Aggravated Mischief: Editing and Digitizing the Papers of Sir James Murray

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Abstract

The authors of this article are at work on a pilot digital edition of the papers of Sir James Murray in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. Murray was chief editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary* from 1879 until his death, aged 78, in 1915. As he himself foresaw, the letters he exchanged almost daily over this period, with a host of correspondents, formed an essential part of "the whole material on which the Dictionary [was to] be built." Today they make fascinating and informative reading, while also providing a case-study of the role of letter-writing in nineteenth-century scholarly projects and networks. The article describes the origins and character of the Bodleian archive—not least its value in illuminating the creation of the *OED*—and sets out the nature and purpose of the edition, along with its planned future development.

Introduction

The papers of Sir James Murray, chief editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, were donated to the Bodleian Library in 1994 by Murray's granddaughter, K. M. E. (Elisabeth) Murray (1909–1998). The existence of the papers was by then already well-known to dictionary scholars, Elisabeth Murray having drawn deeply on them to write her justly celebrated biography of her grandfather, *Caught in the Web of Words*, published in 1977. The collection largely consists of letters—perhaps 5,000 in all—spanning the years 1834–1992, the bulk of them sent to or from Murray (fortunately for us, Murray often kept drafts or copies of his completed letters). These letters begin with a document written before Murray's own birth by one of his most eminent predecessors, the Scottish lexicographer John Jamieson (editor of the *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, 1808), and continue through to a handful of exchanges in the 1980s and 1990s between Elisabeth Murray and T. C. Skeat (former Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum and grandson of one of Murray's closest

friends, W. W. Skeat).[1] In addition to correspondence, the archive preserves copies of *OED* proof sheets, various of Murray's lectures and papers, and other interesting documents—for example, the case made for the fledgling new dictionary, written by Henry Sweet and sent to Bartholomew Price in April 1877, as part of the London Philological Society's long drawn out negotiations with Oxford University Press to take over the project.[2] In 2017, the collection was expanded with the donation of further family papers by Murray's great-grandson, Oswyn Murray. These include the unpublished biography of Murray by his eldest child, Harold (father of Elisabeth Murray), along with family photograph albums from the 1880s to the 1950s belonging to Murray's second-to-youngest child (Oswyn Murray's great-uncle Jowett) and two photographs (inside and outside) of the Scriptorium, the famous shed built in Murray's garden in North Oxford, which he used as his workroom.

In their present home at the Bodleian, the Murray Papers occupy nine linear meters of shelf space and are divided across 60 boxes. It was not until 2020 that a detailed, but still only partial, catalogue of the contents was released (Hughes and Thiel 2020). The authors of this article are at work on a pilot digital edition of a sample of the papers. In what follows, we describe the background and significance of the archive before sketching our plans for the pilot. We set out our hopes for the edition's potential use(fulness), and we report our

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[1] John Jamieson to David Aitken, February 18, 1834 (MS. Murray 1/1 Folder 1), on the etymology of the place name *Minto* in the Scottish Borders, where Aitken served as minister (1829–1866). Murray attended Minto school in 1849–1851, and in the late 1850s he planned a (never completed) phonetic key to Jamieson's dictionary (Murray 1977, 21–23, 51), so he may have acquired Jamieson's letter around this time. Here and below, an MS. Murray shelfmark indicates that a document is held by the Bodleian Library.

[2] Henry Sweet to Bartholomew Price, April 20, 1877 (MS. Murray 3/2 Folder 1).

experience of obstacles on the one hand and generous aid from colleagues on the other. We finish with a few words on how we may develop the project in future.

Origins and Character of the Murray Papers

James Murray would have been familiar with the Philological Society's project to create a *New English Dictionary* (as it would officially be called on its title pages) some years before becoming its third and chief editor. By virtue of being an active member of the Philological Society—and a contributor of edited volumes to both the Society's imprint and that of the Early English Text Society—he was already an associate of Henry Sweet, W. W. Skeat, F. J. Furnivall, H. H. Gibbs, and other Society members who played an important role in the dictionary's early days. The Murray Papers contain many letters to and from all these individuals and their fellow 'Phil Soc.' members. These documents, along with many others in the archive, trace the broader scholarly and intellectual networks of Victorian and Edwardian Britain and beyond, as well as the varying stages of the dictionary project, from the negotiations between the Society and Oxford University Press through to Murray's death in 1915. At the start of this period, they include widely differing views of the dictionary's scope and function—the limited project urged on Murray by Skeat in November 1878 ("The mere piling up of additional words, especially of words of wh[ich] the meaning is self-obvious, gives no value to a Dict^{y}"), as against the grander undertaking outlined in 1877 by Sweet.[3] As the work gathers pace, and the correspondence with other individuals grows

[3] Walter William Skeat to James A. H. Murray (JAHM), November 30, 1878 (MS. Murray 24 Folder 1). Even Sweet's proposal was for OUP to publish an "abridgment" of 6,400 pages, rather than the 18,000-page work "originally contemplated" by the Society (see further

(including the first co-editor, Henry Bradley, reluctantly accepted by Murray), the letters are dominated by discussion of the perennial accumulation of quotation slips for the dictionary, along with the management of this complicated process. This is hardly surprising: quotations from historical texts of all periods of the English language were, and continue to be, the evidentiary basis of the *OED*, fundamental to its revolutionary role in English language lexicography, as Sweet had made clear in the paper he wrote to Price in 1877: "But the essential groundwork [of the project] is a full body of citations. Whatever may be the character of the editing, these will always retain their value, and their collection, it may safely be said, constitutes half of the whole undertaking." Looking back over the dictionary after its completion, its fifth and sixth editors, Craigie and Onions (1933, v), agreed that the approximately five million quotations which had been collected by then "could form the only possible foundation for the historical treatment of every word and idiom which is the *raison d'être* of the work."

This central preoccupation radiates out into a host of associated matters, distributed everywhere over the vast array of letters: discussions of etymology, pronunciation, definitions, of which textual sources to quote; disputes and ups and downs over editing, editors, and staff (including the desirability of employing women for piecework over men—more diligent, reliable, and cheaper); difficulties in recording technical vocabulary; issues of usage and correctness; spelling reform; professional comings and goings (innumerable requests for lectures, visits to and from colleagues); personal struggles—including Murray's own—for preferment and recognition. Old friends from Murray's childhood days in Hawick, in the Scottish Borders, still contact him; members of the public write in to ask innocently

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Gilliver 2016, 90–91). When finally completed in 1928, the first edition of the *OED* ran to 10 volumes and 15,490 pages (see "Dictionary Facts" n.d.).

ignorant questions about the English language, to which Murray not infrequently responds with a pedagogical scolding, no doubt kindly meant. Dozens of knowledgeable and often distinguished individuals (Alfred Tennyson, William Gladstone, Robert Louis Stevenson, George Eliot, Evelyn Sharp, the Secretary to the Astronomical Society, the Secretary to the Prince of Wales) respond to Murray's stream of queries, often on the words they themselves used and what they had meant by them in particular instances.[4] Many of the letters express awe at the magnitude of the task Murray is shouldering and its national, cultural, and linguistic importance. As Gladstone put it in 1896, "I look with a real respect, I might almost say reverence, on your Herculean labours and have gone to work, in defiance of many other calls, to discover the passage affiliated upon me."[5] Murray's printed acknowledgements in the emerging fascicles of the *OED* repeatedly recognize the centrality of letter-writing to the creation of the dictionary:

> I have had constantly to seek advice and assistance on various points, literary, critical, philological, phonological, bibliographical, historical, scientific, and technical. Such advice and assistance has been most liberally given, often by men whose time is much occupied, but whose interest in this under-taking has led them willingly to place some of it at the Editor's service. (Murray 1884, v)

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[4] Not all of Murray's experts were of such national eminence. They included a local Oxford builder, T. H. Kingerlee, who answered a query on the size of bricks (Thomas Henry Kingerlee to JAHM, 1887, MS. Murray 7/2 Folder 2). Kingerlee later served twice as the Mayor of Oxford, and two streets in West Oxford, Helen Road and Henry Road, are named after his eldest children. His descendants' vans are still a familiar sight around the city.

[5] William Gladstone to JAHM, May 16, 1896 (MS. Murray 12/1 Folder 1).

The frequency of postage collections and deliveries—several times daily up and down the country—enabled efficient and sometimes near-instantaneous communication (see Golden 2009, 107–108; Daunton 1985). In addition, as already mentioned, the content and provenance of the letters evidence the social and institutional contexts (almost exclusively inhabited by men) in which scholarly networks habitually operated, or to which they could easily extend—Oxford and Cambridge colleges, continental universities, lawyers, schoolmasters, clergymen, doctors, and engineers, as well as men and very occasionally women of letters who had sufficient education, income, and leisure to devote themselves to extensive reading in search of suitable quotations. As the repeated exchange of letters over many years between (for example) Murray and W. W. Skeat, or H. H. Gibbs, or F. T. Elworthy testifies, lifelong relationships were created, sustained, and developed through these networks, along with structures of power and influence that determined the outcome of applications for academic posts. An instance of the latter can be seen in the flurry of letters sent to Murray around Christmas 1890, requesting and discussing support for various candidates for the position of Deputy Professor of Comparative Philology at Oxford. The post went to Murray's younger colleague (and favored candidate) Joseph Wright, who later became famous as the editor of the *English Dialect Dictionary*.[6] The relative privacy and potential intimacy of letter-writing also licensed frankness—as in Wright's indignant comments on his rival, R. Seymour Conway—so that the letters provide information it would

[6] Thomas Collins Snow to JAHM, December 26, 31, 1890 (MS. Murray 9/1 Folder 1); Richard Francis Weymouth to JAHM, January 2, 1891; Joseph Wright to JAHM, January 30, 1891; Sir Frederick Pollock to JAHM, February 3, 1891 (all MS. Murray 9/1 Folder 2).

be hard to find in published sources (in all these respects see also van Kalmthout 2018, 161–163).

Even before the Murray family moved to Oxford in 1885—soon after which the Post Office installed a pillar box outside their house for Murray's convenience (Murray 1977, 213; Gilliver 2016, 268 n22)—post for the dictionary came thick and fast. Murray estimated that he had received "from thirty to forty [letters] a day" at the start of his editorship, and by 1882 he was still being sent "about sixty a week" (Humphreys 1882, 452). When Jennett Humphreys visited the site of Murray's first Scriptorium—on the grounds of Mill Hill School, where Murray taught until devoting himself to the *OED* full-time—she reported being shown thirteen quarto volumes, each a hand thick, into which more than 5,000 letters had been pasted:

> "Further," says Dr. Murray, after giving these figures, and sharing in the surprise of them, "I shall continue to collect. These are all the letters up to this date, missing none, that I have received; all the post-cards; all the other communications. They come from readers, from sub-editors, from mere inquirers who ask and who are gone; they come from everybody. I keep them for reference; even for history. That the whole material on which the Dictionary shall be built shall be here for any after use that may be made of it, is an essential part of my scheme."
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> (Humphreys 1882, 452)

The zeal with which Murray preserved his correspondence for posterity could amuse and alarm. The historian Edith Thompson, one of the dictionary's most dedicated contributors, teased him in 1891, "[I]t is rather appalling to think that you embalm one's casually written

notes & post-cards in the Bodleian!"[7] Remarkably, for someone constructing a work based on quotations, Murray was wary of letting other people quote from his own communications lest his words be taken out of context. In 1890, when the would-be lexicographer Alfred Mudge asked Murray for permission to cite one of his letters as an encomium on Mudge's own plans for an English dictionary, Murray issued a flat refusal: "I do not approve of the printing of sentences from letters detached from their context, as 'opinions' of the writers. By such means, the latter may be represented as purely condemning or approving something of which they have really a very mingled opinion." 20 years later, a request to quote from a letter that Murray had sent to one of the dictionary's many well-wishers received a similarly firm response: "My wish is that the letter shall *not be printed at all* . . . To print my letter to him would be mischievous, and to do so without printing the letter which gave rise to it would aggravate the mischief."[8]

It is to the great benefit of dictionary scholarship that present-day researchers have ignored Murray's wishes. As already mentioned, Murray's and his correspondents' letters formed a major source for Elisabeth Murray's biography—and she herself was extremely generous in allowing other researchers free access to the papers before giving them to the

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[7] Edith Thompson to JAHM, December 20, 1891 (MS. Murray 9/1 Folder 3). Though of course Murray ordinarily kept his correspondence in the Scriptorium, Thompson's reference to the Bodleian—which proved uncannily prophetic—will be explained by the contents of a small exhibition in the Library accompanying the completion of our pilot edition in 2022.

[8] JAHM to Alfred Mudge, January 16, 1890 (MS. Murray 9/1 Folder 1); JAHM to "Dear Sir (or Madam)," June 18, 1910 (MS. Murray 21/1 Folder 1).

Bodleian in 1994.[9] In the years following her donation, Murray's letters, lectures, and other notes have been mined by scholars for the unparalleled insights they offer into the making of the *OED* and the mind of its chief editor (e.g. Mugglestone 2000, 2005; Brewer 2007; Ogilvie 2013; Gilliver 2016). Yet for all this work, the papers have never been fully excavated. Our pilot is intended to break the ground in a small way for this much larger endeavor.

Editorial Aims and Criteria for Selecting Letters

The project has been awarded a British Academy/Leverhulme Small Research Grant to produce a digital edition of a sample of Murray's letters and related documents.[10] The initial stage of the Murray Scriptorium, as we have decided to call it (www.murrayscriptorium.org), will take the form of a digital platform focusing on the materials at the Bodleian, together with a few additional letters from the *OED* archive at Oxford University Press and elsewhere. We anticipate that the number of edited documents will not exceed 100. In deciding how to tackle the vast wealth of material available, we are setting out to achieve two main ends: firstly, to give a representative indication of the topics covered by the letters, showing how their evidence illuminates the history of the *OED* and of lexicography more generally (including lexicography today), and secondly, to exploit the possibilities of digital editing.

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[9] See e.g. MacMahon (1985, 103 n6). The first author of this paper visited Elisabeth Murray at her house Upper Cranmore in the village of Heyshott, West Sussex, in 1992.

[10] The project was previously awarded a grant by Oxford University's John Fell Fund to underwrite its expenses in the event that the application for external funding was unsuccessful. The Fell grant has now been gratefully returned.

Our initial reading of the archive has thrown up a number of promising topics, including the status of different sources of evidence for documenting the history of English (e.g. women's writing and newspapers versus the traditional male literary canon), the treatment of World Englishes, issues of 'correct' spelling and pronunciation, censorship (in the case of profanity and sexual taboo), the contribution of female workers to the *OED*, and the nuts and bolts—not least staffing problems of various kinds—of how work on the dictionary progressed. Our selection of letters from across the timespan of Murray's correspondence has chiefly been governed by their bearing on any of these topics, though of course many more relevant letters will have to be excluded because of the pilot's spatial constraints, not to mention the difficulties of copyright (see below). The selected letters are being transcribed directly into the markup language XML, so that they may be provided with editorial annotations which will be visible to users and simultaneously tagged with underlying metadata in accordance with the open-source protocols of the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI Consortium 2021). The metadata will allow an individual letter to be electronically identified by, among other things, its author, addressee, and date and place of composition, as well as any particular words it discusses (e.g. *bezique, drawers¸ floccinaucinihilipilification, pook, teff*) and the subjects it touches on (e.g. etymology, literary usage, women's careers, personnel issues, South African English). Our editorial annotations will expand the various allusions made in the letters and provide links to related documents (where these have also been digitized), mini-biographies of the correspondents, and longer commentaries on the various topics raised by the letters.

We intend these commentaries to form an informative backdrop to the project. They will, we hope, illuminate (for example) the lexicographers' and volunteer readers' particular choices of quotation sources for the dictionary, and the conflicting views expressed over the inclusion of technical terms, regionalisms, and 'naughty words'; elucidate how such choices

and views relate to the social and cultural issues of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and demonstrate the importance of these decisions for the making of the first edition of the *OED* (and where relevant, its subsequent forms). In addition, the digital platform will contain an introduction, a timeline of the *OED*, an account of our editorial methods and conventions, indexes, bibliography, and other material necessary to render the work a fully functional scholarly entity. The platform is being built by Huber Digital, using a template originally developed by them for another digital collection, the Thomas Gray Archive (www.thomasgray.org).

Sample Findings from Murray's "Whole Material"

Presenting letters (and sequences of letters) in their entirety, rather than quoted snippets, is a way of allaying the mischief Murray feared, as is the provision of annotations and cross-references, though clearly we cannot make up for the letters now lost (see the next section). Many of the topics we propose to cover in our pilot have been addressed in the existing literature on the *OED*,[11] but scholars making use of the letters in the course of advancing a critical argument, or establishing an historical context, have rarely had the luxury of quoting letters in full or (necessarily) researching their background circumstances. Herein lies one of the chief potential virtues of a critical edition. One example will suffice, given the unparalleled value in so many respects of Elisabeth Murray's *Caught in the Web of Words*. Returning to this book after immersion in the letters, one is constantly struck by the author's

[11] In addition to the monographs cited earlier, see e.g. Brewer (2011) and Mugglestone (2013) on representing women and their writing in the *OED*, Mugglestone (2007), Gilliver (2010), and Turton (2020) on sexuality and profanity, and MacMahon (1985), Brewer (2010), and Mugglestone (2016) on issues of correctness.

eye for picking out a telling quotation from the huge mass of manuscripts she inherited, whether Skeat's passing description of himself as rarely depressed and "buoyant as a cork" (Murray 1977, 14), or Murray's devastating chastisement of the linguistic "ignorance" of "a Mrs Pott":

> I wish to say, with all kindness, that I seem to see on every page of your letter evidence of a want of that preliminary study of the language which was surely necessary to enable any one to grapple with a delicate linguistic problem . . . Surely it would have been worth your while to acquire the preliminary knowledge before dealing with a subject that required it! (Murray 1977, 181, our ellipsis)

Elisabeth Murray chose the latter excerpt to illustrate her account of Murray's inability to "resist teaching," and hence his wasting "an enormous amount of time in writing needless, and especially needlessly long, letters." Therefore she neither observes that the "Mrs Pott" in question was Constance Mary Pott, who was to become a major proponent of Bacon in the Shakespeare–Bacon authorship controversy of the time, nor that what may have ensnared Murray into replying to Pott was her letter's revelation that even at this early stage in the dictionary's creation (before the first fascicle had appeared), she had grasped the potential value of Murray's work for fingerprinting the linguistic character of individual literary giants. In fact, Murray had prefaced his scolding by saying, "I cannot but be struck by the amount of time & labour you have expended upon the arrangement & collection of your words, and I have gone through them with great interest . . . I must beg you to wait till the Dictionary is published; one of its aims is to give you what you desire"—viz., reliable information about the first use of a word or sense in English that would enable the research she imaginatively

envisaged.[12] Reproducing the letter in its entirety will enable us to see both Murray's and Pott's intentions—or hopes—in their full context.

Most striking as we progress (slowly) through the archive, reading each letter in full, is the frequency with which we find a correspondent's suggested definition, quotation, or comment going straight into the dictionary entry Murray was in the process of preparing, whether or not its provenance was acknowledged in the printed text. It is in this respect as much as any other that the letters can justly be described as Murray's "whole material." Thus E. L. Brandreth's account of the "good Anglo-Indian Society word" *coffee shop* finds its way (slightly adjusted) into the entry for *coffee*, split between defining text ("(*b*) in India, a place at which the residents of a station (esp. in Upper India) meet for talk over a light breakfast of coffee, toast, etc., at an earlier hour than the regular breakfast of the day") and quotation ("**1890** BRANDRETH (*in Letter*) The coffee-shop is essentially a social gathering"). G. B. Hill's offer in 1891 of a Johnson quotation (from Hill's own forthcoming edition of Hawkins's *Life of Johnson*) for the term *tea-conversation* duly turns up in the entry for *conversation* published in 1893. Examples of the first use or origin of a word or term—as in Edward Arber's sourcing of *John Bull* as a character representing the English nation in John Arbuthnot's satirical pamphlet *Law is a Bottomless Pit* (1712)—are triumphantly proffered, accepted, and in many cases (as this one) prove the test of time, surviving into revised entries

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[12] JAHM to Constance Mary Pott, December 1880 (draft) and Pott to JAHM, December 14, 1880 (both MS. Murray 4/2 Folder 1). Pott's *Francis Bacon and His Secret Society* was published in 1891. Evidently, such 'linguistic fingerprinting' could only begin to be realized with any thoroughness (and even then, only questionably) after the *OED* was digitized in 1989; for an attempt with Jane Austen's vocabulary, see Brewer (2015).

recently published by *OED3*.[13] On at least one occasion, nevertheless, Murray seems to have ignored the advice he had solicited. The distinguished jurist W. R. Anson, Warden of All Souls College, Oxford, "the best teacher of English Law to be found in Oxford" (Matthew 2006), and, most relevantly, the author of the standard work on contract law, suggested, "with due deference," that Murray's draft division of the various senses of *contract* "blurred" the distinction between the "general" and "legal" senses of the word and should therefore be re-written. In the event, however, the published entry retained (and retains) the blurred division to which Anson had objected, presumably because Murray felt the quotation evidence would not support the clear conceptual distinction that this legal analysis required.[14]

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[13] Edward Lyell Brandreth to JAHM, October 1890 (MS. Murray 9/1 Folder 1); G. B. Hill to JAHM, October 5, 1891 (MS. Murray 9/1 Folder 3); Edward Arber to JAHM, March 12, 1887 (MS. Murray 7/2 Folder 2). *OED3*'s entry for *John Bull* is currently (March 2021) dated June 2019. Other examples of Murray's reproduction in the dictionary of material directly sourced from correspondents' letters are given in Porck (2021); see also the instance cited in note 20 below.

[14] William Reynell Anson to JAHM, September 26, 1891 (MS. Murray 9/1 Folder 2). The entry for *contract* (sb.[1]), first published in 1893 and currently reproduced on *OED Online* (March 2021), does distinguish particular legal uses of the word ("**2.** In a legal sense: An agreement enforceable by law"), but the law also seeps into the more general primary sense: "**1. a.** A mutual agreement between two or more parties that something shall be done or forborne by one or both; a compact, covenant, bargain; *esp. such as has legal effects (see [sense] 2*)" (our italicization). Anson's *Principles of the English Law of Contract* was first published in 1879 and reached its 22nd edition in 1964.

Beyond their material contributions to the dictionary, the full letters brim with the humanness of their writers. Social remarks and personal anecdotes bookend the scholarly matter of many messages, offering poignant glimpses into the lives of the dictionary's helpers. For instance—despite Murray's (1884, v) special acknowledgement of help received from "men whose time is much occupied"—in reading the letters of the *OED's* female volunteers, one perceives the difficulty women often faced of finding space for scholarly work amid the demands of domestic labor (cf. Murray 1977, 185). The philologist Lucy Toulmin Smith lamented to Murray that she had been kept from reading the latest part of the dictionary, as well as several other books, by consecutive visits from her brothers' families (one set traveling from Moscow, the other fleeing an outbreak of measles), which had thrown her into "a period of *Sturm und Drang*." The usually indefatigable Edith Thompson was once unable to answer Murray's inquiries while under doctor's orders to avoid work: for some time, she confessed, she had shouldered aside her own ill health to care for her dying mother, then "struggled on miserably for several weeks" until a friend had "carried [her] bodily off" to Scarborough for "a course of treatment, massage, &c." Margaret Stuart of Edinburgh wrote that she had "no further progress to report" on her dictionary work, as she had "been doing nothing but sewing for several months past," though she did promise to resume her efforts in the autumn. In the meantime, she enclosed in her letter "a pattern of what is *now* called 'brilliant'"—presumably in response to seeing in the dictionary's latest instalment, *Bra–Cass*, that the only textile sense given for *brilliant* (*sb.* 2. "A kind of silken fabric") was marked 'obsolete'.[15]

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[15] Lucy Toulmin Smith to JAHM, June 9, 1887 (MS. Murray 7/2 Folder 2); Edith Thompson to JAHM, c1911 (MS. Murray 23 Folder 2); Margaret Stuart to JAHM, May 31, 1889 (MS.

This last letter points to another intriguing subject that Murray's correspondence raises: the limitations of words as definitional tools. Like Margaret Stuart, the Director of the Royal Gardens at Kew sent Murray a physical object to explain a term—in his case a sample of a species of grass, the stem over two feet long, its roots still attached. Other correspondents fell back on diagrams or sketches. Edith Thompson supplemented her rough description of a hatmaker's *coque*, "a stick-up bow of ribbon loops," with a drawing of the same. Alexander Beazeley furnished Murray with a beautifully detailed illustration of a bridge to explain the position and function of a *corbel*. A sketch of the *hanging guard* position in swordplay was supplied by the jurist and fencing enthusiast Sir Frederick Pollock, though in this case Murray felt obliged to write back and ask for a verbal definition as well.[16] While our digital platform is so far only intended to provide documents in transcribed form, we hope that at some stage we may be able host images of at least a subset of them (and their enclosures, if these last have survived).

Obstacles to Archival Work and Copyright

Sir James Murray and his wife, Ada Agnes Murray, were meticulous about organizing the post their household received. The letters that Jennett Humphreys had seen pasted into quarto volumes were numbered, and an index to correspondents was kept from 1879 to 1893; by the

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Murray 8/2 Folder 2). For other sewing terms missed by the first edition of the *OED*, see Brewer (2015: 758-59).

[16] Sir William Turner Thiselton-Dyer to JAHM, July 3, 1896 (MS Murray 12/1 Folder 3); Edith Thompson to JAHM, December 20, 1891 (MS. Murray 9/1 Folder 3); Alexander Beazeley to JAHM, February 13, 1892 (MS. Murray 9/2 Folder 1); JAHM to Sir Frederick Pollock, July 28, 1897 (MS. Murray 12/2 Folder 2).

end of that time, the index recorded over 12,000 letters, and the number of quartos containing them had grown to 32 (Gilliver 2016, 127 n68).[17] However, the loss, misplacement, and even theft of correspondence proved unpreventable. On at least one occasion Murray himself, by his own account, tore a letter out of one of the quarto volumes—to post it back to the editors of the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* in Leiden as evidence of an agreement to swap *OED* and *WNT* fascicles, on which he feared the later *WNT* editors might renege. (Murray's explanatory note is reproduced in Porck 2021, 116, where more information can be found.) In this case the letter was returned, but Murray was not always so lucky. Even within the confines of the Scriptorium, there was a risk of correspondence being mislaid among the drifts of papers, the workers' careful filing system notwithstanding. A particularly agitated note from Murray was sent to one contributor who, he recalled, had supplied information on the geological sense of *tertiary*. Murray asked if the correspondent would mind supplying it again: the original letter "has somehow gone astray, and after a long search, no trace of it has been found, so that I begin to doubt my own memory, and to wonder whether my impression is merely a dream." As for theft: in 1890, E. A. Abbott, the author of *Flatland*, was greatly affronted to discover that a letter he had written to Murray was being advertised for sale in an autograph-seller's catalogue. Abbott sent a stiff note of inquiry to Murray, which was followed by a flustered apology when Abbott learnt that "certain letters ha[d] been stolen" from the editor.[18] By whatever route, the letter had fallen victim to the nineteenth-century

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[17] Gilliver cites Hjelmqvist (1896, 118) for the figure of "32 stora volymer" ('32 large volumes').

[18] JAHM to "Dear Sir," April 18, 1911 (MS. Murray 21/2 Folder 1); Edwin Abbott Abbott to JAHM, April 9, 14, 1890 (MS. Murray 9/1 Folder 1).

craze for collecting specimens of famous individuals' handwriting, one which spawned a thriving market for buying and selling (Dukes 2020).

The archive has suffered further losses since Murray's death. By the time Elisabeth Murray came to write *Caught in the Web of Words*, the quarto volumes of correspondence had "disappeared" (Murray 1977, 365 n28). Though some of the numbered letters they must once have contained are still to be found loose in the archive, others are not.[19] The old index to correspondents has been saved and carefully records the existence of letters from, among others, Charlotte Yonge and "C. L. Dodgson" (Lewis Carroll), but they are missing from their places in the chronological sequence. Other correspondence that survived to be quoted in Murray's biography—such as a note from Ada Murray to her daughter Hilda describing her working week, and a letter to Harold from his brother Oswyn recollecting their father's acquaintance with Robert Browning (Murray 1977, 332, 235)—can no longer be found. Losses such as these are a source of disappointment, but also of a renewed determination to preserve what remains in a sustainable digital form.

The benefits of digitization have been reaffirmed—even as the process of digitization has been complicated—by the COVID-19 pandemic. A series of lockdowns implemented in England since March 2020 has intermittently prevented us from accessing the Bodleian Library, though we were able to make a series of carefully scheduled visits in late 2020, during which we worked at desks in separate rooms and communicated our findings by email. Since then, we have had to rely on the generosity of the librarians still working on site,

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[19] The OUP Archives hold two algebra exercise books into which Murray pasted correspondence dating between 1880 and 1899 (shelfmarks OED/B/3/6/1 and OED/B/3/6/2), though whether these were among the fabled quartos is at present uncertain. We are grateful to Beverley McCulloch for this information.

who have scanned several batches of letters for us. We have so far been able to make copies of just over 500 letters—more than enough for us to choose from for our pilot edition.

One practical criterion that will determine which letters are selected for digitization is copyright. This is a thorny issue on which we have become rather more informed than we initially imagined would be necessary. Under the Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988 of the United Kingdom, the copyright in a published work usually expires 70 years after the death of the author. We swiftly discovered, however, that in the case of some very old unpublished words, copyright will last for much longer: some works whose authors have died hundreds of years ago will continue to be protected in the UK until 31 December 2039. As a result, vast tracts of historic manuscripts remain under copyright in the United Kingdom, their ownership having passed from their creators into the hands of distant heirs who may not even know of the manuscripts' existence, let alone that they possess the rights to them. In many cases these individuals are impossible to track down. The restraints were somewhat loosened in 2012, when the European Union enacted an Orphan Works Directive for its member states. This requires states to introduce a legal exception to allow cultural heritage institutions, including libraries and archives, to digitize works for which no copyright owners can be found (i.e. orphan works), as long as they have been registered—at no cost—with the EU Intellectual Property Office. However, along with much other legislation, the Orphan Works Directive ceased to have effect in the United Kingdom when it left the European Union on 1 January 2021, and the UK repealed its orphan works exception, leaving cultural heritage institutions with the option of paying licensing fees for every orphan work they have digitized or removing the works from their digital catalogues.

Pragmatic solutions will undoubtedly prevail, but the legal situation has complicated our publication plans. Because the contents of the Murray Papers derive from hundreds of creators, they entail hundreds of copyrights. Fortunately, the copyright of *OED*-related letters

written by Murray himself, as well as by his co-editors and their assistants, resides with their employers, Oxford University Press, who have granted us provisional permission to digitize their correspondence. Much of the pilot will therefore be devoted to these letters, though we are also in the process of contacting the estates of other authors represented in the archive, among them William Gladstone, Thomas Hardy, Elizabeth Wordsworth, and W. E. Henley. The heirs of less well-known correspondents have proved harder to trace, but we have invested a significant portion of time into genealogical and other searches in an effort to identify their descendants. Although we plan to limit the pilot's inclusion of orphan works as far as possible, the budget we prepared for the British Academy/Leverhulme research grant allocates a small sum of money towards the potential cost of copyright licensing fees.

Aid from Colleagues and Future Plans

The difficulties that the project has already faced have been lessened by the enthusiastic support of many colleagues, both in Oxford and beyond. Peter Gilliver, whose knowledge of the *OED* archives is unrivaled, and Beverley McCulloch, the archivist taming these historical records into catalogic submission at OUP, deserve a special mention in this respect. Lynda Mugglestone of Pembroke College, Oxford, Oswyn Murray of Balliol College, John Murray, and Oliver House, Susan Thomas, and Judith Siefring of the Bodleian Library have also given us invaluable aid (not least, from Oliver, dozens of scans over lockdown), as well as helping us think through the possible future scope of the project.

We are additionally grateful to the other researchers and librarians who have drawn our attention to, or answered our queries about, the existence of letters to or from Murray outside the Bodleian and OUP Archives. Given the torrent of letters Murray wrote most weeks during his 32-year editorship, there are many single or small groups of letters still surviving, in widely distributed locations, together with larger collections of regular

correspondence with long-term associates of the dictionary or of Murray personally. Some of the letters we know of are held by Girton College (for which we thank Hannah Westall), the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew (Katherine Harrington), the University of Aberdeen (Susan Rennie and Heather Kennedy), the National Library of Scotland (Kirsty McHugh), and Leiden University (Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade and Thijs Porck, the latter of whom kindly provided us with a pre-publication copy of his 2021 paper, which discusses and reproduces a sample of the Murray letters in question). We have tracked further caches of correspondence to Balliol College, the British Library, the London Metropolitan Archives, the Natural History Museum Library and Archives, Imperial College London, King's College London, Dorset Museum, the University of Edinburgh, the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham, the Beinecke Library at Yale University, the University of Cape Town Libraries, and the National Library of Israel.

These archives not only complement the material in the Murray Papers, but they have refined our understanding of the latter's history. One of the most notable gaps in the papers is a letter from George Eliot on her use of the word *adust*. Elisabeth Murray reported that this was among the treasures once shown to visitors to the Scriptorium, but that it had since been lost (Murray 1977, 300, 375 n85). This seems to have been a lapse of memory: the letter was in fact donated to Girton College by Elisabeth's father Harold in 1947, while Elisabeth was a fellow of the college. Accompanying the letter is a cover note written by Elisabeth herself: "I hope it isn't more trouble than it is worth"![20]

[20] George Eliot to JAHM, December 5, 1879, and K. M. E. Murray to Girton Library, July 14, 1947 (both Girton College GCRF9/1-11/7). Eliot's letter was published in 1978 in *The George Eliot Letters* (Eliot 1954–1978, Vol. 9, 268–269).

Discoveries like this have been greatly facilitated by public digital catalogues, but we suspect there will be many other letters from Murray in private collections. John Considine generously sent us scans of his, which include an almost gossipy account of an "Oxford Philological Soc." meeting where Murray seems to have regaled his colleagues with a shocked (surely also delighted) report of what he later characterized as "one of the most grotesque [philological] blunders on record." This was a seventeenth-century misreading of an Old English expression (itself a gloss of post-classical Latin) as in some way referring to belts (!) for counting paternosters, transmuting what was in origin a reference to the canonical hour at which a paternoster should be sung (*æt VII beltidum*, 'at the seven bell-hours') into a magical object, or as Murray put it "something between a rosary and a wampum belt." Versions of this error were repeated by philological and lexicographical authorities down to the nineteenth century, as Murray laid bare in his explanation of the term *belt of pater-nosters* or *belt of Our Fathers* in the dictionary itself (1887).[21] We warmly urge readers of

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[21] See *belt* (sb.[1]) in the *OED's Batter–Boz* fascicle (1887), where the term is prefaced with a paragraph mark to indicate erroneous or catachrestic use. Murray's accompanying characterization of the misreading as "one of the most grotesque blunders on record" is quoted in the *OED3's* revision of the entry in September 2017 (accessed March 2021). The Considine letter (JAHM to Frederick Thomas Elworthy, November 9, 1885) is one of a group of five letters to Elworthy, all (also) discussing forms of the word *beat* referring to "the rough sod of moorland;" see *beat* (sb.[3]) in the 1887 fascicle just cited, in which Elworthy's part of the correspondence is quoted. The letters are inserted after page 120 of an early issue of Elworthy's own edition of *The Exmoor Scolding and Courtship* (1879), on which his treatment of the same word appears. (Later that year, Elworthy's edition was published as Part I of the English Dialect Society's *Specimens of English Dialects*.)

Dictionaries to get in touch with us if they know of any additional letters (or collections of letters), whether publicly or privately held.

Of course, there is always an element of serendipity in archival work. A query sent to the first author of this paper by a television researcher alerted us to two articles by the late Richard W. Bailey which cite a letter sent by Murray to Thomas Hardy (Bailey 1996b, 2010). Murray is said to have asked Hardy to refrain from lifting words marked 'obsolete' or 'archaic' out of the *OED* and dropping them into his literary works. Bailey (2010) gives as an example *acoast*, which was used by Hardy in "The Alarm": "Doth Duty now expect me / To march a-coast, or guard my weak ones near?" (Hardy 1898, 94). At least five letters from Hardy to Murray are known to exist. Two used to form part of the Murray Papers, but they seem to have been kept by Elisabeth Murray when she donated the rest of the collection to the Bodleian, and their present whereabouts are unknown.[22] Three other letters are held in the OUP Archives. However, where Bailey encountered a letter from Murray to Hardy is unclear. It is not cited in his *Nineteenth-century English* (1996a) or in *Hardy's Literary Language and Victorian Philology* (Taylor 1993); nor is it mentioned in *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy* (1978–1988). It is not in the Murray Papers (to our knowledge) or listed in the records of the OUP Archives. Nevertheless, queries we sent to Michael Adams at Indiana University Bloomington and Anne Curzan at the University of Michigan received nigh instantaneous responses suggesting numerous possible leads, and we have since discovered that seven letters from Murray to Hardy are held by Dorset Museum. COVID restrictions have delayed

[22] The two missing Hardy letters, dated July 9, 1903 and October 24, 1913, are reproduced in *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, where their source is identified as "Elisabeth Murray" (Hardy 1978–1988, Vol. 3, 69–70; Vol. 4, 312–313).

our gaining access to these items, and whether the letter Bailey had in mind is among them remains to be seen, but it is cheering to have such ready aid from colleagues.

Our amassing of library catalogues, and our recordkeeping of all the letters we have so far copied from the Murray Papers—not just the sample we intend to use in the pilot—is all being done with an eye to a later, more ambitious project. Our hope is that the pilot will lay the groundwork for a scheme to digitize the entirety of Murray's correspondence, lectures, and other notes, in all the archives where they are found, along with relevant material from his co-editors too. Ideally, this larger project will be well underway in time for the centenary of the completion of the *OED's* first edition, which will be in 2028. But that is a distant vision of the future. For now, we have more than enough work tackling even a part of Murray's "whole material" to keep us out of mischief, or in it.

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