



The First English Dictionary 1604: Robert Cawdrey's A Table Alphabetical

Robert Cawdrey

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English is one of the most complicated languages to learn, and its constantly evolving vocabulary certainly doesn't help matters. For centuries, men and women have striven to chronicle and categorize the expressions of the English language, and Samuel Johnson is usually thought to be their original predecessor. But that lineage is wrong: Robert Cawdrey published his *Table Alphabeticall* in 1604, 149 years before Johnson's tome, and it is now republished here for the first time in over 350 years.

This edition, prepared from the sole surviving copy of the first printing, documents Cawdrey's fascinating selection of 2,543 words and their first-ever definitions. Cawdrey subtitled his dictionary "for the benefit of Ladies, Gentlewomen, and other unskilled folk," for his aim was not to create a comprehensive catalog, but rather an in-depth guide for the lesser educated who might not know the "hard usual English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French." Each entry reveals an intriguing facet of early modern life and the cultural mores of the time. There are familiar terms—"geometrie" was defined as "the art of measuring the earth," and a "concupine" was described as a "harlot, or light huswife"—and amusingly idiomatic definitions: "prodigall" is "too riotous in spending," while "hetticke" is "inflaming the hart, and soundest parts of the bodie."

John Simpson, chief editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, contributes an insightful introduction that recounts the eventful life of Robert Cawdrey and his mission to become the first English lexicographer. A treasure-trove of linguistic oddity and history for the bibliophile, budding lexicographer, or obsessive Scrabble player, *The First English Dictionary, 1604* reveals the roots of our language in all its eccentric glory.

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