

# A TALE OF TWO CROSSWORD DICTIONARIES

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Ever since the American mania for crossword puzzles began with the publication of the first crossword puzzle book in 1924, many authors have compiled crossword dictionaries as an aid to the harassed solver. I have collected many of these books during the past sixty years, but until recently never tried to infer anything about the sources these authors used from a comparison of their entries with other works.

In this article, I describe the results of a brief investigation of two crossword dictionaries, in the hope that it may inspire others to make a more thorough study of the matter. The two books I selected were published nearly sixty years apart: the Ross Crossword Puzzle Synonyms compiled by Ernest N. Ross, and the Master Crossword Puzzle Dictionary compiled by Herbert M. Baus and others. The former is a slim 276-page volume cheaply printed in Philadelphia in 1924, and the latter is a massive 1693-page tome printed in New York in 1981. Ross claimed to have "fifty thousand words to solve crossword puzzles", but Baus claimed to include one million. However, one should not naively conclude that Baus is twenty times as large as Ross; Baus apparently counted all words in his volume, no matter how many times they were repeated under different clue word entries, whereas Ross must have counted only the number of different answer words in his book. (There are 421 words or phrases on the first page of Ross; multiplying this by 276, one obtains approximately 120,000 words in all.)

Ideally, a crossword dictionary should consist of words taken from crossword puzzles, with each clue word followed by one or more answer words. However, this is difficult to carry out in practice, for most dictionary clues are phrases rather than words. Therefore, crossword dictionary compilers have tended to rely on synonyms culled from dictionaries instead. Most early crossword creators used Funk and Wagnalls dictionaries because thousands of their boldface words were printed out of alphabetic order which made finding them quite difficult for crossword fans. As a consequence, most crossword dictionaries published between 1924 and 1945 were based mainly on Funk and Wagnalls - L.A. Fanshaw's Crossword Solver, Norman W. Cook's The Puzzle Dictionary, Alexander Dennett's Lex, and many others.

Where did Ross get the words for his dictionary? Certainly not from crossword puzzles directly, for it contains almost none of the familiar crossword terms of that era. In 1924, puzzles reeked with oddities like moa, boa, Goa, emu, ani, aa, ai, oo, etui,

aeon and oda. In Ross, for example, the clue word ROOM is followed by 56 answer words, but oda is noticeably missing.

In Ross's time, plagiarism of books published in other countries was rife; until the Buenos Aires Convention of 1955 established international copyright agreements among more than sixty countries, there was little legal protection against the copying of books in countries outside the one of original publication. This was, of course, an especially acute problem for countries sharing a common language, such as England and America; all an American pirate had to do was change British spellings such as honour and unionise to honor and unionize.

Noting that Ross spelled one of his clue words LOADSTONE instead of LODESTONE, my suspicions of its British origins were immediately aroused; the former spelling is rarely encountered in American usage. Had Ross been guilty of plagiarism? Among my synonym dictionaries is one by Thomas Fenby, published in 1905 by John Grant in London. Comparing several groups of answer words in Fenby and Ross, I found they were identical:

ADJUDICATE: judge, decide, arbitrate, award

COERCE: restrain, constrain, repress, compel, oblige, necessitate, force

CELEBRATE: solemnize, observe, honor

CULPRIT: criminal, malefactor, delinquent, felon, convict, prisoner

DISTASTE: dislike, aversion, disrelish, disgust

YOUTHFUL: young, juvenile, fresh, vigorous

Had the 1955 copyright agreement then been in force, Fenby would have had a strong case for the recovery of damages.

In short, Ross gave the purchasers of his book a misleading product - instead of a dictionary of current American crossword puzzle usage, they were buying a twenty-year-old book of British synonyms, presumably augmented by a few answer words drawn from crossword puzzles (for example, I have been unable to locate Ross's *faisness*, listed under WEAK, in any dictionary). No wonder Ross carefully avoided saying what his sources were!

In contrast, Baus lists some forty sources in his Introduction and flatly states:

The following sources, among many others, were combed for entries - most of them page by page and cover to cover - making this volume the most exhaustively researched crossword puzzle dictionary ever undertaken.

This leads the reader to assume that each reference was carefully mined for words, but I do not believe this to be the case. I first became aware of the gap between claim and performance when, in a moment of idle curiosity, I casually compared the first two clue words in Ross and Baus, ABANDON and ABANDONED. Imagine my consternation when I found that Baus omitted *deserted* as an answer word to the latter clue word - a synonym plainly indicated

in Tom Pulliam's crossword dictionary, Webster's Second and Third, and the Funk and Wagnalls Unabridged. All of these references are among the forty which Baus claimed to have combed page by page for entries (with the exception of Funk and Wagnalls).

A further example of Baus's carelessness (or haste) is provided by an examination of the subheadings under his clue word BIBLE, notably Biblical kings, animals and cities. Some years ago, I prepared a specialized booklet entitled Bible Categories based on various authorities. My booklet lists the following which Baus omits:

Kings: Abijah, Abimelech, Achbor, Adonizedek, Akhenaton, Alexander, Ahasuerus, Ahaziah, Amraphel, Antiochus, Aretas, Arioeh, ..

Animals: adder, apes, badger, bats, bears, beast, boar, camel, cattle, chamois, coney, dogs, dragon, dromedary, fallow deer, fox, gazelle, goat, ..

Further, he omits the Biblical cities Abdon, Achmeta, Achshaph, Adam, Adamah, Adithaim, Admah, .. all attested by the renowned Biblical scholar W.M. Jacobus in his dictionary published by Funk and Wagnalls. The "Bible" source actually used by Baus must have been skimpy indeed!

Baus does not list Ross among his sources consulted. Probably he was unaware of it; even if he had known about it, he would have dismissed it as so small that it would contain few answer words he didn't already have from other sources. Yet this is not the case; I estimate from a comparison of the answer words given in 109 clue word groups in Ross with those in the identical clue word groups of Baus that the latter author omitted at least 50,000 of Ross's entries - over a third of his book! (For the benefit of the statistical maven, I found a total of 707 words missing from Baus; expanding the clue word groups from the sampled 109 to an estimated 8300 in Ross that are also in Baus, this predicts nearly 54,000 words missing.)

To give a flavor of the missing words, I append a sample of clue word groups:

ABANDONED alone, cast away, deserted, destitute, dissipated, disreputable, desperate, hopeless, helpless, irreformable, neglected, solitary, uninhabited, vitiated

BREAKER crusher, smasher, cracker, white horse, surge

CONTRAST counter, defeat

DISTRICT portion, tract, allotment, place, subdivision, riding, regency, wardency, presidency, prefecture, lathe

FOURFOLD quadruple, quadruplicate

INTENSE tense, potent, high, acute, exquisite, grievous, dense, sore, marked, earnest

LOBSTER homarine

ODD particular, fantastical, comic, ludicrous, exceptional, not even, unmated, peerless, peculiar, cranky, oddish

REPTILE object, malevolent, treacherous, lacertian, reptilian, dragon, hydra, crocodilian

SUCCEED obtain, answer, prevail, speed, go, do  
 WEAKNESS feebleness, imbecility, failing, defect

It can be argued that some of these are out-of-date words that are most unlikely to appear in modern crossword puzzles - yet if a crossword dictionary advertises itself as unabridged, it must include such words. Like Ross, Baus has misled his public, not by using British words but by making a claim of completeness and comprehensiveness which his work simply does not live up to. If I had the time, I believe I could find 200,000 to 500,000 words or phrases to add to Baus's clue word groups.

So, what should the buyer of a crossword dictionary do? Despite its many omissions, the Baus dictionary is the best one on the market today, and deserves a place on the shelf of the serious logophile. Just don't expect it to solve all your crossword puzzles or logological questions!

### CALL FOR PAPERS

*The fourth international WHIM humor conference will be held on the campus of Arizona State University from March 29 to April 1, 1985. The deadline for proposals, on any aspect of "Humor Across the Disciplines" is December 1, 1985. Proposals must include a title, a cross-referenced interdisciplinary subject, a one-page abstract, and a \$35 registration fee. Extracts of your presentation will appear in WHIMSY IV which you will receive as part of your registration fee.*

### HUMOR AND METAPHOR

*This was the theme of the second annual WHIM conference, held at Arizona State University in April 1983 ('Metaphors be with you'). Abridged versions of the papers presented there have been published in a 320-page yearbook available for \$10 from the English Department, Arizona State University, Tempe AZ 85287. Humor can be effectively used for many social purposes - as a momentary diversion from life's buffetings, as a pedagogical tool, as a defuser of a tense moment - but it has proved surprisingly difficult to develop theories explaining how these things are best accomplished. Most papers on humor, alas, are deadly-dull and jargon-loaded, much like those on other academic subjects. To their credit, some of the WHIM authors employ humor to make their scholarly points; by studying these, the reader may learn through example how to use humor effectively in the service of larger ends.*