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The **Oxford English Dictionary**, or, as it is affectionately known, the OED, has been the ultimate authority on the English language for close on a hundred years. While most of us take its existence for granted, without ever wondering how it came into being, the fascinating tale of its making is told by Simon Winchester in **The meaning of everything: the making of the Oxford English Dictionary** - a story involving, according to the blurb, 'a

kleptomaniac, the nephew of a French emperor; the creator of an imaginary land inhabited by small hairy creatures, a homicidal lunatic, an Esperanto enthusiast, the man who introduced the camel to the Wild West, the captain of an all-ladies sculling team, a hermit, and the son of a Scottish draper'.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, if you needed to consult a dictionary, you had two choices: the eccentric **Johnson's Dictionary**, or the **American Dictionary of the English Language** compiled by the smug New England schoolteacher, Noah Webster. Both had their shortcomings, and neither was anywhere near being comprehensive. On 5 November 1857, at a gathering of the Philological Society in London, Richard Trench, Dean of Westminster, read a paper, which was to have profound importance for the English language. Entitled *On some deficiencies in our English dictionaries*, he set out these shortcomings, and proposed the compilation of a dictionary which would be a comprehensive view of the language. He had in mind the tracking down of every word ever used in published literature, and then listing every sense of every meaning, with every variant of every spelling, and including, in addition, an elegantly-written, carefully thought-out definition, at the same time giving its etymology and preferred pronunciation. 'A dictionary', he declared, 'is an historical monument, the history of a nation contemplated from one point of view - and the wrong ways into which a language has wandered may be nearly as instructive as the right ones.' The work he envisaged would be undertaken by enlisting the help of volunteers who would comb all published works for examples of the ways in which words were used.

Three years later, in 1860, the Society passed a formal resolution to undertake the compilation of such a work, to be known as **A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles**. The first editor was Herbert Coleridge, nephew of the poet, who was appointed at the age of 27. Sadly, he died a few years later, and was succeeded by the flamboyant and slightly disreputable Frederick Furnivall, who combined his pet passions (other than words, that is) of sculling and females by establishing a Ladies' Sculling Club in Hammersmith. Under his direction, however, work on the dictionary descended into chaos, and a new editor had to be found.

The man who took over the job in the mid-1870s was James Murray, a young schoolmaster from Mill Hill School in north London. At the time of Murray's appointment, the Society concluded a deal with the Oxford University Press, who would fund the work, to be called **A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles formed mainly on the Materials collected by the Philological Society and with the Assistance of many Scholars and men of Science**. It was expected to be about 7 000 pages in length, to cost about £9 000

and to be ready in about 10 years. The editor, James Murray, would be paid an annual salary amounting to about £500.

It was to become his life's work: for almost thirty years until his death in July 1915, he presided over the compilation, first in a shed in his garden in Mill Hill, and later in the back yard of his house in Oxford. In each instance, this building was known as the Scriptorium, and was lined with dozens of pigeon holes housing the thousands of slips bearing illustrative quotations of words sent in by volunteer readers from around the world. These slips were filed by the Murray progeny (he had 11 children), who worked after school for pocket money.

As his guiding principle, Murray took the words of the Great Lexicographer himself, from the preface to Johnson's dictionary: he vowed absolute perfection, with no short cuts or resort to expediency, and that he would, to quote Simon Winchester, 'once and for all, fix and enumerate and catalogue all of the English language, no matter if it seemed that he was thereby bound, endlessly, to be chasing the very sun that Samuel Johnson had so signally failed to reach.'

Using the slips of written definitions which arrived by the sackload in the Scriptorium, Murray and his helpers toiled away, one letter of the alphabet at a time, examining the quotations, attempting to discern the different meanings, checking dates and sources, and finally and painstakingly, attempting to arrive at a definition. The work was published in instalments, the first, *A-Ant*, appearing in January 1884. It continued at a snail's pace for the next 44 years. In 1885, Murray gave up teaching at Mill Hill, which he had continued to do till then, and moved with his family to Oxford, to work on the dictionary full-time. In 1886, Henry Bradley was appointed to assist him. Bradley had first come to the attention of the Society after his detailed, critical, but generally favourable, review of Part I appeared in a weekly magazine, the **Academy**. Both Murray's and Bradley's lives were made miserable by the unpleasant, carping Philip Gell, appointed to oversee the work of the dictionary on behalf of the Philological Society.

The volunteer readers were a diverse and fascinating bunch. Probably the most unusual, and also perhaps the most prolific, of these has to be Dr William Minor, American army surgeon and murderer, incarcerated at Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane. His story is told in detail in Simon Winchester's **The surgeon of Crowthorne**. Another volunteer, also American, who contributed enormously to the dictionary was the reclusive Fitzedward Hall, teacher of Sanskrit, who buried himself in a remote cottage in East Anglia after his reputation was ruined following a furious row with a fellow academic.

Later, during the year 1919, after Murray's death, under Bradley's editorship, JRR Tolkien was also involved with the work, specifically words beginning with *W*. Among others he contributed the definitions for *walnut*, *wampum* and *walrus*. He recorded his struggles with the latter word, of ancient Dutch and Low German origin, in one of his ring-backed notebooks, now housed in Oxford's Bodleian Library.

Murray died in 1915, still hard at work in the Scriptorium, busy with the letter *T* - legend has it that his last definition was for the word *turn-down*. His work was continued by Bradley, assisted by Charles Onions and William Craigie, and finally, in April 1928, the last section, *Wise to Wyzen*, was completed (*XYZ* had been completed seven years before, in 1921). The finished work comprised 414,825 words and 1,827,306 illustrative quotations on 15,490 pages of

single-spaced printed text, bound into twelve hefty volumes. Dedicated to Queen Victoria in 1897, a set was presented to King George V, as well as to Calvin Coolidge, a United States President. British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, however, had to buy his own copy for No 10 Downing Street - he declared later that he consulted it on an almost daily basis. The completion of the dictionary was celebrated by a grand dinner in London's Goldsmith's Hall, attended by 150 of the most distinguished minds of the era.

The problem with a work such as this is that it is out of date even before it has been completed. Five years after its completion, in 1933, a supplement appeared, containing words 'born too late for inclusion' in the original work: words such as *aeroplane*, *appendicitis*, *pacifist*, and *zooming*, along with words which had evolved new meanings in the intervening years, and those relating to new technologies which had not even existed at the time when the dictionary was first envisaged. *Television* appears in the 1928 edition, described as 'not yet perfected'. *Radio* receives a proper definition in the supplement, instead of the passing reference in the 1928 version, to a Mr Marconi and his 'radio or coherer'.

After the Second World War, under the direction of Robert Burchfield, work was begun on another supplement which was finally completed in four-volumes in 1986. This meant that there were now three separate, parallel alphabetical lists to be consulted: the original 1928 edition, the 1933 Supplement, and the four-volume Burchfield Supplement. Since the mid-90s, the process of

consolidating these has been in progress - a monumental task made easier by the use of computers (thanks to a generous donation from IBM). Certainly a far cry from the days of Murray's Scriptorium with its pigeon holes holding thousands of slips. Simon Winchester points out, however, that this will be a work of such prodigious proportions that it will probably never appear in print. No-one can be sure when it will be completed, and it is possible that it could contain as many as a million words. Such a work, should it be printed, could run to as many as 40 volumes, each set weighing up to a ton, each printing consuming a vast number of trees. Surely it would be preferable, suggests Winchester, for 'the wisdom of the Dictionary to be purveyed electronically, with no physical harm to anyone or anything at all, and only the intellectual benefits derived from all those decades of scholarship'.

Whatever form it takes, however, the OED will remain the ultimate example of what a dictionary should be. As a press report declared soon after the completion of the 1928 edition:

'The superiority of the Dictionary to all other English Dictionaries, in accuracy and completeness, is everywhere admitted. The **Oxford Dictionary** is the supreme authority, and without a rival. It is perhaps less generally appreciated that what makes the Dictionary unique is its historical method; it is a Dictionary not of our English, but of all English; the English of Chaucer; of the Bible, of Shakespeare is unfolded in it with the same wealth of illustration as is devoted to the most modern authors.'