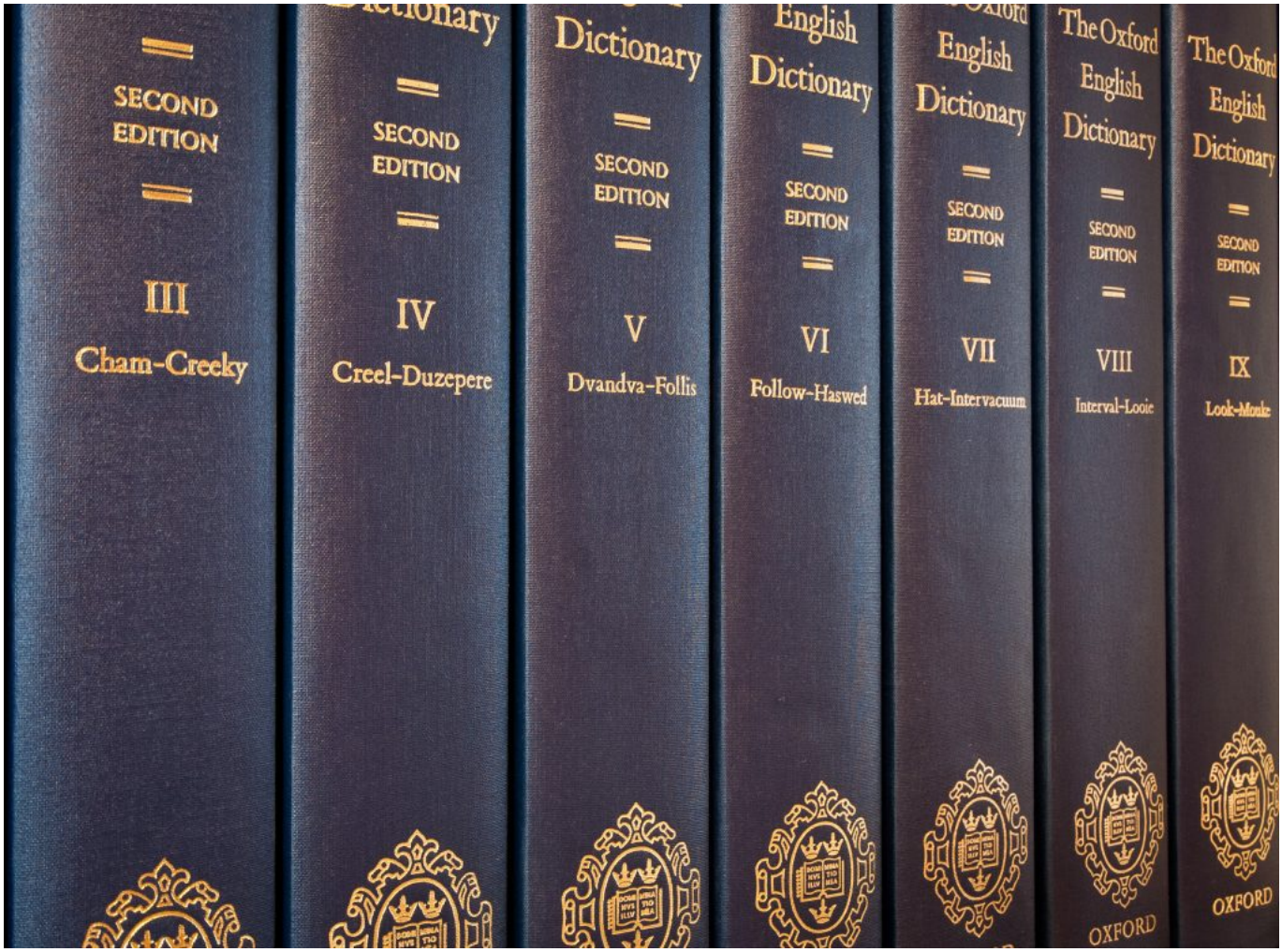
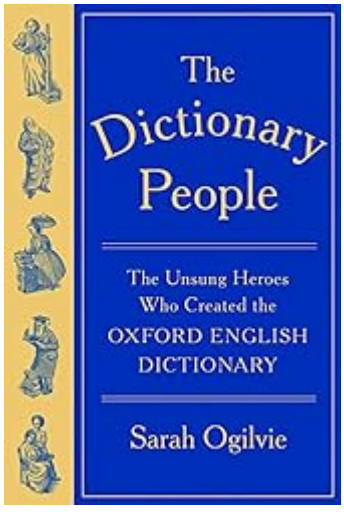
The Delightful Dictionary People Uncovered



by Bruce Bawer



The Dictionary People: The Unsung People Who Created the Oxford English Dictionary
Sarah Ogilvie
(Knopf, 384 pages, $30)

Sarah Ogilvie is an Australian linguist and lexicographer who, after writing her dissertation on the *Oxford English Dictionary*, worked for many years, both in her homeland and in Oxford, England, as an editor of that legendary work. Several years ago, on her last day in Oxford before moving to the U.S. to teach at Stanford (she's also been on the faculty at Cambridge), Ogilvie ventured into the basement of the Oxford University Press building and, quite serendipitously, ran across an old notebook containing the names and addresses of thousands of the *OED*'s original contributors – volunteers around the world who, after the word went out in 1858 that the editors of a new dictionary wanted their help, communicated their desire to do so and were sent instructions, in accordance with which they sent in hundreds of thousands of slips of paper, each containing a single word and a quotation from a published work in which that word appeared, indicating some sense or other in which the word could be used. (Currently, the word in the *OED* with the highest number of different senses – 603 – is *go*.) As far as Ogilvie knew, this notebook – along with several others that she later tracked down, all of them written in the easily recognizable hand of James Murray, chief editor of the *OED* from 1879 to 1915 – had never been seen, or in any event made use of, by anyone who'd ever written about the *OED*. The find led her on an eight-year quest to uncover the stories behind at least some of the names of these "ordinary people," in her words, who'd done "extraordinary things in the name of recording the English language." The result of her efforts is a thoroughly delightful book – delightful, anyway, for those who love language – entitled *The Dictionary People: The Unsung People Who Created the Oxford English Dictionary*.

Like every other book that touches on the history of the *OED* – and there are many – *The Dictionary People* is, in large part, a tip of the hat to James Murray, a remarkable

autodidact and world-class workaholic who left school at 14, is said to have taught himself 25 languages, and oozed self-confidence: “I consider myself ten times better fitted to make the Dictionary than Mr [John] Ruskin, or Mr [Thomas] Carlyle or Matthew Arnold or [Oxford] Professor [Benjamin] Jowett, and so a hundred times better than Dr [Samuel] Johnson, no Philologist, only a man of letters.” But *The Dictionary People* is primarily a tribute not to Murray but, as the title suggests, to the exceedingly motley crew that Ogilvie dubs the “Dictionary People” – the men and women around the world, most of whose names had previously been thought to be lost to history, who contributed to Murray’s project one slip of paper at a time. This book, then, is the story, as Ogilvie puts it, “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 everybody 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.”

A disproportionate number of these folks were, not surprisingly, librarians. Also, perhaps a bit surprisingly, clergymen. And a good many of them were astonishingly colorful characters whose stories Quigley tells at some length, sometimes taking us rather too far afield from lexicography. Sir John Richardson, for instance, took part in an expedition to find the Northwest Passage on which he ended up committing murder *and* cannibalism. Katharine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper were lesbian lovers who wrote successful poetry and plays under the name of Michael Field – and who were also great friends of Robert Browning, sending in to the *OED* editors 500 and 300 slips, respectively, quoting passages from his *Dramatic Idyls* (1879).

Several *OED* volunteers were “rain collectors” — a surprisingly widespread British practice of the time that involved measuring rainfall (a word that wasn’t coined until 1850) and submitting their findings to the British Rainfall Organisation as devoutly as they posted their word slips to Murray.

Some of the Dictionary People had specialties. Beatrix Tollemache, a poet, supplied words coined by Charles Darwin (*apheliotropic*, *apogeotropic*, *circumnutating*). Alice Byington of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, focused on Thoreau. William Holman Bentley, a missionary, sent in Bantu loanwords. Henry Carrington Bolton, a Connecticut chemist, “held the world’s largest collection of early chemistry books,” from which he copied out such obsolete terms as *fusory*, “tending to melt,” *ignoble*, “capable of ignition,” and *spissative*, “serving to thicken.” Edward Peacock, a novelist, helped with Lancashire dialect (*slated*, “scolded”; *nattering*, “chattering”). Edith Phibbs of County Sligo, Ireland, provided the first quotations for several geological terms: “*trappoid*, igneous rock; *siluroid*, fish with no scales; *hydrothermal*, relating to heated water; and *fucoidal*, relating to seaweed.” Thomas Edward Scrutton, a judge with an interest in seafaring, “wrote the definitions of *bottomry*, the action of pledging a ship and its cargo as security for money lent; *dill,* the space underneath the cabin floor in a wooden shipping vessel into which bilge-water drains; and *pink*, a small sailing vessel with a narrow stern.” From John Dormer, a teenage volunteer at the *OED*’s offices who had “an eye for the quirky, fun, and quaint,” came *humbug*, *hanky-panky*, *matchmaking*, and *squeamish*. Without Murray’s friend Frederick Elworthy, writes Ogilvy, the *OED* would lack “many words pertaining to folklore and magic.”

I’ve quoted Ogilvie’s mention of “lunatics” among the Dictionary People; indeed, the four most prolific contributors to the *OED* all spent some time in mental hospitals, which, as Ogilvie writes, suggests “a connection between word obsession

and madness." Of the 56 continental European contributors, the most prolific (coming in at No. 5 overall) was Vienna professor Hartwig Helwich, who mailed in 46,599 excerpts from the 14th-century poem *Cursor Mundi*. The leading U.S. contributor was a Michigan clergyman, Job Pierson, who owned that state's "largest private library." Ogilvie points out that Murray's "first public appeal for help … went out in America — not Britain," and that while British academics were indifferent to the project, their stateside counterparts were thrilled to take part, thereby enriching the *OED*'s coverage of U.S. (and American Indian) words. One Francis Atkins, for example, sent in *squaw* and *frontiersman*. Edward Arber, a professor in Birmingham, England, wrote to Murray about a new American book in which he'd encountered the word *whittle*, adding, "[W]hat that is, I have no idea." Yes, the "Delegates" — the men who ran the Oxford University Press — frowned on the inclusion of Americanisms in the *OED*, but Murray, fortunately, didn't share their prejudice.

The Delegates also opposed obscenities. One contributor, retired surgeon James Dixon, wrote to Murray that he was fine with what we would now call the "c" word, but he viewed *condom* as so offensive that he sent in "a small envelope marked PRIVATE, sealed within a larger envelope" a message urging its omission. When Murray sent proofs of the *OED*'s first section to the philologist Alexander John Ellis, the latter responded by challenging the dictionary's claim to be "exhaustive," scribbling in the margin that naughty words "are part of the life of a language." But owing to Murray's fear of breaching the Obscene Publications Act of 1857, the "c" and "f" words, dating to "the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries respectively," didn't make it into the first *OED*. (They weren't brought in from the cold, in fact, until the 1970s.) Still, the *OED* was never entirely free of blue words: Henry Spencer Ashbee, a notorious collector of erotica who was also one of the Dictionary People, "ensured that the language of pornography, flagellation, and sex" —

some of it, in any case – "got into the Dictionary."

There were relatively few celebrities among the Dictionary People. One was the poet James Russell Lowell, who contributed the U.S. term *axe-grinding*. Others included the then-famous novelist Charlotte Yonge and the author Leslie Stephen, Virginia Woolf's father. One of Stephens' friends, the jurist Frederick Maitland, helped with "current legal terms such as *bail*, *defend*, *culprit*, and *deliverance*, and also many obsolete ones such as *couthutlaughe*, a person knowingly harbouring or concealing an outlaw." J.R.R. Tolkien didn't send in slips, but early in his career he did work in Murray's office for a year. Thomas Hardy, the novelist and poet, wasn't a contributor either, but he did write to Murray at one point asking him to put into the *OED* the words *eweleaze*, *hogleaze*, and *cowleaze*, which are west England dialect for upland pastures where sheep, hogs, and cows (respectively) feed. Ogilvie also quotes an engaging exchange of letters between Murray and the novelist George Eliot about her decision to write *adust* (an original coinage) instead of *dusty* in her 1862 novel *Romola.*

Ogilvie has made some interesting discoveries. One of them is that Furnivall, Murray's predecessor, who has often been criticized for not having done enough for the *OED* in its early years, turns out to have made a huge difference after all: No fewer than eight societies that he founded played a vital role in encouraging contributions to the *OED*. Most important was the Early English Text Society, which printed scholarly editions of previously unpublished Old English texts; perusing these works, EETS members found thousands of words for the *OED*, with writings attributed to King Alfred, for example, yielding very early examples of the use of *darling*, *dwelling*, *laughter*, *lust*, *merry*, *mirth*, and *bliss*, as well as medieval uses of such simple words as *each*, *her*, *his*, *off*, and *on*. When Ogilvie performed a computer analysis, Ellis, the aforementioned philologist,

turned out to be the single individual most responsible for connecting people to the *OED*. “Sometimes within a single day,” writes Ogilvie, Ellis “would rush from the London Library to the British Museum, from the Royal Society to the New Shakspere [*sic*] Society, the Palaeographic Society, and Philological Society. He used these social networks to spread the word about the Dictionary project and to recruit volunteers for it.” Ellis, a model for Henry Higgins in Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, himself invented phonological terms that made it into the *OED* (*palatalized*, *labialization*) as well as the musical term *septendecimal* (a 17th).

Murray was an eminently serious man, but there are moments of levity in Ogilvie’s account of his labors. I’ve mentioned the retired surgeon James Dixon. As it turns out, Dixon advised Murray to omit *appendicitis* from the *OED* on the grounds that the medical lexicon was chockablock with words ending in -*itis* (indicating inflammation) that couldn’t *all* be considered dictionary-worthy. Murray took Dixon’s advice — only to find himself embarrassed when, in 1902, “the coronation of Edward VII was postponed because of the King’s attack of appendicitis. Suddenly everyone was using the word, but no one could find it in the Dictionary.” Then there’s Murray’s hilarious frustration with the poet Robert Browning, who, he complained, “constantly used words without regard to their proper meaning,” thereby “add[ing] greatly to the difficulties of the Dictionary.” What a man! What a life! And yet, for most of it, Murray was almost as unsung as his contributors: Despite everything he did to give the university that employed him a major leg-up on its rival, Cambridge, Murray always felt like an outsider at Oxford; for decades, he waited in vain for an honorary degree that didn’t materialize until shortly before he died. Yet despite that disrespect from on high, his devotion to the *OED* endured to the day of his death, which, as it happens, came when he was at work on the letter *T*. Fittingly, perhaps, the very last word for which he filled out a card was *twilight*.

First published in the *American Spectator*.