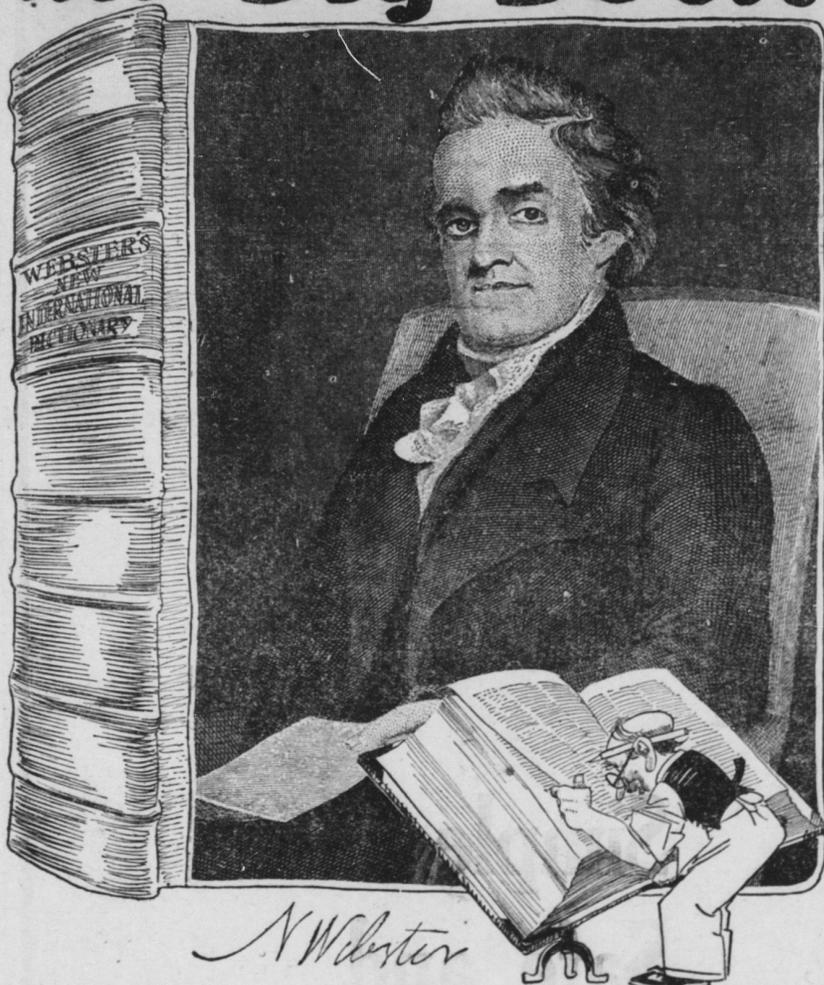


"Look it Up in the Big Book"



By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

IF, WHILE you're reading, you come across a word, the meaning of which you do not know, what do you do? The chances are that you ask somebody to tell you what it means, and the chances are, also, that somebody will tell you to "look it up in the big book" or "consult Mr. Webster."

For that is what Americans have been doing now for exactly a hundred years—"looking it up in the big book" or "consulting Mr. Webster." For it was just one hundred years ago this summer that a scene of unusual activity was taking place in the print shop of Hезekiah Howe in New Haven, Conn., and just one hundred years ago this autumn there came forth the first edition of Noah Webster's "American Dictionary of the English Language."

Now, the issuing of a dictionary is not in itself a unique event, but the issuing of Noah Webster's dictionary away back there in 1828 was a noteworthy event, and in some respects the book itself was unique. Heretofore the English-speaking world had depended upon Dr. Samuel Johnson's for authoritative spelling and definition of words. But when the edition of 2,500 copies of the new dictionary, each consisting of two bulky quarto volumes of more than 1,000 pages each, appeared, Doctor Johnson's work was already obsolete. For Webster's book listed, defined and illustrated with appropriate quotations somewhere between 70,000 and 80,000 words and included 12,000 words and nearly 40,000 definitions which had never before appeared in any dictionary of the English tongue. Most of the definitions Webster had coined anew, doing virtually all of both the mental and manual labor involved unassisted. He also did some revising and simplifying, and it is to him that we owe the fact that we write it "honor" instead of "honour" and "traveler" instead of "traveller." But more than that, his dictionary was almost an encyclopedia in which he set a standard for accuracy and completeness of definition which governs the lexicographer's art of this date. In fact, nearly all of the later dictionaries have been based upon Webster's work and have preserved his identical words in a large number of their definitions.

From that little edition of 2,500 copies issued in 1828 have grown the millions of dictionaries which are to be found in the homes, schools and offices of the English-speaking world of today, and every one of these dictionaries whether it bears his name on its cover or not is a monument to Noah Webster, the Yankee school-teacher and lawyer, who devoted forty-eight years of his life to a task which has enriched our language immeasurably. Although the words "Webster" and "dictionary" are synonymous in the minds of most of us, but few of us know much about the man, Noah Webster. Nine out of ten perhaps would confuse him with his distant relative, Daniel Webster, the orator and statesman. Yet it is not too much to say perhaps, that the contribution of Noah Webster to American life will be an important one long after that of Daniel Webster will have been forgotten entirely.

Noah Webster was the son of a poor New England farmer of West Hartford, Conn., who in 1774, when Noah, Jr., was sixteen years old, mortgaged his farm to pay his son's expenses in Yale college from which the boy was graduated four years later. Upon the day of his graduation his father gave him an eight-dollar Continental bill (worth about four dollars at the time) and told him that he could do no more for him. Although young Webster had intended to become a lawyer, he had no means to continue his studies into that field, so he had to resort to teaching to make a living while he studied law by himself—so successfully, it proved, that he was admitted to the bar in Hartford in 1781. He was unable to wait for a practice, however, so he again engaged in school teaching, this time at Goshen, N. Y., where he established a classical school.

There in 1782, foreseeing that America, after separation from the mother country would need to have its own school texts, he planned a "Grammatical institute" to include a speller, a reader and a grammar. The speller was issued first, in 1783, followed in 1784 by the grammar, and in 1785 by the reader. The success of the now-famous "blue-back speller," still familiar to the older generation of Americans and must have been amazing to the young schoolmaster. In preparing it, he had shown the same skill and sound sense which characterized his dictionary later. It was arranged

in a more logical and serviceable manner than Diltworth's speller, the work of an Englishman previously used, and instead of dry passages from the Scriptures, he used interesting, if homely, anecdotes which appealed immediately to the children who for the next hundred years were to be impressed by the moral of these stories.

By 1815 the sales of the speller were averaging 285,000 copies a year. By 1828 they had risen to 350,000 copies annually, and by 1848 they were up to 1,000,000 a year. As late as 1889 it was still going strong, and it has been estimated that more than 100,000,000 copies have been sold since 1783. Webster's fame may rest mainly upon his dictionary, but in a sense the dictionary owes its existence to the speller, for during the remainder of Webster's life, and especially the twenty years he spent in compiling the dictionary, most of the support of his family came from the profits of this little blue-backed 15-penny book. In 1800 he gave up all his other work to devote himself to his dictionary. His original plan was to correct the errors and supply the omissions in older dictionaries, especially Johnson's. So he spent a number of years collecting words. Then realizing his own lack of knowledge as to the origin of words he changed his plan. For the next ten years he devoted himself to a comparative study of words, and when he was sixty-six years old, having exhausted all the resources of libraries in this country, he went to France and England to complete his work.

Finally his great task was done, and in the autumn of 1828, it came from the press. Not content to rest after a quarter-century of incessant labor on one exacting task, the sturdy old Yankee set about revising some of his earlier works. In 1840 he published a revised edition of his dictionary and he was in the midst of a second revision in 1843 when death came to claim him.

So the next time you come across a word whose meaning you do not understand, before you ask somebody what it means, think of the admonition of one chronicler of Webster's career—"If there is one too lazy to take the half-dozen steps necessary to reach the dictionary, let him picture the Connecticut scholar spending twenty-five years pacing about before his huge semicircular table, laden with dictionaries of all languages from Arabic to Icelandic, so that he might give his great work to the world."

Bubble in a Sapphire

There is exhibited in the British museum a sapphire weighing nine carats and containing a bubble that appears and disappears with changes of temperature. It is believed that a cavity in the gum incloses a quantity of carbonic acid gas under great pressure. When the temperature is such as to correspond with the "critical point" for the gas, under the particular pressure to which it is subjected in its

brilliant prison house, it liquefies and becomes visible as a bubble.

Valuable Nettle

Nettles are usually associated with unpleasant sensations, but a species of the plant is widely cultivated in China for the manufacture of a soft silk-like fabric for textile purposes. In strength, beauty and texture it is said to compare favorably with the finest grades of silk and is less costly. The "grass cloth" of China has been used for more than 4,000 years.

Pineapple fiber is also employed in the manufacture of handkerchiefs and other articles.

Air Sickness Antidote

An apparatus has been installed at Tempelhof field, near Berlin, Germany, for passengers suffering from air sickness. Any passenger who fears that he may become sick may inhale the antidote, which consists in the main of oxygen and cinnamon. The mixture has a quieting effect upon the nerves of the diaphragm.

Experiments Show the Value of Light Baths

By taking a holiday in Switzerland and sitting in the sun, five pit boys from the mines in Mansfield, England, have demonstrated the value of light baths for men and boys who work underground. A report of the committee which has been testing the usefulness of light in industrial hygiene has just been published. Following the Swiss experiment with sunlight baths, a clinic was opened and 50 volunteers from the mines, fourteen to seventeen years old, have had ultra-violet light baths several times a week for three months. At the end of the time, the boys had gained in weight an average of more than four pounds. Boys of the same ages who did not get the light baths gained a little more than two and a half pounds during the same three months. The boys who had the light baths gained in height more than the boys who did not. The clinic will be continued, and the committee report recommends that wherever pithead baths are provided, light baths should be established with them. The report warns, however, that artificial light baths should be given only under medical supervision.

Shoot at "Hate Targets"

At 80 per cent of the Soviet factories in Russia the workmen engage daily in rifle practice. The propaganda department of the commissariat of education is supplying them with targets, which take the form of popularly hated persons. One of the favorite targets is a representation of Sir Austen Chamberlain wearing his famous monocle. The factory chiefs give a prize to the workers who hit the monocle. An effigy of Vice President Dawes is also used, the bull's-eye being the general's pipe.

"Girl" in the Scriptures

The word "girl" occurs in the King James version of the Bible only twice, once in the singular and once in the plural. Joel 3:3 says: "And they have cast lots for my people; and have given a boy for an harlot, and sold a girl for wine, that they might drink." Zech 8:5 says: "And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof."

Who Knows

We often speak impatiently of the interruptions that hinder our work, but in our shortsightedness we may be sadly mistaking values. It well may be that the few minutes we give to helping or cheering another is the most important work of our whole day.

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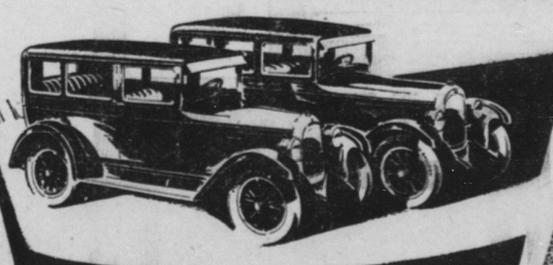
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