

A SELECTION OF DICTIONARIES

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GORDON J. VAN DE WATER

Samuel Johnson, after working on his fine book of words for several years, published it in 1755. It is titled ***A Dictionary of the English Language***. One of the definitions is “Lexicographer”, a word that essentially describes “Dictionary” Johnson himself ... “A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the significance of words.” Many think this was the first dictionary in English, but they would be wrong. Some 151 years earlier, in 1604, Robert Cawdrey published his ***A Table Alphabeticall***, with some 2500 entries in the first monolingual edition. He was a Puritan village priest and learned the value of plain English to reach his congregation. In 1580 he published his first book – essentially an instruction manual to teach others about the principles of Christian religion; and in 1598 he wrote a second book *A godlie forme of household government for the ordering of private families* ... which indicated his very organized and uncompromising approach to problems. A third book was published in 1600 which showed those organizational skills – *A treasurie or store-house of similies both pleasant, delightful and profitable, for all estates of men in generall*.

Then came his dictionary, very primitive by current standards, yet quite important during this time of expansion of the English language, combined with an increasingly literate and educated public. With only 2500 words defined, it was not what would come later, more complete dictionaries of many thousands of words. It is intriguing to read from his introduction of the book. Apparently it was intended to educate those who attended religious services as his introductory words indicate.

“Whereby they may be more easily and better understood many hard English wordes, which they shall heare or read in Scriptures, Sermons, or elsewhere, and also be made able to use the same aptly themselves.”

Cawdrey concludes his introductory words by advising those who wish to profit by his book that they must learn the alphabet. He offers detailed instructions to assist in this learning ...

“If thou be desirous (gentle reader) rightly and readily to understand, and profit by this Table, and such like, then thou must learne the Alphabet, to wit, the order of the letters as they stand, perfectly without booke, and where every Letter standeth: as in (b) neere the beginning, (n) about the middest, and (t) toward the end. ... Againe, if

thy word beginne with (ca) looke in the beginning of the letter (c) but if with (cu) then look toward the end of that letter. And so all the rest.”

Most of the definitions are one-liners – short and sweet. Here is a variety of defined words to illustrate Cawdrey’s labors.

Abba, father **abricot**, kind of fruit **admirall**, chiefe by sea, worthy **blattering**, vaine babbling **buggerie**, conjunction with one of the same kind, or of men with beasts **circumlocution**, a speaking of that in many words, which may be said in a few **driblets**, small debts **extirpate**, to pull up by the rootes **huckster**, marchant, or trade **impuritie**, filthiness, uncleannesse, dishonestie **leake**, runne out **maligne**, to hate, with purpose to hurt **nonage**, a childes time, under age **oracle**, a speech or aunswere given from God **rhetoricke**, art of eloquence **saboth**, rest **sensuall**, brutish, pertaining to the flesh, and bodily sence **tragedie**, a solemne play, describing cruell murders and sorrows **Zodiack**, a circle in the heaven, wherein be placed the 12 signes, and in which the Sunne is moved.

Though not as complete, enlightening, or even as humorous as later dictionaries were to become, Robert Cawdrey’s *A Table Alphabetical* was a beginning in codifying the English language.

A Dictionary of the English Language (1755) by Samuel Johnson. This was the first Standard English dictionary researched and essentially written by one man; a huge project with about 45,000 definitions. Johnson did have help in the form of literate men called amanuenses who copied out numerous quotations and supplied some additional definitions. But Johnson went through their work, eliminating or altering much of it. He also made many corrections and additions. It is essentially a one-man work and had a very long life, more than one hundred years, before even more complete dictionaries toppled it from a top position of usage. When it was first published there was much criticism as to etymology or even definition of words, but most users didn’t pay attention; the popular verdict was that this was *the* dictionary that was long overdue. It became the standard of structure for dictionaries, fixing the form of language, and providing definitions that made sense. It was also a basis for the ***Oxford English Dictionary*** which came along at the end of the nineteenth century and completed in 1928 which through many revisions, has never been surpassed as to completeness or readability. *Johnson’s Dictionary* is also the book that influenced and was used by authors and poets such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Wordsworth and Coleridge.

My library contains a remarkable facsimile copy of the first edition in 2 volumes published by The Folio Society, London in 2006. Measuring 16¼” x 10½” x 3”, each volume weighs a bit over 12 pounds, and is well-bound in leather to withstand

continual usage. It was issued in a limited edition of only 1000 copies, sold out quickly, and is now rather expensive on the retail market. Also on the shelves is a reduced size facsimile, complete in one volume and easier to use and read. However, for those who feel the cost of a facsimile is too much, there is a fine publication, *Samuel Johnson's Dictionary*, Levenson Press, 2002, edited by Johnson scholar which contains some 3100 words, with definitions, etymology, and illustrative passages drawn from the original volumes. A couple of short examples are given here to appraise Johnson's efforts:

dickens A kind of adverbial exclamation, importing, as it seems, much the same with the devil; but I know not whence derived.

Where had you this pretty weathercock? - I cannot tell what the dickens his name is my husband had him of. Shakesp. Merry Wives of Windsor.

What a dickens does he mean by a trivial sum? But han't you found it, sir? Congreve's Old Batchelor.

to peach v.n. [corrupted from *impeach*] To accuse of some crime.

If you talk of peaching, I'll peach first, and see whose oath will be believed; I'll trounce you. Dryden.

As is written on the fly-leaf of the edition edited by Jack Lynch the dictionary is "Learned, curmudgeonly, passionate and disciplined, Johnson infused his *Dictionary* with his distinctive mix of scholarship, authority and wit. For readers of Shakespeare, students of literature, interpreters of law and lovers of language, it is a browser's delight: an encyclopedia of the age and a dictionary for the ages."

Just as Johnson's authoritative dictionary was most revered in England, Noah Webster created his ***American Dictionary of the English Language*** after laboring on it for 21 years. It was published in New York in 1828, a giant two-volume work containing more than 70,000 words, all defined by Webster himself. He paid close attention to the way the language was actually spoken, eliminating or adding letters as necessary to create "American" spellings. The first edition which was published in 2500 copies, at first sold poorly. Once it was realized that this was a special dictionary for Americans, it took off, and today the English language has expanded to no one knows exactly how many words. The current Merriam-Webster edition contains about 470,000 definitions, with hundreds of new words becoming current annually.

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