

# “Life-Writing”: The Lexicographer as Biographer in the *Oxford English Dictionary*

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## 1. Biography as metaphor

Biography, David Lowenthal argues, is one of the most pervasive historical metaphors. As “our most familiar temporal experience”, it is the life-cycle which furnishes “metaphors for virtually everything in existence”. We would, he adds, “hardly know how to describe temporal change without referring to stages in our own lives: ‘infancy’, ‘youth’, ‘maturity’, and ‘old age’ are terms continually applied to nations and neighbourhoods, arts and sciences, rocks and relics” (1985: 128). Looking at contemporary acts of life-writing, we can easily see this to be the case. Recent biographies focus not only on human biographical subjects, as in *Steve Jobs: The Exclusive Biography* by Walter Isaacson or *Charles Dickens. A Life* by Claire Tomalin, but we also find highly successful biographies of, say, specific illnesses as in Siddhartha Mukherjee’s *The Emperor of all Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*, or of cities (as in Peter Ackroyd’s *London: The Biography*). Even honey, as in Holley Bishop’s 2006 *Robbing the Bees: A Biography of Honey*, can be investigated in the narrative frames of biographical research.

That words should share this metaphorical positioning—and that they too should have or be said to have biographies, or that entries in dictionaries should often be described as documenting the life-history of words—is, in this light, scarcely surprising. “A language has a life, just as really as a man”, Richard Chenevix Trench contended in *On the Study of Words* in the mid-nineteenth century (1853: 126). Trench’s imaging of lexical life is transparent in these early lectures. He discusses “the popular birth of a multitude of words” (1853: 118), and comments that “‘Mob’... and ‘sham’ had their birth in one of the most shameful periods of English history” (1853: 124). “One of the striking facts about new words, and a very signal testimony of their birth from the bosom of the people ... is the difficulty ... often found in tracing their pedigree”, he points out (1853: 136).

The salience of biographical thinking assumes still greater prominence in Trench’s famous lectures “On Some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries” which were delivered in November 1857 to the London Philological Society. Underpinning the theoretical foundations of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth *OED*), these also established the projected dictionary as a kind of collective biography. Unlike contemporary collections of “worthies” such as Francis Epinasse’s *Lancashire Worthies* of 1874 or Mrs John Sandford’s *English Female Worthies* of 1883, the dictionary, as an “inventory” of English (Trench 1860: 5), would intentionally extend life-writing to all words which were or had been in use. It is in these lectures that Trench firmly stresses the interdependence of biography and historical lexicography. “It is in every case desirable that the *first* authority for a word’s use in the language ... should be adduced”, Trench writes (1860: 29), constructing the dictionary-maker as a historian who is profoundly engaged in documenting the life of words. “As we hailed it in the cradle, we may also follow it, where dead, to the grave”, he states of the arc of existence which lexical usage can reveal, and the lexicographical processes which are, in turn, to be followed (1860: 41). Even if “a word’s birth may not be as important as a man’s birth”, nevertheless, as Trench continued, “a biography which should omit to tell us when he was born whose life it professes to record, would not, in my mind, be a whit more incomplete in its kind than is the article in a lexicon which makes no attempt to fix, where there are any means for doing so, the date of a word’s first appearance in the language” (Trench 1860: 43). “And as with birth”, as Trench affirmed, “so also with death” (1860: 43).

### 1.1. Lexical biography and the OED

As such, lexical biography—and the historical imperatives of rigorous biographical thinking—were presented as an important aspect of the “deficiencies” of English dictionary-making which the *OED* aimed to remedy. “Much remains to be accomplished”, Trench asserted (1860: 42), “in this matter ... of watching and noting a word’s final exit”. Similar neglect was evident in the attention—or lack of—which had hitherto been paid to the point at which lexical existence might be said to begin. “I doubt whether Johnson even so much as set this before him as an object desirable to be obtained”, Trench pointed out (1860: 29) with reference to the historical absences all too easily discovered in Samuel Johnson’s earlier work.<sup>1</sup> As both metaphor and process, the image of lexical biography was embedded in the the historical principles of the subsequent *Canones Lexicographici; or Rules to be Observed in Writing the New English Dictionary of the Society*, published by the Philological Society in 1860: “The greatest care will also be taken to fix as accurately as possible, by means of appropriate quotations, the epoch of the appearance of each word” ([Trench et al.] 1860: 4), as well as in James Murray’s later work as editor and editor-in-chief. The aim was “to give in the dictionary the life-history of every word in the language”, Murray explained (1880: 173); the dictionary “seeks ... to furnish a biography of each word, giving as nearly as possible the date of its birth or first known appearance” (Murray 1900: 47). Biographical tropes for the art of lexicography in the *OED* repeatedly recur in Murray’s Romanes lecture of 1900. This presented, in effect, a biography of English lexicography *per se*, revealing the evolutionary curves of change and adaptation. In the “supreme development” which the *OED* was deemed to represent (1900:49), biography was key, underpinning both the use of evidence and the ordering of facts. “[T]he Dictionary should be a biography of every word”, Murray made plain (1900: 50). It should “give quotations illustrating the first and last appearance, and every notable point in the life-history of a word” (1900: 46).

The sheer familiarity of biography as metaphor, as well as its pervasiveness, can nevertheless also serve to deflect our critical scrutiny in this context. Trench’s biographical thinking on the life of words, for instance, has long remained a commonplace of comment on the *OED* in popular and scholarly works alike, frequently being cited to illustrate the shift to properly historical thinking in English lexicography. While biography as a discipline has, of recent years, been keen to interrogate its own premises—seeking to probe what “life-writing” means, and examining what is (and what is not) involved in making a life, together with the ways in which biographer and biography might critically intersect in the life-histories which emerge—it is clear that the same attention has rarely been extended to its metaphorical applications. Biography as metaphor can remain rooted in a set of traditional preconceptions while, in terms of biography itself, an explosion of meta-biographical writing has stimulated both enquiry and productive re-evaluation.

“New studies are needed as each new age redefines itself, and fresh questions come consequently to be asked of biography”, Shortland and Yeo argue in *Telling Lives in Science* (1996: 2). In such acts of redefinition, “Our moral and epistemological beliefs...follow suit. So, too, do our ideas about what biography is, can be, and should do”, they continue. Biography as discipline is by no means static. As Bruce Redford likewise emphasizes in *Designing the Life of Johnson*, it is, in this light, no longer enough to see biography as a simple and historical process, isolated from other factors. “Ever since the genre began to flourish in the eighteenth century, readers and practitioners alike have tended to place biography firmly in the historical camp by insisting that its factual status takes absolute precedence”, he writes of the interpretative framing which dominated earlier work (2002: 4). Such approaches are readily supported by the citational evidence which Murray chose to include in the *OED*’s own entry for *biography* (in a fascicle published in 1887). “That Distinction or particular Branch of History, which is termed Biography”, states the illustrative evidence from Richard Fiddes’ *Life of Cardinal Wolsey* of 1724. Yet as Redford’s work on the biographical triad between Boswell, Johnson, and the emerging *Life*

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson’s comment (“it will be proper that the quotations be ranged according to the ages of their authors; and it will afford an agreeable amusement, if to the words and phrases which are not of our own growth, the name of the writer who first introduced them can be affixed ... By this method every word will have its history, and the reader will be informed of the gradual changes of the language, and have before his eyes the rise of some words, and the fall of others” (Johnson 1747: 31-32 )) suggests, however, that Trench was mistaken in this respect.

of *Johnson* forcefully explores, biographical writing is much more than this. “A successful biography both *reflects* a contingent reality (which can be verified outside the text) and *creates* an internal reality of its own”, he declares (Redford 2002: 4). Biography as process moves beyond the simple recital of facts. “To write a life is to design a life”, as Redford instead stresses (2002: 5).

In ways which have important repercussions for biography as metaphor too, the biographer does not, in this view, simply act as handmaid to history, narrating a non-negotiable list of facts. On the contrary, the biographer is, of necessity, forced to filter, mediate, shape and design. And since not all can be told, certain aspects must be omitted or silenced, while other aspects are brought into the biographical foreground. Which aspects these are can depend on the act of life-writing itself, as well as the writer of the individual life. The fact that not only Boswell but, on the current tally, well over 250 writers have designed a life of Johnson acts, in itself, as a neat corrective to popular beliefs that biography can, in any sense, be definitive. Biography, the act of writing lives, instead negotiates a range of possible pathways in which the stance of the writer, his or her ideological assumptions, as well as the point at which the life is told will all affect the life as eventually narrated. Outside the rhetoric of history, in which lexical biography is often placed, stands therefore a range of other ways in which life-writing can be seen.

### 1.2. *Biography and its re-interpretation*

The utility of opening lexical biography in the *OED* to the same processes of scrutiny can therefore seem attractive. While the figurative sense of *birth* was analysed with precision by James Murray in *OEDI* (“Of things: Origin, origination, commencement of existence, beginning”, here as part of an entry in the fascicle *Batter–Boz*), fundamental questions about the utility—and meaningfulness—of such models in the writing of lexical “lives” have tended to remain unaddressed. How illuminating, we might ask, is it really to see the dictionary as a kind of collective biography, a lexical equivalent perhaps to the contemporaneous *Dictionary of National Biography* (which began publication in 1885)? What considerations—and problems—underpin the writing of a successful lexical “life”, and how might we tell? Moreover, if the word can act or be made to act as biographical subject, and the lexicographer as biographer, what, in essence, does this mean in terms of the interpretative trajectories which result?

While images of “life”, “death”, and “birth” are clearly attractive in creating a narrative of lexical existence, they can, as Murray pointed out in his own later lectures to the Philological Society, also create certain difficulties. It is, from the outset, important to note that Trench’s fondness for biographical metaphors in envisaging the *OED* can, for example, elide a number of complexities which seem to render life-writing and lexicography less than compatible. Birth as one aspect of this overarching biographical metaphor could, in particular, often seem awry. Words, as Murray rightly argued, were often used for twenty or thirty years before they emerged in the print record on which a dictionary on historical principles must depend. The facts of linguistic usage, and the fallibility of the evidential record which might be available at the point of editing, could necessarily render the very notion of lexical birth strikingly opaque. “The written instance is, in most cases, evidence not that the word was coming into use, but that it was already established and known to readers generally”, Murray stated (1884: 517).<sup>2</sup> The occasions when a writer helpfully announced the act of lexical generation were few and far between. They can, of course, occasionally occur. “It [*sc.* the House of Commons] has not got the element of time. It is smitten, if I may coin a word, not with an anachronism, but an achronism—viz. the absence of time”, as R. Lowe stated in the *Daily News* in 1877, here in a form of words which duly inaugurates the “birth” of this form as it appears in the relevant *OED* entry (here in both *OEDI* and the revised text of *OED Online*). Yet even announcements of this kind can prove fallible in the light of further research. “The denunciations ... which have been published are all of them so purely political, so purely agitational—if we may coin a word”, a statement which appears in the *Morning Star*

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<sup>2</sup> Trench had, in fact, already conjectured that lexical “birth” might need to be subject to considerable revision (“Every lexicographer must be content to be often set right here, and to have it shown that earlier authority existed for a word than that he assumed the earliest, till thus by repeated corrections something of an approach to complete accuracy in this matter is attained” (1860: 29)).

in February 1866, signals, at least intentionally, a parallel act of lexical creation, and a confident point of onset which was, in turn, duly confirmed at the beginning of Murray's original entry for *agitational* in *OEDI*. As the revised entry for this word in *OED Online* confirms, "birth" has, however, now retreated by over twenty years.<sup>3</sup> The word was by no means coined anew in 1866, but merely reused. Tracing words to the "cradle", even when provided, as here, with apparent confirmation of the act of generation, can be fraught with complexity.

More usual therefore, in terms of lexicography, is a sense of marked approximation in Trench's "register of ... birth" (1860: 29) which, in reality, repeatedly sets lexical life-writing apart from the expectations we might conventionally bring to biography. As we can see in the *OEDI* entry for *flabbergasted*, for example, the lexical biographer can be forced to negotiate the problematic border between written and oral history. Evidence of "birth" appears in an article headed "On New Words" which had appeared in the *Annual Register* for 1772: "Now we are *flabbergasted* and *bored* from morning to night". If this can be used to provide written authentication such that it can be cited in the dictionary (and at least something of the early life of *flabbergasted* thereby documented), the quotation itself clearly refers to indirect oral testimony. Censuring the affectations of fashionable lexical innovation, the word is not so much "born" as used (and condemned) in an act of reportage. And this, in itself, relies on what is essentially deferred and indirect evidence—a fact which importantly seems to confirm Murray's rather than Trench's sense of lexical birth, and the difficulties (and elisions) that this kind of metaphorical positioning can bring. The actual moment of generation remains elsewhere, unknown and unspecified. If "birth" remains a lexicographical ideal, its realization is often relative and approximate, open to question, revision, and the hazards of the evidence which was available at the point of writing.

Other examples of this uneasy metaphorical positioning are not hard to find. We could, for instance, turn to Johnson himself for an antedating or earlier date of birth for the adjective *fugitive* in the sense "Of a literary composition (occas. of a writer): Concerned or dealing with subjects of passing interest; ephemeral, occasional". While "birth" in the *OED* is dated to 1766 (in Christopher Anstey's *The New Bath Guide: or, Memoirs of the B-r-d Family*: "At least, when he chooses his Book to increase, I may take a small Flight as a *fugitive* Piece"), it was in fact used by Johnson in the 1740s in writing his *Essay on the Origin and Importance of Small Tracts and Fugitive Pieces* (1744) which originally prefaced the *Harleian Miscellany*. Birth recedes by twenty-five years; in 1766, the word is not in its infancy (and Trench's "cradle") but well into its mid-twenties. Yet, in terms of lexical biography, such processes are common. That words should gain extra decades before their point of ostensible onset had been envisaged by Murray from the beginning. If he shared (and, indeed, participated in) the rhetoric of biography, he was, as he repeatedly affirmed, all too aware of its limitations. Earlier dates might well be found for over fifty per cent of the entries in the first edition, he warned the Philological Society. Life-writing for words (old and new) regularly came with caveats which rarely attended the biographies narrated in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. As in entries such as that for *drab* (sb.), even the very notion of "identity" can present potentially irreconcilable challenges. In the "biography" of *drab* given in *OEDI* (in a still unrevised section of the text), sense 1 is specified as signifying "A dirty and untidy woman; a slut, slattern". Sense 2 is "A harlot, prostitute, strumpet". Before sense 3, which relates to salt-making, and sense 4 ("A small or petty sum (of money); esp. in *drips and drabs*") we are told: "The following are probably distinct words". Here the lexicographer is clearly unsure, from the available evidence, whether we are still dealing with the same person at all. In terms of our metaphor, do we have one biography—or three?

### 1.3. *The register of birth: ghost words and nonce words*

Telling the biography of words can therefore suggest a process which, while undoubtedly familiar (and familiarised), is, on closer examination, by no means always happy in its consonances, as well as one which has, through time, certainly been productive of a number of habitual confusions among dictionary-users who—contrary to Murray's often expressed reservations—tend to assert with

<sup>3</sup> See *OED3 agitational* (adj.), in a revised entry dated September 2012.

confidence that a word certainly came into use on a given date, based on the kind of neat linear narrative they apparently see before them in the entries of the dictionary. This is not, however, to say that biographical thinking is entirely without utility. As the writer Hermione Lee stresses of the biographical process, for example, “Biographers have to treat all testimony with scepticism and care. Untruths gather weight by being repeated and can congeal into the received version of a life, repeated in biography after biography until or unless unpicked” (2009: 7).

Such axioms of biographical scepticism—and the resistance to received wisdom in life-writing, whether in metaphorical or more literal domains—usefully intersect with Murray’s implementation of the historical method and his determined probing of previous assumptions about particular words and patterns of word-development. “Every word shall be critically investigated, and every statement verified”, as he stressed in a lecture to the London Institute in November 1910 (MP/JAHM/Lecture to London Institute (ms): 33). In terms of the biographical inventory which results in the dictionary, this could, paradoxically, also lead to the creation of a new category of (non)-existence—or to what lexicographers and assistants on *OED1* came, in yet another act of metaphorical birth and generation, to call *ghost words*. Here biographical scepticism, and the contesting of received wisdom, were both vital. Provided with testimony in a range of other dictionaries, such “ghosts”—those words which have apparently been “born” and, as a result, recorded—occupied an entirely spurious existence (see Skeat 1886; Mugglestone 2005: 51–3). *Adventine*, for instance, which was first attested in Johnson, was, as the processes of critical life-writing in the *OED* confirmed, really *adventive* (“That comes from outside or from some external source; extrinsically added; extraneous; foreign”). An error in transmission—reading *n* for *v*—had created a “word” which was recorded in a range of subsequent dictionaries, but for which genuine evidence of its life-history and use was entirely lacking. *Crevet*—variously iterated as headword by lexicographers such as Edward Phillips, Nathaniel Bailey, and, in the nineteenth century, by George Crabb in his *Universal Technological Dictionary* (1823)—was likewise revealed to be *cruset*, meaning “crucible”. Lee’s unpicking of “untruths”—presented as integral to good biographical enquiry—neatly aligns with the concerns of historical biography in the *OED* where a rigorous insistence on first-hand testimony and use, often succinctly—and successfully—dispelled the fallacies of “received English” of this kind.

We could likewise argue the utility of biographical thinking (and the genuine advances in the lexical “inventory” the *OED* would bring) in the documentation of the lexical still-births of usage—as in entries for those words which, in another metalinguistic birth linked to the first edition of the *OED*, Murray came to denote by *nonce words* (“a word apparently used only ‘for the nonce’, i.e., on one specific occasion or in one specific text or writer’s works”).<sup>4</sup> Here the arc of birth to death is necessarily truncated. The specification of this temporal curtailment was seen as another important aspect of the historical methodology of the *OED*; again in contradistinction to earlier works, it thereby aimed to distinguish systematically between forms which did indeed exist through time in wider usage, and forms for which usage was markedly restricted, and indeed potentially confined to a single occasion.

A useful example here can be found in sense 1 of *nepotically* (“In a manner characteristic of a nephew”) where, as the evidence confirms, “birth” and “death” are simultaneous: “They have made me so sleepy that I must (say) Goodnight ever yours most nepotically”, as Byron wrote in a letter in February 1815. In this instance then, it can be relatively straightforward to track a word’s “birth”, and indeed, in Trench’s image, to “follow it to the grave”. For *nepotically*, they neatly occur at the same time. Yet even for nonce-words, some hesitation might be voiced. In fact, as the scrutiny of dictionary annotations and revisions can reveal, lexical birth—and lexical age—can, in other instances, seem strikingly flexible, again depending on the information one has before one at a given point in time, as well as upon the interpretive thrust one might choose to deploy. Here too, the biographer and the biographical subject intersect in ways which can affect the lexical life as eventually depicted. “Why not nonce-word. Has any-one but Pres[ident] Jefferson used it?”, as Fitzedward Hall, one of the most valuable critical readers on the *OED*’s first edition, argued in the margin of the relevant proof-sheet alongside the drafted entry for *fraternation* (“fraternization”).<sup>5</sup> “1846 J. E. Worcester *Universal Dict.*

<sup>4</sup> See the relevant entry in the *OED*.

<sup>5</sup> References to the the *OED* proof sheets (and annotations on them) throughout this chapter refer to the as yet uncatalogued proofsheets of the original *OED* in the OED Archives at Oxford University Press.

*Eng. Lang.* (citing Jefferson); and in mod. Dicts.”, as the accompanying evidence proclaimed. If the facts, such as they are, are ranged on one side, the role (and decision-making) of the biographer is also clear. Henry Bradley (the editor of this section) errs on the side of caution, citing secondary evidence in which Jefferson’s words remain unconfirmed and unlocated, and labelling the form “rare-0” (“a word known to exist but of which no example has been found in a non-dictionary context”, as Robert Burchfield (1989:89) later explained). Hall advocates a different type of life, in which Jefferson’s reported words might be deemed to authenticate a one-off use. As in Redford’s acts of “design”, the entry is shaped in one way and not another, while a range of other potential interpretations also arguably remain. Was *fraternation* used by Jefferson, and is it a nonce-word, limited by such use, as Hall argued? Or was it perhaps another type of “ghost”, not really used at all? Tracking the biographical process reveals the hesitation and doubt which can lie behind the printed text. Similar hesitations litter the original proofs, as under *gardening* where an original sense 1b (attested in the *Pall-Mall Gazette* in 1892), suggested an application in cricket: “I daresay you’ve noticed every batsman has done some gardening. What Sherwin called gardening was the patting down of the little roughnesses which occur on a cutting-up pitch”. In this instance, a marginal annotation which suggested nonce-status (“? Is this not an individual sense”) would result in the decision to reshape the stated life entirely. *Gardening* in the printed text would instead move seamlessly from sense 1 (“The action or occupation of laying-out or cultivating a garden; horticulture”) to sense 2: “grounds laid out as gardens”. Testimony of both birth and death disappear with reference to the original sense 1b.

#### 1.4. Following words to the grave

Images of death—at the opposite end of the life of words—present still other biographical challenges. “But what makes a word obsolete, more than general agreement to forbear it? and how shall it be continued, when it conveys an offensive idea, or recalled again into the mouths of mankind, when it has once become unfamiliar by disuse, and unpleasing by unfamiliarity”, as Johnson had earlier queried (Kolb and DeMaria 2005: 107–8). Johnson’s sense of hesitation on this matter, and his wide-ranging revision of obsolete as a label in the fourth edition of his dictionary, can be all too plain (see Mugglestone 2007–8). Yet for Trench, as we have seen, tracing the word to the grave emerged as another desideratum for the writer of lexical lives, as in his admonition that “not to note ... the time of its extinction, seems in its measure as serious an omission as in the life of a man not to tell us the time, when that can be ascertained, when that life was ended” (1860: 43).

Trench nevertheless clearly also felt compelled to acknowledge the pragmatic difficulties which lay behind his chosen metaphor in this respect. As he concedes “When I say that this is desirable, that this is to be aimed at, it must of course be allowed at once that it is difficult, nay, impossible ever to affirm that we have adduced the *latest* instance of a word’s use” (1860: 41). The conditionality of “when that can be ascertained” remains perhaps the most telling element in the metaphorical positioning which is at work here. If *nepotically*, with some degree of certainty, is able to be temporally confined at both ends of the spectrum, so to speak, the act of following other words to the grave, as in Trench’s recommended narrative trajectory, can be decidedly problematic.

The lack of a reliable method for determining lexical “death” poses particular difficulties in this respect. The problem of “agreement to forbear it” as a factor in obsolescence (as earlier raised by Johnson above) was, for instance, unexpectedly pertinent in the attempt to ascertain the end-point of a range of lexical biographies in the *OED*. A prime example here is the verb *fray*, where agreement was by no means reached between Murray and his co-editor Bradley. Questions of forbearance (and whose forbearance) could also be marked. Sense 2 of *fray* (defined as “To frighten or scare away”) was, for example, labelled “*Obs. exc. arch.* by Bradley in editing this section in the first edition of the dictionary (here for the fascicle *Frank-law–Glass-cloth* which was eventually published in April 1899). *Fray*, he decided, was no longer in use except as an archaism, as indeed in the final citation given within the entry (which was taken from Henry Manning’s *England and Christendom* of 1867: “We should have to answer to the Good Shepherd, if so much as one of His sheep were frayed away from the fold by harsh voices”). Meanwhile, in a later alphabetic section of the text (*Hod–Hywe*, which would be published in July 1899), Murray conversely continued to use *fray* as part of his living, and conspicuously non-

obsolete, defining vocabulary. Sense 10 of *huff*, was therefore defined as “to fray by calling *huff*” where “fray” is unmarked and is, equally clearly, being used without intended archaic resonances. Here the nature of the biographical subject, and the rightful point of demise, proffers two contradictory narratives, and two contradictory aspects of “design”. At least in the proofs, *fray* attains a death in life, or life in death quality—if it is dead at one point, it is unexpectedly resurrected at another. If, as Yeo and Shortland state, the “central promise” of biography is “to tell the truth about a life” (1996: xiii), which truth, we might ask, is right?

Lexicographical biography in this particular case would in fact veer uncomfortably close to euthanasia, at least in the published record of the text. Here *fray* is declared to be obsolete (except in archaisms), and this becomes the closing statement of its own biography in this respect. Murray’s complaint to Bradley, asserting a rather different point of view, was, conversely, silenced in the interests of textual consistency. “My impression is that *fray* is the ordinary word for ‘to frighten away birds by shouting or with a rattle all over rural England. It is *my* natural word for this” (MP/[n.d]/1897)), as Murray had argued to Bradley. Far from being obsolete, it was, he contended, a core element of his, and others’ usage. Nevertheless, the definition which confirmed *fray* as a still living and indeed “ordinary” subject was revised and rewritten. *Huff*, “To scare away by calling *huff!*”, the published text states. All traces of “fray” are removed. Bradley gets what was, in effect, the last word on its fortunes and subsequent history. Only in archival evidence for the dictionary is an alternative narrative maintained in which the end-point of this sense is strikingly different from that proffered, and confirmed, in the published text.

## 2. Design and the life of words: telling the story

For *fray*, it is the biographer rather than the biographical subject who is, in fact, arguably the most salient element in the entry as it would eventually appear in the *OED*. As archival evidence, and the extant iterations of earlier drafts, continue to make plain, had Murray had been writing the biography of *fray*, the story would have been different and its labelling and orientation (as well as its use) configured in other ways. In this respect therefore, and precisely as Redford argues, contingencies of various kinds—internal and external—can and do impact on the nature of the biographical text. In the history of the *OED*, similar examples of agreement/lack of agreement can easily be found; debates on the validity of “obsolete” as a label or “archaic” or “slang” litter the pages of the extant proofs, contesting the ways in which the story is or might be told; pre-publication revisions of individual entries likewise readily reveal the latitude which may intervene in divergent acts of interpretation for individual words (see further Mugglestone 2000). If the *OED*’s framing rhetoric of history suggests the clear-cut and definitive, and the neat progression of a linear trajectory through time, the various negotiations which thereby take place repeatedly illustrate (and confirm) the difficulties of knowing—and telling—the life of words.

After all, as Virginia Woolf demanded as she sat down to try and write a life of Roger Fry, “How can one make a life out of Six Cardboard boxes full of tailors bills lovers’ letters and old picture postcards?” (Nicolson and Trautmann 1980: 6: 374). Writing lexical lives in *OED1* on the basis of five to six million citations, gathered through a vast programme of volunteer reading, necessarily offers an exponential increase in scale—of both material and potential difficulty. Telling things as they really were (the historical principle advocated by the German writer Leopold von Ranke, often regarded as the founder of modern evidence-based historical analysis)<sup>6</sup> or as in Franz Passow’s maxims on the need to allow the word to tell its own story (explored in the introduction to his *Handwörterbuch der Griechischen Sprache* of 1819) repeatedly proves more difficult than it might at first seem. “The theory of lexicography we profess is that which Passow was the first to enunciate clearly and put in practice successfully”, Herbert Coleridge, the dictionary’s first editor, had stressed (Trench 1860: 72). “Every word should be made to tell its own story”, Coleridge had confidently continued, citing and affirming Passow’s own maxim in this respect, even if, as Coleridge also made clear, lexical biography might

<sup>6</sup> This is articulated in Ranke’s *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535* (1824) in the Preface of which he explains his own historical methodology as based on determining “how things actually were”, with a close examination of original source materials. For further discussion, see Krieger (1977).

involve not only the documentation of “the story of its birth and life, and in many cases of its death” but also and “occasionally of its resuscitation” (Trench 1860: 72).

While Passow and von Ranke can both suggest a kind of historical determinism for biography—the evidence is there, the facts just need to be told as they are to reveal the “story”, and the “life” as lived—it conversely remains clear that a range of aspects of preferential narration could instead intervene in the processes of lexical life-writing. As in the lives of Johnson which appear in such multitudes after his death, a range of trajectories are perhaps possible for any one narrative of existence, even where the essential evidence remains the same. “We read about Johnson the enchained masochist”; Johnson’s “long and desperate struggle”; Johnson “haunted by dread” and “oppressed by bugbears”; Johnson “always at war with himself”; Johnson “lacerated” by “his mental illness” and thus “poised dangerously between control and madness”, as Howard Weinbrot has stressed of the diversities which mark Johnsonian biography. Weinbrot writes himself of Johnson’s happiness and sociability (Weinbrot 2012).<sup>7</sup> If shared facts and divergent interpretation dog the life(s) of Johnson, similar capacities for dissent can, in a similar way, all too frequently exist in dictionary-making and the life of words. While the underlying proofs of the original *OED* entry for *both* no longer exist, for instance, it is clear that its original life-history was written—here by Bradley—in a way which Murray rejected and revised. “I am sorry you could not accept my arrangement”, writes Bradley in November 1886: “it is not easy for two persons to come to the same conclusions exactly in such a case” (MP/23/11/1886). In terms of lexicography, Bradley’s words again reveal the salience of point of view, of the direction (and redirection) of the biographical lens, and the co-existence of a range of perhaps equally viable life-histories in which a given word might be presented.

In this particular instance, and at this date in the *OED*’s own history, we might, of course, see Murray’s emendations as part of the beneficial guidance which we might expect from a more experienced to less experienced lexicographer. “Your view is more likely to be right than mine”, as Bradley acknowledges in the same letter.<sup>8</sup> Yet, in reality, the same play of alternative biographies, and of written/rewritten, drafted/revise, created/contested entries for words, senses, etymologies, and evidence runs between different editors across the making of the dictionary. Johnson’s sense that “Chronology is the eye of history” (Redford 1992: 201–2) is clearly not enough. That Murray’s eyes can see a given biography in one way, while Bradley’s or Craigie’s see it in another is a staple feature in the forthright exchanges that extant archival records for the dictionary reveal. “How abject the failure is appears from the fact that *railway porter* can be illustrated only of date 1894, with the quotation it was a ‘railway porter’, the ... ineptitude of which might make the irreverent scoff”, as Murray wrote to Craigie in 1902 in relation to the latter’s drafted entry for *railway* and derivative words. “For whom and what purpose is it intended?”, Murray caustically demanded (OED/MISC/12/24). The entry was categorically rejected. In the first edition at least, this was one story which would not be told (even if biographical redress has since been provided in a later version of the text).<sup>9</sup>

## 2.1. Constructing the lexical life

As such behind the scenes information serves to confirm, the word does not, and of course, cannot tell its own story within lexicographical practice, in spite of the rhetoric of with which the *OED* was repeatedly framed. Instead, “choice”, as Johnson stated of his own methodology, “must be made out of boundless variety” (Kolb and DeMaria 2005: 74). The biographer of words (and in the case of *railway porter*, the editor-in-chief) takes a stand, selecting evidence, deciding on the number and limits of sense-division, the type and nature of citation, the number of citations to be included, or, indeed, the fate of the individual word.

<sup>7</sup> See Howard D. Weinbrot (2012). “Johnson Rebalanced: The Happy Man, the Supportive Family, and his Social Religion”. In Freya Johnston and Lynda Mugglestone (eds.), *Samuel Johnson: The Arc of the Pendulum*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 195–207.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Bradley was appointed in 1886 to assist Murray with the dictionary. He became an independent editor in 1888.

<sup>9</sup> *OED Online* (in an entry revised in June 2008) presents citational evidence running from 1839 to 2006. Craigie’s excised citation of 1892 does not, however, reappear.



Other aspects of the kind of historical contingency and design which, for Redford, contribute to the act of life-writing can be equally transparent in lexicography. The *OED*'s status as commodity—and ideally as profitable commodity—was another, if more pragmatic, factor which, at a range of points throughout the dictionary's making, acted to curtail the kind of biographical expansiveness which might initially have seemed desirable for a “definitive” text. Murray's stringency with respect to Craigie's elaboration of *railway* and associated compounds can, for instance, be seen to have its origins in dictates repeatedly impressed upon the dictionary with reference to the need for compression. “It appears to the Delegates there is a growing tendency to expansion”, Murray had been informed in 1896 by Philip Lyttelton Gell; “they would ask you particularly to impress upon the staff that time and expense seem to be more wasted in this than in any other direction” (MP/2/4/1896). If Gell (as Secretary to the Delegates) advocates pragmatic reduction on their behalf (an axiom which was in turn motivated by anxieties about the financial status of dictionary itself), the consequences for lexical life-writing also remain plain. *Leafy*, for example, enters the proofs of *OEDI* with five senses as part of its historical trajectory from birth. It ends the process of editorial revision with two. While its life-history might not be compressed in temporal terms, possible aspects of its narration are nevertheless removed from view. As the published entry confirms, we no longer have senses which specify “made or composed of leaves” or “abounding in leaves”, while we also lose associated nonce-words, as in the specification which had originally been provided for *leafyship*, a word used by the writer Leigh Hunt in 1818 and quoted in the early stages of life-writing for this entry. All, however, are deleted in the lengthy process by which the text moves from proof to final printed text. Similar is the entry for *garish* which undergoes a similar process of revision and deliberate reduction. The six main sense-divisions, and two sub-senses of the first revise of March 1898 are transformed into the four senses of the printed text which appeared seven months later.

Other acts of preferential narration can further disturb what we might term “the biographical eye of history”. If we look at the *OEDI* entry for *illustrate*, for example, conventional expectations of life-history are, in effect, turned on their heads. The sequential order of senses is counter to the historical evidence of citations. Confirmation of “birth” comes after senses which, at least in chronological terms, are rendered decidedly premature. Sense 1a (given as meaning “To shed light upon, light up, illumine”), is, for example, provided with evidence which begins in 1625. Sense 2 (“To make lustrous, luminous, or bright; to set off with bright colours; gen. to beautify, adorn”) is, however, earlier, with its first evidence of use deriving from 1592. Sense 4 (“To shed lustre upon; to render illustrious, renowned, or famous; to confer honour or distinction upon”) is, in fact, earlier still, being attested in 1530 in Palsgrave: “I illustrate, I bring to lyght or make noble or worthy”. Still more striking is the fact that what is overtly given as “the earlier use”, and attested from 1526 in the available evidence, appears in sense 1b (“to illuminate (the mind)”), following on from 1a in the narrative of the dictionary—but antedating it in the narrative of history and its evidence. Here the underlying (and structural) precept is that figurative transfers of usage cannot, by definition, come first. Life-writing is, as a result, made to work on a diachronic trajectory which can occasionally perplex, at least in terms of what we might otherwise expect from the strict terms of “historical principles”. Similar departures can be seen in a range of other words, as in *chagrin*. Sense 3 of the latter (“Chagrin, cark, melancholy, heaviness, anxiety, anguish of mind; also a disease coming by melancholy”) is attested in 1656 in both Thomas Blount's *Glossographia* and in Cowley's “Pindaric Odes”. Sense 1 (“A species of skin or leather with a rough surface: now commonly spelt SHAGREEN”) nevertheless ostensibly attests the word's “birth” twenty-two years later. Such instances are by no means rare.

Biography here arguably runs along particular prescriptive models, drawing on preconceptions of the ways a lexical life logically should have been lived, and on a particular modelling of change by which particular forms of semantic extensions “should” take place. Sense-division in *shabby* (adj), for instance, draws on citations from 1685 (as in the initial quotation of sense 1a: “That has lost its newness or freshness of appearance; dingy and faded from wear or exposure. Said of clothes, furniture, houses, etc.”); 1669 (which opens the sequentially later 1b: “Of persons, their appearance, etc.: Poorly-dressed, “seedy”), and 1679, which opens sense 2 (“Of persons, their actions, etc.: Contemptibly mean, ungenerous, or dishonourable. Often applied, in a lighter tone, to conduct which is less friendly or generous than one had hoped for”). At least in terms of modern biographical theory, such historical disjunctions might well be adjudged a case of “biographical treachery”. As Kelley and Brack, for

example, explain: “The modes of biographical treachery—to the subject and to the genre—are, of course, legion: unwarranted suppression or invention, the temptation to sit in judgment, slight juggling of dates, the placing of a crucial document or record of conversation at its most effective spot” (1974: 15).

While biographies and dictionary-making therefore both popularly share the diction of the “definitive” (“the definitive record of the English language”, the modern *OED* website proclaims; *The Definitive Biography* states the title page of David Crane’s 2012 work on *Scott of the Antarctic*), it instead often seems evident that the “definitive” (and the act of defining) will, at various points, instead prove highly malleable constructs. Even the entry for *biography* changes markedly through time. “The history of the lives of individual men, as a branch of literature”, as it was originally defined by James Murray in 1887 for *OEDI*. “The process of recording the events and circumstances of another person’s life, esp. for publication (latterly in any of various written, recorded, or visual media); the documenting of individual life histories...”, *OED Online* now states with marked gender-neutrality in an entry which was revised in November 2010. The changing orientation of inclusiveness presents yet another take on biography and the complex relations of internal/external contingency. Indeed, rather than the “definitive” (“Having the character of finality as a product; determinate, definite, fixed and final”), lexicography and biography alike seem impelled by a profound responsiveness to time and place, and the interpretative stance which might, for a range of reasons, be adopted.

### 3. The biographer and the biographical subject

Thinking biographically—and with an awareness of modern biographical theory—therefore perhaps remains most important in the ways it prompts us to be aware of these potentially conflicted relationships between biographer and biographical subject within, as well as outside, lexicography. Writing of biography, Hermione Lee articulates what has become a commonplace of modern biographical criticism: “We write from a certain position, constructed by our history, nationality, race, gender, class, education, beliefs” (2009: 12). “There is”, she affirms, “no such thing as an entirely neutral biography”. This was not, of course, a commonplace of biographical thinking in the making of the first edition of the *OED*, nor in its appropriation of biography as historical metaphor in narrating the lives of words. Yet in *OEDI* lexical lives readily play along particular ideological lines, by which dominant cultural images of gender, class, and race<sup>10</sup> emerge as significant in the interpretative strategies adopted. As in the *OEDI* entry for *biography* itself, women can be overtly occluded from the play of meaning. Focalisation is similarly androcentric in *filicide* (“One who kills a son or daughter; a slayer of his own child”), as well as, say, in *émigré* (“A Frenchman who has left his country for another; esp. one of those Royalists who fled at the French Revolution”). *Emigrée* does not appear. Nor, in an exercise of Victorian decorum in the first edition of the *OED*, do women apparently possess *flanks* (“The fleshy or muscular part of ... a man between the ribs and the hip”). We might note, too, an interesting socio-cultural divide in the defining metalanguage (and scale of negative positioning) of *fornicator* (“one who commits fornication”) and *fornicatress*, defined as “A woman addicted to or guilty of fornication”.

Presuppositions on the subject of language and class can likewise construct a range of culturally normative biographies. The fault lines of assumptions about “educated” and “vulgar” are, for example, plain in the socially-conscious etymology of, say, *genteel* in *OEDI*: “A few years before the middle of the nineteenth-century the word was much ridiculed as being characteristic of those who are possessed with a dread of being taken for ‘common people’, or who attach exaggerated importance to supposed marks of social superiority. In seriously laudatory use it may now be said to be a vulgarism”. *Flummox*, a nineteenth-century colloquial coinage, was, Bradley declares, also “vulgar” (even if accompanying evidence was derived from the *Cambridge University Magazine* as well as the *Pall Mall Gazette*). If Murray consigns *bloody* to “the lower classes” in a bit of biographical (and erroneous) social stereotyping (“now constantly in the mouths of the lowest classes, but by respectable people considered

<sup>10</sup> For discussions of cultural prescriptivism, race and the first edition of *OED*, see Mugglestone (2012).

‘a horrid word’, on a par with obscene or profane language”), this is not a class position which he intentionally shares. As the etymologies of *OEDI* can also disturbingly suggest, some births are clearly better than others. *Conjobble* is ‘vulgar’; a “newspaper word”, we are told of both *francophile* and *francophobe*. Presentation in each departs from the ideals of historical objectivity which Passow (and Murray) formally espoused.

Socio-cultural intimations of this kind can therefore disturb the historical positions (and rigorous impartiality) we might otherwise expect. “We are”, as Johnson stated in his “Life of Milton” (Mittendorf 2010: 118), “perpetually moralists”. The biographical “I” cannot, he argued, escape a certain point of view. Ways of writing the biographical subject in the *OED* can, in this light, repeatedly confirm not the intentionally objective stance of “history” (dependant on, and governed by, facts and their impartial narration), but the authored stance of biography in which cultural as well as personal predilections instead assume a role in the life-histories which emerge. As we have seen, alongside the rhetoric of history is the potential interpellation of the history-writer too. The cultural prescriptivism by which moral judgement—rather than lexical meaning—is conveyed in a range of *OEDI* entries is a case in point. The metalanguage of the “unnatural”, and its on-going revision ((see e.g. *catamite* (*OEDI*: “a boy kept for unnatural purposes”; *OED3*: “A boy kept for homosexual practices; the passive partner in anal intercourse”), *tribade* (*OEDI*: “A woman who practices unnatural vice with other women”; *OED2* and *3*: “A woman who engages in sexual activity with other women”); or *spintry* (*OEDI*: “a place used for unnatural practices”; *OED3*, still unrevised)) perhaps continues to tell us more about the nature of Victorian biography and the mutability of biographical processes than about the words themselves. As John Garraty (1958: 94) has argued, “An age that invented the verb to ‘Bowdlerize’ and considered ‘leg’ an indelicate word could not be expected to excel in biography”. It can, in instances such as these, be tempting to agree. What, after all, we might ask, are we really being told in the original biography of *gamester* as narrated in *OEDI* (“One addicted to amorous sport...; a lewd person, whether male or female”)?

Words can, in this respect, perhaps be all too human subjects, tempting one into subjectivity in the act of interpretation, in spite of the objective and historical credentials which the dictionary formally proclaims. If, for Johnson, the really good biographer was one who had eaten and drunk with the biographical subject, close contiguity with words in use, especially when usage involved a change in progress which one did not necessarily share, could, in lexical life-writing in the *OED*, hence reveal marked fault-lines between facts and interpretation. A note from Fitzedward Hall at the top of the first proof of *fortuitous*, dated 31 Oct 1896, is particularly illuminating in this context. *Fortuitous* = *fortunate* 1799 “A gross error, not worth recording, & so not sent”, Hall wrote. Documenting life as really being lived could be just as difficult—if not more so—than the apparent facts of birth and death. Here it is language attitudes (and the conviction of “error”) which imposes silence and, as a result, the censoring of a particular path of development. Similar is the rejection of semantic extension in *transpire* in the published text of *OEDI*, in spite of the wealth of accompanying evidence. “Misused for: To occur, happen, take place”, the relevant sense-division states. In such instances, biographer and biographical subject arguably come too close. We are again made to see change through a particular set of “mental eyes” which by no means observe with impartial objectivity. Passow’s ideals of lexical (auto)biography are left behind, while a corrective model of existence is proffered for those who consult the dictionary. Biography can be both more and less than we might conventionally expect.

### 3.1. *The utility of biography?*

We might therefore conclude, at least on one level, that biographical metaphors—pervasive, commonplace, familiar as they are—suggest, at first glance, little of the narrative complexities of lexicography and, indeed, markedly fail to do justice to the difficulties and challenges of lexical life-writing in which birth, death, and the very facts of existence repeatedly prove open to question. In the changing text of *OED3*, for instance, adolescence may be relocated to old age; other words prove not to have died at all. *Galaxy* as a verb (‘To gather together into a brilliant assembly’), was, for example, queried as a nonce-formation in the proofs of *OEDI*, declared ‘obsolete’ (with a single 1702 example), in the published text but is, in *OED3*, now merely *rare*, being provided with five examples spanning

1654 to 1995. As here, new information challenges earlier acts of life-writing and interpretation. Lexical biography seems hallmarked by its striking mutability.

On the other hand, the modern understanding of biography as a discipline which is responsive to its essentially historicist positioning—as something which not only tells a history but is also constructed by its own history and period of composition—can be intensely illuminating in our understanding of lexicographical process too. The retold lives in *OED3* reveal, of necessity, the historical contingencies, and assumptions, of a different era. As such, the language of “lust” by which *pandar* was originally defined is occluded (“a go-between between in clandestine amours; one who supplies another with the means of gratifying lust” states the entry in *OED1*; “a go-between in clandestine love affairs; a person who provides another with the means of sexual gratification”, the modern and revised text records) while other proscriptive and prescriptive moralities also fade from view (see Mugglestone 2012). The biographical subject is the same and different; the biographical lens has shifted focus and direction, being both more open and receptive, as well as aligned with the sexual tolerance which governs dominant ideologies in a more permissive age. Gender, class, and correctness have all changed configuration since their original Victorian incarnations, reshaping the lexical lives which are or can be told. Yet the “definitive”—both lexicographically and biographically—can nevertheless remain elusive, as future editors of the dictionary will undoubtedly confirm. Meaning, and its changing patterns of specification, once more return us to Redford’s important emphasis on the ability of biography to reflect, and construct in ways which are essentially (and inevitably) relative rather than absolute.

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# Selected Proceedings of the 2012 Symposium on New Approaches in English Historical Lexis (HEL-LEX 3)

edited by R. W. McConchie,  
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Minna Nevala, and Jukka Tyrkkö

Cascadilla Proceedings Project    Somerville, MA    2013

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Mugglestone, Lynda. 2013. "Life-Writing": The Lexicographer as Biographer in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In *Selected Proceedings of the 2012 Symposium on New Approaches in English Historical Lexis (HEL-LEX 3)*, ed. R. W. McConchie et al., 14-26. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. [www.lingref.com](http://www.lingref.com), document #2832.