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A History of the 'Concise Oxford Dictionary'. By Małgorzata Anna Kamińska. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014, 342 pp.
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In 1986, the Oxford lexicographer R. E. Allen published a fascinating article entitled 'A Concise History of the *COD* [*Concise English Dictionary*]'. In it he described how he was now editing the 8th edition of this venerable work (first published in 1901), and gave a brief but illuminating sketch of its history and of the character and content of its seven previous editions. To do so Allen drew on his insider knowledge of Oxford University Press (OUP), including letters and memos exchanged between editors and publishers from the early days of the dictionary, and his own experience in exploiting the contents of the *Concise* to re-edit the *Pocket Oxford Dictionary*. Allen began by putting the *Concise* in its commercial and institutional context. It was the first English dictionary to be published by OUP other than the great *OED* itself, which was then in the process of appearing in gradual instalments (1884-1928) and was as yet incomplete. Rival publishing houses were already producing smaller, cheaper and more accessible dictionaries, cannibalizing the rich material available in the *OED*, and OUP needed to burn off these competitors and capitalize on its own major investment in English lexicography, which dated back to 1879 when the Press had first committed to funding the *OED* project. Allen explained the dependence of the *Concise* on the parent dictionary and outlined the distinctive characteristics of the new work. Chief among these was the commitment of the two editors, the Fowler brothers Henry and Francis, to multiple illustrative examples, in recognition that contextual evidence of usage is a primary tool in working out what and how a word means. Such illustrative examples were of course a key feature of *OED* itself, whose evidential basis was its collection of over five million quotations - although unlike *OED*'s, the *Concise*'s quotations were mostly invented by the editors. To save the space thus occupied, the Fowlers employed a drastically elliptic form of expression in their defining and

other editorial language which they referred to as ‘telegraphese’ (a term omitted from the dictionary itself – though later included in the first set of addenda). They also crammed lemmas into nested entries and did their best to embed grammatical information in the definitions.

Such was the success of the *Concise* (over 40,000 copies sold in the first year) that the Press commissioned an even smaller dictionary, the *Pocket Oxford*, first published after the war in 1924, as well as *Modern English Usage* (1926), the work that turned H. W. Fowler into a household name. These and other projects effectively prevented Fowler, who died in 1933, from updating the *Concise*, and as Allen says (p. 8), ‘What is really remarkable in the history of the *COD* is that it survived and sold in thousands of copies for some 65 years...without undergoing a major revision’. Instead, the dictionary made do with caretaker editors who supplied minimal changes and lists of addenda. It was only with the appointment of J. B. Sykes in 1971 - the famous crossword authority, former astrophysicist, and in-house Oxford lexicographer - that the dictionary was, at last, wrenched out of the Edwardian era with a complete line-by-line revision. For the sixth edition, published in 1976, Sykes re-visited and re-thought all aspects of editorial policy as well as every entry. Obsolete items were discarded and new vocabulary, notably from World English sources, included; the over-strong literary bias was corrected and scientific and technical vocabulary given its due. Colloquial and slang terms entered the dictionary in far greater numbers than before, not least taboo words (e.g. *cunt* and *fuck*), while - partly as a result of this new generosity - editorial labels were more frequently applied, including (in the 7th edition of 1982, also edited by Sykes) the symbol D to mark items whose usage was disputed, and R to indicate racially offensive terms.

Allen briefly refers to the *OED* Supplement of 1972-86 as a source for new material in the *Concise*, but lacked the perspective of elapsed years. Looking back decades later, we can see that Sykes’ 1980s editions were riding the crest of a transformation in English language lexicography. For Oxford dictionaries, this had begun with the OUP’s realization in the 1950s that the *OED*, the source and fountainhead of the flotilla of smaller dictionaries in its stable, was becoming dangerously out-of-date. A new programme of lexicographical research was

urgently needed to record the flood of new words and senses pouring into the English language after the second World War and the continuing vast changes in society, culture, politics, science and technology. R. W. Burchfield, a New Zealander, was appointed editor of the new *OED* Supplement in 1957; over his thirty year tenure he created just such a programme, which informed not only the Supplement - and hence the *OED* itself, in its second edition of 1989 - but also successive re-vamped editions of the other Oxford dictionaries, the *Shorter*, *Concise*, *Pocket* and *Little* - not to mention further offspring such as the *Oxford Illustrated* and *Children's Dictionaries*.

Surprisingly, much of the context sketched out above goes unmentioned in the book under review, as also the signal influence of *Websters Third* (1961) on Oxford and on US and UK dictionaries everywhere. Yet it is vital to understanding the commercial and cultural pressures on dictionaries - and certainly the *Concise* - which changed both their content and their methodology from the 1960s onwards. *Websters Third* was the first general dictionary of English to include large quantities of lower status language, and the tide of colloquial and slang vocabulary flooding over its lexicographical threshold had provoked outrage. Other dictionaries followed suit, but warded off the outrage with a battery of new labels indicating the social register and potential offensiveness of these terms (not just taboo sexual ones, but also those relating to race, class, gender and so on). In seeking to be more descriptive, dictionaries paradoxically trespassed on prescriptive territory, for labelling a word D (as Sykes did in his sixth edition of the *Concise*) appeared to users to stigmatize the term rather than (or as well as) to describe it. Moreover, as labels proliferated into other less contentious areas - marking geographical region for example - the opportunities for lexicographical partiality and inconsistency multiplied, both within individual dictionaries (again including the *Concise*) and between one dictionary and another.

These crucial and fascinating factors in the history and compilation of modern dictionaries have long been recognized and discussed, whether in histories of individual publications (Morton 1994), handbooks on lexicography (Svensén 2009, Béjoint 2000 and 2010), or specialist articles (notably those

comparing several dictionaries as in Norri 1996 and 2000, both of which considered the *Concise*). They go unmentioned in Kamińska's history of the *Concise*, whose narrow and laborious account is broken down into chapters which one-by-one consider features such as 'selection of vocabulary', arrangement and form of entries', 'definitions, 'sense discrimination and order', 'syntagmatic and paradigmatic information', 'usage labels', and so on, in each case describing, mostly on the basis of a tiny sample of text (30 entries only!), how these elements developed from one edition to another. Of the works just mentioned only Béjoint's 2000 work is cited in Kamińska's bibliography – and the broad and detailed wisdom, knowledge and judgement of that text (and its 2010 revision) do not seem to have guided her in any identifiable way. Most notably, she neglects to make clear how the electronic revolution that began in the 1980s transformed the possibilities and practices of dictionary compilation, in particular – after the publication of COBUILD in 1987 - obliging even old-fashioned dictionaries like Oxford's to wake up to the lexicographical potential of corpuses and the unique and systematic lexical information they could provide both on relative frequency of usage and on the multiple ways in which context determines meaning. Allen noted in 1986 that his primary objective in producing the eighth edition of the *Concise*, other than revision, 'was to bring the book into the computer age by turning it into an electronic database' (p. 1). But he could not (and did not) foresee the manifold consequences. The first Oxford dictionary to grasp the new possibilities with both hands was Judith Pearsall's *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998); the first edition of the *Concise* to draw on corpus evidence, though you will not discover this in Kamińska's pages, was Pearsall's tenth edition of 2001, whose title page, as noted in Elizabeth Knowles's excellent account 'One hundred years of the Concise Oxford Dictionary' (apparently unread by Kamińska, though published in 2011 in the 12th edition of the *Concise*), for the first time made no reference to the preceding Fowlers and credited the new editor alone.

Another important factor driving change in English language desk dictionaries in the second half of the 20th century - and continuing to do so to this day - was the immensely profitable EFL market. The need to sell to non-English

speakers compelled dictionaries, including Oxford's, to be more user-friendly in vocabulary choice, labelling, text design, and general perspicuousness. Kamińska notes that 'in the editions *COD6-COD11*, the users' needs were brought to the editors' attention. Now the dictionary could reach larger audience [sic] than the original edition, taking into consideration speakers of other varieties of English as well' (p. 202). But she provides no information about the changes and developments in English language lexicography generally over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, very seldom mentioning any other dictionary than the *Concise* itself, so her remark is bereft of the contextual knowledge needed to interpret it – information readily to hand in what are now standard works of lexicographical reference (Atkins and Rundell 2008, Cowie 2007, and so on). This may imply that she envisages a well-informed specialist readership, but her work on occasion seems aimed at a general market, beginning as it does with a collection of historical observations apparently selected to contextualise the *Concise's* first edition. Some of these appear imperfectly understood, and they certainly do not enlighten a reader who is not better informed than the writer - e.g. on the physical location of OUP (now situated, we are told, in the 'former property of Worcester College', an unhelpful way of referring to Walton Street in Oxford, pp. 37-38), or on the rather strained (and certainly anachronistic) sense in which Johnson's and Richardson's dictionaries could be said to be corpuses (p. 40). Neither piece of information, incidentally, tells us anything useful about the history or character of the *Concise*. The sample of 30 entries used as a basis for detailed comparison between editions of vocabulary choice, arrangement of entries, definitions, sense order etc is insufficiently representative of many of the features discussed; while it may suffice for identifying changes in text design and ordering of entries, it reveals little about changes in editorial methodology (such as in usage labels as discussed above). For the latter, the author would have needed a much bigger sample, or alternatively, to have chosen her sample differently, for instance looking at the treatment of terms related to contentious usage of various sorts. To her credit, the author evidently consulted Patrick Hanks (veteran of both COBUILD and Oxford dictionaries, and an innovative and conceptually sophisticated lexicographer of high distinction), but as his insightful comments appear only on the penultimate page of the book it seems she was too

advanced in her research to take account of them. Despite some lapses into non-native English the author should also be credited for setting out clearly the nature of her enterprise (Introduction, pp. 17-33), and for pursuing it consistently in the body of the book.

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