

November 2007 marks the 150th anniversary of the reading of one of the most important papers ever to be read to the Philological Society: Richard Chenevix Trench's 'On some deficiencies in our English dictionaries', widely regarded as having created the impetus which ultimately led to the compilation of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

In fact the first seeds of this great project had been sown earlier in the same year, in June 1857, when the Society established its 'Unregistered Words Committee'. Trench, who had only joined the Society in March, was approached by its inimitable Secretary, Frederick Furnivall, about the idea of collecting evidence of English words and meanings which had been overlooked by two of the greatest dictionaries of the day: those compiled by Samuel Johnson (in its latest revision by Henry Todd) and Charles Richardson. The Committee had issued a circular inviting all comers to undertake to read particular works, examining them for 'unregistered' words and meanings, and to send in their evidence in the form of quotations extracted from the work under examination—essentially the same method followed in the collection of all the evidence for the *OED*, right down to the present day. The Committee was instructed to report on what had been found by those who volunteered at the Society's first autumn meeting on 5 November; the plan was then to publish a dictionary containing their findings, which would then serve as a supplement to Johnson and Richardson.

However, the Committee—consisting of Furnivall, Trench, and the philologist Herbert Coleridge—did not present their report in November. Instead, Trench had written a paper—sufficiently long that its reading had to be spread over two meetings—which, as well as describing in some detail the 'deficiencies' to which available dictionaries of English were prone, set out what Trench considered to be the ideal towards which such dictionaries should strive: an ideal which many of his listeners will have found radical. 'A Dictionary,' he wrote, 'is an inventory of the language [...]. It is no task of the maker of it to select the *good* words of a language. [...] He is a historian of it, not a critic.' He contrasted this concept with that which underlay most other dictionaries, such as that of the French Academy, namely the idea of setting a standard; the model he preferred was that of the great Greek dictionary of Liddell and Scott, which sought to record every known fragment of the language, irrespective of whether it was considered 'good' or 'bad' Greek. There was no reason, he maintained, why the same goal of comprehensiveness should not be aimed at in an English dictionary—although the task of collecting the evidence for such a work was undoubtedly enormous. 'If [...] we count it worth while to have all words, we can only have them by reading all books.' To do this it would be necessary to recruit an army of volunteers, to participate in 'this drawing as with a sweep-net over the whole extent of English literature'.

Such an army had already begun to be assembled: before the end of the year Herbert Coleridge could report that 77 individuals had come forward to collect evidence for the Unregistered Words Committee. But it soon became apparent that something grander than a

mere supplement to Johnson and Richardson was required. On 3 December the Society heard that 'a larger scheme, for a completely new English Dictionary, might shortly be submitted'; and on 7 January 1858 this scheme was formally approved. Trench, Furnivall, and Coleridge were appointed as the 'Literary and Historical Committee' of the new project. When (after various vicissitudes) the 'New English Dictionary' finally began to appear, in sections published by the Clarendon Press from 1884 onwards, it was described on its title-page as 'founded mainly on the materials collected by the Philological Society', and indeed came to be known in some circles, not as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but as 'the Society's Dictionary': a fact of which, one hundred and fifty years later, this Society can justly be proud.

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