
Professor Brian Harrison, Editor of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, in association with the British Academy, describes how the new dictionary has been compiled, comparing the modern experience with that of the editors of the original DNB.

Computerised databases, word-processors, the internet and all the paraphernalia of the modern office have transformed the working practices of scholars in the arts and social sciences. Yet have they really changed the essentials of what we do? The Dictionary of National Biography is a reference work so large, with a history so long, that its experience can perhaps shed light on this question. Even today the punctual publication of a complex scholarly reference work in 63 quarterly volumes during fifteen years would be a feat. How was it done?

Unfortunately the loss of the DNB’s early records limits what we know about its early years, but there is no doubt that marvels were achieved with what now seem modest resources. Its publication from 1885 to 1900 was organised from three rooms on the top floor of 14 Waterloo Place, next door to the premises of the publishers Smith, Elder, to which it was linked by what was then the hi-tech device of a speaking tube. The editor occupied the small back room, with his staff working in the large front room. The narrow side room opening out of the front room accommodated reference works, and such periodicals as the Gentleman’s Magazine and Notes and Queries. The front room housed several large tables, many inkpots, piles of proofs and manuscripts on chairs and tables and at each end of the chimney piece pyramids of pipes belonging to the first and second editors, Leslie Stephen, and Sidney Lee. When a typist was recruited in 1888, Stephen thought that ‘our typewriter will want some grooming. It may be a little rusty and the blacking has to be done. But I suppose your young lady is up to that’. By the time the future Tudor historian A.F. Pollard was working there as a young man in the early 1890s he found the door between the front and back rooms ‘generally open as we have continually to refer to each other and to books in the other’s room’. Lee ‘never can put a book back in the right place’, Pollard grumbled in a letter to his parents: ‘fortunately he never puts them back at all so that if a book isn’t in its proper place we always look on his table or in his room and find the book’. On these premises the lists were compiled of the articles needed for forthcoming volumes, building up to the total of 29,120 articles written by the DNB’s 653 contributors. There too the articles were edited and often also written. For if the editors frequently spent the mornings working in the British Museum Library, they returned to Waterloo Place in the afternoon. ‘We have a pleasant time of it on the whole’, wrote Pollard in 1892, ‘and in some ways it is much more comfortable than the Bodleian e.g. we can smoke as much as we like, we always keep a good fire going and we can also talk a little i.e. there is no rigid rule of silence’.

A delicate balance had to be struck, then as now, between creating a pleasant working environment for the writers and researchers, and inducing the sense of urgency needed for tangible results. ‘We do absolutely no work at the office or anywhere else except for the Dictionary’, wrote Pollard in 1893: ‘we have nothing [to] do with any other part of Smith’s business and never see him at all’. None the less, the Dictionary’s drive came from George...
Smith, the philanthropic publisher who conceived and funded the project, and there was from the start that close collaboration between publisher and editor, each exercising authority within his sphere, which has been at the heart of the DNB ever since. 'To secure such unfailing punctuality needed sleepless vigilance, perfect organisation, and... a despotic will', Smith recalled, adding that 'sometimes – say about 4 o’clock in the morning – I would wake and perplex myself with fears that from a literary point of view the work might fail. I was haunted with a dread of inaccuracies... I venture to say that no other book involving the same amount of labour and anxiety has ever been published... We

A letter from Lee relating to Fowler entry (above) and page 89, vol. 20 of original DNB, annotated by Sidney Lee (right)

owler 89

Fowler

Hamilworth.' The dedication, dated from Edinburgh 2 June 1681, is addressed to Francis, earl Bothwell. Fowler sets forth what he alleges to be the excess of Roman superstition, and claims acquaintance incidentally with the Earl of Crawford, Sir James Balfour, and other distinguished Scottish statesmen. He was subsequently prominent as a burgess of Edinburgh, and about 1680 became secretary to James VII’s wife, Queen Anne. He was engaged in political negotiations with England, and in 1697 wrote an epitaph on his friend, Robert Bowes (q.v.), the English agent at Berwick. In 1698 he accompanied his royal mistress to England, and was reappointed not only her secretary but her master of requests. His house was always devoted to poetry, and soon after his arrival in London he enclosed two sonnets addressed to Arabella Stuart in a letter to the Earl and Countess of Shrewsbury; they are printed in Nichols’s ‘Progress of James I’, i. 250, 250–1. In September 1699 a grant was made him of two thousand acres in Ulster. Fowler’s sister married John Drummond, first lord of Hawthorne, and was mother of William Drummond, poet (q.v.). Fowler seems to have left the chief part of his poetry, some of which has been published, to his nephew William. This consists of two volumes, entitled ‘The Triumphs of Love’ and ‘The Triumphs of Petrarch.’ The former is composed of seventy-two sonnets in the manner of the Italian sonneteers, and the latter is a somewhat diffuse translation from Petrarch. These manuscripts were presented by Drummond of Hawthorne to the university of Edinburgh in 1627. The esteem in which Fowler was held by his contemporaries is illustrated by the commendatory sonnets, including one by the king himself, prefixed to his poems. His style is marked by the verbal and sentimental affection of the period, but it is not seldom scholarly and graceful.


FOWLER, WILLIAM (1670–1692), poet, was born at Winterton, Lincolnshire, on 19 March 1670, son, as is wrongly stated in the parish register, 13 March 1670. He became an architect and builder at Winterton, and about 1796 made drawings of Roman pavements discovered there. These were so much admired that he took them to London to be engraved. He then entered the pos-

A letter from Lee relating to Fowler entry (above) and page 89, vol. 20 of original DNB, annotated by Sidney Lee (right)
have taken infinite pains; we have never grudged toil or expense’. For the DNB’s staff it was a demanding regime: a five-and-a-half-day week, with proofs sometimes taken home in the evenings, and with no tea allowed in the office until the letters XYZ had been reached. Leslie Stephen’s private correspondence reveals a DNB that for him meant frustration: he hated losing his donnish freedom to work at his own pace and in his own time, lost patience with time-consuming ‘drudgery’ and petty detail, and was a poor proof-reader. Fortunately the Dictionary’s printers, Spottiswoode and Co, had a good proof-reader in Frederick Adams, who corrected the proofs for the entire work. Sidney Lee, too, proved an admirably calm and industrious lieutenant for Stephen and took over from him in 1891.

Smith claimed to have set out on the venture expecting to lose £50,000, but this grew to more like £70,000 — in present-day terms about £5,000,000. Now leap forward a century, across the even more modest staffing and premises of the twentieth century’s supplements, and into the world of what will in 2004 become the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography in Association with the British Academy. On the surface, the scene is very different. Smith, Elder has long gone, and the Oxford University Press has been in command since 1917, and there are no printers next door; instead there is a text-keyboarding company in Pondicherry, India. There are other contrasts: the Oxford DNB costs a lot more than its predecessor. Launched by my predecessor Colin Matthew in 1992 with public funds of £3m administered by the British Academy, it has required an additional £19m from the OUP. A team of 30 research staff (at its peak) works at desks on three floors and in the annexe of the Dictionary’s building in 37A St Giles’, Oxford, complemented by up to 21 publishing and computing staff and scores of freelance editors. There are telephones on every desk, but they ring less frequently now because largely superseded since the mid-1990s by e-mailing. Books still line the walls, nor has paper vanished, given that we do not edit on the screen. But there are numerous photocopiers and printers (electronic not human), and no typewriters or card-indexes in shoeboxes. Instead, the editors work directly on computers, magic casements opening on to a huge Dictionary database. This offers not only immediate access to the old DNB but to the (now) complete text of its successor, together with all the management information needed to initiate and track the work of 13 consultant editors, about 400 associate editors and 10,000 contributors world-wide. Also on screen is the wealth of information now available in electronic databases: in short, we google.

All this has made it easier to build the Oxford DNB. If we had still been in the typewriter era, the building would indeed have been noisy, and the time-wasting and error-producing separation between typists and editors would have persisted, whereas most editors are now their own typists. Computer technology has helped to make the Dictionary’s jobs more interesting at every level. So we have produced 36,000 newly-written articles together with incorporating parts of the old DNB in twelve years as compared with the DNB’s eighteen, if its initial planning period from 1882 to 1885 is included. The technology greatly aids the search for consistency and accuracy, given that articles can be so easily compared, and it exposes gaps and defects in the data that would have been less visible in the past: inconsistent or wrong citations, for example. Given that in the ancien régime of hot-metal printing the text could not easily or cheaply be changed, most such errors went uncorrected after a revised reissue of the complete set in 1908–9. Almost from the beginning we have been able to scrutinise parts of the entire dictionary in a way that was impossible before: at first only the old DNB could be viewed on line, but gradually we saw the new dictionary building up beside it. Furthermore, we could use it when preparing later articles: the product became, so to speak, self-improving. So we have been able to consolidate the entire work in a way that eluded our predecessors, though more could still be done in the Oxford DNB’s on-line updates after 2004.

What intellectual gains does the new technology bring to the user? It has rendered accessible the greatly widened range of contributors that the worldwide growth of universities has generated; Stephen and Lee’s technology could never have achieved that. We now have 10,000 contributors world-wide, and
our relations with them can be much closer than the DNB’s was with its 653. We have in effect built up a ‘virtual community’ of friends and allies, and we communicate with them regularly as a group, ensuring that they are fully informed on our progress. Flexibility is the second great gain, for after 2004 the Dictionary will no longer be set in lead as it was in 1900. Revision and updating to the on-line version will be continuous and will traverse the entire work, whereas the twentieth century could add only supplements for the recently deceased. Thirdly, searching at many levels will be possible as never before: new combinations of people, interests, and ideas will be highlighted – located for example by place or date of birth, education, place of residence, institution or company. The impact of individual works of science, art or literature upon the influential will be made manifest. So new research agendas will emerge, and the value of the Dictionary will be enhanced still further beyond its original homes of history and literature into many other areas of study. Finally, links will be possible with the abundance of other reference works on the internet: a library catalogue, for example, or the National Portrait Gallery’s data. Nor should I ignore our overseas counterparts. ‘Dictionaries of national biography in some ways have perhaps an anachronistic ring to them’, wrote Matthew in 1996. Our links with the national dictionaries of biography in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Scandinavia and the United States are close, and through spontaneous interlinking the ‘dictionary of universal biography’ or world dictionary that George Smith originally envisaged will slowly come about.

Has all this technology changed the essentials of what we do? No. Leslie Stephen’s problems have throughout also been ours, and I often experience a fellow-feeling with him. We too had to decide who should be included and who should contribute, we too had to tease articles out of the selected contributors, edit what they had written, negotiate necessary changes with them, copy-edit the agreed text, check it with them again and then prepare it for publication. ‘That damned thing goes on like a diabolical piece of machinery, always gaping for more copy’, wrote Stephen in 1888. Sometimes I have been tempted to say the same sotto voce, but the new technology has in general made the Dictionary’s creation more enjoyable for Colin Matthew and for me than it was for Stephen, and that too must be counted as an intellectual gain.