About me

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Course of study: PhD (second year), English Language & Linguistics, University of Glasgow

Taking a break from the office to visit Niagara Falls

My research, supervised by Dr Kathryn Lowe and Professor Marc Alexander, focuses on the history of dictionaries of the Old English language. In particular, I am interested in how dictionaries represent the transition from Old English to Middle English. These are the names given by modern scholars to earlier stages of the English language. As the language has changed over time, different names are a useful shorthand to refer to its distinct characteristics at different points in history. The problem is that language change is gradual and complex, making it impossible to put a precise date on the moment that Old English changed into Middle English.

In my thesis, I show how lexicographers have used different strategies to try to represent this linguistic transition and ask how their choices reflect changing thinking about language change, how these choices influenced later dictionary-makers and, even today, affect our own understanding of Old and Middle English.

Why I applied for the travel scholarship

In the academic year 2018-19, I applied to the Mac Robertson and David Fleming-Brown travel scholarships and was delighted to be awarded funding of £3900 to allow me to spend three months at the University of Toronto, Canada. The university is home to the *Dictionary of Old English*, a ground-breaking project that has spent decades documenting the vocabulary of Old English. It improves on previous dictionaries of Old English by incorporating the findings of modern scholars, and by carefully checking all its information against an

innovative corpus that represents at least one copy of every known Old English text. The *Dictionary of Old English* is the subject of the final case study in my thesis's description of the history of Old English lexicography, and is the ideal place to learn about important innovations in lexicographical methods and technologies.

Through Toronto's International Visiting Graduate Student programme, I was able to carry out my own research at the *Dictionary of Old English* with the support of dictionary staff. One of the main goals of my trip was to gain first-hand experience of the practical work of dictionary writing, both to inform my reconstruction of the methodologies of past lexicographers and to develop my own skills. In addition, I was able to take advantage of the dictionary's extensive library of reference works and editions of Old English texts, many of which are not available in Glasgow.

Details of my visit

I arrived in Toronto in early January, where the warm welcome I received at the university was in sharp contrast to the freezing weather! I spent most of my time in the *Dictionary of Old English* offices, where I was given my own desk space, but also attended various events in the university's Centre for Medieval Studies and Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies. Highlights included classes in spoken Latin, a guest lecture by Paul Schaffner of the *Middle English Dictionary* (University of Michigan), and regular talks in the student-run Work in Medieval Studies series, at which I presented a summary of my PhD findings to date. There were many other opportunities to meet Toronto academics working in my field, and I enjoyed some long and enlightening discussions with Ian Lancashire, editor of the *Lexicons of Early Modern English* website, about seventeenth-century lexicography.

Robarts Library at the University of Toronto, home of the Dictionary of Old English

At the dictionary, I had plenty to keep me busy. I was soon entrusted with the task of finding spelling variants for Old English words. As Old English spelling was not standardised, the

Dictionary of Old English attempts to document as many attested spellings for each word as possible. Many of these are easy to find, as they are included in the dictionary's corpus of Old English texts. However, in cases where more than one copy of a text has survived, the corpus may not include all known versions. Any spelling variants that only exist in a copy not represented in the corpus need to be tracked down manually if they are to be included in a dictionary entry. This task might involve checking printed editions in which the editor has collated the manuscript witnesses to a text. In other cases, where a printed edition does not supply complete, reliable information about spelling variants in other manuscripts, it may be necessary to consult facsimile images of the original manuscripts. Identifying variant spellings is just one part of the process of writing a dictionary entry, but later in my stay at the *Dictionary of Old English* I took on other parts of the entry-writing process, and by the end of my stay I had written – with assistance from editor Robert Getz – six draft entries, for the words *lead* (the metal lead), *leaden* (leaden, made of lead), *leohtfæt* (lamp), *leornere* (pupil or disciple) and two compounds of *leornere*. It was a real privilege to be able to make a contribution to the *Dictionary of Old English*, and in doing so I learnt more about how to navigate different scholarly editions of texts and how to distinguish and explain the range of meanings that a word can convey.


Working on a dictionary entry

Contributing to the dictionary myself was an invaluable way of understanding the challenges and choices that lexicographers face in representing their material. However, to get a real insight into the *Dictionary of Old English*, I needed to draw not only on my own limited experience but also on the insight of seasoned lexicographers and dictionary staff. I was lucky enough to be able to interview the *Dictionary of Old English* team about their work, and to speak with former Chief Editors Haruko Momma and Antonette diPaolo Healey.

One of the most exciting research opportunities I had at the *Dictionary of Old English* was the chance to examine a collection of quotation slips from the *Oxford English Dictionary.*

These slips were written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and were used to record short quotations that would be used in the dictionary to demonstrate the sense and usage of words. When the *Oxford English Dictionary* was complete, the quotation slips for Old English texts were collected for future use by other historical dictionary projects, and eventually arrived at the *Dictionary of Old English*. However, when I was invited to look at the slips, they had not been used for several years. The *Oxford English Dictionary* slips do not represent working practices at the *Dictionary of Old English*, but they offer an insight into an important episode in the history of lexicography. I identified several slips written by J.R.R. Tolkien, who worked at the *Oxford English Dictionary* during the compilation of the letter W; these may shed more light on a formative period in the life of the well-known author. Other quotation slips showed the work of important figures such as James Murray, the dictionary's editor, or demonstrated slight differences in procedure that had to be adopted when dealing with quotations from Old English rather than more recent texts. In addition, some non-quotation slips had become mixed in the collection; these included postcards sent to the *Oxford English Dictionary* by international scholars who offered their expertise to the project, including the historian Felix Liebermann, the philologist Walter William Skeat and several others.


Sorting Oxford English Dictionary *quotation slips*
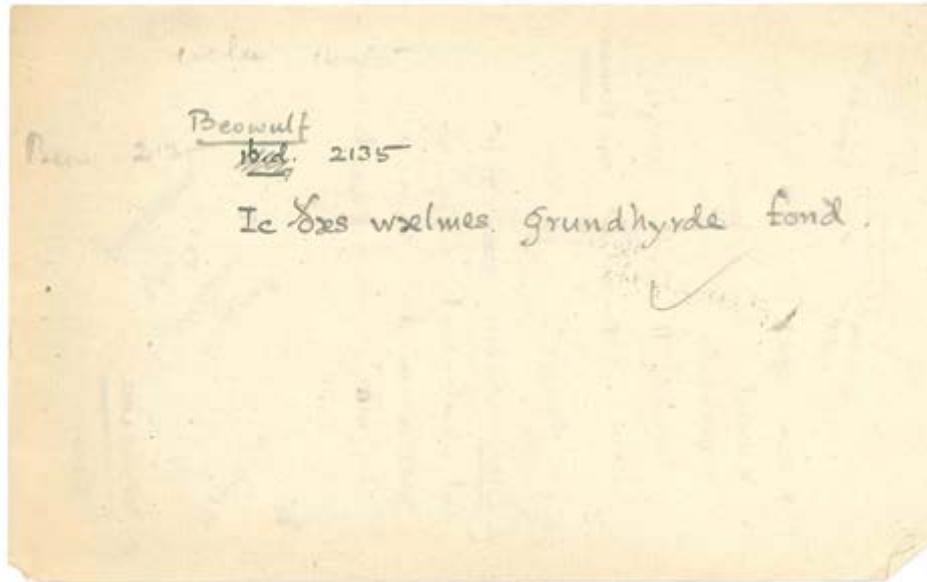
A quotation slip in the handwriting of J.R.R. Tolkien

Impact of the scholarship

My time in Toronto allowed me to collect information about the *Dictionary of Old English* that will enrich my thesis and allow me to present a much fuller, more nuanced picture of the dictionary and of techniques and issues in lexicography today. Beyond this, I have broadened my knowledge and skills in a variety of important areas, including acquiring practical lexicographical experience. I was able to explore interesting topics for future research, such as the history of the *Oxford English Dictionary* as seen through the Old English quotation slips. I have also built a network of contacts in my field and I hope to build on this by supporting further communication between Glasgow and Toronto.
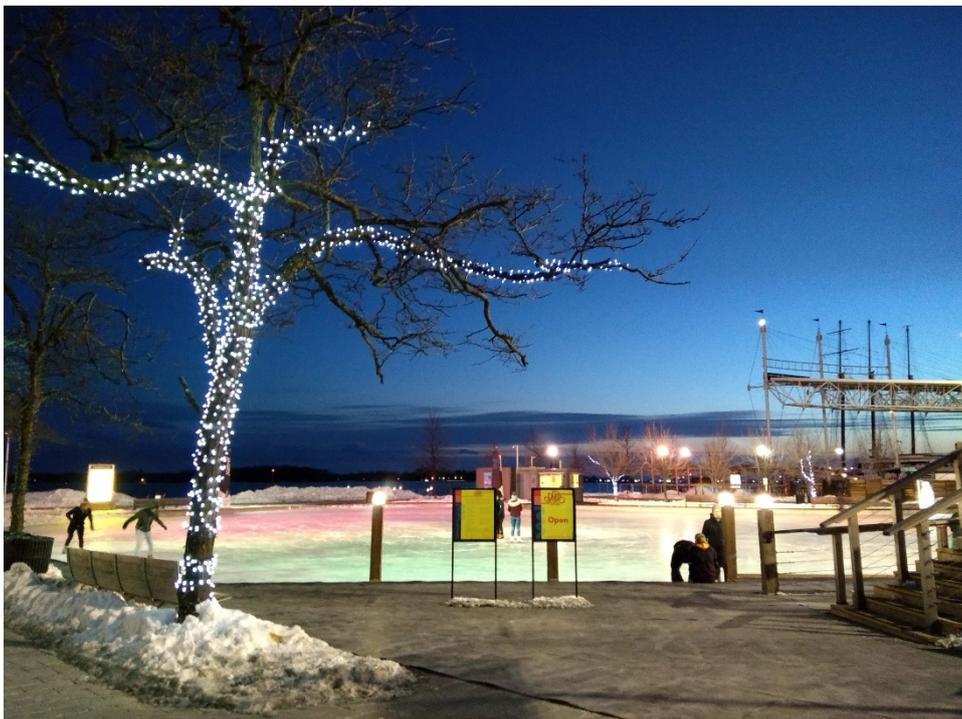
Making the most of winter with outdoor skating by the lake

Acknowledgements