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To the Editors of *The Oxford English Dictionary*

Dear Sirs,

I have before me a copy of the paperback *Oxford English Dictionary* (2002), edited by Catherine Soanes with the assistance of Claire Collinson for the encyclopedic [*sic*] entries.

The information given under the latter is, in some instances, erroneous and, in others, strangely selective. For example, Christopher Wren is stated to be the architect of “many of London’s [*sic*] churches”; the architect of most of the *rebuilt* City of London churches was, in fact, Robert Hooke. A far greater number of London churches date from after the deaths of both Wren and Hooke. Jean-Paul Sartre is said to be the author of *Nausée*; the title given by him is *La Nausée*. Gerard Manley Hopkins is listed as the author of *Windhover*; the title of the poem is *The Windhover*; no mention is made of his “terrible” sonnets; no mention is made of his being a Jesuit priest. John Dryden is important not as a dramatist but as a satirist; his major works include *Absolom and Achitophel* (parts 1 and 2) and *The Medal*. He is also notable as a literary critic, reviving the reputation of Chaucer, and as a creator of modern prose style.

Appendix 9 gives the duration of the Holocene period as 100,000 years. It is 10,000 years. The Cambrian begins at 570 or 540 million years BP, not 590 million.

The punctuation list under appendix 6 omits full-stop, semi-colon, colon, exclamation mark, question mark, inverted commas, hyphen, dash and apostrophe.

The word “cripple” is given as both archaic and offensive. Does this mean it was offensive in the past but is archaic in the present? What sense does this make, and who has made this decision? The words “drunkard” and “drunken” make no appearance at all, and the reader is not told that “drunk” as a noun is American.

We are told that “Waugh” rhymes [*sic*] with “war”, but we are nowhere told how “war” is pronounced. Are we to conclude that “Waugh” has an /r/ sound? Ms Susan Wilkin, the pronunciation editor, seems not to know the meaning of the word “rhyme”. (“Waugh” **rhymes** with law; it is **identical** with “war” in R.P. only. We are also told that “Klee” **rhymes** with “clay” and that “Weill” **rhymes** with “vile”.) Perhaps the editors of the volume ought to have studied their own pronunciation guide on page ix (where *y* is given, unhelpfully, as both a vowel and a consonant). They might also benefit from a course in the phonetics of English if they believe that the vowels in “law” and “corn” and in “calm” and “bar” differ whilst that in “Waugh” and “war” is the same.

The pronunciations given for “Pakistan” and “Afghanistan” are American (primary stress on the first syllable) whilst those given for “Turkmenistan” and “Tajikstan” are British (primary stress on final syllable), but Ms Wilkin seems unaware of this discrepancy. No stress values are indicated for “artisan”, “cigarette”, “kangaroo”, “magazine” or “margarine”—that is, words differing in rhythm in American and British English.

There is no indication that the vowel in “puss” and “pus” is not the same.

Having studied this volume, I find I must make it my task to enlighten the good folk of Derbyshire to the fact that they have been mispronouncing the name of their county all their lives long. The people of Yorkshire and Hampshire are, however, left in the dark as to how they ought to say those words. Some of the pronunciations given are highly entertaining, *e.g.* “sliver” to rhyme with “driver”. Perhaps “slither” can be made to rhyme with “lither”, too, if one tries hard enough; and how about “mother” to rhyme with “Otha”? Ms Wilkin must have considerable trouble with “Thames”, “London”, “Gloucester”, “Durham”, “Norwich” and “England”, let alone “Wemyss”, “Scone”, “Mousehole” and “Happisburgh”.

We are given information on such towering figures as Madonna, David Bowie and Liberace (but not told that he died of AIDS, whereas the end of Princess Diana is given in detail) and such important places as Aspen (“a ski resort in south central Colorado”) but we might be a little surprised to learn that Auschwitz, Treblinka, Buchenwald and Dachau were no more than concentration camps. Are the stories about the gas chambers, the calculated extermination of Jews, Romanies, Quakers, Jehovah’s Witnesses, not to mention homosexuals and the physically and mentally handicapped, in question, then? To judge from your entries, those places had nothing at all to do with these groups. We find no entry under Mauthausen, Birkenau or Sachsenhausen; perhaps they were just holiday villages for the disaffected, and not worth mentioning alongside Aspen. The entry under Himmler gives a quite inadequate account of that man and Eichmann, the orchestrator of the Final Solution, makes no appearance at all. The Holocaust fails to qualify as an encyclopaedic item, but is distinguished with two lines in the running entries, while “Teddy boy” is, quite properly of course, given its immense cultural significance, honoured with four. It throws much light on the twentieth century to learn that teddy boys slicked their hair back and liked rock-and-roll music.

Interestingly enough, elsewhere the reader is told that the words “nigger”, “Negro”, “Wop”, “Eskimo” and even “tribe” are racist and offensive—but not “Jew”. Perhaps the editors are unacquainted with the phrase “You (bleeding) Jew, you!” But then “fuck” and “cunt”, even when used as imprecations, are classed, not as offensive, but harmlessly *vulgar*. All this is, without question, based on controlled sociological research in the cause of objective description.

The slogan at the bottom of the book cover reads “The World’s [*sic*] Most Trusted Dictionaries”—more trusted, then, than Larousse, Littré and Duden. I am sure you will have conducted statistically reliable research to establish the verity of this statement.

yours faithfully

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Mr Wallerstein’s book *Dear Mr Howard: the Changing of Modern English* is published by The Brynmill Press Ltd.

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