

# R.W. Burchfield

1923–2004

## Bob Burchfield — an appreciation

**I didn't know Bob in the early days. When I first met him, it was in the Dictionary offices in 1976, at my job interview. I don't remember saying much, but maybe I did. Bob characteristically did most of the talking, about the *OED*, about Norse literature, about his work on the *Ormulum*. I could see the proofs he was working on, covering an infinitesimally small section of the letter P, on his desk. And there were boxes of dictionary slips, those index cards on which for years readers had submitted their contributions to the Dictionary.**

Later, I heard formally that I was to start working on the *Supplement to the OED*, and, much to my surprise, I received a personal letter from Bob welcoming me to the project and saying how much he was looking forward to me beginning work that summer. By then, Bob had been working on the *Supplement* for nineteen years, and there would be another ten before the final volume of the *Supplement* was published. He dropped in to see me several times soon after I started, just to see how I was getting along with my training. But I didn't see a lot of him to begin with. There were twenty-five or so other staff members working at 40 Walton Crescent in those days, and a new Editorial Assistant didn't come top of his list of priorities. But he was always there, as a directing presence, with his office on the first floor, past which everyone tramped countless times each day, to consult the departmental library across the way, or to pick up post from the collection trays by the library door, or on their way up to the second floor to consult colleagues or to check references in the 'world English' texts which were then housed up there. Bob was always in and out of his office, checking something in the library himself, walking down to the basement to consult the card files, or just stepping into the adjoining room to talk with the departmental secretary. He was a continual presence, both physically and vocally, throughout the building, directing



things and making sure the Dictionary ploughed ahead to schedule.

By this time the *Supplement's* policy was well established: we all knew just how many entries we were expected to work through each month, what was expected of us as far as defining style and documentation were concerned. The work was funnelled in due course through Bob as the final arbiter, and as often as not we received back little slips of paper abruptly pointing out to us errors we had made.

Soon enough we moved into more palatial surroundings at 37a St Giles. Bob had a larger office — imposing to the junior staff — but the regime was maintained uninterrupted. By now we were all working on the fourth

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and final volume of the *Supplement*, and the end was in sight. There were no major changes to editorial policy, for to countenance these would be to interrupt progress. So computers made their way into the office very late, and were only used for non-critical activities. But Bob knew that we had our dictionary slips, our library, and our devotion to the task, despite some growing uncertainty about what, if anything, would follow when the *Supplement* finally drew to an end. Murray had not survived past the letter T of the original first edition of the *OED*, but T came and went when Bob was in his late fifties and there was no doubt that he would see out the great work.

Historical lexicography is a gruelling game, demanding both physical and intellectual stamina, both of which Bob possessed in abundance. To direct such a project at a time when the University and the University Press were passing through a very difficult financial period at the end of the 70s and the start of the 80s, fighting for budgets to retain staff and maintain the crucial reading programme demanded a tenacity which does not fit with the stereotypical public impression of lexicographers. But again Bob possessed this. Hadn't he represented the New Zealand army at rugby, as he sometimes reminded us?

He knew he was a link in an important editorial tradition, and passionately believed that that tradition should be maintained. For several years before the *Supplement* was finally completed he would have a regular morning meeting, lasting about thirty minutes, with myself and Ed Weiner, his two senior general editors. As far as we knew at the time, these were simply an opportunity for Bob to pass back to us a list of errors

(the so-called 'sin cards') he'd noted in editorial text (typically our own) during his previous day's work. But conversation ranged over all sorts of lexicographical topics: plans he had for the future, how Murray and his contemporaries had addressed issues similar to those which we were confronting eighty years later, even over comparisons between the *OED* and its predecessors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As these meetings went on, Ed and I gradually came to realize that Bob wasn't just handing back to us details of our editorial blunders, but was slowly and gradually attempting to pass on to us the traditional lore of the Dictionary. He knew that without these morning talks, which took us away from what we regarded as our 'real' work, the editorial continuity of the Dictionary would be lost. As we work now on the new edition of the *OED* I'm grateful for those moments — out of time — which Bob felt would be so important and which, I hope, link the original editors of the Dictionary, through so many changes in approaches to scholarship, in society in general, and in the English language itself, to the Dictionary as it prepares itself for the future.

John Simpson



Robert Burchfield in November 1958, on the occasion of his first TV appearance

## Tributes

My memories of Bob Burchfield begin and end with lunches. I first met Bob in September 1970, while a graduate student of Angus Cameron, the founding Editor of the *Dictionary of Old English* at the University of Toronto. Bob had been invited, as a historical lexicographer, to take part in the second international planning conference for the new Dictionary, together with Old English specialists and computer scientists. As Angus's student, I was fortunate enough to be seated next to him at one of the conference lunches where he magnanimously kept the conversation going by focusing on my interests and not on his great enterprise. It has only been through reading Roberta Frank's report of that conference that I came to know Bob's crucial role in

helping shape the future of the *Dictionary of Old English*. His shrewd questioning, his straight-talking (on the need for editorial authority), his practical wisdom (on the time constraints against the listing of synonyms and antonyms), and his passionate articulateness (on the inclusion of simple etymological information and personal- and place-name elements), all contributed to setting the new dictionary on a surer footing. The last time I saw Bob was at another lunch, nearly thirty-two years later, at the home of Eric and Mary Stanley. It was easy to share with him both my challenges and joys because he knew, as few others could, what they might be. I am sad our conversation is now over.

Toni Healey

I knew Bob long before he became editor of the second *Supplement*. He at once threw himself into the task, delighted with the little house in Walton Crescent assigned to him. He showed it off, and pointed to the shelving for slips, inherited from *NED* and the first *Supplement*. He was not pleased when I thought the house too small, with walls insufficient to hold the slips that would be needed, especially since not all the rooms were for his *Supplement*.

Collecting quotations required readers: since the early thirties nothing had been read for *OED*. Friends and colleagues were urged by me to help. One of them, charged with reading *The Times*, told me that each daily issue took her a week to read thoroughly and write out slips. Many technicalities in subjects, such as radio, television, the gramophone, electronics, and electrical devices, needed to be traced all the way. When I was teaching at Yale I received a message from Bob that a passage in a late seventeenth-century book on commensuration was given in a technical journal as early in the history of a word: two copies of the book were extant, the British Library copy was lost — could I, please, read the Yale copy? For me Bob's *Supplement* provided occasional excitement: for him it was a daily organizational challenge. He was justly proud of the colleagues he had recruited: John Simpson, Edmund Weiner, Lesley Brown (editor of the *New Shorter*), John Sykes (co-editor of the *Oxford Duden*). He laid the foundations for Oxford lexicography after his *Supplement*.

Eric Stanley

Bob Burchfield was one of a cohort of remarkable students, including Grahame Johnston, Harry Orsman, Bill Ramson, and George Turner, most of whom studied under Professor Ian Gordon at Victoria University College in the aftermath of World War II, and who subsequently had notable careers as lexicographers of English in Australia and New Zealand.

His specialist interests arose from the rich but sometimes conservative philological tradition in English studies rather than from general linguistics, but he never let this get in the way of championing an increasingly diverse range of sources of English words. In the 70,000 new entries in the *OED Supplement* Burchfield and his team ensured that slang, technical terms, and regional varieties of World English, whether from New Zealand, India, or Canada, were more appropriately represented.

Graeme Kennedy

Bob Burchfield was the master scholar of our generation. But he also straddled the great gulf between those two antithetical activities, scholarship and journalism. I met him through Lizzy (Elizabeth Burchfield), the best publisher's publicity manager whom I have ever done business with. She read the papers and recognised a 'story'. Bob was patient, tolerant, witty, and humorous with the visiting hack. He taught me to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, open rather than closed, broad rather than narrow, open-minded rather than grumpy about changes in the English language and grammar. I have even come to enjoy the Maori fauna and flora in his majestic *Supplement*. Whatever I write about English usage and grammar carries the mark of the Master. *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* is misnamed. It is, of course, properly called by all of us 'Burchfield'. I am proud (and lucky) to have been his friend. His influence on English at all levels will live as long as Johnson's.

Philip Howard

Historical lexicographers usually labor in obscurity, editing or reviewing entries in the seclusion of their offices, and then seeing them into print without fanfare or controversy, but not Bob Burchfield. When he agreed, in the quiet decade of the 1950s, to take on the task of preparing a supplement to the *OED* covering the new words, and the new uses of old words, of the twentieth century, he would not have expected that his career would take a different turn and that he would become a public figure. From 1972, however, when the first volume appeared — and indeed even before that — he was called upon to articulate the purposes of the historical dictionary and defend the work of the lexicographer, which he saw as describing words 'as objectively as possible to form a permanent record of the language of our time, the useful and the neutral, those that are decorous and well-formed, beside those that are controversial, tasteless, or worse.' He was not the first to enunciate this objective view, of course, but he did so, in various forms and in various media, in his always eloquent, genial, and uncondescending way, and his printed remarks on the subject will be read and reread, both by me and other lexicographers and by the public, long after his more important — indeed, immeasurable — contribution to the English vocabulary of the twentieth century has been subsumed (anonymously) by *OED3*.

Robert E. Lewis

