How the Oxford English Dictionary was brought to life in a rustic 'scriptorium'

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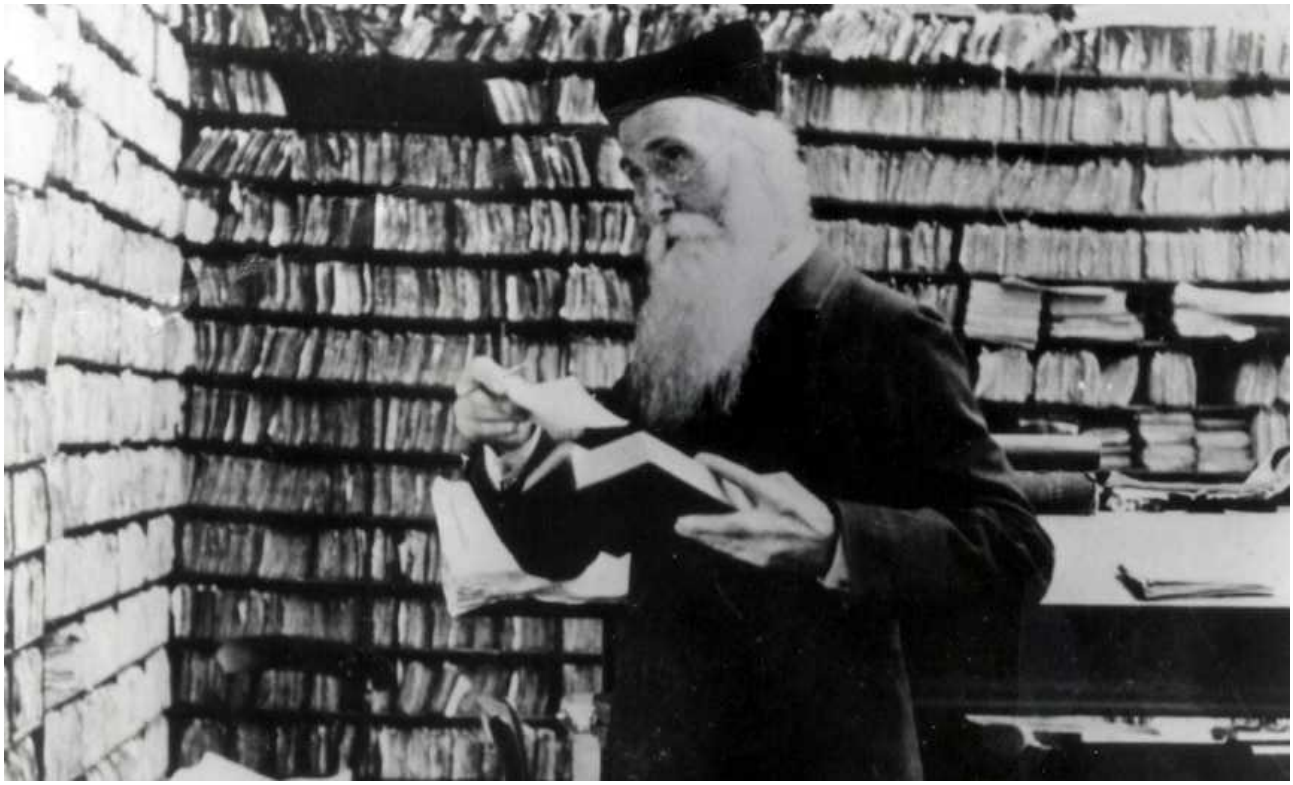


James Murray, surrounded by thousands of postcard-sized quotations, brought the dictionary to life in this "scriptorium".*(Getty: PA Images)*

Just to work from "A" to "ant" took the original Oxford English Dictionary team around 10 years.

They thought they'd reach "Z" in that time — but gathering definitions for hundreds of thousands of words was a mammoth task, especially in the 1870s without the help of technology.

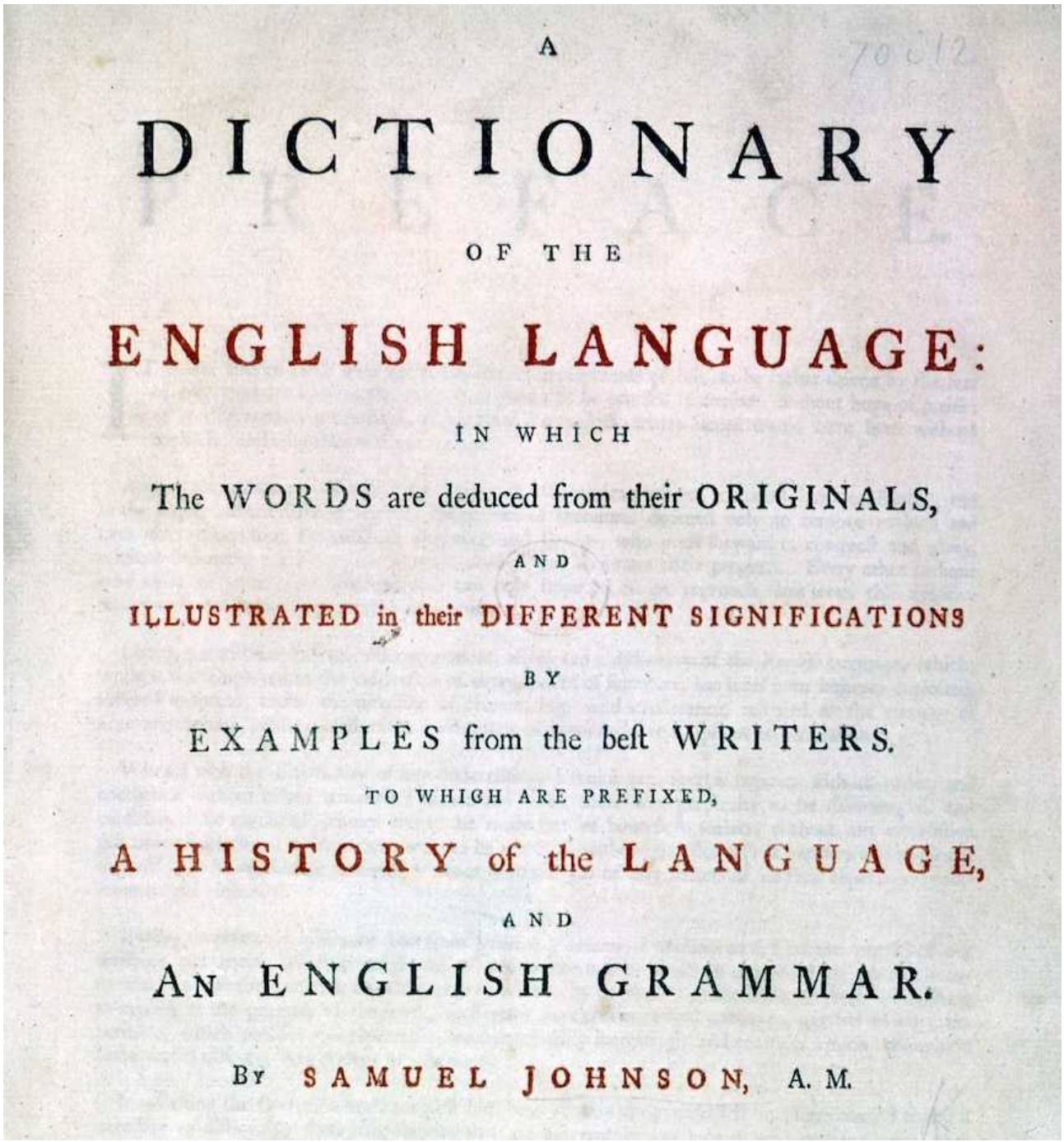
"It is akin to mapping the human genome. It was that big an enterprise," says author Pip Williams, who has researched the dictionary's history.

And it ended up taking another six decades to complete.

Working in the 'scriptorium'

There had been a "go-to" wordlist, Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language, since 1755.

But Williams says it included made-up definitions and idiosyncratic spelling, and was "completely incomplete".


A

DICTIONARY

OF THE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE:

IN WHICH

The WORDS are deduced from their ORIGINALS,

AND

ILLUSTRATED in their DIFFERENT SIGNIFICATIONS

BY

EXAMPLES from the beſt WRITERS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED,

A HISTORY of the LANGUAGE,

AND

AN ENGLISH GRAMMAR.

By SAMUEL JOHNSON, A. M.

Samuel Johnson's "incomplete" 1755 dictionary needed an update.*(Getty: Ann Ronan Pictures)*

The Philological Society of London decided they needed a better dictionary — one that documented every single word in the English language — and appealed to the Oxford University Press to fund it.

Editor Frederick Furnivall kicked things off, but his work didn't prove fast enough. So a few years in, James Murray, an old school teacher, took over.

Murray worked from his Oxford home, in a corrugated iron shed at the back of his garden that had the romantic designation of "scriptorium".

"That's where he and his team of lexicographers and assistants went every day to collate and to draft the definitions of every word in the English language," Williams says.

But they didn't work alone.

Postcards from around the world

Murray enlisted the help of thousands of ordinary people.

He sent a call-out to the public, in pamphlets distributed far and wide and republished in certain journals, asking people to find quotations from magazines, journals, books or newspapers containing words he and his colleagues were looking for.

People from all around the world began mailing tiny little slips, about the size of a postcard, containing references to words the dictionary team sought.

"They'd be stored in pigeonhole shells around the walls of the shed, that were specifically designed to hold the slips," Williams explains.

"Those examples — they were the evidence, essentially, of the meaning of the word."

Pip Williams likens creating the Oxford dictionary to mapping the human genome. *(Supplied)*

The team would sort the slips chronologically to determine the history of word, from the oldest example of its use to the most up-to-date.

"The lexicographers' job was to go through these textual examples of words, fashion meanings and show how a word might have changed throughout history. That's what would be put in as an entry in the Oxford English Dictionary," Williams says.

This is where the Oxford differentiates itself from Australia's Macquarie or Collins dictionaries.

"Those dictionaries give us some modern up-to-date meaning of a word, but they don't give us the history of the word," Williams says.

"Whereas the Oxford English Dictionary is a historical text, so it gives you the history of the word. It gives you the earliest known use of the word in text, which is really important.

"It takes you from maybe the 1530s all the way up to 2020."

If you were to look up, say, "pants" in a modern Oxford dictionary, you'd learn that in the 1800s the word was considered a "vulgar abbreviation" of pantaloons.

In the original Oxford, the word "pants" was described as a "vulgar abbreviation" of pantaloons. *(Getty: Westend61)*

Arguments and blow-outs

The rustic scriptorium, with its busy-bee lexicographers and garden surrounds, might sound idyllic, but it contained tension, too.

"There would be these perennial arguments about which words were worthy of being in the dictionary and which weren't," Williams says.

Murray wanted a dictionary that documented all words, including the colloquial or informal.

More than 400,000 words made it into the initially titled New English Dictionary on Historical Principles.*(Getty: Richard Baker)*

But the delegates of Oxford University Press — who were funding the project — were keen for a more efficient approach.

"They were constantly putting pressure on Murray to curtail the number of words that were in the dictionary," Williams says.

"They were saying, 'some words are not as important as others'."

Words 'lost to history'

Williams researched the original dictionary for her book, The Dictionary of Lost Words.

She was curious about what words were left out, given one specific criterion for entry.

"If a word wasn't written down, it never had a chance of being in the dictionary," she explains.

"How many situations, particularly pre-20th century, would there have been where people were using language in a very specific way, in a very specific situation — like the birthing room, or the laundry, or the scullery, or the coal mine?

"And those words, because they're not written down, because the people who use them are illiterate very often, and because there's nobody listening to them or wanting to record their experience, those words are lost to history, because they're lost to the dictionary."

She says this fact reveals a serious fallibility.

"We do not question dictionaries," Williams says.

"If you want to solve a Scrabble dispute, you go to the dictionary and no-one will argue about the validity of the dictionary's meaning of the word.

"And all of a sudden I thought, well, hang on a minute. You can argue it, because the original source is biased."

Should the dictionary be the unquestionable arbiter in a Scrabble dispute? *(Getty: Hindustan Times)*

And not just because it documents only the written word.

At the time of the first dictionary, the texts available to lexicographers — technical manuals, professional texts, literature and journalism — were mostly written by men.

"That first dictionary had to be a gendered text," Williams says.

"The original sources were mostly written by men and the people interpreting them were men; the people drafting the definitions were men.

"They had the power to exclude, and had the power to include."

But women were significantly involved in the compilation of the dictionary, Williams says.

"There were women assistants. There were women volunteers, but we don't know much about them," she says.

She is frustrated by the lack of recognition for these women — something exemplified by an event in 1928.

That year a dinner was held in London's Goldsmith's Hall to celebrate the completion of all sections of the dictionary — so auspicious an occasion the prime minister Stanley Baldwin presided over it.

In attendance were 150 men. Despite some women having worked on the dictionary for as long as 50 years, none scored an invite.

However, Williams says three women who had contributed invaluable work to the dictionary — Edith Thompson, Rosfrith Murray and Eleanor Bradley — were allowed to sit in balcony of the hall "and watch the men eat".

A constant evolution

The Oxford dictionary, which recognises that the English language is continually evolving, constantly collects new words and new meanings.

And words are never removed — they form part of the dictionary's picture of history.

"It's fascinating to see the trajectory of a word and [their] life cycles," Williams says.

"Climate emergency" was the 2019 Oxford Word of the Year — "carbon footprint" was 2007's — additions that confirm that the dictionary's wordlist is anything but static, and always revelatory.

Source