REVIEW

Who are these Fowlers?

ROBERT ALLEN in Edinburgh, formerly himself an Oxford lexicographer, reviews *The Warden of English* by Jenny McMorris (2002, Oxford University Press), pp. xix + 242, pb 0-19-860525-0 £9.99

'Who are these Fowlers?' wrote a reviewer in the *New York Times*, quoted on page 56 of this much-needed biography of the more famous of the brothers, Henry Watson Fowler. The review was not of *Modern English Usage* or any of their other well-known books, but of an earlier work they wrote for Oxford University Press, a translation of the Syrian Greek writer Lucian of Samosata, published in 1905, the work that first brought them into contact with the strange world of academic publishing.

This fine biography, first published in 2001 and issued last year in paperback, should be read by anyone interested in the life and work of a great lexicographer of the past whose influence is still felt in the present. Its value extends further as an illuminating case study of the age in which he lived, a time of great political and social change dominated by the horrors and wastage of war. Its author, Jenny McMorris, was archivist to the Oxford Dictionary Department from the 1980s until last November, when her death from a brain tumour came as sad and upsetting news. She contributed enormously to ordering the vast and heterogeneous dictionary archives, organizing exhibitions and sorting large quantities of correspondence from dictionary editors, including a substantial collection from the Fowlers which throws much light on their working methods and principles.

Who they were, where they came from, and how they worked, are matters that have up to now been locked away in archives of private correspondence in various places in England and the Channel Islands – the Fowlers lived on Guernsey for many years – and have been largely inaccessible to the general reading public, despite the enduring fame of their writing: so enduring, in fact, that letters continue to arrive at the publishers addressed to Henry Fowler, although he died seventy years ago. This oddity is noted by Simon Winchester in a perceptive Foreword to the book. Now at last, after several years of painstaking research and investigation, this material has achieved a much wider circulation.

For me, Henry Watson Fowler and his younger brother Francis (Frank) emerge as among the more lifelike characters in the world of Victorian and Edwardian lexicography: far more likeable and understandable than (for example) the austere James A. H. Murray (whose biography, *Caught in the Web of Words*, was published in the 1970s and has recently been reissued), the irascible William Craigie, or the waspish Charles T. Onions, and more directly comparable, as writers for ordinary people, with William and Robert Chambers, bearers of another name with a resonance in the dictionary world.

There is no biography of the Chambers brothers known to me, but there is a memoir written by William Chambers in 1872 that is reissued from time to time by the Edinburgh publishers who have inherited their name. It is well worth reading, even if the old lexicographical order has very much changed.

The two Fowler brothers, joint compilers of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* and *The King's English*, differed temperamentally in many ways. Henry Fowler, the main subject of this biography and the elder of the two by twelve years, was a strange mixture of deep reserve, scholarly boldness, and great warmth and humility in ordinary dealings. 'I am incurably shy,' he wrote of himself in 1907.

After several unpromising years teaching at Sedbergh School in Cumbria, he chose a change of direction and moved to London, hoping to make a living from writing. Later, he moved to Guernsey, where his brother Frank had been living since the 1890s and, after the Great War and Frank's death, to the mainland, where he settled in the Somerset village of Hinton St George. Surviving inhabitants dimly recall him as a terrifying figure sitting at his desk engrossed in his scholarship. Despite his awesomeness, he hated the prospect of public appearances. He refused utterly to accept an invitation to join the celebrations for the completion of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1928, declaring that he could not see himself 'among all the big-wigs of the Clarendon Press & the *OED*'.

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Frank, by contrast, was quicker-tempered and readier to take offence, and it was perhaps for this reason that he left most of the correspondence with the publishers to his older and more diplomatic brother. Intellectually Frank was the equal of Henry or even his superior, as Henry most generously acknowledges in a dedication to his memory at the front of *Modern English Usage*: 'He had a nimbler wit, a better sense of proportion, and a more open mind, than his twelve-year-older partner.' Both men were married, Henry in middle age and with no prospect of starting a family; his devotion to his wife Jessie rings out from the these pages, not least in the affectionate verses he wrote for her on special occasions such as Christmas or her birthday, and later published, when Henry was famous, under the endearing title *Rhymes from Darby to Joan*.

The brothers belonged to a large family, originally from the West Country, which suffered more than its fair share of hardship and tragedy, including the loss of two younger brothers overseas (one in Australia and the other in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka) and the suicide of a sister in lonely despair at the age of 48, just as Europe was sinking into the dismal slaughter of the Great War. In this war, Henry and Frank were determined to play their part, resolutely rejecting any opportunity to stay at home and avoid participation – which Henry at least could easily have done as he was in his late fifties and well over the age for active service – although this meant a major interruption to the work they had begun on an 'idioms book', an innocent title for what turned out to be their greatest achievement, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, published in 1926. Apart from the early stages, it was the work of Henry alone, Frank having died of tuberculosis shortly after the end of the war. The pages of the biography devoted to their wartime service as volunteers make for depressing reading, in terms both of the degradation of human existence and of the sheer waste of time and talent during these years, but they are a remarkable tribute to the great courage and determination of ordinary individuals.

Henry himself lived on until 1933, and produced in addition to *Modern English Usage* a second edition of the *Concise*; this was originally to have been extensively recast because, interestingly, he felt the first edition to be too difficult to use, but in the end it was republished more straightforwardly with routine corrections and addenda. But he made little headway with a larger work that was long hoped for. This was unofficially called the 'Quarto Dictionary' and more formally known as the *Oxford Dictionary of Modern English*; it was to elude editors and publishers for years to come, and finally saw the light of day only recently as the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998), a concept light years away from that originally envisaged.

There is much absorbing detail in these pages on the working methods of the first *Concise* editors and of their relations with the Oxford publishers, chiefly the London publisher Henry Milford and successive Secretaries to the Delegates in Oxford, Charles Cannan and Robert Chapman (the Jane Austen scholar, with whom Henry Fowler had an especially good rapport). It is interesting how far the procedures of those days remain familiar today, despite the huge differences brought about by the development of electronic techniques and the construction of online databases in modern lexicography.

In the early stages of a project, samples were produced for criticism by advisers, at that time naturally the *OED* editors (some of whom, especially Onions, viewed the distant scholar in the English Channel with great suspicion, which inclined them to look especially hard for errors and misjudgements). There was agonizing over the best way to show pronunciations (where Fowler showed a minimalist approach, believing it impossible to do the job satisfactorily within such a small compass); problems with trademarks; and endless discussions about titles, the eventual versions often not being decided upon until the very last moment (*plus ça change*!).

Money features prominently in the correspondence from the Oxford archives, though not in quite the way one might expect today, for the Fowlers lived modestly and – despite being hard up at times – tended to regard the remuneration proposed by Oxford as generous or even excessive, offering indeed to return some of the money on occasions. At one point Henry Fowler suggested they be paid a royalty instead of a flat fee for their work on the *Concise*. Had this arrangement been followed, they might well have ended up even more embarrassingly 'overpaid' (in their estimation); but the suggestion, though attractive to the Oxford publishers, disappears from the correspondence and was evidently dropped.

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Most of the evidence for these business affairs comes from the archives of Oxford University Press and from private collections of correspondence preserved in Cambridge, most notably that between Henry Fowler and his wife Jessie while Henry was serving in France during the war, and from memoirs written by friends, especially that of Gordon Coulton, a friend of Henry Fowler from his teaching days at Sedbergh School in Cumbria. Coulton continued to visit the Fowlers in Guernsey and in Somerset. The author has studied this evidence in detail and refers to it item by item in her notes, even though for most readers access to the originals would in many cases be impractical. She has also spent time visiting the places where the Fowlers lived and worked, giving the narrative a strong sense of location.

Henry Fowler's wife Jessie died in 1930, and there is a moving account of Henry's memorial to her: overcoming his own deep religious scepticism, he made a donation to the local church for the repair of the bells which she had so much enjoyed until disrepair silenced them. After her death, he wrote to Robert Chapman in Oxford that he would be in touch again when he had 'hammered out a new manner of life'. But he too was dead within three years.

The book is well illustrated with contemporary photographs, some familiar (among them the famous one of Henry in swimming attire after a bout of exercise) and others new, including a warm and touching portrait from old age. The bibliography includes his own memoirs, now little known, his writing on language, and other biographical material. It omits R. W. Burchfield's study in *Unlocking the English Language* (Faber, 1989), which might also have been referred to more often than it is in the text. Otherwise, references to sources are detailed and exemplary.

Jenny McMorris has combined the roles of researcher and story-teller with understanding and sensitivity. *The Warden of English* is a fitting memorial to her work in Oxford. □

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