

A. J. Aitken

Fly on the wall (1994)¹

Edited by Caroline Macafee, 2015

How to cite this paper (adapt to the desired style): Aitken, A. J. (1994, 2015) 'Fly on the wall', in †A. J. Aitken, ed. Caroline Macafee, 'Collected Writings on the Scots Language' (2015), [online] Scots Language Centre [http://medio.scotslanguage.com/library/document/aitken/Fly_on_the_wall_\(1994\)](http://medio.scotslanguage.com/library/document/aitken/Fly_on_the_wall_(1994)) (accessed DATE). Originally published *Scotsman Weekend Magazine* (11 June 1994).

I would like to have been a fly on the wall of the 'Scriptorium' of Dr James A. H. Murray in the garden of his house at Mill Hill, north London, on or just before 28 March, 1879.

On that day – or shortly before it, the sources vary slightly – Dr Murray received approximately two tons of slips of paper, which constituted most of the collection of quotations so far assembled for the Philological Society's projected *New English Dictionary*.

Murray, who was born in 1837 in Denholm, Roxburghshire, had since 1870 been English master at Mill Hill School. The Scriptorium was a large corrugated iron shed which he had had erected and fitted out in the grounds of his house, "Sunnyside", specifically to house the materials and to serve as the workroom for the dictionary, which would later be known as *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

It was a remarkable structure. Murray himself reported to the Society that it had "been fitted with blocks of pigeon-holes, 1,029 in number, for the reception of the alphabetically-arranged slips, and with writing desks, reference desks and other conveniences ..." A visitor described the Scriptorium as "pigeon-hole higher than the arm can reach; going down so low there is need to stoop. It is pigeon-hole, all up and down, and anglewise ..."

In this building (and in the one which succeeded it at Oxford after 1885), Murray edited between May 1879 and a fortnight before his death in July 1915, some 7,207 of the total 15,487 pages of the OED. He achieved this at the staggering rate of over 200 closely-printed, folio-size, three-column pages per annum – equal to a page edited, revised and proof-read every working day. It was a feat which has probably never been equalled – or even approached – in the history of dictionary-making.

He worked in the Scriptorium sitting on a dais a foot higher than his assistants and sorters – possibly in memory of the way that Samuel Johnson worked on his dictionary, seated at the end of a table supervising his helpers.

This event united the two major stages in the history of the OED: the period chiefly of collection of material between 1857 and 1879, and the period of further collection but also of editing between 1879 and 1927.

If it had not taken place, the OED would not have come into being at the time it did, if ever, and we would have lost or had indefinitely delayed the production of arguably the greatest dictionary ever written and one which has had an immense influence on the history of dictionary-making everywhere.

¹ Originally published in the 'Fly on the Wall' series, *Scotsman Weekend Magazine* (11 June 1994), with illustrations, compiled by Roger Hutchinson. Reproduced by permission of Johnston Publishing Ltd.

A. J. Aitken: Collected Writings on the Scots Language

Murray's herculean work was crucial to the production of the greatest lexicographical resource for the study of the English (including Scots) language, and resulted in the largest single advance in the history of the lexicography of English and of Scots.