



The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories

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The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories describes the origins and sense development of over 11,000 words in the English language. Well-known idioms such as "say it with flowers" are highlighted with the dates of their original use and how and when they came about. Colorful popular beliefs are explored about the origins of words like "posh" and "snob," and insights are given into our social history revealed by language development such as the connection in a Roman soldier's mind of "salary" with salt. Throughout, boxed word-building elements show the various meanings of shared "relationships" between words.

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The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories From Oxford University Press Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1734479 in Books
- Published on: 2002-10-18
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.70" h x 1.50" w x 9.30" l,
- Binding: Hardcover
- 559 pages

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Editorial Review

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Dictionaries of etymology and word histories differ greatly in what is increasingly being called "accessibility" or "user-friendliness." This new work from Oxford, which provides the histories of more than 12,000 words, is definitely on the accessible side. Virtually all of the words are common, "everyday" words--core words--with only a handful of the exotics to which editors of other collections of word histories are drawn. Chantrell discusses the words straightforwardly and with a bit more vivacity than might be expected. In addition, her information is undoubtedly fresher than anyone else's, drawn as it is from the database of ongoing research for the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Each entry includes the date of first recorded use and a brief discussion of the term's origin and evolution. Prefixes are treated in boxed "Wordbuilding" features. A distinct gesture of friendliness on Chantrell's part is her decision to spell out words that would ordinarily be abbreviated in scholarly works and even in some nonscholarly dictionaries. T. F. Hoad's *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford, 1993), perhaps the most accessible of the scholarly choices, is prefaced by a list of almost 400 abbreviations, the use of which no doubt contributed substantially to its conciseness. In another nod to user-friendliness, many of the words abbreviated in Hoad--*ablative*, *substantival*, *indeclinable*, *frequentative*, and so on--are not to be found in Chantrell's word histories.

Still, within the zone of popular word histories, Chantrell sets herself against several formidable and well-established competitors, among them John Ciardi's *Good Words to You: An All-New Dictionary and Native's Guide to the Unknown American Language* (Harper, 1987), John Ayto's *Dictionary of Word Origins* (Arcade, 1993), and Adrian Room's *A Dictionary of True Etymologies* (Routledge, 1986). *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories* is recommended for libraries that need to freshen or expand their collection of word history resources. *RBB*

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Review

This useful book explains the meaning of English words, but only in the course of giving a very concise history, uncluttered by quotations and examples of usage, of how they came to mean what they do. Look up 'egregious', for instance, and you discover that its current meaning of 'remarkably bad' has somehow morphed from an original meaning of 'remarkably good', probably via an ironic usage of the former. In general, it's fascinating to be reminded of how many English words have a root in Old English. And perhaps surprising to find how many 'slang' usages which seem very modern actually originate in the 1920s and 1930s ('funny money', and 'fuzz' meaning police, for instance). It's both a valuable resource for reference, and almost endlessly intriguing to dip into in a serendipitous way.

About the Author

Glynnis Chantrell is Senior Editor in the English Language Teaching department at OUP. For several years she was Senior Editor in the Dictionaries department, working on many books including the Concise Oxford Dictionary (9th edn), and the New Oxford Dictionary of English (responsible for Word Histories). Glynnis taught modern languages for many years, and is multi-lingual. She has taught at every level, including adults.

Users Review

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Gerald Conway:

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