

# Oxford English Dictionary News

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## Editorial

The *OED* has had many homes, from James Murray's first 'scriptorium' in the grounds of Mill Hill School in London to its present offices in OUP's main Oxford site. This issue of *OED News* features a report by Jesse Sheidlower – the first, I hope, of many – from the Dictionary's newest and most significant outpost, in the shadow of the Empire State Building.

The matter of Old English might seem as far removed from modern Manhattan as it is possible to get, but it does represent another frontier for the *OED*, as Anthony Esposito explains in his article on our expanding and improving coverage of Old English. This topic would no doubt have been of interest to J. R. R. Tolkien, who as

well as being an authority on Old English was for a while a lexicographer. In a year when his work as a writer of fantasy is reaching new audiences, it is perhaps appropriate to open this issue of *OED News* with a reminder of his contribution to the *OED*.

Peter Gilliver, Newsletter Editor and Associate Editor, *OED*

## J. R. R. Tolkien and the *OED*

Amid all the publicity surrounding this year's release of the film of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*, it has occasionally been mentioned that Tolkien was an English professor. What is rather less well known is that in 1919 and 1920, at the very start of his career, Tolkien worked on the staff of the *Oxford English Dictionary*; he later said of this time that he 'learned more in those two years than in any other equal period of my life'. Soon after my own employment on the Dictionary began in 1987, I decided to investigate just what Tolkien's contribution had been in that period.



As one of the assistants of Henry Bradley, the second of the four Editors of the First Edition of the *OED*, Tolkien worked on words near the beginning of the letter W. The first entry in the published Dictionary on which he is known to have worked is that for the noun *waggle*; he also worked on the verb, the main sense of which he defined as 'to move (anything held or fixed at one end) to and fro with short quick motions, or with a rapid undulation; esp. to shake (any movable part of the body)'. The great majority of the entries for which

slips of paper in Tolkien's distinctive handwriting survive in the *OED* archives lie in the alphabetical range *waggle* to *warlock*.

Some words, including *walnut*, *walrus*, and *wampum*, seem to have been assigned to Tolkien because of their particularly difficult etymologies. In the case of *walrus*, he wrote out many different versions of the etymology – six of which, remarkably, have survived in the archives thanks to Tolkien's habit of recycling discarded slips by turning them over and writing on the

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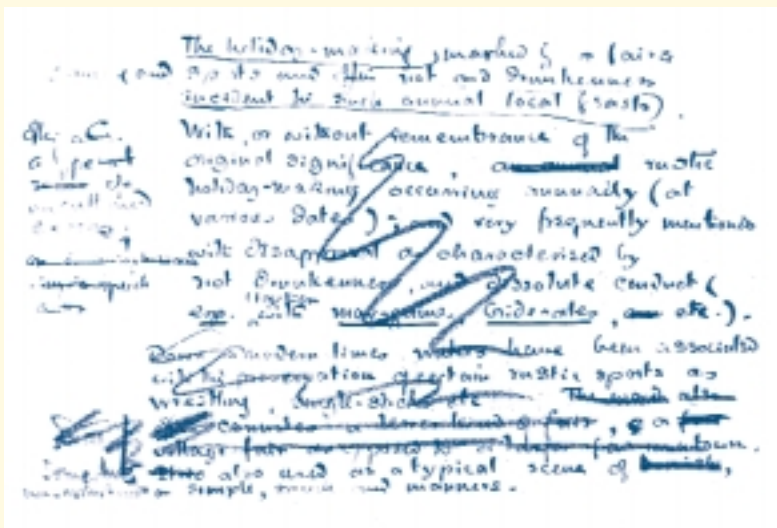
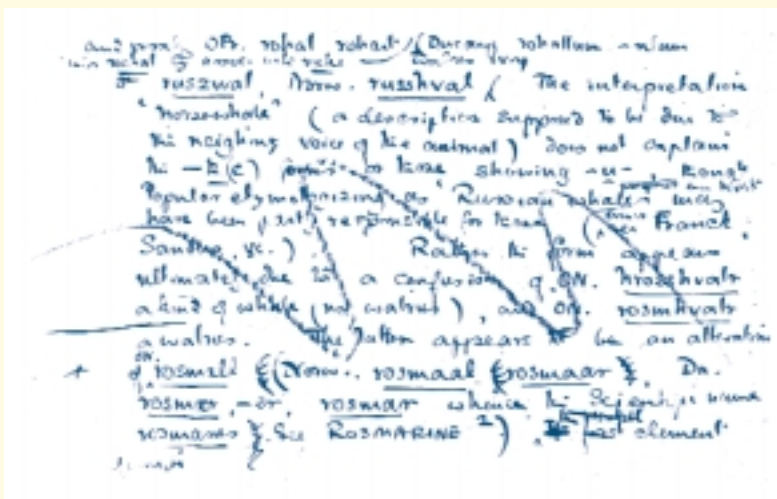
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other side. In fact *walnut*, *walrus*, and *wampum* were among the few entries singled out by Henry Bradley when the fascicle *W to Wash* was published in 1921 as containing ‘etymological facts or suggestions not given in other dictionaries’. Characteristically, Tolkien

over both. He relished the task of distinguishing the different garments denoted at different times by *waistcoat* (as he later grew to relish the garment itself); among the numerous drafts of his definitions of *wake* which survive are many colourful turns of phrase which



Discarded drafts by Tolkien of parts of the entries for *walrus* and *wake*

continued to puzzle over some of these etymologies long after he had left the *OED* to take up a post at Leeds University: a notebook survives in the Bodleian Library in Oxford containing many pages of notes on *walrus* written in the 1920s, and he may have lectured on this topic in Leeds.

Other words, such as *waistcoat*, *wake* (noun), *wan*, and *want*, posed rather different challenges. Teasing out fine distinctions of meaning is a key part of a lexicographer’s job, as is the selection of words to convey precisely the connotations, as well as the simple meaning, of a word; Tolkien evidently took great pains

he considered in his attempts to convey the spirit of a wake; and he was clearly fascinated by the change in meaning undergone by *wan*, which in Old English was applied to dark or gloomy things, and carried no suggestion of pallor or faintness. His biggest challenge, however, must surely have been *want*, one of the commonest of all verbs, which eventually required nearly thirty separately defined senses and subsenses.

Following his work on the *OED*, Tolkien of course went on to publish widely in the field of philology, beginning with his substantial glossary to Kenneth Sisam’s anthology *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose* (1921). However, in 1969 he became directly involved with the *OED* again in a very different way. At this time the second volume (H to N) of the *Supplement* was in preparation, and the word *hobbit* came up for consideration, as the evidence in the *OED*’s files showed that it had achieved currency. The editor of the *Supplement*, Robert Burchfield, had studied under Tolkien in Oxford, and knew him well: in an appreciation published in 1989 he recorded his gratitude to ‘the puckish fisherman who drew me into his glittering philological net’. Burchfield wrote to Tolkien to ask for his comments on a first draft of the Dictionary entry for *hobbit*. Tolkien’s reply was characteristically painstaking: he offered a definition which

was more than twice as long as that submitted by Burchfield, who subsequently published the longer version almost exactly as the creator of *The Lord of the Rings* had supplied it:

In the tales of J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973): one of an imaginary people, a small variety of the human race, that gave themselves this name (meaning ‘hole-dweller’) but were called by others *halflings*, since they were half the height of normal men.

In due course a few other Middle-Earth coinages also made their way into the *OED*, including *mathom*, *orc*

# The newsletter of the *Oxford English Dictionary*

(both in fact revivals of Old English words), and *mithril*. (The June 2002 update of *OED Online* features a revised entry for *mithril*, including earlier evidence of Tolkien's use of the word.) An entry for the derivative *orcish* has been prepared, and no doubt others will follow: for example, our files already contain examples of the

word *balrog*. Tolkien's impact on the English language continues unabated.

Peter Gilliver, Associate Editor, *OED*

*Much of the material in this article was included in a paper given at the Tolkien Centenary Conference in 1992.*

## The *OED's* North American Editorial Unit

**As the preparation of the Third Edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* gets fully under way, one of the major changes to the *OED's* editorial efforts has been the creation of an editorial office concentrating on the collection and editing of materials relating to North American English.**



North America, and the United States in particular, needs a separate editorial office for several reasons, beginning with the great importance of American English today. More so than at any time in history, American English plays a dominant role internationally, exporting words from technical fields to street slang and everything in between. And unlike many other English-speaking countries, the United States has no comprehensive historical dictionary whose research can feed into the *OED*.

The *OED's* North American Editorial Unit (NAEU) is ensuring that American terms can be edited in America by Americans who are familiar with the peculiarities of American English, its dialects, and its history. The extensive scholarship devoted to American English can be more efficiently monitored from here, and we stay in touch with leading scholars and current research by attending the major academic conferences.

For its first two years, the NAEU made do with a single editor, who had to handle everything, leaving little time for broad-based editorial attention to the *OED* text. In November, the office appointed Madeline McDonnell and Abigail Zitin as its first two Assistant Editors. Now that they have completed their preliminary training, they are able to make a substantial contribution to the *OED's* coverage of American English. Rather than merely glancing over the entries that are labelled 'U.S.', the NAEU now has the opportunity to review all editorial text, ensuring that American nuances are not missed through being unfamiliar to the British editor who originally reviewed the word.

The North American Reading Program (which staunchly clings to the American spelling of 'programme') has a longer history, having been originally set up in 1989; its

readers have examined a variety of sources that supplement the *OED's* previous reading. From the pre-1800 period we have looked at such non-literary texts as Thomas Jefferson's memoranda books, which record a variety of household expenses, legal jottings, and the like; the diaries of George Washington; and travel writings such as George Grieve's translation of J. F. Chastellux's *Travels in North America in the Years 1780, 1781, and 1782*. In more recent years, we have been concentrating on the period in the middle of the twentieth century that is not well covered by electronic databases. Texts from this period that we have examined include movie scripts (from Preston Sturges, Billy Wilder, Robert Riskin, and others); the published letters of Beat Generation figures Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs; short stories of Dashiell Hammett; and comic books. We have recently read a wide variety of modern Caribbean fiction, and hope to turn increased attention to Canadian writings soon.

The NAEU is also working closely with the new words group in Oxford, carefully reviewing the high-profile new words that are so often of American origin, and drafting new entries for words that have come to our attention. Some of the words we have drafted in recent months include *tipping point*, *gentleman's C*, *weaponize*, *collateral damage*, *blog*, *skeevy*, and *perp walk*.

Over the next few years, we hope to further expand the North American Editorial Unit. As our staff grows, we will be able to handle an even larger range of American material, researching and editing any entry for which there is American content. In future issues of *OED News* we hope to be able to report in more detail on how the NAEU is working to improve the *OED's* treatment of this important regional variety.

Jesse Sheidlower, Principal Editor, *OED* (North American Editorial Unit)

Words and phrases covered in the June 2002 *OED Online* update could help you to...

...**misread** a **missive** from a **Missourian**...    ...**mitigate** a **misunderstanding** over a **miser's mittens**...  
...**mistake mistletoe** for **mitrewort**...    ...aim a **missile** at a **mischievous mite**...



## Revising the coverage of Old English in the OED



**Old English (or Anglo-Saxon, as it is sometimes called) is the term used to refer to the oldest recorded stage of the English language, i.e. from the earliest evidence in the 7th century to the period of transition with Middle English in the mid-12th century.**

In character and structure, Old English is very different from the English that succeeded it. Like Latin, Old English has grammatical gender, a declensional system for nouns and adjectives, and a series of verbal conjugations. It has been remarked with some truth that 'the language of "Beowulf" would be as unintelligible to a man of Chaucer's time as it is to the modern reader who has not studied Old English'.

Partly for this reason, and partly because reliable editions of Old English texts had not at that time been produced in sufficient numbers, the original editors of the *OED* chose not to include the vocabulary of Old English in their dictionary as a matter of course. James Murray states the policy explicitly in the 'General Explanations' (1888) to the *New English Dictionary (NED)*:

The present work aims at exhibiting the history and signification of the English words now in use, or known to have been in use since the middle of the twelfth century. This date has been adopted as the only natural halting-place, short of going back to the beginning, so as to include the entire Old English or 'Anglo-Saxon' Vocabulary... We exclude all words that had become obsolete by 1150. But to words actually included this date has no application; their history is exhibited from their first appearance, however early.

So Old English material was to be admitted to the *OED* only when required to illustrate the early history of words used after 1150.

The Third Edition of the *OED*, while continuing to adhere to this policy, is bringing to bear the fruits of more than a hundred years of scholarship in the study of Old English. There is now a plethora of reliable editions of Old English texts, a comprehensive

dictionary of Old English is in progress (based in Toronto), and the whole corpus of Old English is now available in searchable electronic form. All of this has revolutionized lexicographical methods.

The revision of Old English material in the Third Edition will be thoroughgoing. Every single Old English quotation, whether already in *OED* or newly added, is being checked against the most recent reliable edition of the text, with new bibliographical details and additional context being given where appropriate. Dating of quotations has been radically revised, with *NED*'s assumed composition dates

replaced by a simple threefold division of all pre-1150 quotations into 'early OE' (up to 950), 'OE' (950-1100), and 'late OE' (1100-1150), based firmly on manuscript dates as agreed by the most recent scholarship.

One of the most exciting aspects of the wholesale review of Old English material for the Third Edition is the number of antedatings being discovered of words and senses for which *NED* gave only later evidence. Already in revised material published to date over fifty words have been pushed back beyond the 1150 threshold into Old English. Among some of the more interesting are the following (dates in brackets are former earliest attestations in the Second Edition): the name of the month *March* (c1200); the occupations of *marshal*

(1258) and *miller* (1362); and the names of the Roman deities *Mars* (c1374), *Mercury* (1340-70), and *Minerva* (1375). Sometimes the very margin of the antedating is itself startling, e.g. *meadowland* (1653), *mint* 'to make a coin by stamping metal' (1546), and the record holder so far, *mind* (a term for a Celtic lunula or crescent-shaped neck ornament), antedated to Old English from 1862.

Anthony Esposito, Senior Editor (Etymology), *OED*

**It has been remarked with some truth that 'the language of "Beowulf" would be as unintelligible to a man of Chaucer's time as it is to the modern reader who has not studied Old English'.**

The animal kingdom is well-represented in the June 2002 *OED Online* update: birds (**mistle thrush**), fishes (**Missouri sucker**), crustaceans (**mitten crab**), reptiles (**mitre snake**), and mammals (**mithan**).

## Appeals

Words or phrases which appear on the Appeals List are those currently being drafted or revised for the *OED* for which the documentary evidence is incomplete. Often these are slang or colloquial items which cannot be researched in specialist texts and are most likely to be found by a general reader in non-specialized or popular literature.

Usually the appeal is for an earlier example than our current earliest (e.g. 'antedate 1970' for a word for which our earliest example comes from 1970), but sometimes the appeal is for an interdating where there is a large gap in the *OED*'s quotation evidence (e.g. 'interdate 1589-1910'). Occasionally we ask for a postdating (e.g.

'postdate 1875'), if an editor feels that an item being revised is still current but has failed to find any recent examples through the usual avenues of research.

**boyf** (*boyfriend*) antedate 1993  
**control freakery** antedate 1990  
**go off on one** (*launch into a tirade*) antedate 1993  
**no-win** (*adjective*) antedate 1961  
**numpty** (*noun: stupid person*) antedate 1988  
**numpty** (*adjective: stupid, foolish*) antedate 1992  
**nut** (*catch for the string on a crossbow*) interdate 1702-1934  
**nutcracker** (*verb*) any examples

Please send submissions to [oed3@oup.co.uk](mailto:oed3@oup.co.uk)

## Interesting antedatings

Revision of the entries in the June 2002 *OED Online* update has revealed an earlier origin than previously thought for many words, including:

**miscellaneous** (antedated to 1615 from 1637)  
**misfortune** (1441 from 1494)  
**mishap** (c1225 from c1330)  
**miskick** (*noun*, 1885 from 1973)  
**mislaid** (1657 from 1781)

**mission** (1530 from 1598)  
**Missourian** (1761 from 1820)  
**mithril** (1944 from 1954)  
**mitten** (1287-8 from c1386)

## Quotable quotes

Thought-provoking snippets from the *OED* quotation files:

### *a stay of execution...*

1904 *Daily Chron.* 22 Feb., I suppose the bullet must have struck the steels in my corsets.

### *...under cover of darkness...*

1902 *New S. Wales Govt. Gaz.*, All persons bathing in any waters exposed to view from any wharf, street, public place, or dwelling house in the Municipal District of Manly, before the hour of 7.30 in the morning and after the hour of 8 o'clock in the evening, shall be attired in proper bathing costume covering the body from the neck to the knee.

### *...a solitary diner...*

a1470 *Malory Morte Darthur*, He sate at his souper alone gnawing on a lymme of a large man.

### *...and the benefits of miniaturization?*

1878 *Design & Work*, To use the electric light on a bicycle is very easy, if you can arrange to place upon a pillion behind you a large steam engine and boiler and a Gramme machine, the whole weighing only about 3 tons.

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