

# HISTORY OF THE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY: THE EARLY YEARS

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## 1. THE ORIGINAL PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON<sup>1</sup>

Formed in response to the new comparative philology practised by a handful of scholars on the Continent in the 1820s, the original Philological Society held the first in a series of informal meetings at London University in the early 1830s. Word of the new continental philology, established primarily by Rasmus Kristian Rask (1787-1832), Franz Bopp (1791-1867), and Jacob (Ludwig Karl) Grimm (1785-1863), filtered through to London principally, though not exclusively, via Friedrich August Rosen (1805-1837), the first and only incumbent of a chair in Oriental Literature at London University (1828-31).

Partly due to the heightened interest in comparative philology and partly in pursuit of the 'Philological Illustration of the Classical Writers of Greece and Rome' (*PPS V*, 1854: 61), Cambridge classicists Thomas Hewitt Key (1799-1875) and George Long (1800-1879), together with German-born Rosen, established the Society for Philological Inquiries (subsequently renamed the Philological Society) in 1830. With the addition of fellow Cambridge scholar Henry Malden (1800-1876) in 1831, the founding principles behind the original and succeeding Philological Society were established.

The primary aims of the Society epitomised the growing and groundbreaking desire in early nineteenth-century British scholarship, not customary elsewhere, to combine the old (classical) philology with the new. Since few records remain in the archives, extant details about the original Society are vague. The whereabouts of the Society's manuscript minutes book, laid on the table by Key at a meeting of the present Society in 1851, are unknown (*PPS V*, 1854: 61). Despite the absence of this minutes book as a means of verifying the life dates and activities of the original Society, to all intents and purposes it ceased to exist in any structured way beyond the mid-1830s. Although Malden produced a paper in 1836, with the intention of reading it to a meeting of the earlier Society, it was ultimately delivered to the Society's successor in 1854. For six years or so, the Philological Society effectively lay dormant.

## 2. FOUNDING THE CURRENT PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Meanwhile a number of British scholars began to carve out their own philological niche, not as self-confessed followers of continental philology but as philologists in their own right. A handful of these scholars held ties both with the original Philological Society and its successor. Amid this new breed of British scholars was practising barrister, revered historian, self-taught Anglo-Saxon scholar, and founder of the current Philological Society, Edwin Guest (1800-1880). It was during the early

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier British Philological Society, based in London's Fitzroy Square, was founded in 1792 under the patronage of Thomas Collingwood of St Edmund Hall, Oxford.

phase of preparing his lifetime's work *Origines Celticae* (1883) that Guest first implemented his plan to establish a society for the advancement of philological inquiry.

To that end, a printed announcement bearing the name of Guest (Secretary *pro. tem.*) was issued in London on 9 May 1842. The statement comprised an open invitation for interested parties to attend a meeting on Wednesday 18 May at the Rooms of the Statistical Society, St Martin's Place, for the 'purpose of forming a Philological Society' (*PPS I*, 1844: 1). Listed on the reverse side of the printed invitation were the names of 101 gentlemen scholars and members of the clergy who had 'expressed their desire to become Members of the Philological Society' (*PPS I*, 1844: 1). Among those listed were Key and Malden, the renowned Anglo-Saxon scholars John Mitchell Kemble (1807-1857) and Benjamin Thorpe (1782-1870), and Charles Darwin's brother-in-law Hensleigh Wedgwood (1803-1891).

On 28 May 1842, *The Athenaeum* carried a notice stating that the preliminary meeting of the proposed Society had been held as planned and chaired by Connop Thirlwall (1797-1875), Bishop of St David's (Wales) and first and longest-serving President of the Philological Society (1842-68). By January 1843, the Society had elected 'five-and-twenty' designated Members of Council and the New Year commenced with Thirlwall in the President's chair. With the formal election of Guest to the position of Secretary (1842-53) and Wedgwood to the role of Treasurer (1842-67), the first official Constitution of Council was complete.

The aims of the new Society were almost identical to those sketched out by the old. Both societies intended to continue the established tradition of investigating the 'Philological Illustration of the Classical Writers of Greece and Rome', and both anticipated the investigation of the 'Structure, the Affinities, and the History of Languages'. It is no coincidence that the new Society's further aim to report on the 'recent progress and present condition of the study of the Structure, Affinities, and History of Languages in other countries' (*The Athenaeum* 1842: 463), outlined at the preliminary meeting in May, was omitted from the final version of the Rules for Government circulated at the first official meeting of Council on 25 November 1842 (*PPS I*, 1844: i-vi).

Works penned by philologists in other countries deemed noteworthy by Members were routinely presented at meetings of Council, and the Society continued to maintain superficial links with continental scholarship. Both Bopp and Grimm became lifelong honorary members of the Society (*PPS I*, No. 3 & No. 5, 1844) and, together with the work of Danish philologist Rask, the works of Bopp and Grimm are frequently cited in nineteenth-century editions of the Society's journal, primarily by authors concerned with establishing genetic relationships between the English language and cognate forms in various other Indo-European (IE) languages. Undoubtedly the Society was founded with the comparative enterprise in mind, but such was the volume of papers presented by Members that the need to report explicitly on developments elsewhere was redundant. At the outset, the Society concentrated less on the explicit emulation or advancement of continental philology and more on classical philology, etymology, the dialects of English, and non-IE ethnographical philology.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Philological Society continued to attract scholars of repute and lively character. Two of Britain's greatest nineteenth-century phoneticians, Alexander John Ellis (1814-1890) and Henry Sweet (1845-1912), were frequent contributors to the journal. Hailed as the man 'responsible for laying the foundations of phonetic studies in Britain' (Kemp 1995: 383), Ellis was an

excellent speaker and consecutively delivered the first three annual presidential addresses to the Society, the first of which was in 1872. Sweet was equally renowned by contemporaries for his role in the advancement of the new science of phonetics. Although Sweet's influence on the Philological Society was predominant during his presidential years (1875-76, 1877-78), he practically dominated the *Transactions* throughout the first decade of his membership. The Society enjoyed a period of heightened success in the 1860s and 1870s, principally via the voices of Ellis and Sweet. However, its greatest single achievement to date remains what has since become the foremost authoritative dictionary of the English language.

### 3. PIONEERS OF *THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY*

From inception to completion, preparation and publication of the Philological Society's *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles (NED)* was to span more than seventy years. James Augustus Henry Murray (1837-1915), the first official Editor (third editor *de facto*) of the *NED*, is traditionally painted as the hero of this chapter in the history of the Society. Although he deserves this accolade to some extent, Murray was the first to concede that any dictionary of English is 'the creation of not one man, and of no one age' (Murray 1900: 6-7). This is especially true of the Philological Society's *Dictionary*, the foundations of which were laid long before Murray was officially appointed Chief Editor by the Delegates of the Clarendon Press in 1879.

As early as January 1844, Cornwall Lewis suggested the Philological Society possessed the facilities for carrying out the compilation of a historical dictionary 'devoted to the archaic and provincial terms of the English language' (*PPS I*, 1844, No. 16, τ), and Council continued to receive letters from would-be lexicographers even when the dictionary project was up and running. In 1890, Alfred Snudge (portrait painter of Queen Victoria) informed the Society that, with the support of H.R.H. Albert Edward Prince of Wales (subsequently Edward VII), he had been writing his own 'literary amphi-theatre' of the English language since 1851 (Snudge 1890). Lewis, Snudge, and others had recognised the Philological Society as the ideal candidate for compiling a large-scale dictionary of English. However, it was not until Richard Chevenix Trench (1807-1886) (then Dean of Westminster, subsequently Archbishop of Dublin) delivered to the Society his momentous two-part paper 'On some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries' (Trench 1860 [1857]) that the Society's seminal plans to design a comprehensive historical dictionary of the English language received the support of the nation.

Five months prior to Trench's rousing discourse of November 1857, the Society had announced the formation of the Unregistered Words Committee (18 June 1857), the purpose of which was to gather all the words previously unregistered in any dictionary of English. The Committee comprised a Literary and Historical section (consisting of Trench, Herbert Coleridge (1830-1861), and Frederick James Furnivall (1825-1910)) and an Etymological section (consisting of Wedgwood and Malden). In July 1857, the Committee issued its first Circular (revised August 1857), and by the time Coleridge (Editor *de facto*) read the Committee's much awaited Report to the Society on 3 December that year, public support was nationwide. The Society's dictionary project was rapidly becoming a matter of national importance, and those involved were frequently lavished with praise for undertaking the production of 'a dictionary worthy of the great English nation' (*The Times* 1869).

In 1859, the Philological Society's *Proposal* for a new English dictionary was published and, on 16 January 1860, Council passed a resolution to produce a dictionary of four volumes, covering the entire English language from past to present. By 30 May 1860, Coleridge confidently asserted that in two years' time the Society would be ready to publish the first fascicle of its *Dictionary*. However, smooth progress of the project was hindered by a series of setbacks, not least of which was the premature death of Coleridge on 23 April 1861. Two weeks after presenting to the Society the first set of words he had collected for the letters A-D, young Coleridge sadly died from the consumption he contracted due to sitting through a meeting of the Society wearing damp clothing. When told he would not recover, Coleridge extracted a death-bed promise from Furnivall to oversee the project through to completion.

Furnivall died before the final volume was published but his concern for the *Dictionary*, which 'amounted to a passion' (Bradley 1911: 7), meant he was able to inspire in others a healthy level of interest at times when work on the project had all but ceased. Furnivall's skills were perhaps better directed toward his secretarial role for the Philological Society (1853-1910) than to the role of reluctant second Editor of the *Dictionary*. Nevertheless, it was Furnivall who persuaded Murray into working part-time on the project in 1876, when it looked as though the mass of quotation slips gathered by volunteers in the past two decades might be shelved for the foreseeable future.

Despite these and other teething troubles, the first fascicle of the *NED* was finally published in 1884, by which time many notable contributors were dead. Coleridge, Guest, Malden, and Key all died before the project had borne its first fruit. Just as Coleridge had lamented the prospect of not seeing the *Dictionary* through to completion, Murray and Furnivall were plagued by the same fear. Aware of his own impending death, Furnivall wrote to Murray following a meeting of the Society in April 1909 expressing his sorrow at having to miss the closing stages of the project. As Murray's friends and colleagues died one by one, he too was left to wonder which would come to an end first, himself or the project.

Murray died in 1915, thirteen years before the tenth and final volume of the *NED* was published in 1928. Although publishing rights were signed over to the Delegates of the Clarendon Press in the University of Oxford on 1 March 1879, overt links between the Philological Society and its *Dictionary* were ultimately severed in 1933 when it was reissued in twelve volumes under its official new title *The Oxford English Dictionary*. We need only consult the pages of the first volume, let alone the last and those in between, to appreciate the sheer amount of time and effort that went into producing a work on such a grand scale; a work that set out to be, and still remains, the world's leading dictionary of the English language.

#### **4. TRADITION AND MODERNITY COMBINED**

Edwin Guest and his colleagues could not have anticipated the enduring success of their modest undertakings. The Philological Society continues to flourish under more or less the same Constitution as it has since 1842, and the traditional foundations upon which it conducted its business then are the basic principles upon which it conducts its business now. Maintaining a traditional interest in historical and comparative linguistics, the Society frequently publishes papers relating to the structure, development, and varieties of Modern English. In addition, however, the Society has broadened its aims to take account of contemporary problematic or controversial

issues in language theory. With its combined traditional and contemporary outlook, at the turn of the twenty-first century the Philological Society remains the oldest and most enduring learned institution dedicated to the advancement of philological and linguistic inquiry in Britain.

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