

A Lifestory in Dictionaries

Peter H. Collin



Peter Hodgson Collin served in the Royal Navy, then studied modern languages in Oxford. He worked as a lecturer in Canada and Hong Kong, edited dictionaries and directed dictionary publishing with Harrap and Macmillan in London, and in 1985 founded his own dictionary publishing house that was sold last year to Bloomsbury. Altogether, Mr Collin has been involved in the making of scores of dictionaries in the UK and in many languages worldwide. At present he is the Chairman and Editorial Director of Modern English Publishing.
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Dictionaries written by P.H. Collin

Published by Harrap

Easy English Dictionary

Easy Learning English

Dictionary

Standard Learner's Dictionary

English Vocabulary

English Mini Dictionary

English Pocket Dictionary

English School Dictionary

Mini Pocket English Dictionary

2000 Word English Dictionary

2000 Word Engels-Nederland

Dictionary

2000 Word English German

Dictionary

Dictionnaire de 2000 mots

Dictionnaire de l'anglais

elementaire

English-Arabic Basic Learner's

Dictionary

As often happens, I got into what turned out to be my life's work—working on dictionaries—by accident.

When I left Oxford with a degree in modern languages, I wanted to work with books, and so wrote to several publishers. I got a job almost immediately with Harrap, at that time the leading publisher in school textbooks for language learners, and also, incidentally, an important bilingual dictionary publisher¹.

In 1958 I started work in the Harrap offices, at the top of the old building in High Holborn, up flights of back stairs (the editorial staff weren't supposed to use the main stairs or lift) in a room about 6x6m, with two small windows looking out over rooftops, where four or five of us schoolbook editors and a secretary worked in Dickensian squalor. The first chore every morning in winter was to light the small and very smelly gas fire. Desk lights were on all day, as the windows were small. Although I was employed to work on school textbooks (my first jobs were to edit a new Russian course for beginners and a university edition of a French medieval text), very quickly I found myself helping out with the new Supplement to the big Mansion French/English dictionary, adding new entries, looking for translations for new words, making up examples, and eventually proofreading. After a few more months I was working on it more than half-time, and the schoolbooks receded into the background.

After the third supplement came out, the decision was taken to produce a whole new edition of the Mansion dictionary, and this was organized partly in the office, with several editors (one of whom, Françoise, I married), and by freelancers all over the place: there was a specialist who dealt only with names of birds; there was one who supplied the phonetics for the French side; there was a lady in Pau who sent in masses of handwritten notes of things she had read in French newspapers; there was an elderly Polish refugee whose very fiddly job it was to cut up a copy of the existing dictionary and stick each word entry down on a filing card, so that new entries could be added on new cards. The cards were stored in drawers in wooden racks. In those days (the early 1960s) there were no computers, although we had demonstrations of card-based inventories which we thought might be useful. In the end, we kept to the old system, and sent the cards off periodically

to be typeset (using metal setting, of course); our printers employed typesetters who worked only on that dictionary.

After a while my wife and I decided that we wanted to travel, so I got a job teaching in Canada (Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia), and after five years there, went to teach at the University of Hong Kong for another five years. But we still kept in contact with Harrap, and proofread dictionaries all the time (1963-1972).

Then I was asked if I wanted to go back to Harrap, firstly to run the schoolbooks department, and then to take over as director of the dictionary publishing as well.

Although we were now in the mid-1970s, there were still no computers involved in the compilation processes, but some very advanced printers were typesetting from punched tapes. I remember discovering that the paper tapes of one of our dictionaries had been thrown away by the printers once the pages had been typeset, and I went down to their offices and searched through the dustbins to retrieve this mass of paper ribbons, which I felt somehow could be used (and indeed they were converted to very early computerized data).

During this stage of my work at Harrap, not only did we produce new editions of all the major bilingual dictionaries, but I also launched a new series of smaller bilingual dictionaries in Spanish and German, plus the first of several monolingual English learner dictionaries. These spawned a small series of semi-bilingual dictionaries in French, German, Dutch, Afrikaans, Arabic² and other languages.

In 1983, I was approached by Macmillan Inc (New York) to see if I would be willing to set up a whole new dictionary division in London to produce a series of bilingual dictionaries in several languages, simultaneously. The languages were to be English, French, Spanish, and German, with the possibility of adding Portuguese and Italian later. The dictionaries were intended to replace the old Cassell dictionaries (owned by Macmillan at that time). The whole project was to be computerized, and Macmillan were prepared to put a large amount of money into it. So I moved from Harrap, and started all over again.

Firstly we needed to find offices, and then staff, and we were lucky to find main language editors who all had dictionary experience; we then recruited numbers of junior editors and opened our main office

in Golden Square, with little offices in various parts of the world; compilation started on source files for each language and within two years we employed around 90 full-time and part-time staff. Although the different languages had different grammatical requirements, we were able to draw up standardized entry forms and compilation was done on paper while the decision on the computer system still had to be made. After two years' compilation most of the source files were more or less complete and were ready to be transferred to computer.

At that stage, I felt that my role was becoming less relevant, and I also wanted to start up something on my own, which I would actually own. So I left Macmillan and formed a new company, Peter Collin Publishing Ltd (or PCP for short) in 1985. I knew exactly what dictionaries to produce, because I could see that there was a gap in the market for English learners' dictionaries in the specialist subjects which were becoming widely taught as part of ELT courses, in particular Business, Legal and Medical English.

Because I wanted the material to be computerized from the start (as opposed to Macmillan where the choice of a computer system took about two years) and I didn't want to use any of the existing compilation systems which were both expensive and derived from other large dictionary projects, I devised my own internal coding system for each part of an entry (headword, phonetics, part of speech, definition, example, quotation, etc.) and bought my first small computer (an Apricot, which in those days had no memory, so that everything had to be stored on diskettes). The great day was when the first draft text was sent to a typesetter for testing and came back exactly as we wanted: this showed that our internal codes could generate typesetting in multiple fonts, different point sizes and with boxes to highlight parts of the text. It also gave us the flexibility to change the appearance of the dictionary page at will.

Compilation of the first two dictionaries (Business and Law) took about six months, so that for the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1986 my wife and I actually had two books on our little stand. Shortly afterwards, we signed agreements with Klett in Germany and Norstedts in Sweden, to use our data to make our first bilingual dictionaries. Again, the simple coding system proved invaluable in compiling bilingual versions, and diskettes of our texts were sent all over the world to have translations added: it proved surprisingly simple to take the original English text and add translations

to make semi-bilingual dictionaries. This process continued over several years, with dictionaries appearing in Chinese, Slovenian, Polish, Czech and other languages, all compiled locally using our material. It was interesting to go to one of the Chinese publishing houses (the China Financial Press, Beijing) and see the text which had been imported from our diskettes appearing on screen, and the Chinese translations being added as we watched.

We also decided to make our own big bilingual dictionaries in French, German and Spanish, for which I recruited specialist translators in various parts of the world.

All this required more and more computer skills, and my son Simon left his job as the technical editor of a computer magazine to join the family company and help run the business. By our 17th birthday in 2002 we had over 100 titles, mainly dictionaries, in fifteen different languages, and sales in almost every country of the world. However, it was becoming more of a strain to fund the new projects, and without new projects I felt that the company could not continue to develop. We had the distinction of being the only privately owned English dictionary publisher, and this made the company attractive to others. It was not unexpected, but a surprise nevertheless, when Bloomsbury, the publisher of the Encarta dictionaries (and Harry Potter!), suddenly made us an offer out of the blue. The PCP dictionaries have now moved to Bloomsbury and form the basis of the new Bloomsbury Reference list. They are being actively updated, and I am still involved to a certain extent in this process.

Because I didn't want to retire, we decided to move into magazine publishing, and set up a new company, Modern English Publishing Ltd³. We were lucky to acquire three ELT magazines, alongside which we are publishing a series of practical guides for teachers of English as a Foreign Language.

There is life after lexicography, after all!

Notes

1 The company was called at the time George G Harrap Ltd, then Harrap Ltd. Now it is part of Chambers Harrap Publishers Ltd, based in Edinburgh, owned by Larousse PLC.

2 *Harrap's Standard English Learner's Dictionary* served as a base for Kernerman's semi-bilingual Arabic (1987), Italian (1987), Chinese (1990), and Spanish (1991) editions.

3 www.modernenglishpublishing.com

Peter Collin Publishing

Dictionary of Business • English, French, Swedish, German, Spanish, Slovene, Chinese, Polish
Dictionary of American Business
German Business Dictionary
French Business Dictionary
Business Spanish Dictionary
Le Bilingue des Affaires
Dictionary of Marketing • English-German
Dictionary of Personnel Management
Dictionary of Human Resources
Dictionary of Banking & Finance • English, German, Chinese
Dictionary of Accounting
Dictionary of Hotels & Tourism • English, German, Chinese
English Law Dictionary • English, Swedish, German
Hungarian Law Dictionary
Chinese Law Dictionary
Spanish Law Dictionary
Dictionary of Government and Politics
Dictionary of Printing & Publishing • English, German
Dictionary of Medicine • English, Swedish, German
Dictionary of Ecology and the Environment • English, German, French
Dictionary of Agriculture • English-German
Dictionary of Horticulture
English Dictionary for Students
Crossword Key Dictionary
English Study Dictionary • Italian, Spanish
Children's English Dictionary

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