare my second edition *Shorter Oxford* (1936; second printing, 1939) to my 1933 *Supplement* from A to Z. In this physically exhausting task, miserably failing at my goal of a letter a day, I found hundreds of *Supplement* words in the *Shorter*, which I wrote down, such as *banjulele* (a small banjo with a ukulele neck).

Curious as to whether the first edition contained as many *Supplement* words, I travelled up Burnaby Mountain to Simon Fraser University's W.A.C. Bennett Library. The library holds a worn-out first edition SOED (second printing, March 1933) in the Maps Collection, sitting on a table with *Webster's*. I don't know if any of the Maps people saw me and wondered, "What's this weird Special Collections frequenter doing leafing through our dictionaries?" but I was satisfied finding far fewer *Supplement* words in the first edition *Shorter*, compared to the second edition. I don't have it in me yet to count how many.

✿ The history of the OED (and its continuing history) were discussed by Fred Shapiro, Simon Winchester, Ammon Shea and Jesse Sheidlower during Yale University's celebrations of the dictionary's 80th anniversary in 2008. A video of their presentation is here: http://youtu.be/VKhixy-_dfM.

Thanks to Eric Swanick, bespectacled head librarian of SFU Special Collections, for weighing a reissue volume at my request.

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~ Gregory Freeman is a collector of antiquarian books based in Surrey, B.C. He has previously written about the King James Bible for *Amphora* and received the second-place award in the 2011 National Book Collecting Contest.

