

The making of a dictionary: James A. H. Murray

ABSTRACT: Describes the work of James A. H. Murray as the first editor of the *Oxford English dictionary*, based on his grand-daughter's biography, *Caught in the web of words*.

Caught in the web of words: James Murray and the Oxford English dictionary,* K. M. Elisabeth Murray's biography of her grandfather, was reviewed by *The Times* as describing 'how a largely self-educated boy from a small village in Scotland entered the world of scholarship and became the first editor of the *Oxford English dictionary*, and a lexicographer greater by far than Dr Johnson'. It makes fascinating reading, especially for indexers, who likewise deal with lists of words alphabetically ordered and glossed - but individually on so much smaller a scale, and with so much latter-day technological assistance. 'A magnificent story of a magnificent man', Anthony Burgess called it.

Murray was born in 1837 in Denholm, in the Scottish Teviot Valley, a son of the village tailor. He was brought up strictly in the Congregationalist church, and sent at the age of seven to the first of three local schools. He left the last school at fourteen for a period of odd jobs and study. His self-teaching was intensive, particularly in languages. 'Before he was seven James had begun to hunt out strange words such as Latin and Greek in any books he could lay his hands on, and copied them out on scraps of paper without knowing their meaning. A big family bible fascinated him when he found in it the Hebrew alphabet'. When a cholera outbreak closed the school, he worked (twelve years old) as a cow-herd, 'lying amongst the heather "hammering away at my Latin grammar and *Lectiones Selectae*".' At thirteen he began to learn French, 'spending every evening poring over the work of Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné by the light of a little oil lamp'. At seventeen he became an assistant master at Hawick United School, four miles up the Teviot, and used his wages to build his own library from second-hand book stalls. 'He claimed that he learned at least two languages on his way to school ... hurrying up the street, never a moment to spare, bearded chin in air and the cape of his Highland cloak flapping behind him, open book in hand'. He wrote later that he had at this period 'a sort of mania for learning languages; every new language was a new delight, no matter what it was, Hebrew or Tongan, Russian or Caffre, I swallowed them all ... I at one time or another could read in a sort of way 25 or more languages'.

His interests and activities began to extend widely -archaeology, geology, philology, and local politics. He belonged to the local 'Mutual Improvement Institute', to which he delivered his first public lecture, on 'Reading, its pleasures and advantages'. When he departed from Scotland for London after 27 years, because of his wife's ill-health, 'it meant leaving the work he enjoyed in his flourishing school (where he had become headmaster); the Archaeological Society where, he said, he was "up to the waist" in work; plans to excavate; research on the Catrail (a linear earthwork); a series of descriptions of Border castles; an investigation of the original site of Hawick; his handbook to the flora of Teviotdale; and a scheme to extend the Society to cover the whole country'.

In London, Murray worked as a bank clerk from 1864 to 1870, while researching into dialectology and early English language -- 'he must have been the most learned bank clerk of the century', as R. W. Burchfield observes in the preface to Elisabeth Murray's beautiful book. He joined the Philological Society, and helped the Early English Text Society produce volumes, editing for them *The Complaynt of Scotlande* (a tract written in 1549). He crossed swords in this capacity with our own H. B. Wheatley, Secretary of the Early English text Society.

Murray's scholarly interests engulfed his private life. The names he gave his eleven children included the Anglo-Saxon Oswyn, Ethelbert, Ethelwyn, Aelfric, and Rosfrith.

In 1878, at the age of 41, now a master at Mill Hill school, he agreed to undertake the editing of the *New English dictionary* for the Clarendon Press at Oxford, for which the Philological Society had been collecting material for twenty years. Only three important dictionaries of English had been produced since Samuel Johnson's: those of Charles Richardson in England (1836-7), and of Noah Webster (1828 and later) and Joseph Worcester (1846 and 1860) in America. The Philological Society had intended to produce a dictionary which would attempt to trace the history of all words, with their origins and any changes of form and meaning. Instances had been collected on the co-operative principle, appealing for voluntary help from members of the Society and from the public, to read books and extract quotations illustrating the use of the words in them, in each of three periods (1250-1526; 1526-1674; 1674 on). Voluntary sub-editors were recruited to work on the slips sent in by the readers, each taking a letter or part of the alphabet. Books were bought and supplied to the readers, who cut up a number of valuable old ones; 'a lover of them would be horrified to see the earliest dictionary slips with bits of black letter editions of the 16th century pasted onto them'.

Murray, having beheld the home of the previous editor of the dictionary materials, Frederick Furnivall, with 'packages of slips of quotations cluttering his entrance hall and rooms, crammed onto every available shelf, balanced on the tops of furniture', had a corrugated iron 'Scriptorium' built in his own Mill Hill garden, fitted with over a thousand pigeon holes for the quotation slips. Two and a half million slips - about two tons of paper - were there delivered, together with all Furnivall's letters relating to the Dictionary project, newspaper cuttings, printed appeals, books of reference and books for distribution to readers, all tied up with string or thrown together in boxes. Elisabeth Murray describes the arrival:

The load delivered in the spring of 1879 which stood on the floor of the scriptorium waiting to be unpacked, was a shock to the newly appointed Editor. Many of the sub-editors had found difficulty in packing up hundred-weights of slips. Some were sent in sacks in which they had long been stored, and when opened a dead rat was found in one and a live mouse and her family in another: one sub-editor's work was delivered in a baby's bassinet: there was a hamper of I's' with the bottom broken, which had been left behind in an empty vicarage at Harrow. Many of the bundles had stood for so many years in unsuitable places that the slips were crumbling with decay and the writing had faded; others had been so illegibly scribbled in the first place that Dr Murray exclaimed in exasperation that Chinese would have been more useful, since for that he could have found a translator. In spite of instructions, the slips were not all of a standard size: Furnivall himself nearly always wrote on scraps of paper or backs of envelopes.

Some sub-editors had died years before, and their materials had been relegated to cellars or stables; others, moving house, had left batches of papers in the empty houses. Murray had to make many diplomatic journeys to retrieve these, while records of readers' work and addresses were imperfect or missing.

After preliminary massive sorting, Murray found that the sections H, Pa and Q, were entirely missing from the accumulation of slips. H was eventually traced and retrieved from Florence, and Q from Loughborough, but Pa had found its way to a stable in County Cavan, and mostly been used for lighting fires. 'A great number of books had to be re-read to make good the loss.'

It was all hands to the Scriptorium. The Murray children 'were pressed into service as each child reached an age when he or she could read'. Jowett, the youngest son, recorded, 'We received no pocket money as a matter of course, but had to earn it by sorting slips. Hours

and hours of our childhood were spent in this useful occupation ... The slips were tied up in bundles of several hundred and had to be arranged in full alphabetical order.' Rosfrith 'was more backward than the others and had hardly mastered her letters. She was soon in tears and the nurse had to come to her rescue.' Elisabeth Murray comments, 'It is not surprising that all the children gained unusually wide vocabularies and some of them shone at doing cross-words in later life'.

The voluntary helpers 'fell into different categories - the good, the bad, the indifferent and the dishonourable who returned nothing - not even the books they had borrowed. Most showed more enthusiasm than ability and failed to grasp the object of the exercise. One laboured to produce 1000 quotations from Lane's *Modern Egyptians* only two of which were any use, the rest being Arabic terms never used in English: another found a botanical book unsuitable for reading for the Dictionary because the bulk of it was just "descriptions of flowers".' Women helpers predominated: 'higher education still being exceptional for them, there were many very intelligent ladies, lonely widows or spinsters living at home ... who found some fulfilment in contributing to the work'. American scholars, organized by Professor Francis March of Pennsylvania, responded enthusiastically: 'all over the States men and women began collecting words'. Slips poured in at the rate of 1000 a day, and in the processes of sorting and classification each was handled by five people.

A visitor to the Scriptorium described Murray at work there: 'The master looks up from the semi-circle of open reference-books amidst which he is sitting; he pushes away his chair, and comes smiling down to give his hand. Wearing his academic cap, he is wearing, even more conspicuously, his academic breadth of courtesy and gentle learning'.

Murray had to consider the typography of the dictionary, all copy being sent to the printers hand-written. The final size was established in 1881: to be six volumes of 1400 pages each. Part I of what was now called *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, consisting of 352 pages, A to ANT, appeared in 1884, five years after the signing of the contract and two years after the first instalment of copy had been sent to the printers, and was well reviewed by philologists. Murray was awarded a Civil List Pension of £250 a year, and in 1885 gave up his Mill Hill teaching post and moved to Oxford as full-time Editor of the dictionary, a new Scriptorium being built in his garden there.

The first complete volume appeared in 1888 with the end of B. From 1895 till 1915, 64-page quarterly sections appeared each year, though not always in literal order. Henry Bradley, appointed the second editor, began publishing E while Murray was still on C. D was finished in 1896. 'By the time Bradley reached the end of G in 1900 Murray had completed H and I, and from 1910 to 1916 S and T were appearing simultaneously. In 1897 a dinner was held in Oxford to which were invited representatives of all those involved in producing the dictionary -- Editors, Delegates, printers, the Philological Society, and the voluntary sub-editors and readers. There were 14 lengthy speeches, and the proceedings lasted till near midnight. Murray commented on the loss of working time the function caused him.

Distinctions were conferred on him as the work proceeded. Durham made him an honorary doctor in 1886, and there followed degrees from Freiburg, Glasgow, Wales, Cape of Good Hope, Dublin and Cambridge. The mistress of Girton College wrote of Dr Murray at the conferment of the Glasgow degree, 'a very tall fine-looking old man, with a most charming manner -- he had been wearing a great variety of hoods when capped, and explained that he owned seven degrees and corresponding hoods, and that his wife had packed for him a selection of four, all of which he had worn, by way of compliment to the University that was giving him yet another'. He was knighted in 1908. Oxford University bestowed an LL.D on him in 1914.

A journalist describes Murray in Oxford in February 1913 on 'a day of bitter cold and splendid sunshine when Winter stood with naked sword in the streets ... Age kept the hearth. Down the Banbury road came a picturesque exception, an almost prophetic figure, his long white beard shaking like snowflakes in the wind. His 76th winter, and he cycles still!'

Murray worked for 35 years on the Dictionary, always under severe constraints of time, space and finance, for months at a time for thirteen to fifteen hours a day. He estimated that he and his team had produced nearly twelve and a half columns in the finished state every hour. In 1915 he died of heart failure following pleurisy. His death, and the outbreak of World War I, when many of the staff and printers were withdrawn for military service, prevented an early completion of the Dictionary publication; the last part appeared in 1928, almost exactly 70 years from the date when the Philological Society had resolved to prepare 'a new English dictionary', and 44 years after the publication of Part I.

Murray was mourned, his grand-daughter writes, 'not only as a great lexicographer who had tragically failed to see the completion of his life's work, but also as father and grandfather, friend, citizen and Christian'. Burchfield summarizes Murray's work: 'he did not live long enough to edit the last pages of the Dictionary. He laid the lines of the Dictionary and drew the plan, and edited more than half of it himself, with the help of a handful of devoted assistants. ... he will be remembered as the founder of the art of historical lexicography'. Anthony Burgess's epitaph for him is, 'Everybody who speaks English owes Murray an unpayable debt'.

The book includes several fascinating photographs.

We must observe that, fittingly, this biography is furnished with an index -- a nine-page index to 377 pages of text, appendices and notes. The entry for Murray, James Augustus Henry, himself fills nearly two pages, with paragraphs headed:

appearance; appointments; appointments considered; articles; awards, academic; other awards; books; books projected and unpublished; character; family life; financial position; handwriting; health; holidays; lectures and unpublished addresses; opinions on; philological studies; other studies; philosophy of duty and work; recreations; religious beliefs and practice; speech.

The entry for '*Oxford English Dictionary* (also known as the Philological Society's Dictionary and New English Dictionary)', a page long, falls into: characteristics of a historical dictionary; costs; criteria for inclusion of words; editorial salary and expenses; editorial team; materials for; publication in parts; reception; Scriptorium; Scriptorium staff; size, problem of; standards and pattern established by JAHM; time, problem of; treatment of; voluntary workers.

A question remains to tease us. What would have been the career of this most distinguished wordsmith a century later, in the age of electronic publishing?

* *Caught in the web of words: James Murray and the Oxford English dictionary* by K. M. Elisabeth Murray. Yale University Press 1977; Oxford University Press paperback 1979. 386 pages. © Yale University 1977.

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— by Hazel K. Bell, in *The Indexer* Vol. 20 No. 2 October 1996 pp 78-80