

My Webster's

Introduction

First, a proclamation. I abhor direct dictionary quotation – to the point whereby I have in me an unwritten rule. I have never, and will never, outside of this paragraph, include the phrase ‘According to (insert dictionary of choice),’ or ‘(dictionary of choice) defines ____ as.’ The use of a dictionary definition in such a way is a writing crutch, and one that seems to me both lazy and unnecessary. This particular piece will include definitions only to illustrate the unique qualities of the document I have chosen to examine, and to compare entries from two editions of the same work, such that the reader can get a sense for stylistic change over the span of a century.

It is curious that the reference tool most Americans hold in highest esteem is the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED). It is perhaps less curious when you consider that Simon Winchester has published two bestselling books about the creation of this work, which he calls ‘a paragon, the most definitive of all guides to the language that, for good or ill, has become the lingua franca of the civilized modern world.’ (25) And surely, the facts surrounding the creation of this dictionary are quite remarkable in comparison to the history of the dictionary that sits before me on my desk – *Webster's New International Dictionary, Unabridged*.

But that is not to say that my Webster's, printed in 1910, lacks a historical richness or is less significant to me than the full, twenty-volume OED, a copy of which also resides in my personal collection. Indeed, my Webster is connected to my family, both present and past, and has taken on a very unique referent role, one that extends well beyond the words, maps, and other material between its leather covers.

Basic timeline of the dictionary and its evolution

Tracing the publishing history of any dictionary can be confusing, but Webster's seminal work has undergone enough changes in form, content, and name that a timeline is necessary to keep it all straight.

1828 – *An American Dictionary of the English Language*

-Two volumes

1841 – *An American Dictionary of the English Language, Corrected and Enlarged*

1843 – Noah Webster dies; Merriam brothers secure rights to publish revisions of the work

1847 – *An American Dictionary of the English Language, Revised Edition*

-Edited by Prof. Chauncey A. Goodrich (Webster's son-in-law)

-First 'Unabridged' Edition

1864 – *American Dictionary of English Language*

-Edited by Dr. Noah Porter (President of Yale)

1890 – *Webster's International Dictionary*

-Editor-in-Chief Noah Porter

1909 – *Webster's New International Dictionary, Unabridged*

-Editor-in-Chief Dr. William T. Harris (US Commissioner of Education)

-General Editor, F. Sturges Allen

1910 – My copy is printed, sewn, and bound in Springfield, Massachusetts

Today, of course, the name Webster is no longer under copyright. There are many 'Webster's' dictionaries, from a variety of publishers. It cannot be assumed that these works have any connection in form or quality to Noah's original. For the most part, a cheap dictionary is, well, a cheap dictionary. Caveat emptor.

What Noah Webster intended his Dictionary to mean to America

Noah Webster was born in 1758 in Hartford, Connecticut. A Federalist who served in the state militia during the American Revolution, Webster earned a law degree from Yale but entered the teaching profession instead. In 1806, he published the first American dictionary, *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*. His attention then turned to the creation of what was to become *An American Dictionary of the English Language*. He compiled some 70,000 words, and in the process learned 26 languages.

Unlike the reference works of today, Webster's dictionaries carried a deliberate bias. Though primarily created with the intention of standardizing American spelling and pronunciation, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* was also an extension of Webster's personal views on nationalism. P.J. Staudenraus, in an examination of Webster's dictionary as a 'personal document' wrote the following:

‘[Webster] saw in his dictionary an opportunity to strike a blow for cultural independence from Great Britain, arbiter of the English language, and a way to strengthen national unity. His preface proclaimed his zeal for domesticating the English languages and making it American.’ (194)

Consider an example provided by Staudenraus from the original dictionary – “*Patriotism* is the characteristic of a good citizen, the noblest passion that animates a man in the character of a citizen.” Or “*Predestination* is a part of the unchangeable plan of the divine government; or in other words, the unchangeable purpose of an unchangeable God” (198). Illustrations of this sort were widely praised in American review literature, and, unsurprisingly, deemed too radical for serious consideration in Britain (Staudenraus 195). Clearly, such proselytizing would cause the reference librarian of today to question the authority of a work. However, Webster’s politics are so much a part of his biographical identity that this zeal may have been necessary to accomplish the enormous task of compiling the first dictionary of American English.

The preface of my 1910 edition begins with another hint at the motivation behind Webster’s work. Compiled and published on the heels of the American Revolution, the dictionary followed a time where ‘the destruction of property, the deaths by disease, and the other fortunes of war that had come to the native population, had left a condition of poverty such as produces disaster to schools and the means of education’ (Harris Preface). As a teacher, Webster understood the role a uniquely American reference could play in the education of a new nation. He was ‘catering to the needs of a new kind of territory, rapidly expanding and hungry for educational guidance. His dictionary was not just a word-bible for the new frontier; it was also the repository of other equally valuable information in appendices like chronologies, weights and measures, currencies, and a list of all the post offices in the Union’ (McArthur 101). His previous publication, a speller published in 1783, was of a similar intention, combining elements of a primer, a simple dictionary, and a first reader. It became the most prevalent of all schoolbooks in America, selling over a million copies annually by the late 1800’s.

What the Dictionary eventually meant to America

Today, *Webster's Third*, as it is commonly known, is the 'go-to' dictionary for many reference librarians, particularly where spelling is concerned. In this it has certainly fulfilled Webster's idea of standardization. Webster initially believed that this standardization could be absolute, that his dictionary would 'freeze' the American language. The need for frequent revision softened this stance, and he realized that language could be 'described and influenced, but it could not be controlled' (Pack 45). Merriam-Webster has updated *Webster's Third* to accommodate new words through the publication of addenda, but the defining usage needs a complete revision, one that no longer reflects circa 1950's usage (Fairchild et. al 415). The last major revision was completed in 1961.

Did Webster's words engender a political and social solidarity as he had hoped? The success of the work would indicate that a new nation did embrace his vision of the language of the times, so perhaps this is a reasonable assumption. That his dictionary was instrumental in the creation of a publishing house that has become an 'arbiter of language;' a challenger in a role traditionally held by educational academies, is further proof of the political nature of his work (McArthur 101). Whatever the case, the name of Webster is forever linked with the dictionary in America, to the point where it often stands in for the very word itself. If you don't believe me, check your own Webster's.

What my copy meant to my uncle

My Webster's came to me from my uncle Terry. Terry, my mother's youngest brother, was very close to my family – closer than any other of my aunts or uncles. He was a frequent holiday and dinner presence at my home. In 1995, I recall picking up a gift from under the tree, one that was notable by its heft. There was no doubt that I was holding a book, and I was astonished to find an old, leather-bound dictionary inside the gift wrap. As it turned out, the dictionary had been in Terry's collection for more than a decade. He simply decided that it was time for the dictionary to change hands, and that my hands were, to his mind, the obvious destination.

Terry was, among other things, a collector. His apartment was filled with art – of such quality that even my untrained eye knew they were quite valuable. His wood floors were covered with Persian rugs he actually traveled to Persia to buy. And then, there

were the books. Terry owned quite a few dictionaries, including a two-volume Samuel Johnson's from the mid-1700's that he purchased in Great Britain, and held protectively in his lap the entire plane ride home!

Terry's love of dictionaries was no surprise to anyone who knew him. He was intelligent, well-educated, with a PhD in public health administration from the University of Michigan. He was a voracious reader, a cultured city-dweller, and a world traveler. Terry was also a sucker for the holidays, and very attuned to the idea of giving. He would spend whatever time and money it took to find the perfect gift for a friend or family member. Without fail, his gift would stand out as unique, beloved, and special beyond the traditional norms associated with such a social transaction.

What my copy means to me

I owe not one but two of my most treasured possessions to my uncle. A few years after Terry gave me the Webster's, I had an opportunity to purchase a full set of the *Oxford English Dictionary* at an extraordinary discount. Even so, the price was beyond my means at the time. I'm not even sure how Terry found out that I wanted to buy the dictionary, but a loan arrived in the form of a check just before the opportunity to make the purchase was to expire.

Terry passed away from cancer in 2000. He was the first and closest family member whose funeral I have had to attend. It is impossible for me to see or touch my Webster's without thinking about Terry—about his generosity, about the love he brought to my family and about all the significant events he was present for. On a sentimental level, the dictionary has become a personal document because it is a permanent manifestation of a loved one. This was an obvious connection, easily identified when I began to think about the dictionary and how it transcends the role of mere reference. Other connections followed.

I know exactly where the Webster's will be when I am ready to pass it on. Though I have three children, Keegan, the man in the middle, has already unwittingly laid claim to the dictionary. Two years ago, as I was getting ready for bed, my wife and I heard an unusual sound coming from the hallway outside of our bedroom. As parents, we are always attuned to any sound that bears investigating. The hallway in question was

just outside the bathroom, and Keegan, more asleep than awake, thought he had made his way to the potty. He promptly answered nature's call on the second shelf of a large bookcase. The Webster's was among the many books on this shelf, and quite fortunately, it was not in the direct line of fire – only part of the leather cover got wet. I tell myself that this can't be too stressful on the document, as there is no permanent stain or discoloration, and it turns out that urine has been used throughout history to tan leather (albeit much earlier on in the process!) (“Tanning”).

Keeping a 96-year-old dictionary out in an accessible location may seem unwise to some, who might cite Keegan's 'claim' on the dictionary as proof. However important the dictionary is as a link to my family, it is equally important to me as a dictionary. The fact is, I use the dictionary on a regular basis, and I have come to realize that I chose this source for myriad reasons. I have a very well developed vocabulary, so I don't need to consult dictionaries as often as some. When I do look up a word, it is often one that has fallen out of contemporary use. As such, the Webster's is a great place to start, contextually. If the entry I find seems incomplete or anachronistic, I then move on to my OED for comparison. Very rarely, I will have to check the current edition of *Webster's Third* at the library if neither of my own dictionaries can provide a conclusive reference.

All this might sound like a lot of work to confirm a spelling or define usage for a word, particularly when the internet has brought so much reference as close as the nearest wireless connection. To be honest, I never realized how much work it was until my seven-year-old daughter asked me one night why I was going back to the bedroom to pull down the dictionary. While I explained to her what I was doing, I had a bit of a revelation. I use the dictionary precisely BECAUSE the act requires me to put down my laptop, get up from my chair, and physically retrieve a book. I found that I derive pleasure from an event that requires me to slow down. This was something new, and something that required more thought!

Like many, I have become dependent on the speed afforded by technology. I find slow bandwidth to be agonizing; I memorize database menu options at work because I navigate faster than the machines can display my choices. In all this I find myself unnerved. Though far from a neo-Luddite, I have always had certain tendencies away from advancing technologies. Sometimes, this has been financial in cause, such as the

fact that I didn't have a car with a third brake light until the late 1990's, long after the technology was required in all new cars. Other times, the cause is my stubborn opposition to popular trend. I put off owning a cell phone for as long as possible, only giving in once I realized that with one car and three kids, I had to choose between the new technology and a second car.

The act of detaching from the digital to reconnect with the physical is something I now appreciate as a 'tangible slow-down event.' The wide ranging debate about the future of the book in the age of computer technology often turns to the tactile, physical feel of a book. Librarians and bibliophiles especially report that this is a sacred connection. I feel this and more when I retrieve my Webster's, when I feel my muscles tense under its weight. The fragility of the cover and the old paper heighten my senses as I carefully use the simple but powerful thumb index. I turn pages with care, certainly in a manner slower than with new book. All of this becomes an event that brings me closer to the origin of the written word, and engenders a bit more patience when I return to the velocity of the binary.

I am not the only person to find solace in slow. There is a growing movement that began in 1989 when McDonald's first opened in Italy. Out of this advance of global consumerism came the Slow Food Movement (<http://www.slowfood.com/>), which serves to protect food traditions from the fast food industry. The success of the Slow Food movement has inspired others to think about how speed is affecting the rest of their lives. In 2004, Carl Honoré penned a surprise international bestseller with *In Praise of Slowness, Challenging the Cult of Speed*, which looked into Slow movements worldwide. A look at this the notes and bibliography confirmed something I found in my own research. While there is a crush of literature about going faster, there has been surprisingly little written about the social affects of this speed.

Honoré mentions a 1998 piece in Harper's Magazine that is an exception to this. Mark Kingwell, a philosophy instructor at the University of Toronto writes in 'Fast Forward: Our High-Speed Chase to Nowhere' about why humans long for speed, and how it can be, in his words, self-defeating:

Faster and faster can only mean, in the end, stasis. The logical outcome of efficiency is usefulness: solving problems has no point but the ultimate

elimination of problem-solving itself. What is the point of being able to read a page every three seconds? To read every book ever written? Then what? Meanwhile, the vehicles of our speed ruin the planet as fast as we move around it.' (7)

These words are powerful, as they deconstruct the very argument for ever-faster technology. For me, they reinforce my own idea that everyone needs at least one 'tangible slow-down event.' Incorporating such a ritual into the ebb and flow of everyday life connects us to the very ground we live on, that sustains us, and offers the only option for a sustainable future.

A comparison to the most recent edition of the dictionary

Walk into a library or a good bookstore near you today and you'll likely find a copy of *Webster's Third*. If it is for sale, it is in a protective blue cardboard box. If it is for public use, it may be opened on a dictionary stand, as much for display as for utility. Compare this edition to my 1910 Webster's through the eyes of a lexicographer, and you have a paper for an entirely different class. But a brief look at the 'Contents' page of my dictionary is illustrative of the all-in-one reference nature of the work.

After a seven page preface by Editor-in-chief W.T. Harris, the introductory section contains a list of authors quoted as authority for the forms and uses of words, a brief history of the English language, a guide to pronunciation, and sections on the orthography and the abbreviations used. The dictionary itself comprises pages 1-2,373, followed by an appendix that includes a biographical dictionary, a pronouncing gazetteer, a geographical dictionary, 'arbitrary signs used in writing and printing,' an index to classified illustrations, and a classified section of pictorial illustrations. The work concludes with a reference history of the world.

Today, the number of pages that comprise the dictionary has actually increased, to 2,662. The atlas, the biographical and geographical dictionary, and the pictorial illustrations have been excised, narrowing the scope of the work considerably. All told, the number of pages hasn't changed radically, but the quality of the paper used accounts for the heft of the older edition. Although it is approaching the century mark in age, one is less likely to tear or damage the pages in my dictionary than in a brand new one.

The most significant difference between the past and the present of *Webster's Third* is simply the feel. To hold my copy is to hold a leather-bound, hand-sewn tome, with a curved spine, marbled end pages, and thick, durable paper. To hold a new copy is to hold a manufactured book with a paper-over-board cover, a 'too-perfect' flat spine, and thin, easy-to-tear paper.

Conclusion

I picked up my 1910 edition of *Webster's New International Dictionary* with the intention of spending an hour or so with it. I meant to examine the binding, the marbled end pages, the paper, and to reflect upon it in terms of the physical, especially in light of the excitement I still felt from our hands-on book binding session. As it turned out, it took only a few minutes of reflection – remembering the question my daughter posed as to why I use the dictionary – to realize that while I still appreciate the document in this way, my dictionary is much more than a wonderful 'old' book. It is a memory of a loved uncle, a future gift to my son, and a reminder that life need not be lived at break-neck speed.

I see a parallel to the future of the library in my recognition of my dictionary use as a 'tangible slow-down event.' Just as I intentionally turn to a physical manifestation in order to research a word, I believe that the library patron of the future will turn to the very real books and the other tangible elements in a library as a way to detach from the digital crush of information. Already we see libraries focus on comfort, on the physical lay-out, even on the ergonomics of the computer workstation. Such emphasis underlies a future where the access to information is less of a concern than the way we FEEL when we access it. Libraries will offer users the opportunities to search as quickly or as slowly as they want at a given time. They have the chance to become a part of the slow movement even as they embrace speed.

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