SAMPLE — INTRO & CHAPTER ONE

of

2026 INSIDE STORY ON ENGLISH SPELLING

by

Paquita Boston

Contents

INTRODUCTION
Chapter One — A Class Plot?
Chapter Two — Cursive Casualties
Chapter Three — Alive and Well
Chapter Four — Beware Greek Gifts
Chapter Five — Where do rules come from?
Chapter Six — The Curse of the Dagger
Chapter Seven — Letter H
Chapter Eight — Yods and Imps
Chapter Nine — Silent Letters
Chapter Ten — Why Bother?
END NOTES TO CHAPTERS
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
APPENDIX ONE — 45 Sounds of English Speech
APPENDIX TWO — English Grammar
APPENDIX THREE — English Punctuation Symbols
BIBLIOGRAPHY
USEFUL WEBSITES

INTRODUCTION

David Crystal is a language expert. He says there is not much help out there for teachers trying to work out how to teach spelling and manage its variations, to find interesting ways to present the facts. Others wishing to master spelling have a tough time of it too, because there is 'a veritable dearth of good analyses and presentations' about English spelling. Lynne Truss attracted millions to read about punctuation in *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, so how about spelling? 'Who will be the Lynne Truss of spelling, I wonder?' Mr Crystal asks, on page 169 of his book *The Fight for English*.

I have given it a go. First I sorted 30,000 words from easiest to decode to hardest, grouped into spelling patterns. Then I found a rule for each pattern and listed all the words which follow that rule or system. I also listed the rebels, which are the words which break the pattern, disobey the rules. Then I found their various reasons for breaking rules. Very few were found to be outright 'rascals' — my label for rebels without a reason. The spelling of 30,000 English words took 200,000 words to explain. I'm told such a big book is very daunting, daunting to teachers, but not when delivered to little children, because it just starts at the beginning of literacy, with little words and simple patterns. Just like any good game, one can enjoy reading and writing without knowing all the rules straight away. Children are never daunted by the long road ahead if they are enjoying the journey.

I called my big book *Spelling Rules, Reasons and Rebels as you Learn to Read*. It is very thorough. The following

book is what I call my chat show about spelling. When people ask me about my big book I find myself chatting away about one aspect or another of spelling. So I have formalized these chats into chapters.

My enthusiasm stems from a desire to explain spelling by revealing the rules which govern spelling. If we know where a rule comes from, what it does, or why it's useful, we are more likely to use and appreciate it, and also to remember it.

Yes, there are rules! My husband, Chris, sometimes says, 'Even if there are rules to spelling, there are too many exceptions to make them worthwhile'.

I hope that when he reads this he will see that there are very few exceptions to each rule, often far fewer than the exceptions to rules of the road. For instance, seat belts are compulsory, except if the driver is reversing, or is driving a taxi late at night, or is delivering goods and driving slowly between stops, and except in public transport, but not always. Oh, and except if the vehicle was manufactured before seat belts were mandatory, like Chris's 1954 Land Rover. My father always made us let down windows before crossing flooded rivers, to escape if the car slipped off the ford. I'm sure a good case could be made for undoing seat belts, too. These, and many more, exceptions to the seat belt rule vary from state to state within Australia, and yet everyone still considers the seat belt rule well worthwhile.

We are used to the complexity of everyday rules. After all, courts are held not just to decide if a rule has been broken, but also to decide if exceptions to the rule can be made, if allowances can be made for exceptional circumstances, or if earlier decisions have set a protocol for exceptions.

Those who scoff at English spelling, by saying it has

no rhyme or reason, sound just like people who look at a game of football and see nothing but a tangle of limbs and a ball. Both spelling and football need explaining to be enjoyed.

More than that, each code of football needs explaining, but for all the rules involved, and all their many exceptions, it's not a big burden. Yes, rules for sport do involve exceptions, e.g. no one's allowed to touch the ball in soccer, except the goalie; every cricket player bats in an innings, except if the captain declares. It's worth looking at the forty-two Laws of Cricket and their five appendices. The details of each Law and all their allowable variations in exceptional circumstances show just how much the human brain is capable of grasping and holding and acting on. Australian spectators ring radio stations to debate the very finest points of laws of sport, especially of AFL, Australian footy. These discussions involve nuances of a degree rarely perceived in a court of common law.

My point is that no one likes to play a game without rules, that everyone I know finds learning the rules of sport and their exceptions no great hardship, and also, spectators find the game uninteresting without them. Spelling's the same to me — why should a student have to spell without direction, to write down and read out words without being told the rules and the exceptions of spelling? Explanations of where the rules come from, what they are for and how they differ from those of other languages, make spelling easier to follow, easier to learn and far more enjoyable.

Besides, teachers are meant to encourage curiosity and teach logical thinking, from day one — i.e. when a child starts learning to read and write. Teachers cannot fulfil this prime duty unless they can answer wisely every time a student asks, 'Why is it spelt like that?'

Chapter One — A Class Plot?

Why is English so hard to read and write? Why do we spend years of school time learning to spell? Is it true that other languages are much easier to read and write?

A quick answer is that the spelling of most European languages has been simplified, made easier to read and write, but not English. We must judge for ourselves how and why this came about. I hope the rest of this chapter helps you decide if English spelling is the product of a class plot, or a victim of history.

English spelling was not simplified but it was unified, because spelling was reduced, from many different ways to spell each word, to just one way for each word. Let's begin at the beginning: writing has its roots in drawing and painting and sculpting and carving.

Long ago, people all over the world began turning their stories into pictures. They carved and painted them on cave walls and later on the walls of pyramids and houses. As houses grew taller, with added floors, more and more rows of paintings and sculptured figures were added. The latter were chipped in to walls or were complete statues, along roof tops. These were our first recorded stories, or *historia* as the Romans called them. We still call each floor of a building a storey, with an extra letter, E, to differentiate it from a story told on paper, or by word of mouth. No matter how tall a store house may be, its storeys are named after what was on the outside, not the inside, not the stores.

Oft repeated pictures were turned into symbols, as short cuts to the thing or idea depicted. Then the very first letters came about, formed when just one section of a word's

symbol was used to represent the first sound of that word. For instance, a section of the symbolic sketch of Aleph the Ox was used to represent the first sound of the word Aleph. A section of the symbol for Bet, a house, (or group of houses, as in Bethlehem) was used to spell the first sound in Bet. So, A and B were the first of a string of letters, collectively called an alphabet. The appearance of each letter changed a little as the concept travelled north, and then west, from Egypt.

In some places syllabets developed — in which each syllable has its own symbol, as in Japan. Australian students learn them by association: the symbol for the syllable 'chee' looks to us like a cheese ball on a stick, the one for 'soh' looks like zigzag sewing, and so on.

In some places entire pictures were simplified to pictograms, one for each word, as in China. My favourite is the pictogram for sunrise: a simplified picture of the sun rising through trees.

Whether by alphabet, syllabet or pictogram, all stories on paper were written by hand until one thousand years ago, when China began printing them. Europe independently discovered how to print in the 1440s, and by 1500, had produced twenty million books. Books were part and parcel of the Renaissance — the European re-birth and flowering of knowledge.

As printed books piled up, Italy was the first to realize that spelling must be simplified if everyone was to read all these books. Italy's spelling institution, the Accademia della Crusca, of 1582, not only simplified the spelling of Italian but also prevented foreign words being used when an Italian one would do the job. If a foreign word was required it was respelt, the Italian way. France did the same, reforming French spelling

and banning foreign words through the Académie Française, formed in 1634. Why didn't the English follow suit and simplify their spelling?

English a slow starter

When Caxton returned to England with his printing press in 1476, English was a minor language, spoken by very few people in the world, compared to Italian, French, German, Spanish and Russian. England was a remote island out west of Continental Europe, where English laws were still recorded in French first, and then translated into English if need be!

English was a collection of dialects in 1476. It was still developing and growing, after a late birth. Italian has firm roots in ancient Latin, and French began during the Roman Occupation of Gaul. Prof. Lerer says that Gauls adopted lots of Latin words from their rulers, whereas the Celts seem to have been more 'them and us', only using a few Latin words, for new, Roman, things, like candles — *candela* in Latin. Latin was used in church or by scholars in monasteries, not by common people.

The English language only began during the Roman withdrawal from Britain in 410. Four hundred years of Roman occupation did little to change the way the original Celtic people of Britain spoke. Their Gallic cousins in France, however, adopted many Latin words, from the Roman soldiers and traders who dwelt amongst them from 55 BC.

The Roman leaders and rulers dwelt on higher ground; mixed less with their subjects. So most of the words the Gauls adopted are what we call Vulgar Latin — spoken by the lower class vulgar Romans. For example, French 'tête' (head) comes from Latin 'testa', which means earthenware jar, i.e. 'jug head', and nothing like the word in Classical Latin, 'caput'. The Gauls

had adopted lots of Vulgar Latin words by the time the Romans left. Then the Franks arrived and added their words, and their name, to the French language.

By contrast, very few Latin words were used by the Celts, other than in church. The English language began when Germanic tribes arrived from Saxony. The Saxons adopted some Celtic words, not vice versa. More invaders/settlers added new words to English. The Angle people were from Angul, an angle of land on the Jutland coast — shaped like a fish-hook — and no doubt they were all good anglers. One man was called an Angle and two or more men were Engles. It's believed the region that Saxons, Engles and Jutes settled in Britain was called Englaland simply because the Engles were the first to keep records. Their dialect, Englisc, gave the new Anglo-Saxon language its name.

This original Anglo-Saxon English, now known as Old English, changed a lot when Vikings arrived and eventually ruled the land, but then it was quashed by conquering Normans ('north men') in 1066. They installed their own language: Norman-French, in all places of importance, like courts and schools. Anyone who wanted to get ahead learnt French and spoke it, even at home. So English was left to the illiterate and no one cared when English words were shortened and grammar neglected by rough-speaking peasants and serfs.

English could have faded out forever. Some say it was the bubonic plague that lifted English from the brink of extinction. It was called the Black Death and killed about half of England's people in one year: 1349. This meant that thousands of English-speaking peasants had to be freed from their feudal servitude (a form of slavery) to fill the labour shortage. They became independent labourers. This forced

employers — the bosses — to speak in English, an English which had changed a lot since the year 1066.

The peasants and serfs were illiterate but although they dropped ends from words, they were not dull to new sights and sounds. Old English became peppered with Norman words. As the great Norman castles dotted the landscape the new word *castle* was on everybody's lips. Serfs ate on *boards* but waited on their masters' *tables*. The old word *board* is still in use, when *bed and board* describes 'food and lodging'.

Peasants not only left the ends off Old English words but dropped some words all together. They exchanged *kine* for the new word *cattle*, but stuck to *swine*, for some reason. There was a continual flow of Norman-French words into England until 1204 when King John of England lost control of Normandy. By then, 10,000 new words had been added to English, and changed it so much it is now called Middle (Age) English. Thousands of Old English words were discarded, left out of Middle English.

Normandy was lost but a new French connection, through King John, was made to a different region of France, and a different sort of French. He inherited provinces in central and southern France and with much coming and going across the Channel more new words arrived in England. More were lost, too. *Holymonth*, *Wolfmonth* and *Haymonth* were replaced by *December*, *January* and *July*. French words like *chattel* and *chase* did not replace their harsh Norman counterparts, *cattle* and *catch*, because they were put to slightly different uses. In this way, English got a double dose of French words, from north and south.

In 1349, when the Black Death forced the freedom of the labouring class and released English back into the upper

classes, many English gentlemen were only too pleased to communicate in English, with their labourers and amongst themselves. They were going 'off' France — its language and its people.

England was at war with France. In 1327, Edward III became King of England. Soon after that his uncle, Charles IV of France, died, without a son or a brother to take over. Edward saw himself as the closest relation and therefore the rightful King of France, as well as of England. The French preferred that King Charles' cousin, Philip, inherit the French throne. This argument started a war between France and England which went on and off for one hundred years and produced a sort of love-hate relationship. The English loved such a lot about the French: their language, their cuisine and other aspects of their culture but it was an unrequited love. The French did not want to be ruled by the English and laughed at their uncultured ways, and at their French, which was peppered with mispronunciations and obsolete Norman words.

None of us like to be laughed at. More and more people gave up on French and fell back in patriotic fervour on their own language — English — much of which they learnt from the labouring classes.

English a late developer

By 1429, the year Joan of Arc repelled the English from Orleans, England had replaced French in schools with English; Parliament was in English, although still written up in French; and the entire Bible was in English, written by hand and circulated in secret. We can 'see' what this revived English was like when reading Chaucer's books, written between 1360 and 1400, but we cannot understand much of it. To my mind this is English in its adolescence, having survived a rocky and

suppressed childhood, after a late birth.

The Middle Ages ended in the 1400s as the Renaissance spread from Italy across Europe, aided and abetted by printed books. Like the internet today, mass-produced books connected people to the scientific, geographic, historic and mental explorations of the day. Great minds stimulated each other through books. It took a hundred years for the Renaissance to ripple all the way west, across land and sea, to little England. Being late starters, there was by then much on offer in the way of new and old knowledge and the English grasped it all with both hands.

The dead languages of Latin and Ancient Greek had been revived and now Latin-English and Greek-English dictionaries and grammars were published. When new concepts and inventions were named these old languages supplied the spare parts to make new English words. Brand new words arrived in England with returning explorers and pirates and were spread through books. English blossomed — between 1590 and 1610 six thousand new words were added *every year*! The year 1611 saw the launch of England's own official Bible, carefully translated from Latin, Ancient Greek and Hebrew into the best English of the day. Many new English words appeared first in Shakespeare's plays, which we *can* understand. He himself created 10,000 words, between 1590 and 1616.

Chaucer's Middle English had about 100,000 words. Two-hundred and twenty years later, Shakespeare wrote in Modern English, which had twice as many words — 200,000 — by the time he died. English continued to expand, and continues to do so, everyday.

English went from being a minor language to the wordiest in the world, because it was not controlled by an

academy. Whilst the Italian academy limited vocabulary to protect the linguistic purity of Italian, and the French academy protected the dignity and integrity of French by rejecting foreign adoptions, the English had no academy and revelled in every new word, even when quite unnecessary. Where one word does the job in most languages, the English use as many as possible — so full of synonyms! For instance, *chair* or *stool*, *bench* or *form*, and these six synonyms: *settle*, *sofa*, *settee*, *couch*, *divan* and *ottoman*!

Many new words were adopted with foreign spellings, and many more were adopted and then adapted — spelling adapted to suit English eyes, pronunciation adapted to suit English lips. At the same time the English were discovering that some of their own words had very old roots, had sprung from Classical Latin or Ancient Greek words.

Some words came from Vulgar Latin, the common, spoken Latin and also Ecclesiastical or Church Latin, or Mediaeval Latin, but I usually just say Latin. When I say Greek, I mean Ancient Greek, not Modern Greek.

Most words which had Latin or Greek beginnings had actually been forced on the English during the centuries of French domination after the 1066 invasion. Words which came into English that way, and altered Old English forever, are called Invasion Words. During the Renaissance, the dead languages of Ancient Greek and Classical Latin were revived and the links between words became clear. In England, scholars changed spellings to show the links. French *dette*, a product of Latin *debitum*, had lost its B long ago, before arriving in England, but now it became *debt*, with a silent B, to show the link.

Without an English academy, English words were spelt

in which ever way suited the writer. Spellings reflected regional dialects, past connections and also technical tricks to improve legibility.

Dictionaries did not dictate how words should be spelt, just *described* how, often showing a range of ways. English continued to grow. It took six men six years to produce Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of the English language in 1775, which just recorded current spelling, described it, but did not decide it.

English expanded geographically in 1620, when the Mayflower took it to America, but other languages arrived there, too, with other settlers. French could have become the preferred language in America, but in 1803, Napoleon sold French territory to English-speaking Americans, and lost more to British Canadians, and English began to really expand over that continent. Later, in 1848, those English-speaking Americans took California and New Mexico from Spanish rulers.

Having declared their independence in 1776, Americans were not bound to the traditions of England, including traditional spelling. They were a mixed lot, from all over Europe. English was easy enough to pick up because it had lost a lot of grammar when it was neglected by the upper classes in favour of French — for about three hundred years after England was defeated in 1066. In English, for instance, the same adjective does for everything — e.g. *beautiful* is used to describe plural or singular, male or female, there's no choice to be made. Italians choose between *bella* and *bello*, which change to *belle* and *belli* to describe more than one beauty. French *belle* or *beau* change to *belles* or *beaux* but English has no such 'bells and bows'. Everything is just *beautiful*.

A great American, Noah Webster, saw that English was easy to speak, but hard to read and write. He spent fifteen years on a dictionary which simplified spelling. His was a private endeavour. He had no academy to back him up and no government support. He had to turn a profit; his publisher was concerned. Changing *musick* to *music* and *centre* to *center*, *catalogue* to *catalog*, and *harbour* to *harbor*, was acceptable. But what about *tongue* to *tung*? Or *women* to *wimmen*?

The publisher reminded him that a man with a wife and eight children and a heavily mortgaged home needed to ensure his dictionary would appeal to a wide audience. At that time the widest audience he could tap into was in England, not America. The English, he was told, would never agree to *tung* and *wimmen* and so he scrubbed all but his meekest simplifications.

Even then the English didn't like *harbor* and *center* but nevertheless they marvelled at Webster's 1828 dictionary for it listed twice as many words as the one Samuel Johnson brought out in 1775.

The entire history of English dictionaries has been one of personal endeavour. In 1830, two classics scholars formed The Philological Society, in which *philological* means 'love of words'. They knew Rask, Bopp and Grimm were busy on the Continent comparing and linking European languages, but they were keener to link English back to the classical languages of Latin and Greek. When an Anglo-Saxon scholar called Edwin Guest discovered that English was linked to Celtic languages, too, the society gained new life. In 1842 many new members joined this new Philological Society, along with the old 1830 members, all with the same aim of collecting and researching words. They investigated the 'Classical Writers of Greece and Rome', and also the 'Structure, the Affinities, and the History

of Languages'. Rask's papers on Danish philology and Bopp's and Grimm's on other Continental connections were welcomed at meetings. The new science of phonetics was explained by English members Ellis and Sweet.

Although there was nothing in their aims about simplifying spelling, making English easy to read, it was this Society which began the dictionary which has become the spelling reference for English.

Tremendous effort was applied to collecting all words, especially those previously unregistered in any dictionary of English, and finding out where they came from.

In order to be a member of the Philological Society one had to be a man of leisure and learning. That is, a gentleman, with loads of leisure time, who had enjoyed long hours in his childhood learning to read. And not just English; learning, in those days, did not stop at English. It was taken for granted that an educated man knew Latin, usually Greek, too, as well as French, and probably a lot of Italian and German. The learned men of the Philological Society saw connections between English and these languages and they decided to spell English words in ways that showed where they came from. They often had a great range of spellings to choose from. One choice was PH instead of F, if a word came from Greece.

Another clue to a Greek origin comes from their decision to remove Y from inside all non-Greek words, and use I instead. We still use both *gypsy* and *gipsy* as no one is sure where they come from. As you can see, Y was only removed from inside words.

Words treated as rocks

They aimed to trap the 'Structure, the Affinities, and the History of Languages' in the very spelling of English

words. These men were not scientists but they were well read and Charles Lyall's book 'Principles of Geology' had been around since 1830. Lyall explained how the structure and the substance of a rock provide clues to its formation. This encouraged the Society men to treat the structure and letters of a word as clues to its origins. Lyall's work justified the way they treated words as rocks.

They saw English as a geological conglomerate bound together in Saxon cement — the conglomerate a mixture of sharp fragments from Greek and Latin quarries, and round pebbles; the cement old and crumbling. The round pebbles were Greek and Latin words which had 'been through the mill' of other languages, obscured and shaped by long rolling 'in Norman channels, Germanic ravines' and so on.

They toiled away, collecting words, deciding on their meaning and choosing the spelling which they felt best reflected the history or origin of each word. In 1858 they began writing 'A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles' (NED). This came out in sections until at last the entire dictionary appeared in print in 1928, seventy years in the making.

Meanwhile, throughout the 1800s, the population of England and North America grew. Although more and more people spoke English, very few read and wrote it. So its quaint spelling did not block its growth.

Reading and writing remained an upper class privilege in England throughout the 1800s. In France, in 1802, Napoleon reformed education, taking great interest in secondary and tertiary education, but leaving primary education as a town and village responsibility, with parents usually paying fees to the local church to teach their children. In Italy education was

meant to be compulsory from 1859, but many children continued to work, without going to school. In England most children had always worked, especially in farming, and the Industrial Revolution had provided power-driven machines which did not require adult strength. Children were cheaper than adults. Parents were fired and their children hired instead — sent to work on spinning jennies and in cotton gins, into pump houses, mills and metal works.

Boys and girls worked underground beside men and women, in coal and metal mines. After 1819, English cotton factories were not meant to employ children under the age of nine, but many did. After 1830, factories were encouraged to provide two hours' schooling a day — to children who had already worked for twelve hours! Days became a tad shorter with the Ten Hours Bill of 1847. It took until 1870 for basic education to become compulsory by act of law, but in actual fact, only if parents could afford school fees. Another twenty years passed before fees in basic government elementary schools were abolished, in 1891.

By 1840 in USA many states had laws to restrict the employment of the young, but children continued to work on the farms and in mills and factories. When schooling became compulsory in Massachusetts in 1852, the notion spread, state by state, to the last one — Mississippi — by 1918. Private education for the upper classes in both nations had always been available. George Washington, for instance, had a private tutor. His father bought an English convict — a convicted schoolmaster — for his son; bought him on the wharf straight off the ship. (British convicts were transported to American colonies for centuries until Americans rejected them, along with British rule.)

Our Society of leisured and learned men would have known little about conditions in the lower classes; the Oliver Twist serial ran from 1837—39 but probably all they sensed was the plight of an upper class boy at risk amongst the lower classes, if they read Dickens at all. Was it mere indifference to the lower classes that prevented the Society from making words easy to read?

Reading and Revolution

The truth is that reading anything but the Bible amongst the lower classes was seen as a risk. If reading was made easy then everyone would start reading — reading new ideas. In France, ideas of equality, fraternity and liberty had spread on handbills in the streets of Paris. If such ideas were on easy-to-read English handbills, England would end up in a revolution as bloody as the French Revolution. Even today, many rulers shudder at UNESCO's definition of literacy as 'involving a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society'.

One member of the Society, Benjamin Thorpe, was eleven years old in 1793 when King Louis XVI was executed, just forty kilometres away in France. The following year-long Reign of Terror would have been firmly etched on a twelve-year-old's memory. The French Queen was guillotined in 1794, followed by thousands more French victims. The English were just as terrified as the French, and then even more terrified when Napoleon Bonaparte turned France into a conquering war machine, with England in its sights. It was not until 1815 that Napoleon's army was defeated and he was banished once and for all. Then in England the 1816 Spa Fields Riot, the 1817 Derbyshire Insurrection and attack on the king's son and heir,

and the 1819 Peterloo Massacre at Manchester, meant the fear of revolution by the lower classes did not go away. In 1832, voting rights were loosened a fraction, in that 7% of Englishmen were now allowed to vote. Apparently this kept the lid on simmering revolution in England, by giving the lower classes a gleam of hope that, one day, they too would vote.

Terrified by what had happened in France and was happening elsewhere in Europe, and wary of the changes in England, parliament saw that spreading new ideas to the masses via newspapers and handbills was too risky, too speedy, for the upper class to remain in control.

A desire to keep the masses in the dark was nothing new to the English. Since 1712 there had been a tax on all British newspapers, which was increased regularly, to ensure that the lower classes could not afford to buy a paper. The tax, a stamp duty, was also applied on journals that contained any 'public news, intelligence or occurrences, or any remarks or observations thereon, or upon any matter in Church or State'. The government hoped that this stamp duty would stop the publication of newspapers and pamphlets that tended to 'excite hatred and contempt of the Government and holy religion'. It lasted until 1855 and was called a Tax on Knowledge by the people who fought to have it removed.

The Philological Society was a group of volunteers. They received no help from the government and no direction. Given the government's desire to keep the masses in the dark I doubt an official academy would have encouraged the simplification of spelling to make reading easier. As it was, the Philological Society was more interested in the history of a word than in making it easy to read.

Some claimed that if spelling was simplified then all

the history captured in the spelling of its words would be lost. Some even said that since the Bible was sacred, so was the way its words were written, words like *psalm* and *saviour*. So all the Society did was agree on just one way to spell each English word, based on history. This unified spelling, but did not simplify it.

They often had to choose between English words from various counties which meant the same thing. Words like *fox* and *vox* became just *fox*, and *vixen* and *fixen* became just *vixen*, very fair-handed. When they unified *altho*, *althô*, *althagh* and *although* into one written word, they did not choose the simplest way to spell it. They chose to keep its GH as a link to its Germanic origin. They let silent letters remain in words like *debt* and *reign*, to link them to Latin *debitum* and *regno*.

Rather than insert G into *iland*, to link it to its Old English ancestor, *igland*, they retained the silent S which had crept into *island* as a false link with Latin *insula*. They also allowed it in the newly adopted French word. Now *isle* does in fact descend from Latin for island (*insula*) but that was long ago. The French, proud of their language and free of any cultural cringe, continued to use the sensible spelling *ile*.

Sometimes the dictionary men displayed ambivalence, allowing *phantom* with Greek PH but preferring F in *fantasy*, which has the same Greek ancestry as *phantom*. They began assembling NED, their New English Dictionary, in 1858. Could more have been done to simplify English spelling at this stage?

I am quick to criticize the educated men who toiled over NED and chose ways to spell words which reflected their history, rather than made them easy to read. We must remember they were volunteers. NED was a project of the Philological

Society. Its full title was A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles.

Both education and democracy remained a privilege in England throughout the 1800s. A small change in 1885 allowed 28% of Englishmen to vote. This scared the upper classes into giving two votes to those with a university education, or wealthy enough to have such extensive property that it was in more than one electorate. University was, on the whole, an upper class experience, provided by only three universities in England, (more in Scotland, and one in Wales).

Was English spelling actually intended to make reading and writing difficult, in order to prevent mass education? Did the men of the Philological Society love words so much that they forgot to love people, forgot that written words are meant to help people communicate? If so, why didn't others come forward? NED was made available in alphabetical sections, but no one spoke up. No one tried to undo spellings which were due to the quirks of old scribes, who changed letters to make them legible, and printers, who lengthened or shortened words so they'd fit on the page.

Simple folk could have spoken up. They had Tyndale's Bible, which William Tyndale had translated into English, using sensible, readable spelling, expressly so that people could read the Bible, in their own language. He wrote words like 'heven, erth, frute', for *heaven*, *earth* and *fruit*. He used Old English 'tung' for *tongue*.

It's true that Tyndale was hunted down and destroyed by the authorities for turning God's word 'into the language of plough boys', but these sixteenth century Bibles were still available and would have been a good spelling resource. Tyndale translated Latin into good English which only looked rough due

to simple, sensible spelling. The official King James Bible was not only harder to read than Tyndale's, it meant that many words are stuck to this day with 'spooky spellings', considered too sacred to change and improve. Hewitt reports that even in America, 'to spell *Saviour* as *Savior* would shock the piety of thousands'.

Ironically, the complete NED was released in 1928, the very year of universal suffrage in Britain. At last, all men and women could vote but now, with every English word spelt to display its history, rather than spelt for easy reading, it meant that the road to accepted literacy was long and hard and discouraging to many on the way to higher education. (University graduates still got two votes, right up until 1948, but only if they had attended the prestigious early universities of Oxford, Cambridge or London. Graduates from the many new 'red brick' universities could only vote once. It was the same in Scotland, Wales and Ireland — only those from the 'old school' got to vote twice.)

Another American failure to simplify

In USA not even a president could fix the problem of English spelling. In 1906 the Simplified Spelling Society got off to a grand start, funded by Andrew Carnegie and supported by President Theodore Roosevelt who agreed with the removal of unnecessary and misleading letters. He insisted that the government printer use the Simplified Spelling List of 300 reformed words, e.g. *thru* not *through*, *cupt* not *cupped*. He was a popular president and expected Congress to back his decision.

However, unlike the president, most congressmen had not been raised with private tutors. They had had to knuckle down in class and learn to spell and they laughed when the president blamed his inability to spell on the way words were

spelt. So did the newspaper men and the printers, all men who'd had to learn to spell to get ahead. Roosevelt had been a sickly child and needed home schooling. His tutors taught him many languages, instead of drilling him in English spelling. This meant that he was not only a poor speller but from childhood knew how bizarre English spelling was, compared to other languages.

Roosevelt's sympathy for school children and those learning to read and write English as adults was out of step with all the men who'd had to endure the boredom of learning to spell, had had to pass spelling tests in order to gain the education they needed to get where they were in life. They'd done it, why shouldn't the next generation? The newspapers made jokes about dumbing things down so that everyone spelt as poorly as the president. Then Carnegie felt the president was being too hasty, that change should come from 'the people' — as if the people controlled the press and the printing houses! The president's dream ended when his order to the printers was quashed by Congress.

This chapter began with a question: 'A Class Plot?' I shall leave you to make up your own mind about that. NED was reprinted in 1933 as the Oxford English Dictionary. Not only did NED begat Oxford's ED but then ED begat SOD and COD, the Shorter and Concise Oxford Dictionaries, then pictorial and pocket versions, in fact an ever-spreading, never-ending family of dictionaries. The Cambridge and all other dictionaries have followed the path NED took on spelling, the historical path.

So, let's hear the inside story to the spelling of each word, the history behind the spelling. The messages words contain in their letters help us remember how to spell them and also empower us. Not only do we read and write better but we

can unlock the cultural treasures of words. The rest of this book is designed to break the spell, spill the beans, and give power to the people, the power of the pen!

END OF SAMPLE