



Lost for Words: The Hidden History of the Oxford English Dictionary

By Lynda Mugglestone

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The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* holds a cherished position in English literary culture. The story behind the creation of what is indisputably the greatest dictionary in the language has become a popular fascination. This book looks at the history of the great first edition of 1928, and at the men (and occasionally women) who distilled words and usages from centuries of English writing and “through an act of intellectual alchemy captured the spirit of a civilization.” The task of the dictionary was to bear full and impartial witness to the language it recorded. But behind the immaculate typography of the finished text, the proofs tell a very different story. This vast archive, unexamined until now, reveals the arguments and controversies over meanings, definitions, and pronunciation, and which words and senses were acceptable—and which were not. *Lost for Words* examines the hidden history by which the great dictionary came into being, tracing—through letters and archives—the personal battles involved in charting a constantly changing language. Then as now, lexicographers reveal themselves vulnerable to the prejudices of their own linguistic preferences and to the influence of contemporary social history.

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Lost for Words: The Hidden History of the Oxford English Dictionary By Lynda Mugglestone **Bibliography**

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

How much blood, sweat and tears, not to mention time—49 years instead of the contracted 10—were invested in creating the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary! By revealing the storied history behind the formidable text, Mugglestone (*Talking Proper: The Rise of Accent of Social Symbol*) brings to life the histories of our lexicon and of the key players who painstakingly saw it into type. Central to the narrative are the numerous conflicts between the dictionary's editors and the delegates of the 19th-century Oxford University Press. The subjects of these clashes ranged from finance to time (in the first seven years, the editors didn't get past the letter "b") to concerns about space. The editors and delegates also struggled with issues of omission and correctness. For example, whereas the delegates protested the inclusion of "bad English" (i.e., slang, popular phrases and scientific jargon), editor-in-chief James Murray held fast to his vision of an "ideal dictionary" that would serve as an impartial, comprehensive inventory of the English language. This aspiration would prove elusive. Prudish Victorian norms prevailed over "vulgar" terminology, and words like "condom" were excised from the first edition, which was appropriately titled *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. These battles are what make this book such a fascinating history, not only of how the OED came to be but of the cultural, racial and gender biases of the period. Though Mugglestone's tone can be overly academic, bibliophiles who loved *The Professor and the Madman* will relish this account.

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From [Booklist](#)

The history of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) has engendered several other chronicles, including Simon Winchester's *Professor and the Madman* (1998) and *The Meaning of Everything* (2003).

Mugglestone, an Oxford English professor, bases her account on close examination of the page proofs for the first edition. Despite the aim to be neutral, inclusive, and exhaustive, the process of compiling the dictionary involved persistent winnowing, dictated partly by economic pressures and partly by questions from the publishers about modern sources (especially newspapers), scientific and technical terms, Americanisms, and more—and the cutting became more stringent as the dictionary progressed. Mugglestone also shows how the editors' own biases crept in with regard not only to proper usage but also to gender, race, and class. The result was a dictionary that, though great, did not always live up to its own ideals. This scholarly volume may not have the popular appeal of other books on the *OED*, but serious word lovers will appreciate its fascinating revelations. *Mary Ellen Quinn*

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Review

"The *OED* was one of the great creative enterprises of Victorian England. It is a real tour-de-force to make the words in the dictionary tell their own story." —Nicolas Barker

"Erudite, thoroughly annotated, and thrilling for scholars, academics, and wordsmiths. . . a worthy addition to any university, public, or personal library."

(Bloomsbury Review)

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