

The Dictionary Wars: The American Fight over the English Language

Peter Martin

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Nationalism and patriotism are not unfamiliar substances in America's bloodstream. As Peter Martin's *The Dictionary Wars* illustrates, such fervor extended into heated debates over English language usage.

In its infancy, the United States sought to establish its own identity separate from that of Great Britain, not only politically and philosophically but also philologically. Enter Noah Webster, a fiercely patriotic lexicographer determined to rid his fledgling nation's language of all British influence. Samuel Johnson's dictionary had been the standard for years, but Webster, perhaps egotistically, assumed the mantle of America's lexicographical savior.

This mission proved to be difficult, and to Webster's dismay, there was much resistance to the radical changes he wanted to institute. Rival American dictionaries and schoolroom spellers still leaned upon British orthography and pronunciation. American and British authors and scholars were particularly partial to Joseph E. Worcester—a quiet, Harvard-educated lexicographer who found himself embroiled in mudslinging he did not want. The entry of Charles and George Merriam into the fray only increased the newspaper-and-pamphlet-driven vitriol until, well after Webster's death, the shrewd brothers finally emerged victorious, never mind the literary and academic carcasses in their wake.

The book's potentially dry material is vivified by engaging, sometimes dramatic prose, and the complex tangle of rivalries and relationships is fascinating. Discussions on lexicography are technical without being abstruse, and they balance well with the biographical details. Historically informative, the book is also an opportunity for American self-reflection. Substitute "internet" or "social media" for "newspapers" or "pamphlets," and several passages of *The Dictionary Wars* could have been pulled from some modern-day editorial or blog lamenting the destruction of public discourse. There is, after all, nothing new under the sun.

With an impressive breadth of research, *The Dictionary Wars* invites contemplation of the ways in which language itself can affect the soul of a nation.

MEAGAN LOGSDON (May/June 2019)

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