

Making it short: The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary

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Of the early history of the SHORTER OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY ON HISTORICAL PRINCIPLES little is known beyond the brief facts set out in the preface to the first edition – that specimens were prepared by William Little of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, in 1902, that he single-handedly edited all but U, X, Y, Z, and W (mainly from his home in Cornwall, in fact), that on his death in January 1922 the editorship passed to C.T. Onions for whom H.W. Fowler and several others were engaged to complete the task. Thirty years after its inception, in 1933, the SOED was published. Only at that point did it acquire its present rather inappropriate title – in all earlier phases it had been referred to as the Abridged. Later editions – the last reprinting to be accorded this name was that of 1944 – mainly involved space-for-space alterations and addenda at the back. Plans for a complete revision in the 1960s fell through after some initial background work, but resetting was essential because of worn printing-plates. A compromise text with some corrections, revised etymologies, and enlarged addenda appeared in 1973, but clearly this could represent only a short-term solution. The project has been taken up again, and now ten full-time editors are engaged on the New SOED, with several freelance researchers providing back-up-information.

Need for a new edition

The SOED is still basically a straightforward abridgement of a late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century work, the OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY itself. On a simple level references such as ‘now’ and ‘present’ have become inappropriate – as when the *Dreadnought*, launched in 1906, is said to give its name to ‘a recent type of battleship’. Spelling preferences have changed, for example *Muslim* for *Moslem*. Many geopolitical, social, scientific, and linguistic changes are to be registered. Bohemia, for example, is described as ‘A kingdom of central Europe, forming part of the Austrian empire’; a plumber is ‘an artisan who works in lead, zinc, and tin’ – these skilled workers presumably don’t have plastic bank or credit cards either. Victorian and Edwardian social presuppositions are inevitably built in to the very fabric of the dictionary – the SOED can still speak unselfconsciously of ‘American Indians and other savages’ and assume a common Christian culture, while the New SOED has to respond to the sensitivities of religious and ethnic minorities, women, emerging nations, and numerous other pressure groups.

The limitations of the first and chief editor, William Little, also sometimes show. As a classicist and lawyer he was not sufficiently confident to abridge or omit OED's scientific items, nearly all of which survive in the SOED, while definitions of general vocabulary can be shortened to the point of obscurity. And Little was left to teach himself lexicography as he went along, without much contact with or help from the experienced OED staff.

The historical record of the SOED also has to be brought up to date. A research programme has gathered together examples of words and senses earlier and later than those of the OED itself, from numerous later period and regional historical dictionaries, from journals, and from other sources. As expected, these are particularly numerous at the beginning of the alphabet (cf. Schäfer 1980: 67). Even under our dating system (see below) we estimate that in the first few letters one in four headwords is allocated a significantly earlier date – not to mention individual senses and subsumed derivatives. In the range of words beginning with *an-* the Michigan MIDDLE ENGLISH DICTIONARY and the DICTIONARY OF THE OLDER SCOTTISH TONGUE together contributed about 120 usable antedatings and postdatings.

Back in the twentieth century, up-to-date vocabulary is supplied by the SUPPLEMENT TO THE OED and also the New English Words Series (NEWS), a branch of the New Oxford English Dictionary project. The New SOED staff, with their intense examination of the OED and of the English Dictionary Department's card quotation files, are in a position to identify many words and phrases not so far dealt with. NEWS helps us in return by giving some priority to those for which we urgently require further information. All NEWS entries, whether suggested by us or not, are also made accessible to us on their completion.

In addition to these lexicographical considerations, there have also been changes in market conditions since 1933. Paperback annotated editions of early literary texts have reduced the need for a general dictionary that is also, in the words of the preface to the first edition of the SOED (1933: viii), "a lexical companion to English literature". Publication of the OED itself in Compact, microphotographically reduced, form in 1971 ended the SOED's role as "the only possible substitute" for the full thirteen volumes (SOED 1933: viii). The necessity for larger sales has brought the SOED into the hands of many who have little or no acquaintance with the OED itself. The New SOED intends therefore to be more up to date, easier to use and to understand, less concerned with early literature, and more self-contained than the present work. We want it also, however, to retain its appeal and usefulness to those with a professional interest in the history of the English language.

The archives of Oxford University Press contain few surviving records of initial discussions and decisions concerning editorial policy. There was no summary statement or other ready help available to H.W. Fowler when he became involved after William Little's death. "I feel like a new boy, told that his new school is a devil of a place for things that new boys must & mustn't do, but that he can't

be told a priori what they are; he will find out soon enough a posteriori, . . . by kicks on the behind for not knowing", he wrote to Kenneth Sisam, then an Assistant Secretary of OUP, in a vain appeal for guidance.¹ Then and now, although some general outlines are clear, particular practice can be puzzling. Because of this, and because of changed aims and requirements, the New SOED is looking at content largely afresh.

Some policy points and changes

Most words obsolete before 1700 will be omitted, though not similarly obsolete senses of words included. This is primarily to release space for modern vocabulary and more expansive treatment of some common words. Exception is made for the vocabulary of a few major literary works and where a word casts light on the origin and development of an item or items independently eligible for inclusion.

Dating by specific years has been abandoned. After Old English, Middle English, and late Middle English, centuries are divided into early (-00 to -29), middle (-30 to -69), and late (-70 to -99). This avoids constant implicit reference to other sources, primarily, but no longer solely, the OED. It also allows a more consistent structure of chronological order (according to date-ranges) within each entry, building a better base for future addition and alteration.

Other changes include provision of the first as well as the last date of obsolete words and senses (not just the final date as at present), provision of dates for subordinated derivatives and other words, and the use of the alphabet of the International Phonetic Association, largely as in A.C. Gimson's fourteenth edition of EVERYMAN'S ENGLISH PRONOUNCING DICTIONARY, this in line with the current general policy in Oxford English Dictionaries.

Problems and limitations

The chief particular problem of a historical dictionary which does not have the space for exposition of early forms and examples is the reconciliation of headword form and date. This is particularly acute with variant forms which have diverged or specialized in meaning or use, for example, *coin*, *coign*, and *quoin*. *Coin* is now usual for monetary senses but earlier and still current for senses related to corners and angles (now usually *quoin*). *Coign* is a later variant used in both sense-sets but now only in the corner set and uniquely in the phrase *coign of vantage* after Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (I. vi. 7). *Quoin* is later still and never used for money. Our three basic principles in such cases are (i) not to separate variant forms at the expense of obscuring or misrepresenting semantic history,

¹ Letter of 11 February 1924, in the archives of the Oxford English Dictionary Department.

(ii) to treat senses under their usual modern form, and (iii) not to produce over-complicated entries. These are as often as not conflicting requirements and compromise solutions have to be reached which may differ in individual cases. We may also be constrained by the original OED treatment of a group.

We are not constrained by restriction to the illustrative quotations presented in the OED, but illustration still presents problems. Genuine quotations – to which we are committed – are usually longer than conveniently invented or modified ones. Brevity is desirable, but not at the cost of ambiguity or individuation as is sometimes the case in the current edition, where Shakespeare is credited with the phrase ‘about midnight’ and ‘an affection of the heart’ turns out to be fatal heart-disease not love.² Inclusion at all is a matter of fine editorial judgement. Quotations are expected to earn their keep, reinforcing sense distinctions, exemplifying possible constructions or common collocations, and so on, but must not be too numerous.

Obviously there are external limitations on what we can do lexicographically. The degree of dependence on the OED for dating often prevents radical alteration of the structure of OED entries. Though senses can be combined they cannot usually be split – it could no longer be assumed that the OED printed its earliest available example, and later research has largely based itself on OED divisions. Parallel and comparable entries can thus not always be brought into line as we would wish. And then there is time and money. We have a publication target and a budget. We have not given priority to checking all quotations taken over from the OED in modern more reliable editions or to systematic reviewing of OED’s dating of manuscripts, diaries, etc. We are acting on datings known to us from the first to be inconsistent or inadequate, for example the works of the Gawain poet, which are now generally considered to be later than the OED thought, or John Evelyn’s *Diary*, the dates of which have been more accurately established by de Beer; and we are investigating OED’s first or last quotations with imprecise dates, for example Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments of these Latter and Perillous Dayes*, frequently dated 1563–87, or Chambers *Cyclopaedia*, frequently dated 1727–51. However, there must be other similar instances of which we are unaware. We cannot do everything at once in this first major overhaul of an ageing work.

Pronunciation of rare or obsolescent words often has to be guessed, and the true pronunciation of items with no currency in standard southern English cannot be represented without undue complication of the pronunciation system. Considerable precision is for us a disadvantage of Gimson’s version of English in IPA.

The changes being made to the existing SOED are so substantial that the whole text is having to be rewritten. At present the method of preparation is traditional

² In the OED, the quotation (from Lytton’s *My Novel*) reads, “Died, sir, suddenly, last night. It was an affection of the heart.”

— handwriting on 6 by 4 inch paper slips. It was felt that the New SOED is too big and too complex to be a guinea-pig in OUP's programme of introducing computers into Oxford lexicography. However, much collective wisdom has been acquired during the computerization of the New OED and that of the editions of the CONCISE OXFORD DICTIONARY and the OXFORD ADVANCED LEARNER'S DICTIONARY OF CURRENT ENGLISH now in progress, the first being largely for production purposes at present, the second to provide a combined production and editorial tool. We are going to start feasibility studies to identify a system suitable for the New SOED. Shortly of course.

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