BY BRYAN A. GARNER

Garner the Grammarian

Fowler Reconsidered

Next year marks the centennial of Oxford University Press's publication of H. W. Fowler's magnum opus *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. It was a category-creating book: a quasi-dictionary dealing not with all the words in the English language but with all its troublesome wordings. During its creation (1911–26), Fowler referred to it variously as "a general *vade mecum* of English writing," as "an idioms dictionary," and as "the Perfect English-speaker's Companion." Having just completed the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, he meant to compile a novel dictionary-like reference work in which "approval & condemnation would be less stingily dealt out than has been possible in the official atmosphere of a complete dictionary." Furnishing abundant guidance, the book ended up having an unequaled influence on 20th-century attitudes to the English language.

Having imbibed Fowler's words as an adolescent, I've always considered myself a Fowlerian in spirit—willing to bring literary judgment to questions of English usage. I've been skeptical of his many critics, who like to call his enterprise a "dodgy business" because of the fluidity and changeability of language. How justified is the criticism?

In this brief space, I propose an experiment. Let's examine two consecutive pages of his 741-page work to see how his judgments stand up to time. I've opened the 1926 edition randomly to page 78.

First up is an entry on musical instruments, but Fowler doesn't tell us that. He just gives us six possibilities—*cither*, *cithern*, *cittern*, *gittern*, *zither*, and *zithern*, followed by this main guidance: "When the forms are distinguished, cither is the general word including the ancient cithara & its more modern representatives." Most general readers today might recognize only zither, which refers to a family of stringed instruments with strings stretched across a flat resonating body, most often played by plucking or strumming. Although this German-influenced spelling is now predominantly used to refer to the entire family, Fowler proclaimed it to be narrowly "appropriated only to the Tyrolese instrument." If that judgment was sound in 1926—something we might doubt—it isn't good today.

His use of *instrument* in that sentence, by the way, is the only hint that he's talking about music. But many readers would never get that far into the entry. By the time you see *cither*, *cithern*, *cittern*, *gittern*, you probably realize that this entry isn't for you and skip to other things. That's what I've done, over the years, in the many times I've seen this page.

Let's stick to music for now. There's an entry on *clari(o)net*. Here we have a question of spelling and syllabification. Fowler wasn't relying on mere guesswork. He had the benefit of the slips of paper compiled for the *Oxford English Dictionary*. He probably wrote this with quite some confidence: "**clari(o)net.** The two forms denote the same instrument, but the *-onet* form is in more general use (& therefore preferable in literature), while musicians & musical connoisseurs affect the other." Wow. Musicians *affect* the other? What a pretentious bunch. Today, of course, anyone who writes *My son is taking clarionet lessons* would be considered just a mite affected.

With the benefit of big data, we can now see that Fowler's evidence was miserably outdated. *Clarionet* did indeed predominate in English-language sources throughout most of the 19th century. In books published in 1826, for example, *clarionet* was more than four times as common as *clarinet*. In 1872, it remained nearly three times as common. But in the 1880s, there was a sudden reversal in linguistic fortune, and *clarinet* began its tremendous crescendo. By 1926, when Fowler's book was published, *clarinet* had become more than 30 times as common as its rival spelling.

Fowler censured certain uses of the verb *claim*, and here you can see why he is sometimes called "donnish." His opening line is hard to decipher: "**claim.** A vulgarism that has made its way, probably through the advertisement column, into journalism, & is now of daily currency, is the use of *claim* in the senses of *assert*, *maintain*, or *represent*, with the infinitive construction admissible after them, but not after it." Read that again, if you will, to see whether you're sure about the antecedent of the very last word. It takes a little study to discover that *it* refers to the word *claim*.

But that opaque statement is followed immediately with a qualification: "The only legitimate infinitive

after *claim* occurs when *claim* is in the active [voice] & also has the same subject as the infinitive." Ooh. This is getting technical. In short, Fowler approves *He claims to have proved his case* and *He claims to be the heir* but disapproves *Usage is not, as it is often claimed to be, the absolute law of language* (his examples, all three). Usage is not the absolute law of language? If he means what that example says, then he's disagreeing with all the other acknowledged authorities, ancient and modern.

What Fowler wrote about *claim* is difficult to puzzle out from his words. It would have been much more accessible if he had simply disparaged the passive locution *is claimed to be.* That's the phrasing he disliked. It has been fairly common in English since the 1840s. But that's no matter: despite its "daily currency," he branded it a "vulgarism."

This page 78 is proving unfortunate. In the follow-on paragraph, Fowler condemned *I claim that it is false* and *Liberals claim that reform of the Prussian franchise is . . .* This phrasing, quite common by the 1880s, was, in his view, "contrary to British idiom." This judgment hasn't endured well.

Let's put away our clarionets, drop our claims, and move to page 79. Do things get better there? In some ways yes: there are sound distinctions between *classic* and *classical*, *clue* and *clew*, *climate* and *clime.*

But in some ways a resounding no. Even in 1926, Fowler was on the wrong side of both cultural history and British idiom in this entry, which I reproduce in full: "**clever** is much misused, especially in feminine conversation, where it is constantly heard in the sense of learned, well read, bookish, or studious; a woman whose cleverness is apparent in all she does will tell you that she wishes she was clever, that she cannot read clever books (meaning those of the graver kind), & that Mr Jones must be a very clever man, for he has written a dictionary. But in fact ignorance & knowledge have no relation to cleverness, which implies ingenuity, adroitness, readiness, mental or manual quickness, wit, & other qualities incompatible with dullness, but not with ignorance or dislike of books."

And so my experiment in closely examining two consecutive pages, found by chance, leads me to this conclusion: Even if Fowler had some admirable qualities, he must be read through an extremely selective lens that discounts or ignores much of his advice. It requires some cleverness.

Next time: more on what I mean by "category-creating book." What exactly was this usage category that Fowler devised? ●

POEM BY LAWRENCE DUGAN

A Lost Allegory Replaced by Hope

Like Keats' withered Titans,
A race of *Pale Omegas*,
The leaves are opaque
Under streetlamps as they fall
And pile up at the base
Of the patriot's statue.

The leaves are brown
And don't adorn the statue,
The allegory broken
By autumn's supple
Indifference to all
Attempts at exaltation.

The lapsed leaves disintegrate,
And blow away as dust,
The abandoned sycamores
Lift their empty branches
Near the Cathedral,
Where the red lamp always burns.