GIVE THE WORD

DID VICTORIAN PUNDITS need less sleep than we do? Consider the facts. They tramped miles over brake and through briar before breakfast or after high tea. At either or both of which collations they would consume flitches of bacon, grilled kidneys, silver-sides of Scotch beef, a garland of mutton chops, kippers and bloaters in silvery shoals, and half a dozen cavernous cups of India tea. They sired more offspring than Jacob the Patriarch. They breathed Homer and Catullus, Plato and Vergil, Holy Scripture and Bradshaw's Railway Guide through their stentorian nostrils. When they voyaged, it was either through Turkestan with a walking stick and one change of flea powder or to the spas of Europe with a pride of steamer trunks, portable escritoires, tooled-leather vanity cases, and mountainous hampers. The Sunday sermons that they orated or listened to ran anywhere up to two mortal hours. A second service, with an average of eleven hymns, four homilies, and assorted benedictions, followed in the afternoon. After which there would be Mendelssohn's "Songs Without Words" at the piano, a reading out loud of two or three of the shorter epics by Clough or Tennyson, a charade featuring General Gordon's celebrated descent of a staircase at Khartoum in the grinning face of death.

Between which accomplishments our sages, scholars, bof-

17040.01_AtTheNewYorker.indd 306 8/19/08 11:42:56 AM

fins, and reformers would learn languages, sciences, literatures, and crafts at a rate and with a mastery to make lesser generations cringe. Victorian memories ingested epics, Biblical family trees, the flora of Lapland, Macedonian irregular verbs, Parliamentary reports, local topography, and the names of third cousins with tireless voracity. Victorian wrists and fingers wrote, without typewriters, without Dictaphones, to the tune of thousands of printable words per diem. Histories of religious opinion in six volumes, lives of Disraeli ditto, twelve tomes of "The Golden Bough," eighteen of Darwin, thirty-five of Ruskin. Trollope had composed his daily stint of several thousand deftly placed words before the professional working day had even begun. Dickens could produce a quire at a time with the printer's devil puffing at the door. But this was only the half of it; for after the public leviathans came the private immensities—diaries that run to thousands of minutely crowded pages, personal reflections, maxims, and exercises in pious meditation straining the hinges of marbled notebooks folio size, and, above all, letters. Letters of a length and deliberation of which we have no present imagining. Letters in the literal thousands and ten thousands: to Cousin Hallam on the Zambezi, to the Very Reverend Noel Tolpuddle concerning the thorny points raised in his nine addresses on infant perdition, letters of credit and discredit, epistles to every member of the family, to the beloved across the street. Written by hand. Very often with a first draft and a manuscript copy (no carbon, no Xerox). With scratchy pens. In the yellowish, straining aura of gaslight. In rooms getting chillier by the hour.

It is late 1866, and a position is to be filled at the British Museum Library. A twenty-nine-year-old bank clerk applies. He writes by hand, of course, in copperplate, and at some break in a ten-hour day. We need to hear him in full:

> I have to state that Philology, both Comparative and special, has been my favourite pursuit during the whole of my life,

17040.01_AtTheNewYorker.indd 307 8/19/08 11:42:56 AM

> and that I possess a general acquaintance with the languages & literature of the Aryan and Syro-Arabic classes—not indeed to say that I am familiar with all or nearly all of these, but I possess that general lexical & structural knowledge which makes the intimate knowledge only a matter of a little application. With several I have a more intimate acquaintance as with the Romance tongues, Italian, French, Catalan, Spanish, Latin & in a less degree Portuguese, Vaudois, Provençal & various dialects. In the Teutonic branch, I am tolerably familiar with Dutch (having at my place of business correspondence to read in Dutch, German, French & occasionally other languages) Flemish, German, Danish. In Anglo-Saxon and Moeso-Gothic my studies have been much closer, I having prepared some works for publication upon these languages. I know a little of the Celtic, and am at present engaged with the Sclavonic, having obtained a useful knowledge of Russian. In the Persian, Achaemenian Cuneiform, & Sanscrit branches, I know for the purposes of Comparative Philology. I have sufficient knowledge of Hebrew & Syriac to read at sight the *O.T.* and *Peshito;* to a less degree I know Aramaic Arabic, Coptic and Phenician to the point where it was left by Gesenius.

James A. H. Murray, son of a tailor in the small town of Denholm, near Hawick, in Teviotdale, did not get the job. But this did not, for even an instant, diminish his conviction that the intimate knowledge of almost anything a man will turn his soul and spirit to is "only a matter of a little application." From this conviction came the greatest intellectual monument of the Victorian age, and the achievement that, more even than the Authorized Version or Shakespeare, incarnates the genius of the English tongue: the Oxford English Dictionary, under James Murray's editorship. The story of its preparation is one of the sovereign adventures of the life of the mind. It is told, beautifully, by K. M. Elisabeth Mur-

17040.01_AtTheNewYorker.indd 308 8/19/08 11:42:57 AM

ray, Murray's granddaughter, in "Caught in the Web of Words" (Yale).

From earliest childhood in the one buzzing room of a border-country school, Murray had shown prodigious capacities in both the acquisition and the imparting of exact knowledge. When taking over a one-man academy in Hawick, the young Murray, then all of twenty, could confidently advertise, "In addition to the usual elements of education comprising English Reading, Writing, Grammar, and Composition, Arithmetic, Mathematics, Geography, Drawing, Ancient and Modern Languages, Mr. M. will make it his endeavour, to impart to his Pupils, both Male and Female, the leading principles of Moral Science, Political Economy, History, Natural Science, Human Physiology, and the other Branches of Knowledge which must form an important part of every Enlightened System of Education." Soon the Hawick pedagogue "could read in a sort of way 25 or more languages." More than individual talent and formidable assiduity lies behind this encyclopedic zest. Murray exemplifies dramatically the Victorian capacity for squeezing experience to the pips, for making every sensation yield organized knowledge. The wild flowers Murray saw on his upland walks became exact botany. His eye made a live cartography of the contours of moor and beacon. When he picked up a flint or a medieval potsherd, the context of local and national history was firmly in place. There was no waste motion in heart or brain. We find this omnivorous apprehension, at once sensory and abstract, in Browning's verse, in Carlyle's prose, in the prodigal architecture of Gilbert Scott. A tremendous confidence underwrites it, and a gymnastic of concentration and memory. By contrast, our schooling is planned amnesia, our work a hiatus between phone calls.

Murray was fortunate in that his passion for philology, for phonetics, for the organic development of linguistic forms, for dialects and the singular splendor of the English tongue precisely coincided with the start of modern English studies. In London, F.

17040.01_AtTheNewYorker.indd 309 8/19/08 11:42:57 AM

J. Furnivall, founder and editor of the Early English Text Society; Walter Skeat, the great Anglo-Saxon scholar; and Alexander Melville Bell, Alexander Graham's father and a pioneer in the scientific study and notation of phonetics, could spot Murray's phenomenal gifts. And though English society was rank-ridden to a degree, the eighteen-fifties and sixties brought an intense liberalization in scholarship and the sciences. In the new freemasonry of intellectual pursuit, Murray's humble origins and status, as a schoolmaster and as a correspondence clerk in the Chartered Bank of India, Australia & China, did not matter. The author of "The Dialect of the Southern Counties of Scotland" had made his mark. In Paris, the *Revue Celtique* took respectful note.

As Elisabeth Murray shows, the process that led to the conception of the Oxford Dictionary was halting and uncertain. Noah Webster had challenged and in many respects surpassed Dr. Johnson. In Germany, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, with a battalion of helpers, were at work on the great *Deutsches Wörterbuch*. At sixty-one, Émile Littré, philologist, educator, translator of Dante into medieval French, was about to launch on his thirteen-year task of producing a historical dictionary of the French language (another brilliant example of nineteenth-century work addiction). Only Britain lagged behind. And this at a time when empire glowed at high noon, and when conquest and commerce had flung the English language across the globe on a scale undreamed of by the ecumenical aspirations of Latin or the prestigious mundanity of French. Would Macmillan's undertake the task? Should it be organized and sponsored by the Philological Society, with Dr. Furnivall's busy but often bruising talents at the hub? Ought there to be a public subscription? Negotiations dragged as the cost and intricacy of the enterprise began to emerge. It was Henry Sweet, the original of Professor Higgins in Shaw's "Pygmalion," who perceived clearly that the best chance for "the English Dictionary" was its adoption by the Oxford University Press, and that if there was one man ca-

17040.01_AtTheNewYorker.indd 310 8/19/08 11:42:57 AM

pable of tackling the titanic project it was James Murray, assistant master at the Mill Hill School.

Murray hesitated. More than anyone else associated with the whole idea, he had some notion of the labors and vexations involved. He met with the delegates of the Oxford University Press in April, 1878. It was March, 1879, before an agreement was concluded. Even for that time, the terms offered to Murray were tight: a publication of seven thousand pages, to be completed at the rate of at least eight hundred pages every year. If this schedule could not be met an extension of up to five years was allowed, but with no increase in the editor's total payment of nine thousand pounds. Out of this sum, Murray, to a very large extent, financed his own staff, the physical plant needed to assemble the millions of word slips, and life for himself and a family that was soon to number eleven children. No one in that early spring of the forty second year of the glorious reign of Queen Victoria could have guessed that the O.E.D. would run to more than sixteen thousand pages, that it would cost three hundred thousand pounds to produce, and that neither James Murray nor his heirs would ever receive a penny's profit.

The trouble, to be sure, lay with the editor's majestic vision and his perfectionism. Murray had in mind a lexicon that would literally encompass the entire formal and substantive history of the English language, from its Anglo-Saxon, Latin, and Anglo-Norman root to the latest ideological, literary, journalistic, and scientific coinage. Illustrations of usage would he drawn not only, as they had been in Dr. Johnson, from eminent and approved authors but from that almost incommensurable spectrum of printed material—literary-technical, ephemeral, colloquial—which articulates the organic existence and echo chamber of a civilization. Moreover, the etymology and, where applicable, the dialectological genesis of every word were to be traced and set down according to the most rigorous standards of modern scholarship (standards evolved in Indo-European studies since the beginning of the nineteenth cen-

17040.01_AtTheNewYorker.indd 311 8/19/08 11:42:57 AM

tury and now tightened by the establishment, in which James Murray had himself been instrumental, of phonological analyses). Even with lavish financing and an army of trained auxiliaries, Murray's project would have been overwhelming. Instead, perfection had to be achieved on a shoestring.

Though reticent in her style, Elisabeth Murray speaks in detail of the "triple nightmare" that came to hang over Murray's labors and that almost brought the O.E.D. to a halt. Some five million word slips provided by volunteer readers had to be sorted and stored, to be used in compiling entries listing a word's earliest known appearance in the language and examples of those subsequent, changing usages through which its history could be shown. Both at Mill Hill and, after 1885, at Oxford, the name Scriptorium (soon famous throughout the literate world) stood for an inadequate, often damp, desperately overcrowded garden shed. At no point did the editor and his team have even the physical facilities that would, today, be regarded as minimal for any comparable enterprise. Soon, time became a harrowing factor. As the unprecedented scope and intended excellence of Murray's design began to emerge, the delegates of the University Press fretted. Would the monster see the light of day within the decade, within the lifetime of anyone associated with its inception? On this issue, Murray himself had been far too sanguine. Part I, or "A-ANT," only appeared in January, 1884; completing "B" took till 1888; "C" entered the world in 1895, three years after the date initially fixed for the publication of the entire dictionary. Naturally, the formidable proliferation of Murray's material and the concomitant delays in publication proved to be a financial hecatomb. Subscribers were mutinous, and as costs mounted, sales withered. By 1897, the deficit stood at more than fifty thousand pounds and was rising at the rate of some five thousand a year. Had anyone known that the O.E.D. would take fifty years to complete, the undertaking might well have been stopped.

As it was, James Murray had to fight a constant battle on two

17040.01_AtTheNewYorker.indd 312 8/19/08 11:42:58 AM

fronts. Though thousands of volunteers in Britain and the United States responded to his call for word slips, far too much of what they sent in proved to be sloppy and haphazard. Some sixty-five actual assistants worked on the dictionary during the half century of its genesis. Of these, no more than a handful showed the necessary philological skill and critical judgment. Time and again, sometimes at the galley stage, the editor had to redo his assistants' work himself. For their part, the almighty delegates turned out to be vexatious taskmasters. It was not until 1896 that relations between editor and publisher eased. It was only then that Murray won his battle for perfection and that the Oxford University Press began to realize what glory lay in its keeping. Again, Miss Murray's scruples are almost Victorian, but what we read between her sober lines is a tale of condescension all too characteristic of the treatment Oxford and Cambridge like to mete out to those who love them too well. No college offered a fellowship to Murray. No research post or lectureship was opened to him in England. Potentates and scholars and writers from divers corners of the earth might come to the Scriptorium in fascinated pilgrimage; to the nabobs of Oxford, Murray was a recalcitrant, perhaps unduly privileged employee. When his knighthood came, in 1908, the university took lofty content.

No wonder that Murray was often on the verge of collapse and resignation. In 1887 and again in 1889 and 1890, his robust health and tireless intellect almost broke. In November, 1892, the delegates communicated to their editor the dolorous insight that "the more they endow the Dictionary the slower proportionately it goes." Surely the number of quotations might be reduced, the range of technical words might be narrowed. (What excuse could there be for including so outlandish a term as "appendicitis"?) Murray was ready to resign. Rumors of a suspension of publication appeared in the press. Some future age, under happier conditions, might resume after "F." Public appeals were bruited, letters flew, subcommittees met. Murray won the day. But at a self-destructive

17040.01_AtTheNewYorker.indd 313 8/19/08 11:42:58 AM

price. As early as 1883, he had been working a seventy-seven-hour week—twenty as a schoolteacher, fifty-seven as a lexicographer and a writer, in longhand, of anywhere up to fifteen letters a day. During the summer of 1895, he was working between eighty and ninety hours a week. Looking back on his Sisyphean labors, he was to speak of "troubles and bitterness, of which the world knows, and need know, nothing."

Their fruit, of course, lies in the actual details of "A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles." But it is in the sheer statistics that lurk the drama and the vision. In Webster, the etymology of "black" takes five lines; in Murray, twenty-three (themselves a classic of concision). In the O.E.D., "do" occupies sixteen times the space allotted to it by Webster. Work on this ubiquitous monosyllable went on from Christmas, 1896, to June, 1897. The longest entry of all turns out to be "set," and here the treatment by Henry Bradley, who was to succeed Murray as the editor, amounts to little less than a miniature treatise on crucial social, philosophical, and scientific aspects of the Western imagination. "Point," on which Samuel Johnson had had his thoughts, consumes eighteen columns; "put," thirty. Personal touches intrude poignantly: sitting by his wife's bedside just after the birth of Elsie Mayflower, on May 1, 1882, and correcting the proofs of the first section of the dictionary, Murray adds to the first column of page 2, as an instance of "a" following an adjective preceded by "as," the words "as fine a child as you will see." Poets and novelists are a fruitful affliction. What in the world does Lord Tennyson mean by "balm-cricket"? Where has Mr. Thomas Hardy dredged up "terminatory"? Browning "has added greatly to the difficulties of the Dictionary," but has proved helpful over his wife's use of "apparitional." James Russell Lowell gives help with the mysterious "alliterates," which turns out to be a misprint for "illiterates." The Chief Rabbi is informative on "Jubilee." The India Office has a letter of 1620 with the first mention of "punch." From New York, *The Nation* gives help with political

17040.01_AtTheNewYorker.indd 314 8/19/08 11:42:58 AM

terms, so many of which are starting to come eastward across the Atlantic. An early entry for "jute" must be checked with the administrator of the Andaman Islands.

Letters to be written and answered by the thousand; readers' slips by the million to be solicited, filed, and crosschecked. James Murray, rather serenely, worked himself to death. In April, 1915, he was completing "T" and planning how to handle the mad swarm of words in "un-." He worked at the Scriptorium for the last time on July 10th, and died on the 26th. The O.E.D. was completed in 1928. But there can, of course, be no completion of such a job. Two massive volumes of a planned four-volume supplement have been published in the nineteen-seventies. And now there is talk of redoing the whole.

But, whatever the future, James Murray's monument and its derivatives—the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, the Concise Oxford Dictionary, and the two-volume edition in miniaturized format issued in 1971—stand matchless. They are the living history of the English tongue and the dynamic embodiment of its spread over the earth. The master wordsmiths in modern letters—Joyce, Nabokov, Anthony Burgess, John Updike—are Murray's debtors. Where speech is vital and exact, it springs from the O.E.D. and enriches it in turn. To anyone who knows and loves English, the old quiz question "What single work would you take to read on a desert island?" does not require even an instant's thought. The O.E.D. carries within its dark-blue boards the libraries of fact and of feeling. Dip into it anywhere and life itself crowds at you.

17040.01_AtTheNewYorker.indd 315 8/19/08 11:42:58 AM