



Lost for Words: The Hidden History of the Oxford English Dictionary

Lynda Mugglestone

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The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* holds a cherished position in English literary culture. The story behind the creation of what is indisputably the greatest dictionary in the language has become a popular fascination. This book looks at the history of the great first edition of 1928, and at the men (and occasionally women) who distilled words and usages from centuries of English writing and “through an act of intellectual alchemy captured the spirit of a civilization.”

The task of the dictionary was to bear full and impartial witness to the language it recorded. But behind the immaculate typography of the finished text, the proofs tell a very different story. This vast archive, unexamined until now, reveals the arguments and controversies over meanings, definitions, and pronunciation, and which words and senses were acceptable—and which were not.

Lost for Words examines the hidden history by which the great dictionary came into being, tracing—through letters and archives—the personal battles involved in charting a constantly changing language. Then as now, lexicographers reveal themselves vulnerable to the prejudices of their own linguistic preferences and to the influence of contemporary social history.

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