AMERICAN DICTIONARIES. A DISSERTATION

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AMERICAN DICTIONARIES

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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AMERICAN DICTIONARIES

I

ENGLISH LEXICOGRAPHY TO THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

A comparison of a modern dictionary with earlier and intermediate dictionaries will show that the science of lexicography has been of slow growth. One will be amazed at the complexity and the vast amount of information contained in the modern dictionary as compared with the simplicity and meagreness of early works. Not until the third decade of the eighteenth century was any attempt made to include all of the words of the English language. Bailey's dictionary, first printed in 1721, was the earliest attempt at such an inclusion. This, however, fell short of its aim; for "The alphabetical vocabulary cannot be at all depended on as complete, even as to familiar language."[1] William Curtis Stiles says that even "fifteen years ago no general dictionary existed that had more than one-third of the words desirable for use in writing and speaking the English language."[2] Though this insufficiency has been removed and the vocabularies of modern dictionaries are for all practical purposes complete, we may still say that Bailey is not the only lexicographer to fall short of his aim.

The functions of a modern dictionary are in the main, five: to give for each word the correct orthography, syllabification, pronunciation, derivation, and definition. Usually the definitions are clarified either by illustrative extracts from standard writers or by pictorial representation of the object defined, and

[1] *Living Age*, Dec., 1873, Vol. 119, p. 645.
[2] *Success Magazine*, Sept., 1903, p. 409.

sometimes by both. These, however, were by no means the functions of the early dictionaries, but are distinctly modern contributions produced by slow evolution. Even as late as the beginning of the eighteenth century there seems to have been in existence no book which had for its design the definition in English of the English words in general use.[3]

It is my purpose to treat historically and critically American dictionaries, endeavoring to show to what extent and with what success they have fulfilled the fundamental requirements of a good lexicon of a living language, and to point out any defects which may have occurred in such an undertaking. In order to understand just what foundation America had upon which to build, we may devote a few pages to a brief survey of what had been accomplished in lexicography in England before the appearance of the first American dictionary.

In the following brief treatment of English lexicography, no attempt is made to discuss all works. Such an exhaustive treatment is not only unnecessary but for our purpose useless. I shall, therefore, limit myself to those dictionaries which have in some way contributed to the development of lexicography, or which possess some particular interest in themselves apart from such contribution. For convenience of treatment the following divisions may be made: (1) The beginnings down to the fifteenth century; (2) The Latin-English labors to facilitate the study of Latin; (3) Works to facilitate the study of modern languages; (4) The purely English dictionary of the seventeenth century; (5) Later dictionaries aiming at completeness of vocabulary.

The origin of lexicography in England was similar to its beginnings on the continent. The first works were in substance glosses, in form manuscripts, and in language Latin. In order to assist his own memory, and to aid those who followed him, the owner of a Latin manuscript wrote the meaning of a difficult word above the original, either in a more familiar

[3] *Our Dictionaries.* Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1890, p. 8.