



Happy 99th birthday, Alan Horsman!

In the list of Editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* that begins with James Murray and continues down to Michael Proffitt, the present chief Editor, one name has often been overlooked: that of Alan Horsman. Today we would like to celebrate this unsung hero of the *OED*'s history, who may also be the longest-lived of all of Oxford's lexicographers – so far.

Robert Burchfield (1923–2004) is usually described as 'the' Editor of the Dictionary's second Supplement (the Supplement which began to be compiled in the 1950s, and was finally completed in 1986 with the publication of its fourth volume). However, when Oxford University Press first began to think about the preparation of a new Supplement to the *OED*, the first person who agreed to take on the position of Editor – though only on a trial basis – was a New Zealander called Alan Horsman. In 1955, when he was first approached about the job, he was at Durham University; his edition of the diary of the New Zealand statesman and poet Alfred Domett had just been published by OUP, and he was now at work on an edition of a Ben Jonson play. He responded favourably to the approach from Oxford, and agreed to a trial period as Editor of the new Supplement. He also made it clear that what he really wanted to do was find an academic position in his native New Zealand; however, suitable posts were few and far between, and the job of editing a new Supplement to the *OED* sounded an exciting one.

It was also a pioneering venture. By 1955 it was over twenty years since the lexicographical team which had produced the first edition of the *OED*, and (in 1933) its first Supplement, had been stood down; other lexicography had been going on in Oxford, both in English and in other languages, but this was to all intents and purposes a new beginning. There was no instruction manual about how to compile entries for a historical dictionary like the *OED*. Two of the Editors of the original *OED*, [William Craigie](#) and [Charles Onions](#), were admittedly still alive, and meetings were arranged with these two grand old men.

The kind of Supplement that was envisaged at this stage was quite modest: a single-volume expansion of the 1933 Supplement, containing something like 12,000 additional entries, dealing with post-1930 developments in the language. The new material was expected to contain a high proportion of scientific vocabulary; the need to improve coverage of the English of America and the Commonwealth was also recognized. Working closely with Raymond Goffin – a veteran of OUP's India branch who had been tasked with doing some preliminary work – Alan Horsman set about establishing a programme of reading, so that the new words to be included in

the new Supplement could be identified. The business of actually compiling entries lay some way in the future, but he did try his hand at writing a few definitions.

However, in October 1956, only a couple of months after he had arrived in Oxford, Alan Horsman learned of a piece of good luck – which was also bad luck for OUP. The University of Otago, in the South Island of New Zealand, now wished to offer him the position of professor of English. This was, as he had made clear from the outset, what he really wanted to do; and so he asked leave to give up the Editorship. The original agreement with OUP had been for a year's trial, but the Press did not hold him to this, and allowed him to leave in the spring of 1957. By this time they had been able to find someone else to succeed him: another New Zealander, Robert Burchfield, who after graduating from Victoria University College in Wellington had secured various lecturing posts in Oxford. Burchfield took over the Editorship in July 1957, and remained as Editor for the next 29 years.

And Alan Horsman disappeared almost entirely from the *OED* story until 2011. It was in that year, during my research into the history of the Dictionary, that I learned that Alan was still alive. I contacted him – aware that by now he would be in his nineties – and tentatively asked whether he would be able to help me by giving me his reminiscences of his brief tenure as Editor. He turned out to be still very active: in his detailed email response to my first batch of questions, he apologized for answering my questions in instalments because he was busy preparing a series of lectures!

Alan's reminiscences helped me enormously in writing about the short period of his Editorship for my history of the *OED* ([published in 2016](#)). Even in his nineties – he turns 99 on October 24th – Alan has remained engaged with the two mainstays of his working life: teaching and lexicography. Many happy returns.

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