

Matters of tradition

The first dictionary of English was the *Table Alphabeticall*, published in 1604 by the schoolmaster Robert Cawdrey. This was a compendium 'conteyning and teaching the true writing, and understanding of hard usuall English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French, &c.' Cawdrey's small book, covering only 3,000 entries, was the acorn from which the great present-day oak of English-language lexicography has grown.

The lengthy title of that little book runs on: 'With the interpretation thereof by plaine English words, gathered for the benefit & helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskilfull persons'. Cawdrey was more than a lexicographical innovator. Though his words may seem patronizing and sexist today, they indicate that he was concerned about the education of women, helping the less privileged, and the use of plain English – and did not hesitate to make his position clear.

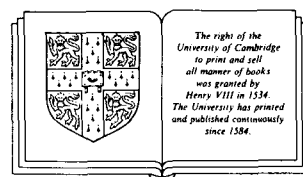
In Cawdrey's wake, the 17th-century tradition of 'hard-word dictionaries' blossomed, explaining complex or rare words through simple and common words. This tradition pioneered a defining style that is nowadays more typical of dictionaries of English as a foreign language (EFL) than of general dictionaries, whose definitions can often be circuitous and obscure – indeed, couched in the very 'hard words' that Cawdrey wanted to explain.

Last year, we reviewed eight leading desk-cum-family dictionaries (*ET*10, Apr 87). Commenting on that review, some readers expressed the hope that we would in due course also take on the EFL dictionaries. This we are now doing. In this issue, Della Summers describes and discusses the learners' dictionaries. In planning her article, we have followed the same format as last year, so as to present the three leading dictionaries in the field side by side. In this way, you can form your own opinion of the three works, and we look forward to your comments.

*ET*14 continues its own tradition of variety. Even a casual survey of the contents of this issue testifies to the cosmopolitan service now largely provided by readers for readers. Apart from the commissioned cover article, all the special features in this issue have been sent in by writers who are also readers. They indicate that *ET* has become what it set out to be – a worldwide forum for a worldwide language.

Tom McArthur

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English Today (ISSN 0266-0784) is a quarterly.
ISBN 0 521 35553 2

Publisher: Cambridge University Press, Edinburgh Building, Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 2RU. Telephone (0223) 312393

Subscriptions: the current annual subscription price for four issues for libraries and institutions is £30 in UK, £33 elsewhere; £15 for individuals; £10 for students and the retired; airmail £8 per year extra. Apply to Paul Driver.

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Advertising Sales: write to Andrew Patterson at Rooms 484-6, Tavistock House South, Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9JZ. Telephone (01) 388 7487/8/9.

USA AND CANADA:

Publisher: Cambridge University Press, 32 East 57th Street, New York 10022. Telephone (212) 688 8888.

Subscriptions: the current annual subscription price in USA and Canada for libraries and institutions is \$50; \$25 for individuals; \$17.50 for students and the retired. Copies are air-freighted to New York to arrive with a minimum delay. Apply to Linda Huppelsberg.

Promotion: write to Harry Florentine at the above address.

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Application to mail at second class postage rates pending at New York, NY and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: send address changes in USA and Canada to *English Today*, Cambridge University Press, 32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022.

Letters to the Editor: write to Dr Tom McArthur, Editor, *English Today*, 22-23 Ventress Farm Court, Cherry Hinton Road, Cambridge CB1 4HD, UK.

Typeset by Goodfellow & Egan. Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge.