What's in a name?

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable:
Millennium edition, revised by Adrian Room,
1999, Cassell (pp. xxiv + 1298)
*Brewer's Dictionary of Modern Phrase and
Fable*, compiled by Adrian Room, 2000, Cassell
(pp. xxiv + 773)
The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable,
edited by Elizabeth Knowles, 2000, Oxford (pp.
viii + 1224)

Review by Robert Allen, Edinburgh

'Brewer' is one of a small handful of individual language-reference works in English that are known by the single name of the original compiler. The only other that comes immediately to mind is 'Fowler', and these two join a select band from other reference domains – Debrett, Burke, Whitaker, Grove, and so on. Like Fowler's *Modern English Usage,* Brewer's book is the product of years of collecting and thinking, and also like Fowler's it possesses that great quality of making language come to life, complementing authority with interest and variety. With books like these, the reader lingers and makes discoveries. Language spills over into life and culture.

Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* was first published in 1870 from enormous quantities of material said to have been 'fully thrice the size of the present volume'. The compiler, Ebenezer Cobham Brewer (1810–97), was the son of a Norwich schoolmaster who seemed destined to follow in his father's footsteps and was ordained a deacon in the Church of England; but after a period abroad he married and settled at Lavant in Sussex. He seems to have formed a connection with the publishing house of Cassell, Petter and Galpin, who published his manuscript of the *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* in 1870, although whether the original idea was theirs or his is not clear (more likely his). The dictionary was an instant success: by 1886 it had been reprinted 18 times and over 100,000 copies had been sold by the time of the second edition in the 1890s.

Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* has been revised many times over the last hundred years or so, most recently in editions edited by Adrian Room appearing in 1995 and in a Millennium edition in 1999. *A Dictionary of Modern Phrase and Fable*, dealing with material from the 20th century, appeared in 2000. There is some duplication between the two (e.g. *eager beaver* appears twice with identical entries); nonetheless, anyone wanting the whole story has to have both. The title has become so well established that when Oxford published a rival work in 2000 they evidently could not think of a better one: so we now have a one-volume alternative to Brewer, the *Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*.

'Phrase and Fable' takes over where the standard household dictionary leaves off. Dictionaries are of course word-based, but all dictionaries from Pocket size up tend to tack on to the end of many entries separate paragraphs containing phrases and idioms that can only be explained as fixed or semi-fixed expressions and are not analysable in terms of their individual words. For example, the entry for *boot* in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* includes a section listing the phrases *the boot is on the other foot*, *die with one's boots on*, *give (or get) the boot*, *old boot*, *put the boot in*, and *with one's heart in one's boots*. (These sections are well-known dumping grounds for awkward collocations and grammatical patterns, as any honest lexicographer will admit.)

But there is more to 'Phrase and Fable' than this. If analysed, the concept falls apart; so we should not analyse it too hard. What surely is important is that entries should be free of the rigidly lexical constraints of the conventional dictionary (i.e. should include word-groups, names, and so on) and that the allusions contained in the entries should have some relevance to language and explore the overlap of language and culture, and not just be a string of curiosities. When I open the latest edition of Brewer, interest leaps out of the page; when I open the Oxford book, my initial reaction is of disappointment. This is partly a matter of bland typography but there are reasons of content: Brewer covers a wider range of material and interprets the brief more imaginatively and with humour, including entries for classes of things (I like the list of animals' cries: did you know that deer bell? – males only, I believe, and in the rutting season) and – above all – providing lots of colourful literary examples. Skimming through the book, the eye alights much more readily on words that have a resonance. There is a feeling of serendipity – but it's fruitful serendipity.

By contrast, Oxford comes across as rather inconsequential in approach, with many dead ends, as sketchy in illustration, and as somewhat deadpan in style. This comes as a surprise to anyone who is familiar with the lively writing, full of interest, in the *Oxford Dictionary of New Words* (1997, also edited by Elizabeth Knowles). Some of the entries in the Oxford *Phrase and Fable* are

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excellent, succinct and informative: the *Maundy* entries for example, and the panel entry for 'last words'. Others are distinctly undercooked. Recently I needed to check on the origin of *sea-green incorruptible*: I thought it had some connection with Robespierre but couldn't remember exactly what or why. Oxford tells me that it was Carlyle's name for Robespierre (ah yes) and refers me to an entry for Robespierre where the same information is included in a mini-biography (which I don't really need). Yes, but why 'sea-green'? For the answer I need Brewer: 'he was of a sallow, unhealthy complexion.' Success!

Inevitably there is considerable overlap between the Cassell and Oxford *Phrase and Fable* books and both include items that seem to come in the category of curiosities and odd survivals: in a random few pages of the letter *C* I noted Brewer's *cramp rings* (a former royal benefaction on Good Friday, discontinued after Mary Tudor), *creeping to the cross* (by coincidence, another former Good Friday ceremony), *Cremorne Gardens* (19th century London pleasure gardens), *cresset* (a beacon light), *crewel garters*, and *croque-mitaine* (a Gallic hobgoblin). I can understand how, once having found their way into the text, items like these tend to stay put; but it might have been time to do a bit more pruning to make way for fresher material and it is a bit odd to see all but one of them (the exception is *crewel garters*) surface again in the Oxford book.

In its favour, the Oxford book includes some valuable up-to-date material not to be found in the main Brewer: *Blair babes, chaos theory, desert storm, London eye, velvet divorce*. To find these in Brewer you have to buy the *Dictionary of Modern Phrase and Fable*, where you will also find a lot of ephemeral froth: *can't pay, won't pay*, a slogan of opposition to the poll tax (remember that?); *Gromyko of the Labour Party* (Denis Healey's description of himself) and padding (e.g. *canned music*: 'the comparison is with canned food'). But Oxford is weak on the 'phrase' part of phrase and fable: why no *deliver the goods, fly off the handle* (*fly on the wall* is in), *over the moon* (*once in a blue moon* is in)? Why *drunk as David's sow* but not *drunk as a lord*? We have an entry for *dodo* but *dead as the dodo* (which is surely the main point) isn't mentioned. These are all included in Oxford's *Dictionary of Idioms*, a more linguistically based book which explores some of the areas, such as sense development, that the Phrase and Fable books leave out. On the other hand, Oxford's *Phrase and Fable* wastes space by reproducing material more or less word for word from the *COD*, for example *crape*: 'black silk or imitation silk, formerly used for mourning clothes.'

Both books contain entries for the names of people, but surely here the justification lies in the name providing some peg on which a point of language or of historical or social interest comes to be hung. In the Oxford book there is an entry for

Crazy Horse, the Sioux chieftain. The entry gives his Sioux name (Ta-Sunko-Witko); but there is no explanation of what this name means (is it the same as Crazy Horse or not?), or what the significance of a crazy horse might be (there is no entry in Brewer; we have instead *crazy golf* and *crazy paving*). Even less point is to be found in the entry on the same page for *Marcus Licinius Crassus* (the Roman triumvir), which has little relevance to either phrase or fable because there is no story to tell beyond the facts of his life, and these belong in a dictionary of biography; the same applies to *Mao Zedong, Matisse, Mazzini*, and many others. It is difficult to discern in these entries any 'figurative or allusive connotation' or to see them as 'central to the development of a civilization or culture' (*Mao* excepted: but surely the interest is in Mao*ism*), which are stated in the book's introduction to be the main criteria for inclusion.

The organization of material that is phrase-based rather than word-based presents obvious difficulties. Brewer has stuck to its principle of listing items under main words, usually the first stable word in the phrase even if this is a function word like *as*. This has the advantage of grouping certain phrases of the same type (all the similes under *as*, for example), but has the disadvantage of dispersing items that might better be grouped under a common keyword (such as the many phrases based on the word *hand*). In other ways this system produces slightly absurd placements: the innocent reader wanting to know about *letting the cat out of the bag* is likely to look first under *cat*, but there he will be told to go to *let* (and the alphabetization of phrases is unsubtle – presumably thanks to ASCII – including the definite and indefinite articles and other words usually ignored in indexing, which some people might not expect). The key here is rigorous cross-referencing, and fortunately the new Brewer is as strong on this as its predecessors were. Brewer's *Modern Phrase and Fable* has a letter-by-letter listing of phrases, without attempting to group them under single-word headwords, so that turning from one book to the other can be confusing. Oxford lists by its first keyword, so that *you can't teach an old dog new tricks* appears under *teach*, and there is a cross-reference under *dog*. Fewer such references are needed under this system, and Oxford's reference lists at the end of entries are neatly done without becoming intrusive and tiresome, as they tend to in Brewer.

In the Oxford book, the panel entries, which explore themes and associations, are variable in their usefulness, some tending to be too selective and sketchy, listing items without properly doing the job of explaining them. A case in point is 'city nicknames', a strange selection that would have been much more worthwhile if it had explained their origins; most of them are not nicknames at all but literary epithets and associations (Athens: *City of the Violet Crown*; Rome: *the Eternal City*; and

does anyone really call Aberdeen the *City of Bon-accord*?). We find all the allusions in Brewer's much more substantial article. Overall, I think the problem is that books of this kind can't simply be created opportunistically from database subsets (despite publishers' wishful thinking in this area) but need years of thought and maturity.

One important area in which all these books are weak (and this extends to the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*) is in providing information on chronology. Some phrases are fixed in time by their coinage, especially the type known as *catch-phrases* and associated with a particular person, event, or (in recent years) television programme: for example, *thereby hangs a tale* is from Shakespeare (*As You Like It* ii.vii.28), and *beam me up, Scotty* (which is in Brewer's *Modern* but not in Oxford) is associated with the science-fiction television series *Star Trek* shown in the 1960s – although, like *elementary, my dear Watson*, it seems not to have occurred in the form that has become established. Others have no self-determining anchors and need to be located in time. To find this information one often has to resort to the *OED*, where phrases are notoriously difficult to find, even in the CD-ROM versions. The chronology can often be surprising, phrases being either earlier than one might expect (*making faces*, in *Macbeth*; and *such-and-such does not grow on trees*, which dates from the 17th century) or later (*sweep under the carpet* seems to be in use no ear-lier than the 1960s). The difficulty is that considerable research is needed to establish dates, and perhaps for this reason no one has attempted to do it systematically since the compilation of the *OED* at the turn of the 19th–20th century.

Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* is a great book because, as well as being informative in unique ways, it makes language interesting. Its value lies in the collection of material over many years; in the devotion and imagination with which this has been written up (by Brewer and his successors); and, like all great reference books, by its idiosyncrasies. Any rival has to meet this challenge; a database subset, which is what Oxford seem to have given us, is not enough. The potential is there, and it may well need several editions for the book to mature. An alternative might be to rename the book more appropriately: perhaps *The Oxford Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* or *A Reader's Companion*, the original proposal formed in the 1920s for the book that Sir Paul Harvey turned into the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Then I think honour might be satisfied.

All these books, the Brewers included, live in the past and exploit old reputations. What comes over for me in comparing them is how difficult it is to imitate a good idea already magnificently achieved. What's in a name? – a great deal, when it's the title of a famous reference book. □

Regicide

To hear a word
like 'regicide'
You wouldn't think
that someone died
Or, worse than that,
was killed, in fact
in some horrific
heinous act
And not just any
John or Jean
It has to be
a king or queen

No, 'Reggieside'
to me it seems
A villa for
retirement dreams
Where dear old Reggie
has been drawn
To tend his veggy
patch and lawn

— Roger Berry,
Lingnan University, Hong Kong