

WOLFGANG MIEDER

"THE WORD [AND PHRASE] DETECTIVE"  
A PROVERBIAL TRIBUTE TO OED EDITOR JOHN A.  
SIMPSON

Ten years after John A. Simpson, lexicographer *par excellence*, co-editor with Edmund Weiner of the second edition of the famed *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989, online in 2000), and pioneer of the work on the third online-only edition (ongoing since 2000), published his acclaimed *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (1982), my colleagues Stewart A. Kingsbury, Kelsie B. Harder, and I edited our *A Dictionary of American Proverbs* (1992). Having produced a proverb dictionary for Oxford University Press put John Simpson in the role of judging whether our large project was worthy of the Oxford University Press imprint. I remember a meeting at the OUP office in New York City where I had the opportunity to meet John Simpson to discuss our collection project. We benefitted from his suggestions and received his important stamp of approval. Our book appeared ten years after his own smaller collection, but I have never forgotten his support and help. Twenty-five years have passed since our encounter, and after having started his work at OUP in 1976 John Simpson brought his tenure there to an end in 2013. To occupy his keen mind, he has been working on the multifaceted language of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, leaving him time enough to write his fascinating scholarly autobiography *The Word Detective. Searching for the Meaning of It All at the "Oxford English Dictionary". A Memoir* (2016). When I discovered this personal account, I read it with great interest as I remembered that I am indeed indebted to John Simpson. In order to put my appreciation into words, I offer this proverbial tribute to this great scholar in the form of a review of his very own proverbial language in his intriguing and revealing account of his dedicated work on the English language. I shall not be able to comment on every proverb or proverbial expression in the book, but the at-

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tached list of 260 phrases on 350 pages demonstrates clearly that his work on phraseological units has rubbed off on his narrative style.

One might have thought that the positive reviews that his memoir received would include some comments on his language. After all, John Simpson dedicated his entire professional life to the English language! But while bestowing plenty of praise on the content of the book, the reviewers ignore Simpson's impressive writing ability. They do compare his book favorably with Simon Winchester's two excellent earlier books *The Professor [James Murray] and the Madman. A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the "Oxford English Dictionary"* (1998) and *The Meaning of Everything. The Story of the "Oxford English Dictionary"* (2003). Simpson lists several other studies on the *OED* at the end of his book (343-346), but his account is quite different because of his expertise and experience as the modern chief editor. And there is also his personal journey that includes his wife Hilary, a literary scholar, and his daughters Kate and Ellie. The latter beloved child has remained at the mental state of an infant without the ability of intelligible speech. John Simpson as the father finds touching words about Ellie on these pages, perplexed by the fate that he as a masterful linguist cannot relate to his daughter by way of words:

Even if I can't communicate with her verbally, spending time with her reminds me that interaction isn't only verbal. Seeing her takes you into a corridor where communication fluctuates with the passage of time: sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker. When it's weak, it seems almost to vanish away, and you wonder if you will see it again. When it's strong, it's the most important thing there is. Wordless, but powerful. (339)

The reviewers are mindful of this painful but loving situation in the Simpson family (Anonymous 2016, Hitchings 2016), but they obviously zero in on John Simpson's invaluable role as the chief editor of the *OED* as of 1993. Lynne Truss in *The New York Times* has summarized Simpson's untiring work in the service of the English language as the modern *lingua franca* with these laudatory words:

“The Word Detective” is a charmingly full, frank and humorous account of a career dedicated to rigorous lexicographical rectitude. [...] I doubt there has ever been a better account of how a person with a capacious brain sits down with a cup of tea and a pile of cards and sets about creating authoritative definitions. Throughout the text, Simpson inserts potted word biographies (apprenticeship, deadline, inkling) that illustrate both the complexity and the “excitement” of the work. It is astonishing that anyone could have done this taxing job, without a break, for over 35 years, especially while engaged in heaving and shoving the whole intractable project from its original state as a set of heavy (and instantly outdated) books toward being a lively interactive online tool. He is an absolute hero. (Truss 2016)

Simpson is indeed a lexicographical hero, who would be the first to admit that he was standing on the broad shoulders of James Murray as the editor of the original ten-volume *A New English Dictionary* (1888-1928) that evolved into the twenty volumes of the second edition with its more appropriate title *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989). As Murray, Simpson never rested on his laurels and has remained a humble and unassuming yet progressive world-class lexicographer. Luiza Lodder offers an insightful description of Simpson’s *modus operandi* in her review of his intriguing memoir:

Simpson’s memoir [is a] pleasant and cohesive account of his career and personal life. He writes with easeful grace, employing a humorous and conversational tone saturated with characteristically British self-awareness. Additionally, Simpson packs his narration with explanatory asides and parenthetical insertions, and renders his memories lighthearted charm [...]. Although the self-deprecating humor is excessive at times, for the most part Simpson’s recollections sparkle with immediacy and relatability. Unlike the executives at the Press or the Oxford dons with frightening credentials, Simpson retains his everyman sensibilities, and keeps the focus of the Dictionary and his memoir on what really matters: the words.

This focus manifests itself in sections of bold text in which Simpson narrates the etymological twists and turns of a particular word used in the preceding paragraphs. By showcasing words like *serendipity*, *Aerobics*, and *bird-watching*, Simpson intends to show that “any word can have an interesting history, if you just take a few moments to look behind the scenes.” These little lexicographical interludes will delight any reader who enjoys accumulating tidbits of learning and trivia. (Lodder 2016).

Lodder’s review touches on Simpson’s writing style, emphasizing such matters “conversational tone”, “immediacy and relatability”, and “everyman sensibilities”. This might well have led her to comment on Simpson’s quite frequent employment of proverbial language, but she failed to make a comment on this stylistic feature that doubtlessly adds to the readability of his memoir.

A particularly interesting use of an old English proverb by Simpson was picked up by Henrik Bering in his review of the book: “From his stint as the editor of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, he will offer an early sixteenth-century proverb: ‘The longest way round is the shortest way home’ as especially pertinent to lexicographers, since ‘language development isn’t linear’” (Bering 2016). Throughout his book, Simpson emphasizes the fact that there are no shortcuts for lexicographical work that always must include diachronic and synchronic aspects in dealing with words and phrases. His involvement with proverbs came about because Oxford University Press was interested in marketing a small proverb dictionary – a matter of “publishing politics” (80) as Simpson calls it:

Oxford had an *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* [3rd ed. 1970 by F.P. Wilson]. However, in those days you shouldn’t *just* have a full Oxford dictionary of any subject; it was also advantageous to have a *Concise Oxford Dictionary* on the same topic, and possibly even a *Little* one, too, if you thought the market wouldn’t object. There is an element of publishing-by-numbers here, but it made sense: you might not want to buy the full

weighty and complex version, but you might want its little sidekick. (80)

As a paremiologist I might argue that it would be a welcome move on part of Oxford University Press to plan a fourth edition of the large proverb dictionary, but this desideratum appears to have found no interest whatsoever. In fact, after Simpson published his *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* in 1982, he brought out an expanded second edition with the assistance of Jennifer Speake in 1992, followed by a third edition in 1998. The fourth edition of 2003 saw two major changes: John Simpson was no longer listed as co-editor, with Jennifer Speake being the sole editor from now on, and the title was changed to *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, an indication most likely that the large proverb dictionary from 1970 will not see a new edition. In the meantime the sixth edition of the shorter collection has appeared in 2015 under the editorship of Jennifer Speake as well, and it would not be surprising that there will be another edition in due time. I might add that Elizabeth Knowles has also edited a less scholarly *Little Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* (2009) for the more popular market. Oxford University Press clearly has recognized that there is money to be made with proverb dictionaries.

In any case, in the early 1980s Simpson accepted the challenge of editing *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* that gave him a break from his work on the *Supplement to the OED* (4 vols.; Burchfield 1972-1986). He really had little paremiological and paremiographical experience, but he took on the challenge and succeeded in bringing out a very useful and reliable proverb dictionary. He recounts his experience with proverbs on seven fascinating pages (80-86) of his memoir that include some of the following observations:

While working on the *Supplement to the OED* I had had little to do with proverbs, as we were predominantly dealing with the emergent vocabulary of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and most proverbs were well and truly set in stone by then. Modern proverbs tend to have a long gestation period, beginning as quotations from known authors, and only gradually assuming the status of universal proverbs or maxims many years later, when the identity of the original author has been largely

or completely forgotten. It's a moot point whether we should still call *If it ain't broke, don't fix it* (Bert Lance, US President Jimmy Carter's director of the Office of Management and Budget: 1977), or *Work expands to fill the time available* (Parkinson's Law – British naval historian C. Northcote Parkinson: 1955), quotations, or whether they have moved into the more abstract world of proverbs. Proverbs are pithy sayings that offer some general truth, by and large. Also, I had expressed no interest in proverbs over my time at the dictionary. (80-81)

Simpson valiantly devoted himself “to the unknown realm of ‘old said saws’ and proverbs” (81), without any prior paremiological training. Not surprisingly then, there are a number of problems with this statement. For one, the proverb “If it ain't broke, don't fix it” did not originate with Bert Lance in 1977, with numerous earlier references beginning in 1960 having now been registered (Doyle, Mieder, and Shapiro 2012: 80-81). Modern proverbs also have often rather short gestation periods due to the incredible influence of the mass media in all of its forms. It is also not true that the author is known for most modern proverbs (Doyle 1996, Mieder 2012 and 2014). I also would not speak of “the more abstract world of proverbs”, a better adjective perhaps being “general” (or indirect, metaphorical, etc.). But as John Simpson obviously realized during his work on this proverb dictionary, proverbial matters are as difficult to deal with as is the case with individual words. The paremiographers and lexicographer have difficult tasks to master in order to give precise information. But Simpson faced the challenge and got into it, to put it colloquially:

And so I spent the next year, which expanded to eighteen months, writing out by hand – as you did in those days – the entire text of a *Concise [Oxford] Dictionary of Proverbs* [quite an achievement in that short time, with Wilson's 1970 dictionary providing a solid base, of course]. By the end I could speak fluently in “old said saws” and offer trite truisms on demand to anyone who approached me with a problem. One man may steal a horse, while another may not look over a hedge; a stern chase is a long chase; near is my shirt, but nearer is my

skin; the best thing for the inside of a man is the outside of a horse (i.e., take some exercise); little pitchers (i.e., children) have large ears; bairns and fools should not see half-done work; if you lie down with dogs, you will rise up with fleas (a saying translated from the Roman sage Seneca); the looker-on sees more of the game. Proverbs were universal truths (or what passed as these), normally presented in sentence form. Some were abstract [in this case this adjective fits] (of the "Hope springs eternal" variety), but many evolved from the home and hearth of the medieval peasant, and so their subjects were often homely subjects – cats, dogs, friends, the weather, churchgoing, food and drink. They were extraordinary, colourful, reassuring adjuncts to everyday conversation.

(82)

That's quite an enumeration of proverbs, although it is a bit surprising why Simpson chose rather archaic texts for the most part. Perhaps because they need explanatory comments as to their origin and meaning in the dictionary itself. Of special interest for his writing style is his humorous tongue-in-cheek statement that after working so much on proverbs he could "speak fluently in 'old said saws' and other trite truisms". No wonder that his memoir is replete with proverbial language!

As Simpson worked on abridging, correcting, and updating Wilson's massive *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, he came across a somewhat archaic proverb that in a nutshell could describe his detailed work as a lexicographer and short-time paremiographer: "I discovered that my favourite, the old and now almost-forgotten saw 'The longest way round is the shortest way home,' dated from the early sixteenth century, to 'The road to resolution lies by Doubt; The next way home's the farther way about' (where *next* is used in its etymological meaning of 'nearest'). It is a thought that applies to historical lexicography in spades, where you need constantly to remind people that the shortest way of doing something isn't necessarily the best way, and that there are advantages in being a little more considered" (85). Studying the intricate history of individual proverbs Simpson became aware of the fact that he "should be looking not just for classical prototypes for English proverbs, but

for the trail of development from Latin, say, into French or Italian, and then into English. As with words, the situation was much more complex than first meets the eye, but the final resolution is far more satisfying. The longest way round is the shortest way home" (85)

There are numerous studies that trace proverbs from Greek antiquity by way of Latin into the vernacular languages of Europe (Mieder 2009), and I might mention as an example my study on "'Big Fish Eat Little Fish': History and Interpretation of a Proverb About Human nature" (Mieder 1987: 178-228 and 259-268) that does not only look at historical texts but also discusses the meaning of the proverb in various contexts. Simpson chooses a proverb of a considerably more recent origin as an example, namely "When the cat's away, the mice will play" that had its start in medieval Latin as so many other proverbs still employed today like "Strike while the iron is hot" or "All that glitters is not gold". They were all translated *verbatim* into numerous languages, adding to the stock of common European proverbs (Mieder 2004: 9-13). But here is what Simpson writes:

A good example of an expression that illustrates the mixed international heritage of proverbs would be *When the cat's away, the mice will play*. It's a typical old proverb, with imagery from the domestic environment, which is a hallmark of many old sayings. We know it in English from the early seventeenth century (Thomas Heywood's *Woman killed with Kindness* [1607]). Even here it is offered as an "old proverb." In the absence of earlier English evidence, we can see, however, that the proverb existed in French from the early fourteenth century: *Ou chat na rat regne* ("Where there is no cat the rat is king [the rat rules]"). Maybe we are more squeamish than the French, and prefer mice to rats. (85)

Admittedly, John Simpson is writing here for a general audience, but it would have been good to point out the medieval Latin origin of the proverb – "Dum deerit cattus, discurrens conspicitur mus" (When no cat is there, one can see the mouse running around) – that existed in a number of variants as proverbs often do as they are handed down over time. But Simpson is wrong in thinking that the French text with the "rat" might have been the



source for the English reference. The proverb existed in French since the late 12th century with a mouse: "Ou chat n'a, souriz i revelent" (Where there is no cat, the mice become playful), and numerous medieval French variants with "mouse" have been recorded (Paczolay 1997: 114-119, Singer and Liver 1995-2002: VI, 452-454).

In any case, Simpson finishes his account of the challenging work on his *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* with the following remarks that show how the serendipitous request by the OUP for him to compose this book resulted in his very much deserved advancement on the editorial staff of the *OED*. That he also relates his concerns about whether his manuscript would be judged worthy of publication shows the humility of this renowned scholar/editor:

Before the proverb dictionary could be published, it had to survive an internal review. This turned out to be crucial to me and my prospects of promotion on the main *OED*. I was nervous about how my draft dictionary would be received. Oxford likes to criticize – on the principle that it is the making of good scholarship – but a bad review would be catastrophic. After a few months of anxious waiting, the review came in. [...] I was fortunately informed that I had got the thumbs-up [this phrase also appears on p. 224], and the next thing I knew I was joining Ed [Weiner] in a more senior role [senior editors, to be precise] on the *OED*. As a footnote, it's curious that the first major printed notice of the proverb dictionary appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, in the same issue as its (equally positive) review of [my wife] Hilary's book *D.H. Lawrence and Feminism*. Things were looking up. (86)

With two books in their hands and a promotion at OUP, life indeed looked good for the couple, but there was more to be delighted about. A baby arrived with much joy, leading Simpson to one of his many comments that make his memoir such a reading pleasure:

In the same year in which the proverb dictionary was published (1982), things took an altogether different

track at home: we had our first baby, Katherine Jane ("Kate"). Despite my rather curious job, we did all the usual, ordinary things: bringing the baby home very cautiously the first time, photographing her in her carry-cot, etc. Over time Kate hit all the right percentiles, fitted the right-sized clothes, and developed her eating habits just the way the books said she would. Later, Kate would come to argue with me about words, not appreciating that I was in fact the ultimate arbiter. Sometimes kids just don't realise. (86)

Their second daughter Eleanor ("Ellie") was born in 1990, and as already noted, she unfortunately has not developed mentally. The many pages dealing with her disability belong to the most touching statements in the entire book. They show how intelligent parents with superb linguistic abilities are confronted by a dear child without verbal and cognitive abilities. Tears are coming to my eyes again as I type just these few comments filled with love and understanding by John Simpson and through him by Hilary as well:

I desperately wanted her to speak, and to speak to her. There was a period of about eighteen months when we used to return home from work every day hoping to hear that Ellie had spoken her first word. It never happened. We'd look for signs of comprehension, and try to transmit ideas to her by action, tone, if not by speech. But it was no use. There *was* communication and comprehension happening, but it was at a very low level: she seemed to understand about five words. But was it even that? Was she just picking up on situations in which they be used ("car," "food," "drink" – not much else). Then at times she'd burst out laughing: it's always been clear that she has a quiet sense of humour. And she liked the colour yellow for some reason. [...] But nothing coordinated remained, nothing that could be a cognitive platform from which easy communication might develop. In the end, we found that gestures and tone – leading, guiding, directing, assisting – were all we could use, and we hoped that she was happy with our efforts. We were an excessively "wordy" family with a wordless newcomer

in our midst: at times she dragged us into her silence,  
and we couldn't think how to help her. (260-261)

Despite all, there is much love in the Simpson family for Ellie to this day, and one can well imagine that Simpson's strenuous work on the *OED* was of help in dealing with the deep concerns about Ellie. Work can help to deal with pain and anguish, and writing his humane memoir in such telling words must also have given him comfort.

And work John Simpson did year after year as his autobiography makes clear on almost every page. There was so much to do to bring the not perfect multi-volume dictionary up-to-date. Simpson expresses this fact with a very appropriate proverb in the introduction to his book: "Nothing, of course, is perfect. As I continued to work on the dictionary, I – along with many of my colleagues – became more and more aware of cracks in the wallpaper. Back then, the *OED* was a late nineteenth-century dictionary which had hardly changed in a hundred years. As editors, we were adding new meanings to it, but really it needed a complete overhaul and update" (xii). And with this first appearance of a proverb John Simpson is on a proverbial roll without overburdening his readers with such folks speech, heeding the wisdom of such proverbs as "Nothing in excess" and "Everything in moderation". The attached list of all phraseological units reveals Simpson's colloquial style beyond any doubt, with the following discussion of at least some particularly telling examples of his narrative use of proverbial language illustrating that they serve a considerable communicative purpose.

Since this is a personal narrative, it should not come as a surprise that there are quite a few proverbial statements that employ the "I" pronoun. Early in the book Simpson explains that he decided to respond to a job advertisement announced by the OUP, giving his comment a metaphorical flavor by using a well-known proverbial expression: "The promised salary wasn't large – in fact it was only moderate – but in comparison with a student grant it suggested undreamt-of affluence. Eventually I decided to throw my hat in the ring" (6; there is another reference of this proverbial phrase on p. 243). As he reflects on the possibility of a job interview, he employs another proverbial expression that shows his reserved if not shy nature as well as his honesty with

himself: "I was nervous about the interview – there were so many questions I could be asked to which I would not want to commit an answer. I think I'm quite a slow learner. At least I don't like to commit myself until I know what I'm talking about. Given time I can usually work things out, but not necessarily right away. [...] I would just dry up, not wanting to commit myself and be wrong. I'm fine after a while – after I've had a chance to absorb things. But for those first crucial ten seconds of an interview I wouldn't put my money on me" (15). But luckily the interview did take place, leading Simpson to the following proverbial observation: "Somehow I had survived those first ten seconds with the amiable chief editor [Bob Burchfield], but his deputy [John Sykes] saw through me immediately – or, as I like to remember, he formed the wrong and worst opinion of me from the moment he walked through the door. Furthermore, I suspect that he didn't like playing second fiddle to the chief editor in an interview for a post reporting to him" (21). This proverbially charged description of his OUP interview concludes with a fascinating reworking of a quotation from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* long turned proverb: "There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at its flood, leads on to fortune" (Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder 1992: 595). By shortening this hopeful expression and adding the negative proverbial phrase of the game being up to it, Simpson is able to verbalize his impression that he had failed the interview: "There came a tide in the affairs of the interview when I knew the game was up, and I was ushered back out of the office, leaving both editors to discuss my prospective candidacy" (22). Unfortunately his negative premonition proved to be correct as he was informed a few days later that he had not made the cut this time.

But fortune did smile upon the young man when a month later he received a letter from OUP offering him an alternative job after all that would change life for him and Hilary rather abruptly, as indicated by the triadic proverbial expression "lock, stock, and barrel". Add to this that the idea of moving to Oxford almost immediately was proverbially speaking sinking its teeth into him, it becomes clear that he would not only be married to Hilary but to OUP as well:

Once the new letter had arrived from Oxford University Press, Hilary and I had to decide whether to pack up our things lock, stock, and barrel and relocate almost immediately to Oxford. We talked about it. Hilary was happy to shift her research to Oxford, with instant access to the gargantuan holdings of the Bodleian Library, so she needed little convincing. I still toyed with the possibility of further medieval research [towards a never completed dissertation], but the idea of becoming involved in a major international language project based in Oxford was starting to sink its teeth into me. I'd always liked approaching things from odd angles: maybe dictionary work would be an intriguing outlet for my interest in language, literature, and historical research. Also, there were no other job offers available on our kitchen table that day. So, arguments in favour: more or less everything. Arguments against: we would have to move. (25)

One might well have expected that at this point of his narration Simpson would have cited Julius Caesar's proverb "The die is cast", but instead he comments proverbially on not finishing his graduate studies as he sets out on his life-long lexicographical journey: "Soon another letter was on its way to OUP informing the powers to be that, even before I had my master's degree in medieval studies tucked under my belt, I would be 'delighted' to launch myself on the sea of historical lexicography" (25). This is quite the understatement by this accomplished champion of the *OED*, but this is his humble nature that becomes a leitmotif throughout his scholarly autobiography.

John Simpson certainly never blows his own horn on these pages. As his career advanced, he remained down to earth without showing off. This is obvious from such proverbial statements as "Without realizing it, I was bringing myself into the spotlight, and starting to etch out a future for myself" (69) and "I was beginning to make a faint appearance on the chief editor's radar as a prospect for the future" (70). When he was put in charge of the "New Words" project, he did not dominate the group of lexicographers, realizing that this was new lexicographical territory for him:

Running the New Words group didn't represent the future, but it gave us a breathing-space while we, and the University Press generally, thought about how we might work in the years to come. The group gave me my first opportunity to organize an area of the *OED*'s work from the ground up, and over the next few years my New Words colleagues and I lived very close at hand with the lexical changes to which the language was subject in the early to mid-1980s. I don't think I'd heard of a steep learning curve in those days, but I would have appreciated its meaning. (98-99)

The proverbial expression "to be (have) a steep learning curve" has become ever more popular by now in light of the various electronic products that have become part of modern life.

Even after the Second Edition of the *OED* was published in 1989, Simpson did not rest on his laurels as he realized that there was much more to be done, notably bringing the famed dictionary into the computer age, accessible first on CD-ROM and now as a constantly updated online version. Instead of bragging about his accomplishments, he negates the proverbial expression "to be the be-all and end-all" ~~proverbial phrase~~ in order to stress that the work on the *OED* must go on: H h

For me, the *OED* was at last heading in the right direction. It wasn't that I thought the Second Edition was the be-all and end-all of lexicography. In truth, for me it was a mechanistic project – though tough and imaginative for all that. I wanted to see the text of the dictionary safely housed on computer so that we could start updating the *OED* comprehensively, rather than making piecemeal additions through supplementary volumes. It was, of course, still very uncertain. [...]

But first of all, we had to get the dictionary on to a computer by 1989. If we couldn't do that, there was little point in trying to write a happy ending beyond. I thought of the project until 1989 as Phase One; Phase Two was our secret dream of what we wanted to do with the dictionary in the longer term. We thought perhaps we could

engineer an *OED* **redux** – an *OED* reborn. If you wait long enough, most things make a comeback. (148-149)

The dream continues to be materialized with the constantly updated electronic version of the *OED* today. Thus the older versions of the dictionary are indeed reborn in a modernized way, even though it took a long time to get this ongoing project on track. John Simpson did well to summarize all of this with his statement “If you wait long enough, most things make a comeback” which most likely is based on the modern proverb “If you keep anything (wait) long enough, everything (it) comes (will come) back into style” (Doyle, Mieder, and Shapiro 2012: 243). Towards the end of his book, Simpson comes up with his ultimate proverbial understatement. To be sure, he is not a computer expert, but he shepherded the *OED* into the modern online resource it is today. There really was no need for him to state that “I’m not always the sharpest knife when I come to new ideas” (323). Let’s just agree that the English language owes the world to this sharp guy, who as a lexicographer thought innovatively outside the box. That certainly is the path to new horizons in dictionary making, even if, as Simpson states, it might be “only a start, but the first step, as they say – to quote another trite proverb – is the most difficult” (326).

Of course, whether the lexicographical steps might be traditional or innovative, they are best accomplished by way of cooperative team efforts. John Simpson by no means accomplished the breakthrough advances of the modern *OED* by himself. This can easily be seen by his repeated use of the “we” pronoun, indicating that he surrounded himself by excellent lexicographers for whom he represents a true team player. Mindful of the modern proverb “There is no ‘I’ in team” (Doyle, Mieder, and Shapiro 2012: 128), Simpson begins many proverbial statements with the collective “we”. The result are emotive comments that add considerable expressiveness to the team spirit ~~team~~ of lexicographers among which Simpson would best be described as “primus inter pares”. Here are a few contextualized examples of this effective style of narration showing the ups and downs of serious lexicographical work where everybody has to work together for the common goal of the most complete and up-to-date dictionary possible:

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We had had to restrain the *Supplement* to its four volumes, and we had around four or five years to complete the task for publication before the 1980s ran out of steam (the fourth and final volume was published in 1986). (87)

Word selection wasn't really an issue, as we had drawn up rules and guidelines based on hard evidence and currency, which took any guesswork out of the whole process. We applied a rule of thumb that demanded that any term had to have existed over several years (we said five in the early days, and later modified that to ten); had to be documented in various genres (formal, technical, everyday, slang – not all of these for every word, of course); and had to be evidenced by at least five documentary examples in our card files. (104; the “thumb” phrase reappears on p. 246))

Did the Press owe the *OED* a living, or did the *OED* need to start earning its keep? The smart money was on option two, but we had our heads down, and some of us didn't notice that the world was changing. [...] It turned out that the future [of the computer] was opening up before our very eyes. (130)

For the time, this was big data. And if we couldn't transfer this international interest in the dictionary into something that opened up the text [via the computer] to the masses, then we weren't worth the paper we were written on. (139)

If we could pull it off [the computerization of the dictionary], then dictionaries would make a quantum leap to the benefit of both readers and editors. [...] We would be creating a massive, dynamic, and updatable language resource. (150)

By now we were battling hell-for-leather to meet our regular and draconian deadlines for processing the text, and checking the proofs that were rolling off the old-style printing presses to form the pages of the Second Edition [1989, 20 vols. in print]. The full dictionary text



existed on computer at this point, but it was only accessible internally, to *OED* editors. (176)

Just for a moment [at the publication of the 20th vol. of the Second Edition], we felt on top of the world. Over the previous five years we had commandeered the text of the dictionary from its old-style book form on to computer; we'd proofread it, added 5,000 new entries, and altered the pronunciation system; and we'd got it all to the point at which it could be published. Curiously, it was going to be published again as a book, and not (straightaway) as an electronic resource. We still had some work to do. (177-178)

We didn't tell them [the OUP Advisory Committee] how far we would move in future, because the issue – for example – of citing web pages didn't exist. In due course we did open the floodgates even further, accepting evidence of the language from the Internet – from personal web pages, for example. (219-220)

With the ever-present deadline [for the Online Third Edition of the *OED*] of the year 2000 looming, we needed to take serious action to recruit staff. [...] We did manage to bring into (or back into) the fold several colleagues willing to give it all a shot. But we still needed more hands on deck, and we needed them quickly. (242)

When we advertise for editorial posts, we have to be very careful not to open the net too wide. We did once, in the early days, and received over a thousand applications for three jobs. It's not worth the time spent reading through those applications. If the job is described in too open a fashion, you just encourage anyone who loves words, or who wants an excuse to extend their adolescence in Oxford, to throw their hat in the ring. (243)

It turned out that although we could extract remarkable swaths of historical material from the electronic databases, we sometimes needed the raw brainpower and ingenuity of a researcher to track a problem right down to earth: there was room for both research techniques. (279)

It would be nice to report that once the dictionary had gone online we could relax into automatic pilot, allowing the steady pendulum of progress to take the *OED* on its stately route through the alphabet. When we went online we were committed to updating and publishing at least 1,000 entries a quarter, but we wanted to get that up to 2,000 or 3,000 a quarter as quickly as possible. (304)

Alongside all of these plans for the future, we still needed to keep the editorial chariot on track, maintaining our production targets and publishing more and more of the dictionary online at each of our quarterly updates. We were progressing well through the alphabet by now, and we were producing remarkable entries, full of new and exciting information. Wherever the dictionary was going in the future, we knew we'd brought it through. (328)

These 13 texts with their proverbial expressions are telling statements of the team work that John Simpson was involved in and guided as the time-honored *Oxford English Dictionary* went from traditional printed volumes to its constantly updated online version. Being a bookish person, I must admit that I still enjoy using the first and second print editions from time to time, but obviously I value what the online *OED* has to offer as the most comprehensive and up-to-date dictionary in the world and for the *lingua franca* of the world to boot.

With such proverbial tidbits Simpson succeeds in a truly lively and somewhat colloquial account of his life's work. In addition to writing about himself, he also speaks of his team in a personal way by employing the "I" and "we" pronouns. And there is a third stylistic feature in all of this, namely those statements in which he uses the pronoun "you". This enables him to speak to his readers and getting them drawn into his amazing tale. As one of those eager readers, I had two wonderful experiences. The first came when early in the first chapter I discovered the name of Richard Chenevix Trench (1807-1886), later archbishop of Dublin, who had bemoaned the fact in his lecture "On Some Deficiencies in Our English Dictionaries" (1857) at the Philological Society of London that the English language was lacking in a scholarly historical dictionary (7). I might add here that he was an incredibly prolific author, publishing his own po-

etry, anthologies, translations, and works dealing with history, the church, and philology. Among his philological books are *On the Study of Words* (1851), *English Past and Present* (1855), and *A Select Glossary of English Words* (1859). But he also published a still valuable book *On the Lessons in Proverbs* (1853). It went through seven editions during Trench's lifetime and several more later on, including a final edition with additional notes and a bibliography in 1905 with the slightly changed title *Proverbs and Their Lessons*. The publication history of this slim volume of less than 200 pages is ample proof that it is an important and influential survey on the origin, nature, distribution, meaning, and significance of proverbs in the English-speaking world. It was my honor to edit a reprint of this book in 2003. Obviously I have been delighted for quite some time that a fellow paremiologist was instrumental in getting the ball rolling towards a superb dictionary that had its beginning with James Murray in 1879.

The other reading experience came in the second chapter where Simpson writes "The Philological Society had, very early in the life of the dictionary, invited American politician and man of letters George Perkins Marsh [1801-1882] to drum up support across the Atlantic. He was not entirely successful, but later efforts produced a steady influx of American English material. And as the dictionary grew in size and acclaim, more and more [American] readers became attracted to the work (34; for the American influence see pp. 112-113 and 235-236). Marsh deserves a few more comments from me if alone for the fact that he was born in Woodstock in my beloved state of Vermont. But there is so much more to this incredible Renaissance man – a true gentleman and a scholar. He was not only a diplomat, having been appointed as the first ambassador to Italy by President Lincoln in 1861 and holding this position to his death in 1882 (he is buried on the Protestant cemetery in Rome). He is also considered the first American environmentalist, with his book *Man and Nature, or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (1864) being considered a classic in the concept of a sustainable environment. More importantly for the English language, he is the author of the two massive volumes *Lectures on the English Language* (1860) and *The Origin and History of the English Language, and of the Early Literature it Embodies* (1862). I shall never forget the day when my wife Barbara and I

discovered the two green volumes in a second-hand bookstore in Maine and acquired them for a mere \$2.00 each! He was an unbelievable polyglot linguist that included Icelandic, and he did considerable work in comparative linguistics. But there is more: while in Italy, he amassed a personal philological library of 12,000 volumes that at his death was donated to the library at the University of Vermont. When I arrived at Burlington in 1971, the librarian gave me a present that I read cover to cover: *Catalogue of the Library of George Perkins Marsh* (1892). These volumes are considered to comprise one of the best collections in philology up through the nineteenth century in the United States, and it has been my privilege to have these books at my immediate disposal for the past forty-five years. And yes, the book on proverbs by Trench is among them!

I hope that I might be forgiven for these two digressions that are close to my heart. But let us return to our proverbial muttons, namely to the readers of Simpson's book and also to the readers who went through uncountable volumes of literature and other matters to excerpt references for the *OED*. The proverbial expressions "To play havoc with", "to put oneself in someone else's shoes", and "to stop someone in his/her tracks" add much metaphorical expressiveness to Simpson's explanation:

"Reading" for the dictionary was all very well, and it helped to gather together a mass of material that might be useful in future years to the dictionary's editors, but it didn't do any good at all for my own ability to read. The process of reading text word by word, and then weighing up whether each word was worth carding for future reference, played havoc with my appreciation of literature. My estimate is that it would take the average person about five years of working on the dictionary and "reading" texts of all sorts before he or she came through the barrier and was able to read properly again.

Put yourself in the reader's shoes: You are reading *Jane Eyre*, perhaps not for the first time, but you're enjoying it all over again. You've followed the narrative through its twists and turns. [...] What are the man-traps here for the budding lexicographer? Your growing lexi-

cographical intuition stops you dead in your tracks. (34-35; there is another reference on p. 183)

Here is another example of how the use of the “you” pronoun pulls the readers into Simpson’s account. One can well imagine how the readers might have a mental picture of digging themselves out of a proverbial hole:

He [the classicist Philip Hardie] had a facility for knowing which entry in the *OED* was the exact counterpart to the entry you were struggling with, and which would therefore help in your attempt to dig yourself out of whatever lexicographical hole you were in. (76)

Another telling example of this stylistic feature can be seen with the employment of the expression “to try one’s hand at something”:

Although you might not be able to predict precisely which new words are just over the horizon, it is certainly possible to examine how new words arise, and to identify the general routes they take into English. If you do want to try your hand at prediction, you need to play the percentages – which means that you have to know two things: how words have been formed in the past, and which areas of the language are likely to generate new vocabulary. (113)

And on it goes with such short “you” proverbial comments as “and you can bet your bottom dollar”, “but you didn’t end up with a complete picture” (124), “But you get the idea” (135), and “That might stop you in your tracks” (183).

But I am not yet willing to be stopped in my tracks with this proverbial review. There are still at least a few contextualized examples of proverbial expressions to cite that exemplify John Simpson’s captivating style. They add a great deal of emotive and metaphorical flavor to this erudite narrative with its personal touch:

The Victorian editors had worked their fingers to the bone finding examples of everyday words. (31)

Almost all the work on *red* had been edited by my old trainer, Lesley [Brown], and she was not one to leave any stone unturned. (60)

If my first year at the *OED* had seemed to last for ages, as I concentrated on learning how to become an editor, the next few years – as we steered the *Supplement* project to a conclusion and finally brought the curtain down on old-style Oxford lexicography – seemed, in contrast, to rush by. (65)

The *OED* doesn't just include the tip of the iceberg of language, but there are levels beneath the water that will be hard-pressed ever to make their way into the editing process. (71)

It was simply a case of training, encouraging, and cajoling the junior editors to get through the requisite amount of work each week, and the *Supplement's* final trajectory would be more or less in the bag. (87-88)

There was a fly in the ointment. Despite the complexity of our work on the *Supplement to the OED*, I and others found ourselves becoming dissatisfied with the concept of supplementing – of adding lights and tinsel to the dictionary, rather than addressing the whole of the language all the way from the Anglo-Saxon period to the present day. (95)

The *OED* was at the most alarming crossroads that it had seen for around one hundred years. Some senior members of the Oxford University Press and of the University of Oxford itself regarded the dictionary as a white elephant, and one that was stifling other exciting publishing projects. (133)

If you wanted to, you could teach outside office hours, but that never appealed to me. There were enough other odd souls drifting around Oxford to pick up any additional teaching that the college or University authorities offered, without upsetting the dictionary's apple cart. But as I had never regarded myself as a natural teacher, I chose not to take this route. (222)

Since the publication of the Second Edition of the *OED*, the whole project was becoming more visible to the public, and some companies had done their best to clamber on to the bandwagon of the dictionary's success. (291)

We couldn't go on field trips every day, but this one is a reminder of the value of paper-based research, conducted in conversation with an expert who can guide you through an archive. It is also a salutary reminder that even something in the *OED* may have been misinterpreted – that lexicographers should never accept anything at face value. Beware of relying simply on yourself or on the Internet. (297)

These texts all show Simpson's desire for the constant advancement of the *OED*, a most impressive and laudable commitment that he maintained for close to four decades. He even got involved in European language policies, bemoaning the fact that the study of foreign languages in Great Britain was not stronger:

The British are in general bad at learning foreign languages and the general concept of linguistic diversity, but I agreed with the multilingual objectives that EFNIL [European Federation of National Institutions for Language] and the European Commission promoted: that state educational systems should promote the knowledge of two languages as well as the country's native tongue. It's just that dotting the *i*'s and crossing the *t*'s on a European document doesn't mean the British will play the game and sign on for language evening classes. (301-302)

Of course, he is also aware of the fact that "most graduate programmes in the sciences [and business administration] in European universities are nowadays taught in English, and theses are predominantly written in English; major international companies in some countries – Germany, for example – use English as their internal company language. There are two sides to every question, as the old proverb wisely says" (298).

With all his professional commitments, it must be remembered that Simpson was not only married to his work on the *OED*. He also had a home-life with wife and two children. Both

worlds needed to be balanced, and he could draw strength from both of them. But there were moments of frustration and anxiety as well, as can be seen from the following paragraph with the emotional reworking of the proverbial expression “to see the light at the end of the tunnel”:

As we entered the early 1990s, we embarked upon what I regarded at the time – and also in retrospect – as a dark phase of the project, which lasted perhaps for the first half of the decade. The Second Edition of the dictionary had been published to acclaim, but we had been working with our sights set so closely on this goal that we had completely overlooked the need to plan for – rather than just to expect – a future involving the comprehensive update to which computerisation was only the prelude. And my dark mood paralleled something of a dark period at home, as Hilary and I gradually realised that our younger daughter, Ellie, had severe developmental problems of the sort that no amount of funds, effort, care, support, or love would overcome. Not everything can have a happy ending, but at this point we were deep in a tunnel with no sign of light ahead. (207-208)

I remember the sadness that befell me when I read the last lines of this paragraph about the Simpson family. Of course, I also noticed John Simpson’s appropriate use of the proverbial phrase to capture the family’s anguish. It is not a cliché, and to be sure, love does prevail to this day.

Always being the historical/etymological lexicographer, John Simpson has integrated a number of word and phrase explanations throughout his readable, entertaining, and enlightening book. In these scholarly “asides”, the work on the *OED* as well as the *OED* come alive. I can imagine that many a reader would like to become a lexicographer at Oxford. I know well from my own studies of individual proverbs and proverbial expressions how much work goes into them, and Simpson as well as the *OED* must accomplish such tasks in a much-condensed space. In any case, Simpson’s treatment of “hue and cry” (170-171), “to hit a brick wall” (172-174), “dribs and drabs” (201-202), and “to be a shaggy-dog story” (317-318) are an absolute delight for any phraseological sleuth. Being mindful of Simpson’s splendid

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creation of the anti-proverb “An example is worth a thousand words” that is based on the quite internationally disseminated modern American proverb “A picture is worth a thousand words” from 1911 (Mieder 1993: 135-151, Doyle, Mieder, and Shapiro 2012: 196), let me cite his comments on the proverbial expression “by a long chalk” as an illustration:

Phrases live and die through the amount of use they enjoy. In order to survive, they often need to leap from a small world into the big one. But they don't always jump continents. *By a long chalk* (“by far,” “by a long way”) is an expression first recorded in 1840, just into the Victorian era. It is commonest in British English, with less evidence – for example – from Australia and New Zealand, and less still from America.

The phrase comes originally from the small world of bar-room games. If you were engaged in a long drinking session in a public house in Britain in the sixteenth century, the landlord might chalk up on a slate just how much you owed. In the seventeenth century, people found it useful to use chalk to keep the score in games (often also enjoyed in alehouses) – and each point you scored would be represented by a chalk mark. If you ran rings round your opponent in the game, then you'd win by a larger margin, or a “long chalk.” So they say. (314)

I am quite certain that Simpson has Thomas Chandler Haliburton's (1796-1865) satirical and humorous work *The Clockmaker; or, the Sayings and Doings of Samuel Slick of Slickville* in mind when he cites the year 1840 as the first recorded reference for the phrase. F.P. Wilson gives the years 1837-1840 with Haliburton as the earliest source in his *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* (Wilson 1970: 113). However, Haliburton's *Clockmaker* was simultaneously published in 1836 by Joseph Howe in Halifax, Nova Scotia and by George Routledge in London. The author used the phrase numerous times (see Taylor and Whiting 1958: 64), but the first reference is “[...] isn't this as pretty a day as you'll see between this and Norfolk; it whips English weather by a long chalk” (p. 75 and p. 54 respectively). The Halifax publication should not be a surprise, since Haliburton was born in Windsor, Nova Scotia, where he became a judge of the provin-

cial supreme court. For now, the phrase's earliest written record is from Canada, and it remains to be seen whether an earlier occurrence can be found in Great Britain. Haliburton certainly liked it, but he is not necessarily the originator, and the phrase might well have come to Canada from England.

Enough of this, but it is a small illustration of how complex the search for the origin of a proverb or proverbial expression can be. In any case, there are also short comments on the modern expressions "the full monty" (315) and "to be a couch potato" (291), with the latter adding some humor to it all:

At one point, the University Press's offices in Oxford were the object of a small demonstration by a potato company on behalf of their wards (the potatoes themselves). The argument – such as it was – ran along the lines that the *OED* was disrespecting the potato by including an entry for *couch potato*. Clearly, the demonstrators were people, not potatoes, as the potatoes were far too idle to get off their sofas in their own support. But things died down once the company had achieved whatever publicity it was after. We fearlessly refused to budge from our position that people had the right to read an entry for *couch potato* in the *OED*, and we returned to our lairs wondering whether to seek revenge by downsizing our entries for *chip* and *spud*. (291)

Who would have thought that political correctness would get involved in this harmless but wonderfully descriptive phrase! But just think what the thought and language police could do when it comes to the sexual and scatological vocabulary that by needs must be part of a truly comprehensive dictionary!? The astute Simpson does not dwell on such "taboo" words and phrases, but knowing that his readers want to know how the *OED* deals with this fascinating topic, he has included – wouldn't you know it? – the word "fuck". In fact, it receives major billing in an entire twelve-page section (226-237). It makes for great reading to see how this four-letter word has been treated by the *OED*. Not wanting to take the anticipation away from reading Simpson's splendid account, I shall reluctantly refrain from going into considerable detail here. Let me simply mention the "fuck" phraseology that is part of his learned exegesis: "tell

whoever it is to go fuck themselves” and “fuck the bloody thing” (228), “fuck about, off, up” (235), “fuck around, over, with” (236), and the popular rhyming expression “to go fuck a duck” (236). Of course, I could add the modern disgusting proverbs “You don’t fuck the face”, “Fuck them and forget them”, and “There is no such thing as a bad fuck” to this (Doyle, Mieder, and Shapiro 2012: 72, 89-90, and 253-254, Mieder 2012: 184), and there is more! But let me give Simpson the last lexicographical word here:

One contemporary issue with *fuck* is whether it has lost, or will lose, its taboo status. That, like most other language change, would be something that happens over several generations. For one tier of society (by age, gender, ethnic background, national economic power, geographical location, social class, etc.) it will retain its power to shock, whereas for others it will tend to lose this. Words can become taboo (as *fuck* once did), or they can go the other way and enter the mainstream. Which one wins out depends on how our cultures move. Often the significant vector is age, and so as the generations pass, the meanings that the older members of society know and have clung to will disappear, and the younger strains of the language will assert themselves. But it doesn’t have to be like that. The usage of a dominant economic power can influence the language of its less dominant cousins, and vice versa (Australians or others might be attracted to some American usages, such as the filter *like*, because of the attractions of the culture it represents, or the reverse may occur). Normally there’s some conflict between a number of vectors, so you can’t claim to know precisely what is going to happen. It’s too complex for that. (236-237)

Indeed, complexity is the real thing when it comes to the study of the multifaceted aspects of language! John Simpson dedicated his professional life to the lexicographical documentation of the English language, and his name will forever be associated with the unsurpassed *Oxford English Dictionary*. I am not aware whether he has received a “doctor honoris causa” from the University of Oxford, but if not, then he should definitely be hon-

ored in this fashion. The title of the last chapter "Becoming the Past" has a melancholic tone to it, but Simpson is well aware that after thirty-five years with the *OED* the end of his work had to come. He knows that much remains to be done, but he had "come to terms with that some years back" (329), as he puts it proverbially. And then, with typical humility, he relies on another fitting phrase to take his leave as it were: "It seemed to me that the *OED* was entering a period of consolidation – without any radical changes on the horizon – and so it might be a good time to give someone else a chance to step into my editorial shoes. I hope I left it in good shape" (330). Indeed, everything is on track in keeping the *OED* going online due to his expertise, diligence, dedication, and "enthusiasm" (330). I like the last sentence of the book, thinking that my wife Barbara might say something similar about me as my own retirement is approaching: "Hilary says I'm just an ordinary bloke who's been lucky enough to do an extraordinary job. I suppose she's right. She usually is" (340). I am, of course, not putting myself on the same pedestal with John Simpson, and Barbara might well simply state that I have done a "good" job for my students and my paremiological work. John Simpson's shoes are a very special size and can't be filled by another person. He is a model for us all, and I am thankful that many years ago he helped me to get my paremiological feet on the ground.

*Proverbial references as they appear in the book:*

- p. xii: Nothing, of course, is perfect.
- p. xiii: when I first set foot inside the *OED* offices.
- p. 6: Eventually I decided to throw my hat in the ring.
- p. 6: my experience was rock bottom.
- p. 6: without needing to cross swords with scholars themselves.
- p. 7: materials for a new English dictionary which would knock all of its predecessors into a tin hat or paper bag.
- p. 7: To cut a very long story short.
- p. 15: I wouldn't put my money on me.
- p. 17: the air of a scholar searching austerely for wheat amongst chaff.
- p. 17: but, truth to tell, the only one available.
- p. 18: to put the academic world back on its axis.

- p. 21: I suspect that he didn't like playing second fiddle to the chief editor.
- p. 22: There came a tide in the affairs of the interview when I knew the game was up.
- p. 23: who were more egg-headed and therefore more suitable than I was.
- p. 23: Hilary didn't go into overdrive either.
- p. 25: I had to decide whether to pack up our things lock, stock, and barrel.
- p. 25: Oxford was starting to sink its teeth into me.
- p. 25: even before I had my master's degree in medieval studies tucked under my belt.
- p. 26: there wasn't all that much to write home about.
- p. 27: as sharp as an icicle when it came to editing the dictionary.
- p. 27: I came to look up to her as a dog looks up to his master.
- p. 27: in the time it takes to make a pot of tea.
- p. 28: it meant not rolling up your sleeves and tackling real editing until you'd been around the track with all sorts of ancillary tasks.
- p. 30: The dictionary was starting to move with the times.
- p. 31: the Victorian editors had worked their fingers to the bone finding examples.
- p. 32: and you can bet your bottom dollar that they all came from my pen.
- p. 33: it may be worth checking whether either of those celebrated first uses would pass muster today.
- p. 34: The process of reading text word by word [...] played havoc with my appreciation of literature.
- p. 34: Put yourself in the reader's shoes.
- p. 35: Your growing lexicographical intuition stops you dead in your tracks.
- p. 35: has been around since the dawn of time.
- p. 36: in the form of whatever text they could lay their hands on.
- p. 37: The editors were kindly, for the most part, and keen to show me the ropes.
- p. 45: several other writers who were even then heading pell-mell towards oblivion.
- p. 45: Others invariably see you through Oxford-tinted glasses, however different you think you are yourself.

- p. 46: I felt it was our duty to be in at ground zero as this new vocabulary was arriving.
- p. 51: In modern terms that is absolutely nothing, but it was a gold-mine back then.
- p. 53: to let a breath of fresh air into the new *OED* in this way.
- p. 54: Nowadays, leaving before the wedding lunch was over would probably put me beyond the pale.
- p. 58: So the *OED* deserves a small pat on the head for knocking 63 years off the German world-record schedule.
- p. 59: the work we conducted to research the history of the expression *the thin red line* (more on pp. 59-61).
- p. 60: she was not one to leave any stone unturned.
- pp. 60-61: But all was not lost.
- p. 61: But this time it was John Bartlett who nearly came up trumps.
- p. 61: Facts were dissolving like butter in a pan.
- p. 62: The icing on the cake came a year or two later.
- p. 65: finally brought the curtain down on the old-style Oxford lexicography.
- p. 68: I regarded myself as the *OED*'s eyes and ears on the street.
- p. 69: I amassed as many [...] magazines as I could lay my hands on.
- p. 69: I was bringing myself into the spotlight.
- p. 70: I was beginning to make a faint appearance on the chief editor's radar as a prospect for the future.
- pp. 70-71: There were some eyebrows raised in the dictionary office.
- p. 71: but they didn't generally stand the test of time.
- p. 71: The *OED* didn't just include the tip of the iceberg of language, but there are levels beneath the water.
- p. 75: This is a trap into which it is too easy for the lexicographical mind to fall.
- p. 76: which would therefore help in your attempt to dig yourself out of whatever lexicographical hole you were in.
- p. 77: I'd tell him the time of day when he needed it.
- p. 78: If they are likened to foot soldiers marching to someone else's beat.
- p. 80: wanted to float an idea about a future project that I might like to be involved in.
- p. 81: I could see how my cards were marked.

- p. 82: One man may steal a horse, while another may not look over a hedge.
- p. 82: a stern chase is a long chase.
- p. 82: near is my shirt, but nearer is my skin.
- p. 82: the best thing for the inside of a man is the outside of a horse (i.e., take some exercise).
- p. 82: little pitchers (i.e., children) have large ears.
- p. 82: bairns and fools should not see half-done work.
- p. 82: if you lie down with dogs, you will rise up with fleas (a saying translated from the Roman sage Seneca).
- p. 82: the looker-on sees more of the game.
- p. 82: the "Hope springs eternal" variety.
- p. 83: it was plain wrong.
- p. 85: I discovered that my favourite, the old and now almost-forgotten saw "The longest way round is the shortest way home."
- p. 85: "The road to resolution lies by Doubt."
- p. 85: The next way home's the farther way about" (where *next* is used in its etymological meaning of "nearest").
- p. 85: the situation was much more complex than first meets the eye.
- p. 85: *When the cat's away, the mice will play.*
- p. 85: *Ou chat na rat regne* ("Where there is no cat the rat is king").
- p. 86: I had got the thumbs-up.
- p. 87: we had around four to five years to complete the task for publication before the 1980s ran out of steam.
- p. 87: Anything else would have to catch the next bus.
- p. 88: the *Supplement's* final trajectory would be more or less in the bag.
- p. 88: The secret was to acknowledge that there are always at least two ways of doing something.
- p. 90: to make sure the editors were all on track.
- p. 91: It wasn't a dream job, as far as I could see.
- p. 91: In no time at all I was handed the first instalment of yet another book with no plot.
- p. 91: We pussyfooted along, exchanging courteous comments and responses.
- p. 95: But this excitement came at a price.
- p. 95: There was a fly in the ointment.

- p. 96: It was only as the curtain fell on the final years of our work on the *Supplement*.
- p. 98: what I selfishly regarded as the real thing.
- p. 98: the dim prospect of an olive branch offered for the eventual revival of the full *OED*.
- p. 98: if the cards fell in the right way.
- p. 98: This, it goes without saying, became a matter of great interest.
- p. 98: should the old warhorse ever survive.
- p. 98: but it gave us a breathing-space.
- p. 99: I don't think I'd heard of a steep learning curve in those days.
- p. 99: So as not to miss a trick, we engaged in a correspondence.
- p. 101: its associated vocabulary knocked on dictionary editors' doors for attention.
- p. 104: We applied a rule of thumb that demanded that any term had to have existed over several years.
- p. 106: but it was a child of its time.
- p. 107: Selecting and defining words [...] can have many pitfalls.
- p. 109: Plan A had fallen flat on its face.
- p. 109: True to his word.
- p. 110: We scratched our collective heads.
- p. 112: We did a collective double-take when we heard that.
- p. 112: a fearless, uncompromising lexicographer sticking his neck out.
- p. 112: We had witnessed this assimilation of American English in previous decades ([...], or *to fly off the handle*).
- p. 113: If you do want to try your hand at prediction.
- p. 114: It goes without saying that they were [...] instantly forgettable.
- p. 115: the economic strength of America pushed home this position.
- p. 117: *OED* editors could see that there was more to *American* than met the eye.
- p. 124: but you didn't end up with a complete picture.
- p. 127: But the winds of change could penetrate even Oxford.
- p. 130: or did the *OED* need to start earning its keep?
- p. 130: The smart money was on option two.
- p. 130: but we had our heads down, and some of us didn't notice that the world was changing.



- p. 130: It turned out that the future was opening up before our very eyes.
- p. 133: The *OED* was at the most alarming crossroads that it had seen for around one hundred years.
- p. 133: the University of Oxford itself regarded the dictionary as a white elephant.
- p. 134: In any case, our jobs were two halves of the same egg.
- p. 134: to edge my way into that side of the project slowly.
- p. 134: to get the project off the ground.
- p. 134: so that it might in due course decide on whether to give us the official go-ahead.
- p. 135: But you get the idea.
- p. 135: but he also had his finger on the editorial pulse.
- p. 137: we are actually looking at a mixed bag of words.
- p. 139: We put the word around in Britain and internationally in our search for partners.
- p. 139: or at least those in serious positions of power in the Press put the word around.
- p. 139: then we weren't worth the paper we were written on.
- p. 140: *Computer* (and its base, the verb *compute*) rings all the right bells for me.
- p. 141: Once we had international partners on board.
- p. 141: Tim Benbow (affectionally known as the Admiral), to keep us on track.
- p. 141: without a director to keep them on the straight and narrow.
- p. 141: I was enormously pleased when the news came down the line.
- p. 141: but the right answer seemed to be "wait and see, and don't call an end to print publication straightaway."
- pp. 141-142: my job was to call their bluff and to find the loose brick in the wall of obscurity they erected.
- p. 142: It was rubber-stamped in gold when he asked me to turn out a few times in the [...] cricket match.
- p. 142: I was at the edge of my competence.
- p. 142: The Shark [...] tried to encourage us to put on a good show.
- p. 143: he [...] lamented the loss of the windfall revenue that this Götterdämmerung of the *OED*'s heritage would precipitate.
- p. 145: Promises like that have a short half-life.

- p. 145: The Press had no stomach for other long-drawn-out supplements.
- p. 145: there was a chance that the dictionary might just pull through.
- pp. 147-148: We set about announcing the project [...] through [...] budget-free word of mouth. (You will see that the syntax of *word of mouth* is extraordinarily un-English; not surprisingly, it is a straight translation of the medieval Latin *verbum oris*, first recorded in English in the 1450s.)
- p. 148: It wasn't that I thought the Second Edition was the be-all and end-all of lexicography.
- p. 149: If you wait long enough, most things will make a comeback.
- p. 150: If we could pull it off, then dictionaries could take a quantum leap.
- p. 159: We revealed that Shakespeare was credited with augmenting the word-stock of English with [...] 146 phrases (*too much of a good thing*).
- p. 159: There were two gentlemen who led the pack.
- p. 170: When the *hue and cry* had died down, we wore T-shirts (more on pp. 170-171).
- p. 171: my new responsibilities should have alarmed me to the core.
- p. 172: sometimes they were just wrong and the computer hit a *brick wall* (more on pp. 172-174).
- p. 173: (yes, there is no end to the twists and turns that a lexicographer can take).
- p. 174: such as *banging your head against a brick wall* (known since 1697).
- p. 174: coming up against a *brick wall* (an impenetrable barrier).
- p. 175: when to put one foot in front of the other.
- p. 176: By now, we were battling hell-for-leather to meet our regular and draconian deadlines.
- p. 177: Just for a moment, we felt on top of the world.
- p. 181: we were unused to sticking our heads out of our offices to talk about it [the *OED*] in public.
- p. 182: We have the regional *poke* – a bag or sack, as in buying a *pig in a poke* (i.e., unseen) – in parallel with the standard *pouch*.
- p. 183: That might stop you in your tracks.

- p. 183: they were a little sorry and down-in-the-mouth that they didn't have their own historical dictionary of Japanese.
- p. 184: the Japanese public, who thought that the best things come in old and dignified packages.
- p. 186: was going to be put on hold.
- p. 187: the other things will, at some point, fall into place.
- p. 187: once a word like *lad* creeps into the limelight, it develops in ways we might not have expected.
- p. 193: the *OED* needed to wait its turn.
- p. 199: we would not be handed the future on a plate.
- p. 199: not even *we* thought that the Second Edition was the end of the road, but that it was really only a new beginning.
- p. 200: Researchers started to knock on our door, at first just in dribs and drabs (more on pp. 201-202).
- p. 208: Not everything can have a happy ending, but at this point we were deep in a tunnel with no sign of light ahead.
- p. 209: They would [...] loosen the institutional purse strings for us.
- p. 209: and with luck decide to give the enormous update project the go-ahead.
- p. 210: After three years in limbo, there was once again a palpable sense of excitement.
- p. 214: The idea was that we could save ourselves from dipping even a toe in the murky waters of Anglo-Saxon.
- p. 218: "They've been vetted, an' we're putting 'em through their paces" [quoting Rudyard Kipling].
- p. 219: In due course we did open the floodgates even further.
- p. 220: would benefit us and also benefit the dictionary in the long run.
- p. 221: but I had been happy to remain on the other side of the fence.
- p. 222: without upsetting the dictionary's apple cart.
- p. 223: so we knew our place.
- p. 224: If the committee liked what it saw, then it would give us the thumbs-up.
- p. 225: taking it [the *OED*] by the scruff of the neck and forcing it into the twentieth (or, soon enough, the twenty-first) century.
- p. 225: *Solvitur ambulando*, the Roams said: solving problems by practical experience.

- p. 227: a figure to lend his academic weight to the inclusion of such a taboo term.
- p. 227: Oxford was right there on the second bus.
- p. 227: Once it had nailed the lid down on that sense.
- p. 227: again tiptoeing rather gingerly round the issue.
- p. 228: "tell whoever it is to go fuck themselves."
- p. 228: "fuck the bloody thing."
- p. 234: But Joyce, too, was a sign of the times – he wanted to write what people said.
- p. 235: After that, we were in the realm of phrases and exclamations [...]. "Const. with various adverbs: *fuck about* [...]; *fuck off* [...]; *fuck up* [...]."
- p. 236: the stock of expletives and colourful expressions we know today (*to fuck around*, *to fuck over*), and a phrase with a preposition, *to fuck with* (someone).
- p. 236: phrasal verbs (*to fuck about*, etc.), exclamations and swearing ("go fuck a duck").
- p. 240: we had high hopes for this candidate.
- p. 242: We did manage to bring into (or back into) the fold several colleagues willing to give it a shot.
- p. 242: But we still needed more hands on deck.
- p. 243: we have to be very careful not to open the net too wide.
- p. 243: you just encourage anyone who loves words [...] to throw their hat into the ring.
- p. 246: We had several rules of thumb.
- p. 246: that is just playing into our hands.
- p. 253: Lexicography is a long hall, and you need to stay with it.
- p. 254: They were the cream of the crop.
- p. 254: Obviously we couldn't use all of them, but they were all on short odds.
- p. 255: that would only cause problems down the line.
- p. 255: it always left us on an up when the interview ended.
- p. 256: the expression "poisoned chalice" was heard in the dictionary halls.
- p. 256: whose job it was to steer the ship round any rocks that reared their ugly masses.
- p. 257: we scratched our heads whenever the output seemed problematic.
- p. 258: when the public thought they were probably writing to a brick wall in Oxford.

- p. 259: Hilary and I took one day at a time, relied on our instincts.
- p. 263: It's a rough ride, but [the letter] *B* doesn't throw anything unexpected at you.
- p. 264: which does make it something of a handful.
- p. 272: we were not going to pull this off by the year 2000.
- p. 273: they should sit on both sides of the fence where scientific vocabulary was concerned.
- p. 274: An example is worth a thousand words.
- p. 279: we sometimes needed the raw brainpower and ingenuity of a researcher to track a problem right down to earth.
- p. 282: Editors' ears were pricking up.
- p. 289: even they could see that the wind was changing.
- pp. 289-290: It was considered – by those in the know – that [...] we should concentrate on [...] subscriptions.
- p. 290: who might not still be on the staff (through old age or infirmity) to see the fruits of their labour.
- p. 291: some companies had done their best to clamber on to the bandwagon of the dictionary's success.
- p. 291: that the *OED* was disrespecting the potato by including an entry for *couch potato*.
- p. 293: Flavour of the Month [title of chapter twelve].
- p. 293: we have the Illinois Association of Ice Cream Manufacturers to thank for the expression *flavor of the month*. (more on pp. 293-294).
- p. 297: who was accused of some hanky-panky [...] with a male friend.
- p. 297: lexicographers should never accept anything at face value.
- p. 298: There are two sides to every question, as the old proverb wisely says.
- p. 298: The British government leaves the English language largely to itself, at least on the face of it.
- pp. 299-300: *Faute de mieux*, as we say when we are trying to get out of a tight spot and don't want to involve the English language.
- p. 301: (and so were on occasions prepared to let Britain off the hook).
- pp. 301-302: dotting the *i*'s and crossing the *t*'s on a European document.

- p. 302: the British will play the game and sign on for language evening classes.
- p. 302: After several years of shadow-boxing.
- p. 304: we could relax into automatic pilot.
- p. 306: the engineers couldn't go back to basics to fix it.
- p. 309: We didn't get the word willy-nilly from Paris or central France.
- p. 310: If they start bending the rules.
- p. 310: It's better and safer to err on the side of caution and conservatism.
- p. 314: That wasn't what got him the job on the *OED* by a long chalk. (more on p. 314).
- p. 315: So we went back to square one.
- p. 315: The sort of expression people might be interested in, apparently, was *the full monty*.
- p. 316: there was a fighting chance that the public might turn up gold.
- p. 316: The B.B.C.'s word hunt started to take shape.
- p. 317: when she told us yet another shaggy-dog story about the origin of *shaggy-dog story*. (more on pp. 317-318).
- p. 317: we were all [...] prepared to throw it out the window.
- p. 317: the expression first saw the light of day in a seaside town in East Anglia.
- p. 319: We had found this sort of informal children's term hard to pin down.
- p. 323: I'm not always the sharpest knife when I come to new ideas.
- p. 326: It was only a start, but the first step, as they say – to quote another trite proverb – is the most difficult.
- p. 327: It's something we need to work on, but we've travelled a little down that road.
- p. 328: we still needed to keep the editorial chariot on track.
- p. 329: I wouldn't see the update through to its completion, but I'd come to terms with that some years back.
- p. 330: it might be a good time to give someone else a chance to step into my editorial shoes.
- p. 330: You make the decision, and then you stick with it.
- p. 331: Nonchalant, non-interventionist observation was the order of the day.

p. 333: that with my family there was sometimes less than meets the eye.

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