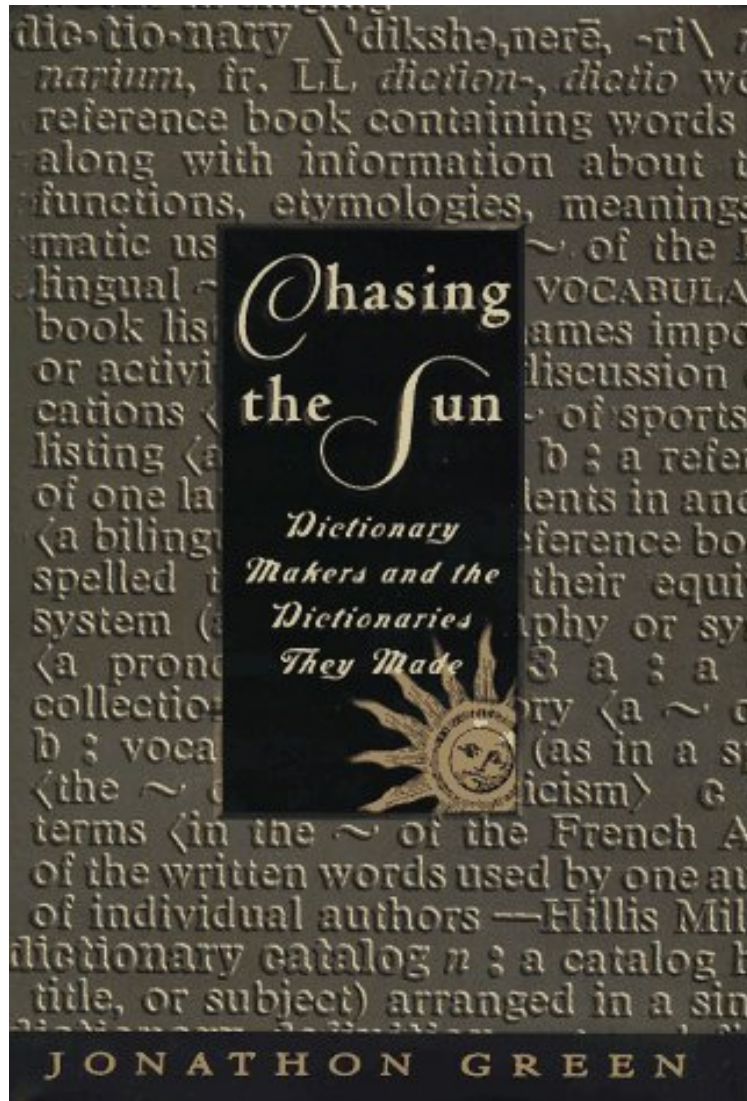


(Pdf free) Chasing the Sun: Dictionary-Makers and the Dictionaries They Made

# Chasing the Sun: Dictionary-Makers and the Dictionaries They Made

Jonathon Green

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**Jonathon Green : Chasing the Sun: Dictionary-Makers and the Dictionaries They Made** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Chasing the Sun: Dictionary-Makers and the Dictionaries They Made:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. CHASING THE SUN IS IMPOSSIBLE...By Mark Karamian This is a phenomenal book. Completed but not finished. The subject matter is grand. The space is never enough. The reason of any incomplete oeuvre is UNKNOWN. This phenomenon is a very usual paradox. Incompleteness is the reflection

of our very incomplete Universe...14 of 15 people found the following review helpful. An entertaining meander down the byways of English letters

By A Customer

As a lexicographer, Jonathon Green is brave, foolish or honest. Chasing The Sun presents his fellow abecedarians in a poor light: querulous, conceited, or mad. Photius, the ninth century Byzantine scholar, used to respond to his friends' letters by correcting their grammar. (He was also the first book reviewer.) Dr WC Minor, who defined tens of thousands of words for the OED, did his work from Broadmoor after being driven mad by the American Civil War and killing a stoker in Lambeth. Noah Webster bowdlerised the Bible. In many cases, the idiosyncrasies of lexicographers are amplified by the insecure economics of the profession. Dictionary-making takes years, if done painstakingly and well, and a lexicographer with no other source of income must beg and scrape where he can. (Hence Johnson's celebrated rebuke to Chesterfield, willing to shell out more than 10 pounds only once the work was nearly completed: "Is not a Patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground encumbers him with help?") Sales are uncertain: Johnson's dictionary sold fewer than 4,000 in the ten years after publication. And worst of all, the results are easily plagiarised. These economics explain some of the more harmless self-puffery, such as Partridge publishing a slang lexicon anonymously as *Vigilans* and recording in it his special debt to Eric Partridge, then repaying the compliment to *Vigilans* under his own name. Accusations of plagiarism can also lead to more protracted warfare. When dictionaries appear within a short time of each other (and that can mean within a decade or two), the earlier lexicographer will often have to attack the later, in the press, in pamphlets or in subsequent editions, because the latter is eating its predecessor's food. This lay behind the two most celebrated wars of words, between Blount and Phillips in the seventeenth century, and between Webster and Worcester in nineteenth century America. Blount's *Glossographia* of 1656 was followed two years later by Phillips, who had lifted the bulk of *New World of Words*, uncredited, from his predecessor despite heaping scorn on him in his preface. Blount struck back, rebuking and refuting Phillips word by word, definition by definition, as a "beggary, half-witted [sic] scholar". This war was extinguished by the death of both men and their replacement by Johnson as authors of the 'Unidentified Authorising Dictionary'. Webster and Worcester went beyond personal hostility to embody a clash of cultures. Webster consciously defined his 1828 dictionary as American, despite the fact that, as Green points out, very few of his words are distinctively American (though their spelling is). Worcester, following him by two years, again, was framed by default the Anglophile, elitist choice. The decision of which dictionary to buy became a question of national pride and national identity, and Webster won out, his more egregious errors, mostly of etymology, being fixed by others in later editions. Modern battles over dictionaries are less personal, usually centring on political correctness of one sort or another: either dictionary-makers are censured for allowing too many 'dirty' words in without comment, or for being insufficiently prescriptive. The battle over Webster's *Third International* in 1961 grew beyond a dispute over whether the dictionary should have admitted the word 'ain't' and became a clash over definitions of Western Civilisation. The debate over *W3*, as the dictionary is known to its friends, is in effect a clash between the prescriptive attitude of the general public and public commentators, who want a dictionary to set a standard of 'good English', and the descriptive bias of the professionals, who want a dictionary to describe a language as it is. Language, certainly the English language, is too tricky a thing for the prescriptivists ever to win out; at the same time, as Green acknowledges, every lexicographer leaves some words out, and is therefore to some extent prescriptive. Dirt depends on date: Aelfric got away with 'beallucas' in 1000 AD, whereas in nineteenth century America 'leg', 'trousers' and 'sneeze' were beyond the pale. Abusive epithets are harder to deal with: Green tells the history of 'Jew' as a verb meaning to cheat, defined in this sense by the OED in the early twentieth century (and used in this sense by pop monarchy in 1995). Green sides firmly with the descriptivists rather than the prescriptivists: "include the word, opprobrious though it undoubtedly is, and mark it as derogatory, offensive, whatever. But do not on any account exclude it." Green's book wavers between scholarship and readability: it meanders entertainingly into the byways of English letters, but its determination to mention by name every lexicographer since the Akkadians and Summerians cuts down on the amount of space available for the more entertaining episodes. In keeping with the subject, the reader has to hunt hard for the juicy bits, but aimless browsing yields unexpected rewards.

18 of 19 people found the following review helpful. Lexicographers as priests -- and people

By A Customer

On the surface, dictionary-making seems like an unlikely subject for a history intended for anyone other than specialists to read. Yet Jonathon Green succeeds in leading the reader to appreciate, first, that dictionary-makers serve an important role as arbiters of the language we use to shape our lives, and second, that they are not "harmless drudges" (in Samuel Johnson's memorable phrase), but people with colorful, even strange, backgrounds. Green has several objects in his history. One of the primary ones is to elevate the lexicographer from drudge to priest. He points particularly to America in the nineteenth century as a land where immigrants and lower-class people wanted to be told how to speak and write properly in order to advance in society. They looked to dictionaries and their makers as the arbiters of what counted as "correct" language. Green argues that America has generally tended toward prescriptive dictionaries, while England has been home to more descriptive efforts. He clearly sides with the latter, and his discussion of the controversy over Webster's *Third International* (which took a more descriptive approach than most American dictionaries) with barely disguised disbelief -- how could people have been so silly? Still, his editorializing is relatively subtle -- and convincing. Another of Green's goals is to present the people

behind the dictionaries. In the modern world, dictionaries are identified by their publishers -- the American Heritage, the OED, the Merriam-Webster -- and the people involved vanish into anonymity. This was not always the case, as Green makes clear. Dictionaries from the sixteenth century onward were known by their authors, despite the fact that the dictionaries drew on (and, frankly, plagiarized) each other. The authors did not shy from letting their personalities and biases show through. What is more, they and their modern successors led unusual lives, shaped by the near-fanaticism that lexicography seems to require. Green shows us these characters, from the cash-strapped but elitist Samuel Johnson, to James Murray, long in charge of the OED, with his vast arrays of cubbyholes and contributors (including an inmate of the Broadmoor insane asylum!). Green's history is very readable, if sometimes more detailed than necessary; he tends to throw more names at the reader than anyone could possibly keep straight. Still, the book should be fascinating for anyone with a love of words and a curiosity about unusual people.

A history of the dictionary reveals the reasons behind the creations of dictionaries, the motivations of their creators, how their biases seep into their work, and their works effect on us. 12,500 first printing.

.com Word-collecting is an ancient practice that began nearly 4,500 years ago in pre-Babylonian Sumer. In *Chasing the Sun*, prominent British lexicographer Jonathon Green gives an account of his kind, tracing the history of dictionary making from the clay tablet to the CD-ROM. Green also examines--and debunks--the so-called impartiality of lexicographers. No matter how zealously they may protest, dictionary makers are never the passive recipients of linguistic law. They do have an agenda. As Green puts it, they are always "playing God. Or if not God, then at least Moses, descending from Sinai with the tablets of the law." From *Library Journal* In a readable and interesting history, Green (*The Encyclopedia of Censorship, Facts on File, 1990*) traces the evolution of the dictionary from its earliest beginnings in Sumeria to today's state-of-the-art CD-ROM products. He examines the history of the genre and the biography of its creators. His strength lies in the deft handling and illustration of the power of words and the significance of definition. Green recounts the language philosophy of Nazi Germany and the various and changing definitions of the word Palestine, for example, in order to make the point that words have power and those that define words by "definition" have power. Ultimately, Green has written an exploration of culture and its verbal content. His book will fascinate all those interested in lexicon and language and, with the index (not seen), should be helpful as a research tool. With its lengthy bibliography, the inclusion of photos, and Green's wonderful examples, this work is well worth including in all public libraries and in academic libraries where there is a perceived need. Neal Wyatt, Chesterfield Cty. P.L., Va. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. From *Kirkus* sEverything we could want to know, and more, about the long history of dictionary writing. Green is Britain's top slang dictionary writer, so this isn't a dry study of lexicography. If it is overly long, it is because we are given too much gossip about dueling definers, sniping censors, and petty etymologists. Before they were self-declared guardians of culture with powdered wigs, compilers of glossaries wanted to teach the necessary foreign terms for trading with and ruling over neighboring friends and foes. Green credits the Sumerians with the first such lexicons, and for many centuries dictionaries offered polyglot vocabularies for merchants and artisans. (Calepin's 11-language dictionary would be the standard until the 1500s.) There was no French-English vernacular dictionary until a royal intermarriage in 1514 made it necessary. The first Italian-English lexicon is seen as surpassing this achievement because many slang and obscene terms were included among the 46,000 headwords. Among the great lexicographers, Green is unhappy with Samuel Johnson's conservatism, criticizing him with pronouncements like: "For all Johnson's achievements, his work is ultimately backward-looking." Green considers Noah Webster to be an insufferable prude. Biblically oriented Webster couldn't omit "sodomy," but he defined it merely as "a crime against nature." We also read about a statewide ban on "obscene" dictionaries in Texas. It can be fun reading about the "F" word but less so the great fuss made about the inelegance of words like "lengthy." But ironically, for all his criticism of Dr. Johnson's conservatism, Green is guilty of defending anachronistic 19th-century German theories of etymology that have themselves been supplanted by new evidence of the monogenesis of world language. What might have been a lively book on hot cultural issues gets bogged down in lexicographers' name-calling and shop talk. (8 pages bw photos, not seen) -- Copyright 1996, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.