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The Treasure-House of the Language: The Living OED (review)

Tim William Machan

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 30, 2008, pp. 347-349 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.0.0011>

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CHARLOTTE BREWER, *The Treasure-House of the Language: The Living OED*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. Pp. xiv, 334. \$35.00.

One thing many Chaucerians have in common, besides their interest in Chaucer, is departmental responsibility for a course on the history of English. The responsibility may reflect genuine interest and training, or the fact that the language backgrounds of medievalists make them well suited to work up such a course, or maybe a greater sense of collegiality and accommodation than that of their fussy modernist colleagues. And along with this responsibility comes recognition that few tools for historical analysis are more pervasive, limited, maddening, and, above all, essential than the celebrated *OED*. As welcome as a book on metrics or manuscripts might be to Chaucerians, then, just as welcome will be Charlotte Brewer's elegant, engrossing, and sophisticated account of this dictionary's life since its first appearance in 1928.

For some time now, social and political history has focused on the omnipresent if sometimes amorphous channeling of various kinds of social power. Presenting individuals as less agents than products, this is a historiography formed specifically in response to earlier kinds that concentrated on the great deeds of great men and women. And obviously, it can be a very effective historiography, as in John Willinsky's *Empire of Words: The Reign of the OED*. Brewer takes a different tack and shows that sometimes history really can happen because of the specific deeds of specific individuals (however great the individuals or their deeds turn out to be).

It's difficult to imagine the first *OED*, for example, without the indefatigable and purposeful efforts of James Murray. There may have been another qualified, dedicated individual who could have carried the project off—to completion, in a sense, thirteen years after he had died—but no obvious candidates present themselves. Skeat would have been too distracted by too many other projects; Furnivall was too distracted period; and Sweet would have been distracting to those around him. What Murray did was take the slimmest of ideas from the Philological Society and translate it into an objective, a method, a means to realize that method and objective, and, effectively, a professional enterprise. In the process, with very little to guide him, he did much to invent modern

lexicography. He also, arguably, created a kind of white elephant for publishers, scholars, and his successors on the *OED*.

From the very beginning, Brewer shows, the enterprise has been torn between the conflicting needs to produce thorough and accurate material and to limit costs, particularly by limiting the time taken to do the work. And this conflict has been exacerbated by the fact that even the most well-intentioned lexicographers discovered that besides being a white elephant, the *OED* could be a bit of a cash cow: finish it, and they finished their jobs. Murray himself further exacerbated the efforts of his successors by his dictum that the history of every English word ought to be represented. Compounds, negatives, and nominal phrases all made realizing this injunction difficult enough, as did the limitation of any reading program that depends significantly, as the *OED* always has, on the kindness of readers. But once linguistic and social mores began to change in the last century, and the people and language habits of far-flung locales began to be accepted as making legitimate claims on the character of English, the notion that the lexicon could ever be circumscribed, much less recorded and defined, has evaporated. In a sense, far better than could any of his successors, wrestling as they have with new sociolects, regional dialects, and even World Englishes, Murray could know what English was, though even he, in the Preface, acknowledged a core and fringe vocabulary.

Many of the difficulties Brewer describes involve efforts to achieve, then, what may have only been just barely possible in Victorian England. And even before the last volume of the first edition had appeared, the failure of the *OED* to achieve this goal was apparent. But what to do? Should errors be corrected, additional quotations supplied, gaps filled? Should the focus of the dictionary lean more toward description, which Murray's methods embraced, or prescription, in the form of an avoidance of vulgarity and an emphasis on belletristic writing, which his methods also embraced? What proportion should there be between illustrative quotations and a word's currency? And even if the original had errors and omissions, how could the press, even as it marketed the dictionary as its flagship enterprise and a monument to learning, contemplate the investment of additional time and money to redo it?

The history Brewer traces suggests that these questions have never been satisfactorily answered. The 1933 Supplement sought only to fill in gaps, but even then the *OED* had to keep going in some sense, if only because it drove a number of lucrative spin-offs, such as the Shorter

OED and the Concise *OED*. In this vein, the press for a time contemplated a dictionary drawing only on literary examples, though it never came to fruition. And even as academics and word sleuths continued to collect examples of omissions, antedatings, and errors—not to mention pronunciations that reflected Murray's own idiosyncrasy of articulating initial *p* in words like *psychiatry*—the press quite understandably resisted any notion of wholesale revision. By the 1950s another supplement, this one focusing on modern words and filling in more gaps, though resisting the addition of quotations for any word cited as recently as the nineteenth century, was under way. Like everything else associated with the *OED*, it grew in the telling, and eventually appeared in four volumes from 1972 to 1986. In 1989, this supplement, melded into the first one and the original *OED*, was issued, perhaps a bit disingenuously, as a second edition. By this point, thanks to the advent of computer technology, a true revision could be contemplated, one that was infinitely expandable and need never appear in print, and this is *OED3*, currently in production and on-line, in part, since 2000. And through all these editorial crises, conflicts, and ministrations, it was again individual personality that not only shaped the enterprise but kept it alive: Onions and Craigie, the last connections to Murray and his aspirations; Sisam, a shadowy but ubiquitous figure who provided continuity for almost half a century; Wyllie, a tormented soul and tireless quotation collector; Burchfield, who brought production of the dictionary into the modern era; and now Simpson and Weiner, who have made possible the searchable glory that is *OED3*.

As the *OED* has grown and changed over the past century, a shift in emphasis has occurred that should both guide its editors and reassure its readers. Rather than the impossibility of providing a history of every word—for a language, like every natural language, whose lexicon changes daily—the value of realizing what is possible has become more prominent. The *OED* may be flawed, but for historical linguistics it is crucial and superior, I think, to any other dictionary in any language I know. Brewer's meticulously researched and clearly written book—telling the plot of a mystery in progress—shows that for all its claims to scientific accuracy and thoroughness, *OED* owes its successes (and failures) to the individuals who devoted their lives to it.

TIM WILLIAM MACHAN
Marquette University