

**ON SOME DEFICIENCIES IN OUR
ENGLISH DICTIONARIES: BEING THE
SUBSTANCE OF TWO PAPERS READ
BEFORE THE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY,
NOV. 5, AND NOV. 19, 1857. PP. 1-77**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649357802

On Some Deficiencies in Our English Dictionaries: Being the Substance of Two Papers Read Before the philological society, Nov. 5, and Nov. 19, 1857. pp. 1-77 by Richard Chenevix Trench

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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RICHARD CHENEVIX TRENCH

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TO WHICH IS ADDED

A LETTER TO THE AUTHOR FROM HERBERT COLERIDGE, ESQ.
ON THE PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS OF THE SOCIETY'S
NEW ENGLISH DICTIONARY.

LONDON:
JOHN W. PARKER AND SON, WEST STRAND.

1860.

820.3

379.1

1760

LONDON:
SAVILL AND EDWARDS, PRINTERS, CHANCERY STREET,
COVENT GARDEN.

ON
SOME DEFICIENCIES IN OUR
ENGLISH DICTIONARIES.

THE course adopted by the Philological Society, in its session of 1856-1857, with a view of removing some of the imperfections, and supplying some of the deficiencies, of our English Dictionaries, is now known to many besides the members of the Society itself. Many, too, are aware of the general acceptance with which the scheme was received, as one at once practical and full of promise; of the large amount of co-operation which was freely tendered both by members of the Society and by others; so that, the horizon of those who had undertaken the scheme enlarging by degrees, it was finally resolved to publish, not a Supplement to existing Dictionaries, which it was felt would only imperfectly meet the necessities of the case, and would moreover be encumbered with inconveniences of its own, but an entirely new Dictionary; no patch upon old garments, but a new garment throughout. The little Essay which follows is the substance of two papers which were read before the Society, while the scheme was yet in its infancy. It has been for some time out of print; and is now republished with amendments and additions, and also with such alterations as the altered condition of things may require. I may be allowed, perhaps, to mention here what I mentioned on that former occasion—namely, that I have thought it right to abstain from employing any portion of those large materials already collected for the Dictionary,

partly as being unwilling even to seem to employ for a private end contributions made for a more public object; but with a further advantage; for I am thus able to show, that it needs no such combined effort of many to make palpable our deficiencies, however it may need this to remove them; but that any one who is not merely and altogether a guest and stranger in our earlier literature, has in his power to bring forward abundant evidence even from his single, and it may be slenderly furnished treasure-house, of the large omissions which it is desirable to supply.

The title which I give to this little Essay that I am about to read is as follows--*On some Deficiencies in our English Dictionaries*. It deals, that is, with some, and not with all their deficiencies. It leaves wholly aside the etymological aspect of our present Dictionaries, and treats only of the imperfect registration in them of the words of our language, and the imperfect use of our literature in the illustration of the words. The plan which I propose in the following pages to adopt will be this. Remembering the excellent maxim of the Schoolmen, *Generalia non pungunt*, I shall deal as little as possible with these generals, shall enter as much as I can into particulars in proof of my assertion. Such a course, indeed, will be attended with a certain inconvenience, which is this: the fact that the vocabulary of our Dictionaries is seriously deficient can only be shown by an accumulation of evidence, each several part of which is small and comparatively insignificant in itself; only deriving weight and importance from the circumstance that it is one of a multitude of like proofs; while yet it will be impossible within the limits of one paper, or even of two, to bring more than comparatively a very small portion of this evidence before you. Neither my limits, nor your patience, would admit of more. This inconvenience, however, I cannot avoid. Even as it is, I

fear I shall put your patience to the trial. Perhaps I shall make the smallest demands upon it at all consistent with my subject, by grouping the materials which I wish to present to you according to the following arrangement.

Our Dictionaries then appear to me deficient in the following points; I do not say that there are not other matters likewise in which they fail, but to these I would desire at the present to direct your attention.

I. Obsolete words are incompletely registered; some inserted, some not; with no reasonable rule adduced for the omission of these, the insertion of those other.

II. Families or groups of words are often imperfect, some members of a family inserted, while others are omitted.

III. Much earlier examples of the employment of words oftentimes exist than any which are cited; indicating that they were introduced at an earlier date into the language than these examples would imply. So, too, on the other hand, in the case of words now obsolete, much later examples might frequently be produced, marking their currency at a period after, and sometimes long after, that when we are left to suppose that they passed out of use.

IV. Important meanings and uses of words are passed over; sometimes the later alone given, while the earlier, without which the history of words will be often maimed and incomplete, or even unintelligible, are unnoticed.

V. Comparatively little attention is paid to the distinguishing of synonymous words.

VI. Many passages in our literature are passed by, which might be usefully adduced in illustration of the first introduction, etymology, and meaning of words.

VII. And lastly, our Dictionaries err in redundancy as well as in defect, in the too much as well as the too little; all of them inserting some things, and some of them many things, which have properly no claim to find room in their pages.

Such are the principal shortcomings which I find in