

The
Dictionary
PEOPLE



The unsung heroes
who created the

**Oxford English
Dictionary**

**SARAH
OGILVIE**

'A wonder-book for word-lovers'

JEANETTE WINTERSON

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*The unsung heroes who created
the Oxford English Dictionary*

SARAH OGILVIE

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To Jane,
and in memory of Antoinette.

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I am sure that lovers of our language will not willingly let die the names of those who, from unselfish devotion and service to that language, have laboured in the cause of the Dictionary.

James Murray, Editor of the OED, 1892

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Introduction:

Discovering the Dictionary People

It was in a hidden corner of the Oxford University Press basement, where the Dictionary's archive is stored, that I opened a dusty box and came across a small black book tied with cream ribbon. That basement archive is, strangely perhaps, one of my favourite places in the world: silent, cold, musty-smelling; rows of movable steel shelves on rollers; brown acid-free boxes bulging with letters; millions of slips of paper tied in bundles with twine; and Dictionary proofs covered in small, precise handwriting. It is a place full of friendly, word-nerd, ghosts. Perhaps those ghosts were guiding me because the discovery I made that day would lead me on an extraordinary journey and eventually to the book you are now holding.

I was there out of nostalgia more than anything. I used to work upstairs as an editor on the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and I was filling in time while waiting for my visa to come through for a new job in America. It was Friday, and I had spent the whole week revisiting my favourite spots before leaving the city that had been my home for fourteen years.

Monday had been a walk around the deer park within the walls of Magdalen College. C. S. Lewis had said that the circular path was the perfect length for any problem. It was true. The fritillaria weren't in flower but the trees were yellow

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and the leaves on the ground were damp and smelled of the earth. Next, noisy Longwall Street and past the dirty windows of where I used to live at number 13. Through a heavy gate and an arch in the old city wall and into the vast gardens of New College with its immaculate lawn and long border still in colour. The bells rang as I paused at the spot under the oak where the college cat, Montgomery, had been buried by the chaplain. Along the gravel path by the purple echinops, crimson dahlias, and red echinacea with their pom-pom centres. Through the grand gates of the old quad, and into the silence of the cloisters where they had filmed *Harry Potter*. I pushed open the door of the chapel and was immediately hit by the comforting smell of beeswax and the sound of the choirboys rehearsing. I stayed in the antechapel and sat in front of Epstein's *Lazarus* rising out of the tomb and spinning free of his bandages. Tuesday was the Upper Reading Room of the Bodleian Library. Wednesday was the secret bench against the President's wall at Trinity College where I used to worry about my thesis. Thursday was Wolvercote Cemetery and the resting place of my hero James Murray, the longest-serving Editor of the Oxford English Dictionary from 1879 up to his death in 1915.

The Dictionary had started out with three men, Richard Chenevix Trench (1807–86), the Dean of Westminster Abbey, along with Herbert Coleridge (1830–61) and Frederick Furnivall (1825–1910), both lawyers turned literary scholars, who suggested the creation of a new dictionary. This would be the first dictionary that *described* language. Until then, the major English dictionaries such as Dr Samuel Johnson's in the eighteenth century were prescriptive texts – telling their readers what words *should* mean and how they *should* be spelled, pronounced, and used. In 1857, these men proposed to the London Philological Society – one of the scholarly societies that were such a hallmark of their day – the creation of 'an entirely new Dictionary, no patch upon old garments,

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but a new garment throughout'. Coleridge became the first Editor of the *New English Dictionary* (as the OED was first called), but he died two years into the job. Frederick Furnivall took over for twenty years, until he was replaced in 1879 by a schoolmaster in London called James Augustus Henry Murray (1837–1915).

Before moving to Oxford, Murray tried to combine teaching at Mill Hill School with work on the Dictionary. The Dictionary won out. It was at Mill Hill that Murray had started to compile the Dictionary inside his house, but the vast quantities of books and slips threatened to crowd out his growing family (in time, he and his wife Ada would have eleven children). Ada eventually put her foot down, insisting that he build an iron shed in the garden and use that as his office; it was nicknamed the Scriptorium. When Murray moved to Oxford in 1884 to work solely on the Dictionary, his family and the Scriptorium went with him. It was partially dug into the ground, so Murray and his small team of editors laboured on the Dictionary for the next thirty years in dank and cold conditions, often wrapping their legs in newspaper to stay warm. Over the years, he was helped by paid editorial assistants and joined by three key editors who subsequently became Chief Editors in their own right: Henry Bradley, William Craigie, and Charles Onions.

The new Dictionary would trace the meaning of words across time and describe how people were actually using them. The founders, however, were smart enough to recognize that the mammoth task of finding words in their natural habitat and describing them in such a rigorous way could never be done alone by a small group of men in London or Oxford. The OED was the Wikipedia of the nineteenth century – a huge crowdsourcing project in which, over seventy years between 1858 and 1928, members of the public were invited to read the books that they had to hand, and

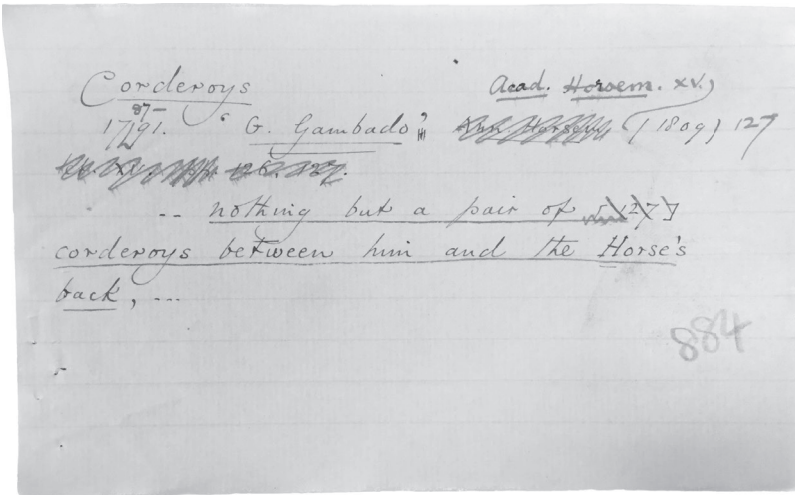
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to mail to the Editor of the Dictionary examples of how particular words were used in those books. The volunteer ‘Readers’ were instructed to write out the words and sentences on small 4 x 6-inch pieces of paper, known as ‘slips’. In addition to being Readers, volunteers could help as Subeditors who received bundles of slips for pre-sorting (chronologically and into senses of meaning); and as Specialists who provided advice on the etymologies, meaning, and usage of certain words. Most people worked for free but a few were paid, and the editorial assistants formed two groups – one under the leadership of Murray in the Scriptorium and the other managed by Henry Bradley at the Old Ashmolean building in the centre of Oxford.

In the first twenty years, this system of crowdsourcing enlisted the help of several hundred helpers. It expanded considerably under James Murray, who sent out a global appeal for people to read their local texts and send in their local words. It was important for Murray that everyone adhere strictly to scientific principles of historical lexicography and find the very first use of a word. Readers received a list of twelve instructions on how to select a word, which included, ‘Give the date of your book (if you can), author, title (short). Give an exact reference, such as seems to you to be the best to enable anyone to verify your quotations. Make a quotation for every word that strikes you as rare, obsolete, old-fashioned, new, peculiar, or used in a peculiar way.’ He distributed the appeal to newspapers and journals, schools, universities, and hundreds of clubs and societies throughout Britain, America, and the rest of the world.

The response was massive. In order to cope with the volume of post arriving in Oxford, the Royal Mail installed a red pillar box outside Dr Murray’s house at 78 Banbury Road to receive post (it is still there today). This is now one of the most gentrified areas of Oxford, full of large three-storey, redbrick, Victorian houses, but the houses were brand

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A 4 x 6-inch 'slip' sent in by one of the most prolific female contributors, Edith Thompson of Bath, who sent in 13,259 slips. The underlinings and markings were made by Dr Murray.

new when Murray lived there and considered quite far out of town. He devised a system of storage for all the slips in shelves of pigeonholes that lined the walls of the Scriptorium.

We know some of the contributors' names from brief mentions in the prefaces to the Dictionary that accompanied each portion (called a 'fascicle') as it was gradually published between 1884 and 1928. Other historical documents, such as Murray's presidential addresses to the London Philological Society, also mention groups of contributors: some are famous, some ordinary, and some unpredictable – perhaps most notoriously the murderer and prisoner William Chester Minor, so brilliantly depicted by Simon Winchester in *The Surgeon of Crowthorne* (1998). Through these sources, historians have thought that there were hundreds of contributors, but have not known who they all were.

Today, crowdsourcing happens at extraordinary speed, scale, and scope thanks to the internet. In the mid-nineteenth

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century, the launch of ‘uniform penny post’ and the birth of steam power (driving printing presses, and leading to railway transport and faster ocean crossings) enabled this system of reading for the Dictionary to be so successful. The growth of the British Empire, the proliferation of clubs and societies, and the professionalization of scholarship throughout the century all conspired to create the conditions for a global, shared, intellectual project that continues to this day.

The OED is now on its third edition, and still makes appeals and invites contributions from the public (via its website), but is chiefly revised by a team of specialized lexicographers. As one of those lexicographers, my job was to edit the words that had originally come from languages outside Europe – words from Arabic (*sugar, sofa, magazine*) or Hindi (*shampoo, chutney, bungalow*) or Nahuatl (*chocolate, avocado, chilli*) – in the third edition. Apart from the use of computers, the editing process I followed was exactly the same as that masterminded by Murray: each lexicographer was given a box of slips corresponding to our respective portion of the alphabet and, aided by large digital datasets, we worked through slip by slip, word by word, striving to piece together fragments of an incomplete historical record, until we had crafted an entry and presented a logical chain of semantic development in much the same way that Murray and his editors had. We also worked in a silent zone, just as it was in the nineteenth century. It has relaxed a bit now and editors work in small groups, but when I first started there if you wanted to speak to a colleague you were encouraged to whisper or to go into a meeting room to do so.

It was only natural that on my final day in Oxford I should want to bid farewell to the Dictionary Archives, where I had spent so many happy hours in the past. On that cool autumn Friday in 2014, when I casually popped by to pass

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some time, I could not have imagined what I was about to discover.

I collected my visitor's badge from the reception and made my way along multiple corridors, down some stairs, along a tunnel. I had walked this way many times because I had also written my doctorate on the OED using historical materials stored down there. As a previous employee, I have always been granted exceptional access to the stacks. One last swipe and a loud click, and I was inside the inner sanctum of the archives. Bev and Martin greeted me; I passed through another door into the OED section of boxes and paraphernalia. It was the material relating to the first edition of the OED which drew me. It was a treasure trove. You could pick any box and it held something of interest.

I don't even remember what was written on the one that I pulled off the shelf, but I noticed that it was lighter than the others. I placed it on the floor and lifted the lid. There, right on top, was a black book I had never seen before, bound with cream ribbon.

I carefully picked it up and removed the ribbon that held the stiff black covers together, and looked more closely. It was the size of an average exercise book; the spine had disintegrated to reveal fine cotton binding; the pages were discoloured at the edges, slightly foxed. When I opened it, the first thing that struck me was the immaculate cursive handwriting. I recognized it as the familiar hand of James Murray.

He had written the names and addresses of not just hundreds but thousands of people who had volunteered to contribute to the Dictionary.

Finding Dr Murray's address book was one of those moments when everything goes into slow motion. I immediately appreciated the significance of the find. I realized I held a

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key to understanding how the greatest English dictionary in the world was made: not only who the volunteers were, where they lived, what they read, but so many other personal details that Murray often included on their deaths, marriages, and friendships.

I was stunned by the sheer numbers of people who had contributed. Murray had not only listed the names and addresses of his contributors but had meticulously recorded every book title they had read, with the number of slips they sent in, and the dates received. Every page was filled with black ink: names, addresses, and titles of books with numbers beside them, small symbols and notes, ticks and checks, stars and scribbles.

I wondered whether I was the first person to open the address book since Murray had last used it. Had it remained closed for almost a century? Not quite: there was an archival classification number written in pencil at the top of one of the pages, and I knew that the dictionary archive had been re-organized and categorized by the Dictionary's wonderful archivist, Bev. However, I was familiar with the books and articles written about the OED over recent decades, and I knew that it was likely that no one else had seen Murray's address book or, if they had, they had not deemed it valuable. I was the first person to take this opportunity to track down who the contributors really were, and to build as comprehensive a picture as possible. I had found the Dictionary People.

The box in the archives held two further address books belonging to Murray, and the following summer, in a box in the Bodleian Library, I found another three address books belonging to the Editor who had preceded him, Frederick Furnivall. As I worked my way through them, it became clear that there were thousands of contributors. Some three thousand, to be exact.

The address books provided me with the kind of research project that scholars can only dream of. My excitement was

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followed by long, hard detective work. My visa came through and with the help of a team of tech-savvy student research assistants at Stanford (where I was by then teaching) I used the information from six address books (Murray's and Furnivall's) to create two large datasets of the thousands of Dictionary People and the tens of thousands of books that they read. In tracking contributors across the world, I visited libraries, archives, and personal collections in Oxford, Cambridge, London, New York, California, Scotland, and Australia. I also gathered portraits and digital photographs of the contributors, scanned hundreds of letters and slips showing the handwriting of the contributors, as well as great lists of the words and quotations they collected.

Murray's address books were clearly the work of an obsessive. Piecing together the stories of the Dictionary People from his brief and often cryptic notes required a similar focus. Some pages held original letters from the addressees, and almost every page contained signs that needed decoding. What did Murray mean by D4, D6, a tilde accent, or a U with a cross through it? It took me a while to work those out, while others I immediately grasped – '11/2/85' clearly meant 11 February 1885. Some people in the address books had cryptic marks and ideographs above their names. Others had not-so-subtle descriptors: 'dead', 'died', 'gone away', 'gave up', 'nothing done', 'threw up', 'no good'. I sat with the books and studied their pages, and other patterns emerged. Some names were underlined in bright red pencil, and gradually I realized this meant they were Americans, while others were crossed out in blue pencil with the letters 'I-M-P-O-S-T-O-R' written over them.

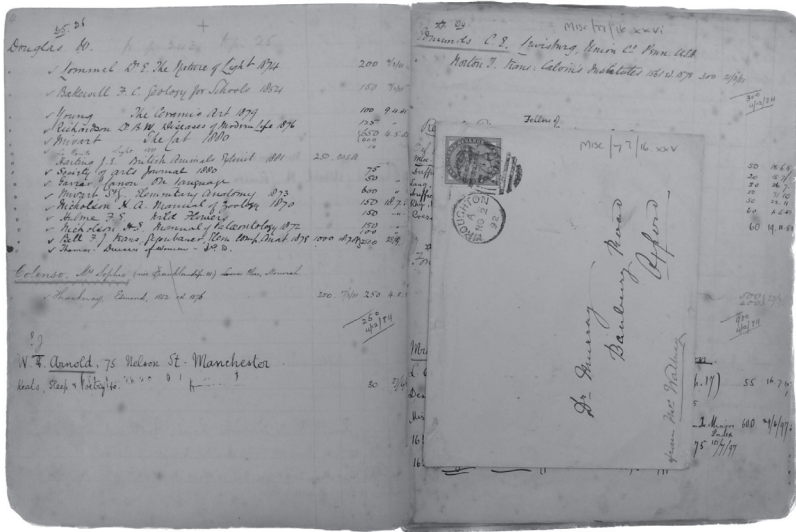
For the past eight years I have pored over these address books, researching the people listed inside them – where they lived, what they did with their lives, who they loved, the books they read, and the words they contributed to the

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Dictionary. Some people have remained mysteries, despite my trawling through censuses, marriage registers, birth certificates, and official records, but many more have come to life with such force it is as though they have been calling out for attention for years.

The Dictionary was a project that appealed to autodidacts and amateurs rather than professionals – and many of them were women, far more than we previously thought. It attracted people from all around the world as well as Britain: from Australia, Canada, South Africa, and New Zealand, to America, Europe, the Congo, and Japan. Remarkably, they were not generally the educated or upper classes that you might expect.

Over the years that I have been researching them, I have fallen in love with the Dictionary People. Most of them never met each other or the editors to whom they sent their contributions, and most were never paid for their work. But what



Some pages of Dr Murray's address books contain letters from contributors.

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united them was their startling enthusiasm for the emerging Dictionary, their ardent desire to document their language, and, especially for the hundreds of autodidacts, the chance to be associated with a prestigious project attached to a famous university which symbolized the world of learning from which they were otherwise excluded. The Dictionary People could also be cranky, difficult, and eccentric – as James Murray often found out – but that, paradoxically, also makes them lovable, or at least fascinating.

Tracking the lives of these three thousand people has been a long task and, yes, a labour of love. I have wanted to tell the story of the OED from the ‘bottom up’ through the eyes of the volunteers rather than from the perspective of the editors or the scholars. Murray’s incredible record-keeping in his address books made much of this possible, though some of those three thousand were easier to track through the many archives I consulted than others: the biases within record-keeping meant that there were sometimes frustrating gaps in the evidence and a skew towards certain classes, genders, and ethnicities. And yet the stories of so many were findable – and I often found them on the margins. Even James Murray was unusual in not being part of the Oxford Establishment – he was Nonconformist and Scottish, and had left school at fourteen. He was an expert in the English language but he was also somewhat on the fringes. The OED was a project that attracted those on the edges of academia, those who aspired to be a part of an intellectual world from which they were excluded. While I always wanted to find out more about Miss Janet Coutts Pittrie of Chester who is marked in the address book as ‘Friend of Miss Jackson’; Mr John Donald Campbell, who was possibly a factory inspector in Glasgow; and Miss Mary A. Pearson, who was possibly a cook and servant in Eaton Square, London, the details of their lives eluded me. But there were so many more whose life stories popped

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out in technicolour as I was doing my research. I was thrilled to discover not one but three murderers, a pornography collector, Karl Marx's daughter, a President of Yale, the inventor of the tennis-net adjuster, a pair of lesbian writers who wrote under a male pen name, and a cocaine addict found dead in a railway station lavatory. In the process of searching for these people, I have come across many hundreds of fascinating and often unexpected stories – dramatic and quotidian. I became obsessed with shining a light on these unsung heroes who helped compile one of the most extraordinary and uplifting examples of collaborative endeavour in literary history.

The time that the Dictionary was being written was an age of discoveries and science, an explosion of modern knowledge, and we see in so many of the rain collectors, explorers, inventors, and suffragists how much our current world was shaped by this relatively short period. There is a paradox about the very project of the Dictionary, the words collected for it and included in it. The Dictionary enterprise can easily be seen as a mastery of the world for the sake of the English language and the intellectual passions of white people. Murray's commitment to including all the words that had come into the English language may be seen as colonizing – or it may be seen as inclusive. Murray went out of his way to include all words, often being criticized for it by reviewers of the Dictionary and his superiors at Oxford University Press. This means that the pages of the Dictionary incorporated words from the languages of Black and indigenous populations, and of people of colour. The Dictionary People who sent in those words were, for the most part, white, because of their privileged access to literacy in the period. The published sources of those words drew originally on the language of members of Black and indigenous communities whose names never made it into the pages of Murray's address book, and it is

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Dr Murray and his editorial team working on the OED
in the Scriptorium, a shed in his back garden.

important to acknowledge those often unseen and unrecorded interlocutors.

A myth of Murray has persisted as the Editor who devotedly and single-handedly created the world's largest English dictionary with its half-million entries – only to die during the compiling of the letter T in 1915, not knowing whether his life's work would ever be finished. While Murray was clearly a master-manager of the whole Dictionary project and had a small number of paid staff in the Scriptorium, this oft-told story ignores all the many people who corresponded with him and sent him words and quotations which made the Dictionary happen. The photograph in the Scriptorium might show only five men, but a careful observer will see the volunteer contributors clearly present, there in the thousands of word slips they sent, poking out of the pigeonholes.

It is their lives that I unearthed and relate in this book.

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The story here is one of amateurs collaborating alongside the academic elite during a period when scholarship was being increasingly professionalized; of women contributing to an intellectual enterprise at a time when they were denied access to universities; of hundreds of Americans contributing to a Dictionary that everyone thinks of as quintessentially ‘British’; of an above-average number of ‘lunatics’ contributing detailed and rigorous work from mental hospitals; and of families reading together by gaslight and sending in quotations. This extraordinary crowdsourced project was powered by faithful and loyal volunteers who took up the invitation to read their favourite books and describe their local words not just so that the bounds of the English language could be recorded for future generations but so they could be part of a project that was much bigger than them.

They are the Dictionary People, largely forgotten and unacknowledged – until now.

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A

for ARCHAEOLOGIST

Which of the Dictionary People should start this book, I wondered, and be given the honour of representing the letter A? There are many ‘Americans’ I could, and will, tell you about, some autodidacts, and quite a number of activists. However, for me, archaeologist Margaret Alice Murray deserves to be at the beginning, not least because recognition for her came late in life. Despite being one of the most famous archaeologists of her day, she had to wait until the age of sixty-one to be made, in 1924, an Assistant Professor at University College London. Margaret was indefatigable: she embarked on a lecture tour to Norway, Sweden and Finland aged seventy-two, and on reaching her century she optimistically titled her memoir *My First Hundred Years*. The story of her involvement with the Dictionary begins when she was just eighteen years old, shortly after Dr James Murray (no relation) made his general appeal to English speakers around the world in 1879, asking them to read their local books and send him words and quotations on small slips of 4 x 6-inch paper. National and international newspapers picked up Murray’s appeal and advertised the project in their pages. It is likely that this is how Margaret heard about the OED and its call for contributors: her family, then living in Calcutta

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(now Kolkata), regularly read the weekly edition of *The Times* newspaper, distributed throughout the Anglo-Indian community, which carried Murray's advertisements.

Margaret's mother was an English missionary. Her wealthy father – of British descent born in India – was managing partner of a firm of Manchester paper merchants. The family lived in a grand white stone-and-stucco house at 8 Elysium Row, in the Anglo-Indian quarter of Calcutta not far from the Anglican Cathedral. The houses here were neoclassical in design, with floors of polished chunam, high ceilings, ornate cornices, and marble pillars. In fact, none of the large homes on Elysium Row would have looked out of place on London's Pall Mall, were it not for the Anglo-Indian addition of jill-mills (wooden louvres) and plaited-grass screens that hung between the columns of the verandahs to provide a cool flow of air. But even these grand spaces could not escape the heat, sounds, and smells of the city, situated as it was on the Tropic of Cancer along swampland and salt marshes. There were (and still are) few places on Earth hotter and more humid.

Margaret had a routine of getting up at sunrise and taking a book to the balustraded, flat roof to read alone in the cool early-morning air. As she read, the smells of the dawning day would drift up to her: incense from the Hindu house servants performing their first devotions, and the pungent odour of spicy jhalmuri (Bengali street food). She underlined words in her books to the background noise of the kitchen staff preparing breakfast, the slap of laundry on stone, and the far-off clatter of the street traders, astrologers, and chaiwalas (tea sellers) setting up their stalls. And then, as the day got hotter and stickier, she made her way downstairs to write out her selected words and quotations on slips of paper at a desk on the shaded verandah. At night, she would continue the work in her bedroom, in the company of her

cat, Dapple, working by the soft, smokeless light of a small pottery lamp half-filled with water and castor oil.

Margaret was so dedicated to reading for the Dictionary that she persisted even during insect plagues. One evening at the end of the rains, while she was reading by oil light with all the windows open, Calcutta was hit by a swarm of emerald-green insects with black spots. They got into Margaret's hair, down her back, up her sleeves. Under every light in the house the harmless beetles started to accumulate until reading was impossible and the rooms on the windward side were uninhabitable. Another time she had to stop because a plague of fleas had formed a solid wainscot on the walls and had to be removed by spreading fresh-cut grass on the floor for an hour, which attracted the fleas and was swept up and taken to the garden for burning, and then every wall and floor washed in strong tobacco water.

Margaret's situation as an Englishwoman in India directed her choice of reading. She drew on the religious books in her English mother's library but also on the Indian world in which she was living. She started with William Lisle's edition of Aelfric's *Saxon Treatise Concerning the Old and New Testaments* and, 300 slips later, moved on to Thomas Fuller's *Abel Redivivus*, a set of seventeenth-century biographical sketches of key figures in the English Reformation. Her reading of a 1665 translation of the Italian Pietro della Valle's *Travels in East India*, and the 600 slips which she sent of words from that text, opened the Dictionary to language from the part of the world where she was living. Pietro della Valle was a young Roman from a noble family who, depressed after a failed love affair, was advised by his doctor to travel. His letters from seventeenth-century India, translated from Italian into English, provide an insight into the new customs and people that he encountered.

Margaret sent in words that only made it into the

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Dictionary because of her reading, such as the rare word *spicerer*, someone skilled in the nature of spices or drugs, which has a singular citation sent in by Margaret. She also sent in *chinch*, a bedbug; and an obsolete sense of *breeze* meaning the specific cool wind that blows from the sea by day on tropical coasts. But it was a sixteenth-century translation of the Bible that took up four years of the young woman's life, resulting in 3,800 slips from the *Bible Douay* (a translation of the Bible undertaken by Roman Catholics in response to the Protestant Reformation), and many new and obscure words were, as a result, added to the Dictionary such as *ethecke*, a porch or gallery; and *superexalt*, to praise excessively.

Margaret was also familiar with local words and terms from the team of Indian servants who ran the house for her Anglo family: all dressed in long white coats, the Muslim table servants were distinguished by their colourful cummerbunds and the Hindu house servants by their puggaree turbans. It was from Margaret's beloved personal servant, 'Baba Ayah', a tall and graceful woman who cared for her from her birth in Calcutta on 13 July 1863 until the time she left India at the age of twenty-five, that she would have first learned local words and phrases. But there was also a durzee tailor, who made clothes for the family; a mehtar sweeper; a khansamah and several khidmutgar table servants; a mussalchee washer-up; and a Malay cook called Teeloo who made special children's curries for Margaret and her older sister Mary.

These Indian-English words, along with many others, made it into the Dictionary with published quotations written out on slips. The Dictionary project was a concerted effort, and Margaret was one of many Readers who sent in words from books relating to India. Others included William Francis Grahame, a civil servant living in Madras; John Wesley Caldwell, a school superintendent in America; John Thompson Platts, a school inspector from Benares (now Varanasi)

who retired to Oxford; and Charles Sutton, a librarian in Manchester.

If all of this paints a picture of a young Anglo-Indian woman idly passing her time in a marble mansion, then you would be mistaken. As a child and teenager Margaret accompanied her mother on visits to provide medical treatment to orphanages and zenanas (the secluded sections of Muslim or Hindu households for women) around Calcutta. From the age of twenty, working during the day and often through the night on twelve-hour shifts, Margaret was a nurse, as the first 'lady-probationer' in India, in one of the world's busiest hospitals, Calcutta General Hospital. Her forthright, competent and calm demeanour helped to save hundreds of lives during a cholera epidemic and, when the sister-in-charge collapsed from overwork, Margaret was promoted to this role at the age of twenty-one. Her medical knowledge would come in handy later, once she became an archaeologist and was working at excavation sites.

Margaret sent slips to Murray from 1881 until 1888, first from Calcutta, and then from England. During this time, she had no idea that her future mentor, the archaeologist William Matthew Flinders Petrie, was doing exactly the same thing from his home in Bromley, Kent. His reading was quite different from Margaret's. The contributors to the Dictionary had the freedom to read whatever they wished, and while Margaret Murray had chosen religious books and travellers' tales, Flinders Petrie chose poetry, the works of John Ruskin, and William Dampier's *Voyages*. The contributors' paths did not cross until the next decade, in 1894.

In her mid-twenties, Margaret moved from India to England with her mother and sister Mary, settling first in Rugby where her uncle was Rector, and then in the village of Welwyn, Hertfordshire. There were height requirements for nurses in England in those days, and Margaret, who was

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only 4 foot 10 inches, was not deemed tall enough so she tried her hand as a social worker and district visitor instead. She later referred to these years as ‘failed attempts to find a career’. Nothing suited her, and in 1893, she returned to India to visit Mary who had gone back and was now living in Madras with her husband and new baby. It was the height of the hot weather, and the sisters were sitting in the coolest room in the house reading the weekly edition of *The Times*. ‘It says here that Flinders Petrie is going to hold classes for Egyptian hieroglyphs in London at University College,’ said Mary. ‘Who is Flinders Petrie?’ asked Margaret.

Back in London, at the age of thirty-one, Margaret attended Petrie’s lectures and her life changed. She had found her passion, and, in January 1894, became a student of Egyptology at University College London which was (radically) co-educational. Petrie’s bold lectures captivated his audiences. As Margaret explained in her memoir, ‘On the occasion when he expounded his system of sequence-dating, Sir Herbert Thompson, who was sitting next to me, whispered in my ear, “But this is Epoch making.” And more than once at the close of a lecture the audience has clapped vigorously, a rare thing for a college audience to do after listening to a routine lecture.’ Margaret excelled at her studies, and soon became Petrie’s research assistant, helping him write papers and filling in for his teaching when he was away on archaeological digs. She eventually attended those digs alongside him, working in Abydos, Saqqara, Malta, Minorca, and Palestine.

Margaret managed to forge her way against the odds in the male world of professional Egyptologists, and was known for her support and mentorship of female colleagues. She published more than one hundred books and articles, and became famous not only for her work in Egyptology but also for her groundbreaking books on witches. It was reported by her friends that, later in her life, she herself practised

A for Archaeologist

witchcraft. If she did not approve of an academic appointment, she would try to reverse it by casting a spell in a saucepan. Known for her wit and humour, she was interviewed by the BBC at the age of ninety-six and commented, ‘I’ve been an archaeologist most of my life and now I’m a piece of archaeology myself.’

Margaret Murray’s work eventually came full circle back to the OED when some of her own writings were quoted in the Dictionary. Entries such as *talayot*, a Bronze Age tower;



Margaret Alice Murray (1863–1963) who sent
in slips from Calcutta

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torba, a kind of cement made with broken pottery in Malta; and the term *witch dance*, a ritual dance performed by witches, were taken from her controversial book *The Witch-cult in Western Europe* (1921). The citations from her writings were added to the OED in the 1970s, after her death, and some ninety years after she had contributed words and quotations to the Dictionary from her own reading, but we can imagine that she would have been pleased. The whole world of scholarship delighted her. She wrote of the exhilaration that she felt when her first article was published, 'I often wonder whether great writers have that same feeling of sheer unadulterated pleasure when their first writings appear in print. But I think that researchers have a keener pleasure, for besides the glory and splendour of becoming a real author there is the additional splendour of having added to the knowledge of your subject, of having filled a small and possibly not a very important gap, but still a gap. This is one of the purest joys that life can give.'

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B

for BEST CONTRIBUTOR

Over the seven years that archaeologist-to-be Margaret Murray sent in words to the Dictionary, she managed to contribute 5,000 slips. This was impressive, but there were many others who sent in far more, testifying to extraordinary industriousness and commitment, often over long periods of time, on the part of the people who were inspired to help with the project. If we define best contributor or OED Reader in terms of number of slips, then the outright winner was a mysterious character called Thomas Austin Jnr who sent Dr Murray an incredible total of 165,061 over the span of a decade. Second place goes to William Douglas of Primrose Hill who sent in 151,982 slips over twenty-two years; third place to Dr Thomas Nadauld Brushfield of Devon, with 70,277 over twenty-eight years; with Dr William Chester Minor of Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum coming in fourth place with 62,720 slips. Dr Minor was not the only one in a mental asylum – all four were, for some period or another, suggesting a connection between word obsession and madness. More about that later.

Mr Austin caused Dr Murray a lot of trouble. He started out a loyal and faithful friend of the Dictionary, frequently visiting the Editor for tea and dinner during his time in Mill Hill. However, Austin became increasingly enraged that he

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wasn't being recognized or paid for his work on the Dictionary. After Murray moved to Oxford, Austin also moved there and would wait outside the Oxford Scriptorium, pestering the Dictionary staff. Dr Murray called him 'a painful case'. He was a painful case for me in a different way. Of the hundreds of people whom I researched for this book, Austin was one of the most difficult to identify. He has several addresses crossed out beside his name in the address books which shows that he moved between Hitchin, Oxford, and London. At one stage, I thought he might be a servant of the same name at Exeter College, Oxford, who started work at the age of fourteen, never married, lived on the seedy side of town in a squalid boarding house behind St Ebbe's and racked up a huge tab on his battels (college food and drink account), was eventually fired from Exeter College, and spent the rest of his life in and out of mental asylums, and even had a stint at an abattoir for pigs. I loved the idea of an uneducated servant contributing the most slips to one of the most prestigious scholarly projects in the world, and even pictured this Mr Austin sitting in the college porters' lodge during the night, as drunk students came back, busy sorting out quotations from the books listed beside his name in Dr Murray's address book: Thackeray, Byron, Defoe, not to mention Dryden, Milton, and innumerable volumes of the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*.

Alas, there was a piece of the puzzle which did not fit the servant theory – the OED's Mr Austin read some very rare manuscripts only found in the Bodleian Library and the British Museum (which at that time incorporated the British Library). How could a servant in Oxford in the 1870s get access to these rare materials when such a person would not usually be granted membership to these libraries? I so wanted to believe that the Exeter servant was our Mr Austin that I even imagined he might have got a job as a porter at

B for Best Contributor

From Dr. MURRAY,
(Sunnyside, Banbury Road.)
OXFORD, 7 ^{Nov^r} 1887

My Dear Sir,
Austin's is a painful case.
He has done a great deal of valuable reading
for the Dict. & we wd. do anything possible
for him. I have done everything I could think of.
I was surprised shudd, after
coming to Oxford, by receiving a violently
abusive letter from him, which felt as we like
a bomb-shell, and for which I could not account,
as we had never even had ^{one} word of unpleasantness
during all the time I had known him, and he was
a constant visitor at my house while I was at
Millhill, where he dined & usually had tea at
least once every week for a long time. I and my
assistants could only guess, that he considered
that when I came to O. I ought to have offered to

Dr Murray writes to Frederick Furnivall in 1887,
'Austin's is a painful case.'

the Bodleian so as to gain entry, but a search of the employment records came up empty.

I kept searching for answers: had he been one of Murray's students at Mill Hill School (where Murray worked before becoming full-time Editor of the OED)? The school's historical records said there was no Millhillian with that name. Was he the same Thomas Austin Jnr, a civil engineer, who wrote a scholarly paper about a Crinoidea sea animal fossil with his distinguished father, Fort Major Thomas Austin

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FGS? No, that man moved to Canada in 1860. Was he the Thomas Austin Jnr of Hitchin who submitted two comments to the *Notes and Queries* journal in April 1871 about the etymology of a French word and about the date of a sixteenth-century hymn? Very likely, as Murray's address books record him as living at one point in the town of Hitchin. Was he therefore the only son of Mrs Annie Austin who, with Emily Davies, was one of the founders of Girton College, and lived in Hitchin at the same time? No, her son was called Gerald. Was he the same Thomas Austin who edited *Two Fifteenth-Century Cookery Books* in 1888 for the Early English Text Society? Here is what I found out.

The OED's Thomas Austin Jnr was born in London in 1835 to Eliza and Thomas Austin (Snr), a prosperous brewer. The only boy amongst six sisters, Thomas Jnr grew up in a large house with three servants at 29 Liquorpond Street, Middlesex. After school, he followed his father into the brewery, moving to Hitchin and boarding with various families and their lodgers. He never married. He started contributing to the OED when he was forty-three years old, but how his path initially crossed with Murray's we do not know.

Five years into his devoted service for the OED, the strain on Thomas Austin's mental health began to show. By that time, he had successfully sent in 121,190 slips but the rest of his life was falling apart. He lost his job at the brewery. He was trying to survive on a small allowance from his father, but then his father died and grief was compounded by disappointment and frustration when he was left nothing in the will. He fell out with his sisters and could not return home to Middlesex so, with scant savings, he moved from one house to another, lodging with strangers until finally settling with a family of six in Hornsey.

These conditions were far from ideal for Dictionary work and so, when Murray moved to Oxford in 1884 to work

full-time on the Dictionary, Austin decided to move there too, in the hope of getting tuition, or a job at Oxford University Press, or, better still, a place in the Scriptorium on Murray's editorial team. His hopes came to naught.

Austin should have seen the writing on the wall. When the first part of the Dictionary was published that same year, he received very little credit or recognition in the book. The only mention of his name appeared in a footnote in the preface: 'T. Austin, Esq., jun., Hornsey, stands first with a total of 100,000 quotations.' Four years later, in 1888, when the first volume (A and B) was published, there was more disappointment. Murray used his preface to give credit to the scholars and Specialists who had worked on the Dictionary, most of whom were well-known, but the majority of volunteer Readers who had sent in slips, such as Austin, were relegated to the appendix, listed after the Subeditors.

Nothing was further from Murray's mind than employing Austin, and he was shocked when, soon after moving to Oxford, he received 'a violently abusive letter' from Austin which, as he would later write to Furnivall, 'fell on me like a bomb-shell, and for which I could not account, as we had never even had one word of unpleasantness during all the time I had known him'. While Austin industriously read books and sent in thousands of slips with the hope of employment, from Murray's point of view, Austin 'had no qualifications for constructive work'. To pay him for his reading 'was quite out of the question', wrote Murray, who 'had never even for a moment thought of such a thing'. Receiving a torrent of abuse from Austin, Murray vowed to leave him alone and hoped he would go away.

Murray's side of the story shows a discrepancy between how he saw the role of Readers and how Readers, such as Austin, understood their work. Austin called his reading 'work for the dictionary', but Murray's view was that it was