Murray, Sir James Augustus Henry (1837–1915), lexicographer  by R.W. Burchfield

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Murray, Sir James Augustus Henry (1837–1915), lexicographer, was born in the village of Denholm, near Hawick, Roxburghshire, on 7 February 1837, the eldest of the four sons and one daughter of Thomas Murray (1811–1873), a village tailor, of Hawick, and his wife, Mary (1803–1888), the sixth child of Charles Scott, a linen manufacturer of Denholm.

Formative years in Scotland

Thomas Murray was highly regarded in Denholm. He was an elder of the Congregational church and a promoter of the Total Abstinence and Horticultural societies, of the Reading Room Club, and of other institutions contributing to the welfare of the village. His formal education was limited, however, and there was certainly no tradition of academic scholarship in the ancestral families of the Murrays or the Scotts that would account for the emergence of the lexicographical prodigy that his son proved to be. James Murray is reputed to have known the letters of the alphabet by the time he was eighteen months old and to have acquired a knowledge of the written forms of Greek letters before he was seven. He is also known to have copied out on scraps of paper some lists and passages in Hebrew and Chinese written in copies of the Bible that happened to come into his parents' possession.

Murray was educated first at Cavers School, the parish school of his native village. It was a 3 mile walk from Denholm, and his lifelong interest in botany may well have begun among the many wild flowers that grew beside the footpaths that took him to and from this school. In 1845 he moved to Denholm School, which took pupils from infancy until they were old enough to go out to work. He was soon recognized to be a pupil of unusual ability: he took in stride the names of the parts of speech, the elements of geography and mathematics, and, as the only boy
taking the subject, an outline knowledge of Latin. In his out-of-school hours he became
interested in astronomy and in identifying the Latin names of plants, as well as the names of rock
formations and other features of geology, and the classification of the names and varieties of
animals.

An outbreak of cholera in Denholm in 1849 closed the school and led to an arrangement for
Murray to spend six months as a cowherd on a friend's farm near by, where he remembered
‘hammering away at [his] Latin grammar and Lectiones Selectae’ in his spare time. The family
returned to Denholm at the end of summer 1849, but Murray did not return to his old school. He
went instead to Minto School, a mile and a half from Denholm, where he fell under the influence
of an inspiring new schoolmaster, John Rankin Hamilton, and a new syllabus. He began work on
four new languages: French, German, Italian, and classical Greek.

Murray left school at fourteen and a half, and helped the family budget by taking temporary
employment of various kinds. He learned how to bind books and declared on the flyleaf of the
first issue of John Cassell's serial publication Popular Educator (1852) ‘Knowledge is power’ and
‘Nihil est melius quam vita diligentissima’. In 1854 he left home and was accepted first as a
junior assistant master at the grammar school in Hawick, and then, in 1857, he became
headmaster of a private school called the Hawick Academy. His extra-curricular activities
continued in the same vein as before: he acquired an outline knowledge of the written form of up
to twenty-five foreign languages (his own figure), including Russian and Tongan, and also made
a close study of the local border dialect. In addition to his language work, he explored the
geological structure of the Teviotdale district, and its flora and fauna.

In August 1856 a public meeting was called in Hawick at which it was agreed to form an
archaeological society, with James Murray as its secretary. By 1858 Murray's interests had
widened to include philology. In Edinburgh in 1857 he had attended a vacation course on
elocution by Alexander Melville Bell, the inventor of a phonetic system called ‘Visible Speech’,
a set of symbols designed to record the pronunciation of every sound used in human speech.
Melville Bell's son Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, later became Murray's
friend; when he moved to London Melville Bell was one of those who introduced him to the
Philological Society. Reflecting a more general movement in Europe, the Hawick
Archaeological Society turned its attention in 1859 to philology, and in particular to the history
and nature of the variety of English used in the Hawick area. As a typical example of the new
thinking, Prince Louis-Lucien Bonaparte, nephew of Napoleon, persuaded Henry Scott Riddell,
the president of the society, to translate parts of the Bible into lowland Scots.

James Murray, by now alerted to the need for someone to investigate the nature and history of
varieties of English extant in the British Isles, learned Gaelic, began his research into the dialects
of Scotland's southern counties, and planned a phonetic key to Jamieson's Etymological
Dictionary of the Scottish Language (1808). He also began studying the language of the Anglo-
Saxon period, especially that used in the surviving works of King Alfred. Members of the
Hawick Archaeological Society placed many books at his disposal. He absorbed them all,
including the language of the Bible as translated into Gothic (also formerly called Meso-
Gothic) AD c.350 by Bishop Ulfilas (or Wulfila), preserved in a manuscript of the fifth or sixth
century entitled the Codex Argenteus.
Migration to London

At this stage of his life Murray was in many respects a recluse—interested, it would seem, only in the pursuit of a scholarly *vita diligentissima*. He was also a ‘tall, strong, healthy, good-looking boy’ who wore his hair to shoulder length in the fashion of his time. At the time of his appointment to Hawick grammar school ‘he was encouraging the growth of the red beard, which turning to snow white in later years, was to contribute to his striking and patriarchal appearance’ (K. M. E. Murray, 26).

On 12 August 1862 Murray married Margaret (Maggie) Scott (1834–1865) an infant-school mistress, the daughter of a Hawick clerk. She had taught for three or four years in a primary school near Manchester, but at the time of her marriage was living in Belfast. She and Murray were married in the Fisherwick Presbyterian Church, Belfast, after which they lived in Hawick, with Murray returning to teach at the Hawick Academy. In January 1864 Maggie gave birth to a daughter, but both mother and daughter were ‘weak and ailing’, and the baby died in August of that year. Their doctor recommended that for the sake of Maggie's health—she was suffering from consumption in an advanced stage—they should migrate to a place in a more equitable climate. The place turned out to be London. Murray found rented accommodation in Nunhead Lane, near Dulwich, and accepted a post as a bank clerk in the Chartered Bank of India, Australia, and China in Threadneedle Street. The couple attended the Congregational church at Camberwell. Murray was soon invited to preach, and to take part in the educational work of the church. But Maggie's health did not improve, and she died in September 1865.

Before Maggie's death the Murrays had become friendly with the Ruthven family, who were near neighbours in Camberwell, and on 17 August 1867 James Murray married the eldest daughter, Ada Agnes Ruthven (1845–1936). Alexander Graham Bell was his best man. The marriage proved remarkably happy—where Murray was ‘naive in dealing with money matters’, Ada was by contrast exceptionally businesslike.

Murray obtained a reader's ticket at the British Museum, and revived his earlier interest in comparative philology and in the study of the border dialects. Through Melville Bell he met Alexander John Ellis, who was writing an important history of English pronunciation. Ellis in turn introduced Murray to Henry Sweet, who was also to make signal contributions to the study of the English language. It was not long before Murray met other philologists: these included Richard Morris, who, along with A. J. Ellis, Walter Skeat, and Melville Bell, introduced him to the activities of the Philological Society and the publications of the Early English Text Society. Murray made progress with the project close to his heart: the preparation of his book *The Dialect of the Southern Counties of Scotland* (finally issued by the Philological Society in 1873). He was invited to deliver papers at meetings of the society, and duly gave three papers between 1868 and 1869. He had entered new territory in the systematic study of dialects of the English language as found in Scotland, referring to them as ‘Scotch dialects’, as was customary at the time. He also joined the English Dialect Society.

Perhaps Murray's most important scholarly connection, however, was with Frederick J. Furnivall, a mercurial scholar, who had deservedly established a reputation as an energetic founder of organizations designed to promote the study of English language and literature.
Murray produced several editions for Furnivall's Early English Text Society: The Minor Poems of Sir David Lindesay (1871), The Complaynt of Scotlande (1872, 1873), and Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune (1875). This editorial work, apart from its value to Middle English scholarship, formed an ideal background to the stern lexicographical task that lay ahead.

**Mill Hill School**

Murray's work as a bank clerk came to an end in 1870 when he became a schoolmaster at Mill Hill School, which had been established in 1807 as the ‘Protestant dissenters' Grammar School’. Mill Hill was then a village just north-west of London. A particular attraction of the post was that he was offered a rented house, with a garden, only five minutes' walk from the school. His years there were among the happiest of his life, his ‘Arcadian Years’ as he called them. He founded a Natural History Society, and encouraged his pupils to explore the countryside and learn how to classify the local flora and fauna, for example by listing all the quadrupeds to be found locally—mice, voles, weasels, and so on. He had a real talent for teaching, dating from his early childhood when he had done his best to pass on his knowledge and enthusiasms to his younger brothers. His school lessons were interesting and entertaining—it was said that ‘a nominal geography class might easily develop into a lecture on Icelandic roots’. Another tradition has it that in teaching German he composed doggerel verses and stories to illustrate the declension of German nouns. He often preached in the school chapel, and his sermons had two dominant themes—the doctrine of work and his belief in divine guidance.

Elisabeth Murray neatly summarizes the pressures on her grandfather as he worked away on a wide range of activities:

In the years 1870 to 1875 it must be remembered that besides his school duties he was also working on dialects with [A. J.] Ellis … He was helping Ellis, [Henry] Nicol and [Frederick] Elworthy with their proofs: he was writing papers for the Philological Society: he was working on numerous texts for the Early English Text Society in addition to the three he actually published, … and he was also reviewing books for the Academy and the Athenæum. (K. M. E. Murray, 116–17)

In addition to all this he was now studying for an external London BA degree, which he completed in 1873. In 1874 he was awarded the honorary degree of LLD by the University of Edinburgh. He was now entitled to wear a ‘full-dress gown of extra Saxony light scarlet cloth, faced with rich blue silk’ (a revival of the old ceremonial dress worn at the university before the Reformation) and a cap of a pattern worn by his hero John Knox. Murray wore the cap to work in for the rest of his life. In 1878 he was elected to the office of president of the Philological Society.

Between 1868 and 1888 the Murrays had eleven children, and all were brought up in an intellectual atmosphere. They were discouraged from the reading of novels, and encouraged to write their own stories and poems. They produced a series of magazines. Their father helped them to form the Sunnyside Amateur Debating Society, Sunnyside being the name of the house at Mill Hill and later of the family's home in Oxford. Family holidays in Hastings, the Isle of Wight, the Lake District, Wales, and elsewhere were characterized by Murray's insistence that the children should pursue his own boyhood hobbies—history, archaeology, botany, geology, and so on. All the Murray children were given first names drawn from Anglo-Saxon literature.
and history, with second and other names honouring relations from their father's or mother's families.

The early years of the New English dictionary

In 1857, at the suggestion of the dean of Westminster, Richard Chenevix Trench, the Philological Society resolved to prepare a large dictionary of the English language, intending to include as comprehensive a collection as possible of English words and meanings that had survived the Norman conquest or been introduced into the language after the conquest. The hope was that the final product, ‘by the completeness of its vocabulary, and by the application of the historical method to the life and use of words, might be worthy of the English language and of English scholarship’ (preface to vol. 1 of the Oxford English Dictionary).

The project was motivated by the need for a more up-to-date dictionary than the latest editions of the three standard dictionaries of the time, those of Charles Richardson, Noah Webster, and Joseph Worcester. These were three very respectable dictionaries, but the difference was that the proposed new one was to be based on historical principles: that is, each word and meaning was to be supported by evidence drawn from works of every kind—those of famous authors, such as Chaucer, Malory, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, and Dickens, but also those of ‘minor’ authors, private letters, glossaries and early dictionaries, technical handbooks, newspapers, learned journals, and so on.

Herbert Coleridge was appointed editor, and as a first step he established an ambitious reading programme in which quotational evidence was to be systematically gathered. Several hundred readers were drawn into the scheme, including F. J. Furnivall, the novelist Charlotte Yonge, and the etymologist Professor W. W. Skeat. One of the odder incidents in the history of the dictionary was that a particularly prolific contributor of illustrative quotations, Dr W. C. Minor, was later discovered to have been confined in the Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane during the time of his contributions—he had shot and killed a man some years before in an apparently motiveless attack. Minor provided an invaluable service to the dictionary with his painstaking lexicographical research.

The importance of these readers to the larger project cannot be overemphasized. One reader (Thomas Austin) had produced 165,000 supporting quotations by the time that the first volume (A–B) was published in 1888. Furnivall had produced 30,000 in the same period, and Minor came up with between 5000 and 8000 quotations. Ultimately, the dictionary was very much a collaborative effort. Other assistants, including members of Murray's own family, helped with sorting and filing the material as it arrived. About fifty names, including those of Charlotte Yonge and W. W. Skeat, are listed in the preface to volume 1 as having sub-edited, or prepared for sub-editing, the quotational evidence submitted to the editor.

However successful the reading of sources was to become, in the early years of the project it proved inadequate. What Dean Trench had grandly described in 1857 as ‘this drawing as with a sweep-net over the whole extent of English literature’ had by 1860 garnered only about one-tenth of the quotations that were ultimately needed. In 1861 Herbert Coleridge died. Furnivall was persuaded to take on the editorship, but his methods of work were erratic and in the end
unsuccessful. As a first step he proposed the compilation of a concise dictionary, and forecast that such a book could be produced in three years. Both ideas came to nothing. Negotiations with Macmillan as possible publisher of the society's dictionary also proved to be unfruitful, and the dictionary's future was uncertain.

The Oxford University Press

In March 1879, after a series of prolonged discussions, the Philological Society came to an agreement with the Oxford University Press concerning the editing and publication of what was now to be known as The Oxford English Dictionary (OED). After consulting several scholars, among them Frederick Furnivall, Henry Sweet, and the comparative philologist Max Müller, the delegates of the press offered the task of editing the dictionary to James Murray. He was invited to edit the material for publication in parts. It was proposed that he would be able to compile the successive fascicles with help from a small editorial staff while he was still teaching at Mill Hill School. Murray, estimating that the dictionary could be finished in ten years in an estimated 7000 pages, accepted. In fact the first fascicle, consisting of words in the range A–Ant, was not published until 1884, and the last one in 1928, forty-four years later. (Volume publication, collating the fascicles, also took place over this span of time). In its final form the dictionary consisted of more than 16,000 pages.

Murray arranged for a workroom to be built in the small front garden of his house in which to store all the accumulated piles of illustrative quotations that had arrived over the years; it was also to serve as a suitable place for editing the dictionary itself. He jokingly called this building his scriptorium. Elisabeth Murray describes the initial chaos in graphic terms:

Many of the sub-editors had clearly found difficulty in packing up hundredweights of [dictionary] slips. Some were sent in sacks in which they had long been stored, and when opened a dead rat was found in one and a live mouse and her family in another … Many of the bundles had stood for so many years in unsuitable places that the slips were crumbling with damp and the writing had faded. (K. M. E. Murray, 174)

It was clear that much additional work needed to be done before the editing could begin. Nor did it take long for Murray to discover that much of the reading of sources already conducted was inadequate. Moreover, many early English texts previously existing only in manuscript form or in inadequate editions were being issued while work on the dictionary continued. These new editions, many published by the Early English Text Society, needed to be taken into account by the voluntary readers. One other set-back was that the excerpting of eighteenth-century works having been allocated to a group of American readers, the organization of their work had proved to be unsystematic.

In 1885 the second part (Ant–Batten) of the dictionary was published. Murray left Mill Hill and moved with his family to Oxford, where he could devote his whole time to the dictionary. He worked, with a small group of modestly paid assistants, in a new scriptorium built for the purpose in the garden of his house at 78 Banbury Road. The Mill Hill scriptorium, which had been planned from the beginning as a portable building, was presented to Mill Hill School, the costs of its removal being met by money raised from an appeal to old boys. Murray's idea was that it would be a quiet place for the boys to read in, especially on Sundays. It was burnt down by
accident in 1902, but was replaced, and there is still a ‘Murray scriptorium’ used as a reading-
room at the school.

Three more editors

Before the editing of words in the letter B had been completed it became obvious that another
editor should be appointed, to work for a year under Murray's supervision, and then, with a small
team of assistants, to produce some later sections of the dictionary. Henry Bradley was this
second independent editor, beginning in 1889. He and his assistants had a separate office in
Broad Street, Oxford. At the end of the nineteenth century, by which time less than half the
dictionary had been completed, a third co-editor was needed. The person appointed, in 1901, was
W. A. Craigie, who had joined the staff of the dictionary in 1897. His work as an independent
editor began with the letter Q, and by 1928, when the dictionary was completed, he had edited
nearly a fifth of the OED. In the same period he was appointed professor of Anglo-Saxon in the
University of Oxford, and also played a leading role in two other lexicographical projects. A
fourth editor, C. T. Onions, who had been an editorial assistant on the staff of the dictionary, first
in 1895 in Murray's team and later in Bradley's, became responsible from 1914 to 1928 for
fascicles in the range Sub–Sz, parts of the letter W, and the whole of the letters X, Y, and Z.

The thirty years from 1885 to 1915 that Murray spent in Oxford were almost wholly devoted to
his work on the dictionary. Except for brief holidays in Britain and an absence of some months in
1905 on a visit to Cape Colony, during which he received an honorary LittD degree from the
University of Cape Town, he worked unceasingly on the dictionary with a small staff of
assistants including some of his children.

Throughout the preparation of the dictionary he had to endure what his biographer called ‘The
Triple Nightmare: Space, Time, and Money’. The project was plagued by a lack of adequate
office space in which to accommodate the editorial staff and their essential books, as well as the
pigeon-holes for the quotation slips. There was also mounting pressure from the delegates of the
University Press, who feared that the return on their investment was increasingly at risk because
the dictionary was taking much longer to prepare than had seemed likely when the contract was
signed in 1879. Murray felt persecuted by what he saw as harassment to accelerate the rate of
completion of the fascicles.

Murray gave occasional lectures on the project, the best-known of which was the Romanes
lecture, ‘The evolution of English lexicography’, which he delivered on 22 June 1900 in the
Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford. It gave an outline account of the emergence of interlinear glosses
(some Latin/Latin, others Latin/English) in England in the pre-conquest period, and the later
transformation of individual glosses into classified and alphabetized lists of ‘hard words’, then
into dictionaries of ‘hard words’, and finally into dictionaries of ‘the whole’ language, including
ordinary words such as the definite and indefinite articles, adverbs, prepositions, phrasal verbs,
and so on—arguably the most difficult entries to compile in any modern dictionary. The scale of
the OED was astonishing by comparison with that of any English dictionary published before the
end of the nineteenth century. Murray had revolutionized the whole process by which the
English language was mapped.
Murray had the satisfaction of receiving honorary degrees from nine universities, Cambridge and Oxford among them in 1913 and 1914 respectively. The OED was dedicated to Queen Victoria in 1897. Murray was knighted in 1908. He died at his home in Oxford on 26 July 1915 from heart failure, following a year of ill health which culminated in a bout of pleurisy, one of many such illnesses caused by working in his cold, damp scriptorium. Sheer determination had earlier that month driven this ill, old man of seventy-eight to complete a double section of the dictionary, covering entries in the range ‘Trink’ to ‘Turndown’, on schedule. He was buried on 30 July in the Wolvercote cemetery on the northern outskirts of Oxford, and was survived by his wife and children.

**Continuations and parallels**

The OED was completed in 1928, the editing of the fascicles after Murray's death having been entrusted to his colleagues Henry Bradley, W. A. Craigie, and C. T. Onions. Some other dictionaries on historical principles have been produced or are in hand in Germany, Sweden, France, and the Netherlands, each of them presenting its material in a manner broadly similar to that of the OED. Several dictionaries of varieties of English with the entries presented historically—in Scotland, the USA, Canada, the Caribbean, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand—were published in the twentieth century. All owe a great deal to the methodology of Murray's pioneering work.

A one-volume supplement to the twelve-volume OED, edited by W. A. Craigie and C. T. Onions, was published in 1933, and a four-volume supplement, edited by R. W. Burchfield, was published between 1972 and 1986. The contents of these four volumes, together with some additional material, were absorbed in the second edition of the OED in 1989. The twelve volumes of the OED had become twenty volumes by 1989. It is expected that the third edition will be double that size.

Later editions of the dictionary have departed from Murray's basic principles in only two important ways. He had not given sufficient attention to the English used outside the British Isles, whereas since the 1972–86 supplement the OED has attempted to cover the language as it is written and spoken throughout the world. And, as was to be expected of a Victorian lexicographer, Murray drew a veil over all coarse words: none of the ancient ‘four-letter’ words was included in his dictionary.

At the time of Murray's death in 1915 the portions of the OED for which he was personally responsible amounted to about half of the whole. Henry Bradley's tribute to Murray in the Proceedings of the British Academy is just:

When the remaining part of the last volume is finished, the Oxford English Dictionary will stand unrivalled in its completeness as a record of the history of the vocabulary of a living language, and it is to Murray far more than to any other man that the honour of this great achievement will belong.

R. W. BURCHFIELD
Sources


Archives


Wealth at death

£3836 17s. 9d.: probate, 22 Sept 1915, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

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