The Man Who Made Dictionaries

A.S. Hornby

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The Story of the
Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary

Albert Sydney Hornby
(1898-1978)
A Passion for Language

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary could be called the father of foreign learners’ dictionaries.

For 60 years it has organized a sprawling language into simple definitions that learners of English can understand. It was, and still is, a breath of fresh air.

Behind the dictionary’s creation is a fascinating story of a ‘simple teacher’ with a brilliant mind, whose passion for language teaching changed the way the world learns English.

A. S. Hornby was the man who made dictionaries. And his story began here, in Japan . . .

**compass** instrument with a needle that moves round freely and always points north and south.
The nickname ‘ASH’ was given to him by his second wife Marion in 1942 and it stayed with him all his life.
The Start of the Affair

ASH had a passion for exploring. By 1923 he had already seen some of the world while serving in the Royal Navy during the war, but his next journey was different. This time the destination was his choice, and his heart was set on Japan.

First he had to break the news to his family. ASH came home one winter's day and announced to his parents that he was getting married — the first they had heard of it — and was leaving for Japan. It was 1924.

Bags packed, ASH and his new bride Ida climbed the ship's gangway and set sail for the island of Kyushu. This was the beginning of his love affair with Japan — a place which was to influence the rest of his life.

trunk 4 a box (much larger than a suit-case) with a hinged lid.
1.5 copies of the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* is sold every minute.
A Simple Philosophy

While ASH was a young teacher at the Oita Higher Commercial School in Kyushu, he discovered that, although his students had a good understanding and appreciation of their English literary texts, they were much less confident in speaking and writing English. This was a turning point in ASH’s career and he began to concentrate on teaching the English language rather than literature.

He pioneered a simple, revolutionary approach to teaching English that was years ahead of its time. For teaching examples he used real-life stories torn out of fashionable English magazines. ASH made language learning approachable by always using clear and understandable English. His mission was to help students master current English, and his philosophy was to keep it simple.

lobster a large shellfish with eight legs and two large claws. It is bluish-black and turns scarlet when boiled.
Did you know?

In 1942 ASH used just 19 words in his simple definition of ‘lobster’. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, available at the same time, used more than seventy.
An Obsession With Words

ASH’s interest in ordinary English words and phrases became almost obsessive. He would ‘hear and see things, make a note on a sheet of paper or a card, and drop it into a box’. He combed through his daily life, the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* and *Webster’s Dictionary* to collect information on the complex English language.

For years, his scribbled notes describing English words and phrases waited patiently on the backs of envelopes, postcards and scraps of paper, stored in boxes. Then, in 1938, the pieces of paper began their transformation into the *English Dictionary for Learners*, which became the *Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary* (*ISED*). A breakthrough.

**type-writ-er** a machine, worked by the fingers, which prints letters on paper.
In 1946, ASH founded the English Language Teaching Journal (today’s ELTJ) which has helped to shape the ELT profession.
Spotting a Winner

In 1939, at the sweltering Bombay offices of Oxford University Press, a package of four drab little books full of Japanese notes arrived in the post from an unknown Japanese publisher, Kaitakusha. The books had been sent for review in OUP’s Teaching journal, but were clearly of no interest to Indian teachers.

The journal editor was about to put the books to one side when he turned one of them over and saw an advertisement on the back cover. Under the heading ‘in preparation’ was a description of the forthcoming Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary (ISED) by A.S. Hornby and his colleagues E.V. Gatenby and H. Wakefield.

Could this be the winning formula foreign learners of English had been waiting for? A letter from Oxford University Press was sent to the Japanese publishers asking for sample pages to be sent immediately – even though the dictionary was not yet published. This was the first indication of how important an international edition of this dictionary could be.

**tur-ban** a long piece of cloth wound round the head. It is worn chiefly by men in India.
ISED, the 'Japanese mother' of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, measured 186mm in height, and weighed one kilogram. Its spine was 53mm wide.
The Lost Pages

Although Kaitakusha, the Japanese publishers, had already advertised ASH’s forthcoming *Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary*, getting it printed wasn’t easy. In 1940, while Kaitakusha was trying to print the *ISED* in Japan, ASH wanted to get a copy of the pages to Oxford University Press’s headquarters in England so the international edition could be printed. The world was at war and getting 1,500 pages sent safely from Japan to OUP’s headquarters in London was risky. ASH made two attempts. The first set of dictionary pages was sent via the Director of the British Library of Information and Culture in Tokyo (it is uncertain if this set arrived in London). Shortly afterwards, ASH carefully parcelled his second set of pages, crossed his fingers, and sent it by post to London, hoping that it would ‘escape bombs and torpedoes’. Sadly, this second set of dictionary pages never made it to England and disappeared without trace. This left ASH with one last set of pages that he kept with him in Japan no matter how difficult his life became.

**bi-plane** an aeroplane with two wings (or planes), one above the other.
Did you know? The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary has sold over 35 million copies.
The Hidden Manuscript

Disaster struck. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, ASH was held under *house arrest* at a German Jesuit monastery in Japan until he was exchanged, along with the British diplomats, for Japanese prisoners. He left behind his treasured library of books in Tokyo (which was later bombed by the Americans), but kept with him one precious bundle of dictionary pages.

In **July 1942** ASH boarded the last Swiss Red Cross ship of prisoners to leave Japan and set sail for England. Instructed to take only clothes on his long voyage home, ASH carefully hid his last set of dictionary pages in the diplomatic bag. These smuggled papers were to become, in 1948, the international edition of *ISED* — then called the *Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* (known today as the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*).

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**life-jack-et** one made of cork or other light material to keep a person from sinking in the water.
The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* is said to be the most pirated book in the world.
Melting Words

Back in Japan, Kaitakusha was trying frantically to publish the *ISED*. Pearl Harbor had left metal in short supply, making it impossible for the Japanese publisher to create a full set of printing plates for all 1,500 dictionary pages. So the printers had to improvise. A team of Japanese typesetters worked around the clock setting letter by unfamiliar letter to produce enough metal plates for 100 dictionary pages at a time. After each set of 100 pages was printed, the typesetters painstakingly melted down the original metal plates to repeat the slow task again, and again, and again . . .

*ISED* was published quietly in Japan in 1942, but ASH, its creator, did not set eyes on it until after the war – in 1948.
The mammoth task of checking over one million English words in the *ISED* was done by Japanese proofreaders who did not know a single word of English.
Cancel Shakespeare!

In England, publishing a dictionary in wartime was far from easy. Paper was in short supply and Oxford University Press had to break all the rules to turn their set of 1,500 loose pages into the revolutionary new Learner’s Dictionary of Current English (later to become the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary).

OUP had to find a way of locating enough paper to print 30 million of ASH’s dictionary pages. As long as ‘Mr Clapperton at the paper mill could still get coal’, he could provide half the paper ‘at a pinch’. But what about the other 15 million pages? Oxford’s Shakespeare and Bible print runs were cut to provide extra paper. Perhaps more controversial was the Press’s plan to stop a reprint of the popular Concise Oxford Dictionary to make way for ASH’s new dictionary. This meant English dictionaries became virtually impossible to find, ‘to the extent that one can seldom buy a copy’.

printing=press ① a machine for printing ② the place where a printer’s business is carried on.
In 1940 paper was in such short supply that publishers’ letters were typed on the backs of pages torn from unwanted books.
The Runaway Success

Despite all these efforts to print the dictionary in England, OUP’s paper supplies were impounded during the war and the first edition of the Learner’s Dictionary of Current English could not be printed until 1948.

ASH’s dictionary was certainly worth the trouble it caused. In the first 15 months of its life, it sold 10,000 copies of its 20,000 print run, and went on to become OUP’s biggest-selling title of all time. Today the famous dictionary helps millions of students around the world learn English.

book-ends are used to keep books in position on a table.
Today’s edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* contains 184,500 words, phrases and meanings.


The Man Who Made Dictionaries

A.S. Hornby was not just a name on the cover of a book. He had a warm human presence, and was a cultural mentor who wanted to share what he loved most — the English language.

He called himself ‘a simple teacher’, but there was more to him than that. He was the first to realize that much of the burden of everyday communication was carried by remarkably few words. This is why his dictionary, and indeed his whole philosophy, laid such stress on ordinary familiar words. He was an inspirational teacher with a perceptive mind, whose passion for the language had a profound influence on the way we learn English today.

Genial and mild-mannered, ASH had an eye for what was odd or funny in people, opinions, and situations. People wanted to be with him; he was good company. In 1956 his voice became well known to millions through his BBC radio show ‘English by Radio’, which quickly became ‘Hornby by Radio’. A.S. Hornby, quite rightly, became a household name, and his dictionary a famous landmark.

globe 1 anything that is round like a ball, esp. a round model of the earth.
ASH had a lifelong passion for gardening and opera.
An Act of Kindness

ASH was lucky — he said so himself. His self-effacing modesty was perhaps what charmed people most. During his lifetime he was slightly bewildered by what seemed to him an excessive income from the sales of the dictionary, which he felt he didn’t quite deserve.

So, in 1961, ASH set up an extraordinary and generous arrangement by which over half of his royalty income was given to improve the teaching and learning of English. His aim was ‘to have the money used for education, so that it would go back to the countries from which it comes’. For over 40 years the Hornby Educational Trust has enabled hundreds of people to come from overseas to Britain for advanced training, and has funded causes such as VSO, IATEFL, and the English-Speaking Union.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of A.S. Hornby and his revolutionary dictionary in the history and development of English language teaching. As Lord Annan said, ‘No man has ever done more to further the use of English as an international language’.

**wallet**  a folding pocket-book, usu. of leather, for carrying papers, bank-notes, etc.
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