

Anna and the *OED*

We didn't know that Anna was one of the greatest fans of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) – just quietly, in the background, for most of the time. My colleague Edmund Weiner and myself, then Co-Editors of the Dictionary, came to know her well in the early 1990s, when she was invited to join the *OED*'s Advisory Committee, a small group of senior academics with whom we met from time to time over several years to hammer out issues of high editorial policy, as the Dictionary was launching into its first full editorial overhaul for well over a hundred years.

As you would expect, Anna was full of ideas. Some came straight from her knowledge of early comparative philology: she was instrumental in our decision to reverse the policy of the First Edition of the *OED* to include reconstructed Indo-European forms in our etymologies. "These are intelligent guesswork, which has no place in a modern *OED*". In other instances she spoke up prominently on our preferred system of pronunciation, and whether we should standardly supply hypothetical historical pronunciations ("more guesswork"), or on the style of modern definitions and the wording used to describe obsolete terms ("ensure you have evidence to back these up"). In general, her observations were music to our ears, and helped to validate the complex editorial policy that eventually emerged.

As the 1990s rolled on dark clouds appeared on the horizon. The final policy went before the Delegates in 1993 for approval, which was essential in order to lock in the funding for our editorial vision. Needless to say, there were murmurings amongst the Delegates that financing might be better applied to other worthy projects on the University Press's wish list.

Anna was one of the Delegates responsible for literary and philological projects, and as the dark clouds threatened to turn into a hurricane the *OED* needed Anna's support. We held private meetings in Anna's rooms in Somerville to argue out possible approaches. We thought they were secret, but it's almost certain that the University and the Press understood clearly that strategies were being discussed.

Edmund Weiner and I attended to represent the editorial side (and were more or less unaware – or pretended ignorance – of the financial issues). Tim Benbow, then the organisational director of the *OED*, was there to bridge the gap between the editors and the Press management. And the meetings were chaired and managed by Anna, intensely aware that she, together with her partner on the Advisory Committee, Christopher Butler, would in due course need to argue our case in the scholarly free-for-all of one of the fortnightly Delegates' meetings.

With our 'secret' private meetings over Anna proceeded to the crucial Delegates' meeting, where the *OED* policy and budget would be picked over. We only heard rumours of how the meeting went after it had finished. Little did we realise how close the revision of the Dictionary came to being shut down. Anna faced a barrage of arguments on the business case, but in the end the respect in which she was held by her colleagues, and the weight of her arguments in support of the new editorial vision, won the day and the revision of the *OED* was approved as recommended.

Anna went back to her rooms in Somerville and got on with the rest of her life, but she has left a vital legacy which informs the work of updating the dictionary to this day.

JOHN SIMPSON  
(Chief Editor of the *OED*, 1993–2013)