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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Obituaries

Katherine Barber, maven of Canadian English, dies at 61

Katherine Barber was the editor in chief of the Canadian Oxford Dictionary. (Michael Stuparyk/Toronto Star/Getty Images)

By
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Katherine Barber, a lexicographer who served as founding editor in chief of the Canadian Oxford Dictionary, a tome that codified a long-neglected argot with definitive entries on such linguistic gems as “gotchies” (slang for underpants) and “jambuster” (a jelly doughnut), died April 24 at a hospice center in Toronto. She was 61.

The cause was brain cancer, said her brother Peter Barber.

Known in Canada as the “Word Lady,” Ms. Barber devoted the better part of her professional life to collecting and cataloguing the manifold words and idioms that make Canadian English different from the language as it is spoken in England and the United States.

Her work may not have entailed much glamour, or glamor, as she slogged her way from “eh to zed,” as a reporter for the Globe and Mail once joked. But she found abundant pleasure in awakening her countrymen and women to the marvels of their language, the words they said and heard every day without ever realizing that those expressions were uniquely theirs.

“People often ask me, why do we need a Canadian dictionary? Isn’t an American one good enough?” Ms. Barber said. “It’s as if Canadians don’t realize how distinctive their language is. People use words like ‘seat sale’ but don’t know that other people don’t use them.” (A “seat sale” refers to a markdown in price, especially of airline tickets.)

A polyglot, Ms. Barber spoke fluent French and German and was conversational in Italian. She had trained in translation and lexicography — the practice of compiling dictionaries — when Oxford University Press hired her in 1991 to oversee the publication of a new reference guide to Canadian English.

The Canadian Oxford Dictionary was not the first dictionary of its kind; the Gage Canadian Dictionary, among other guides to Canadianisms, preceded it. But when the Canadian Oxford was released in 1998, after more than six years of toil by Ms. Barber and the team of lexicographers she oversaw, it was hailed as a "monument."

"It immediately outshone its second-rate schoolhouse predecessors and became a universal professional standard in this country," a reporter for the National Post of Canada wrote in an obituary about Ms. Barber, describing her as "our appropriately reserved and gentle answer to blustering Samuel Johnson or officious Noah Webster."

To assemble the dictionary, Ms. Barber and her colleagues studied thousands of texts from high literature to bodice-rippers, periodicals, and even advertisements and restaurant menus in search of distinctly Canadian words and phrases. In the end, they identified more than 2,000.

These expressions included "Molson muscle" (beer belly), "bangbelly" (a dessert typical of Newfoundland), "spinarama" (defined as an "evasive" hockey move "consisting of an abrupt 360-degree turn") and "bunny hug" (a hooded sweatshirt).

Foreigners visiting Canada could rely on the Canadian Oxford to tell them that a "parkade" is a parking garage. They might turn to the "B" section of the alphabet to learn, with relief, that a sign advertising a "bachelor for rent" refers not to a male escort but rather a studio apartment.

Canadians have at least 17 words to describe ice and so many regional terms for doughnut — besides jambuster, Burlington bun and bismarck — that Ms. Barber kidded her dictionary should perhaps have been titled "The Oxford Companion to Canadian Doughnuts."

By the time she had completed her task, she was possessed, a reporter for the Ottawa Citizen once wrote, of a "vocabulary the size of Saskatchewan." It grew even larger by 2004, when a second edition of the dictionary, also overseen by Ms. Barber, was released.

In an interview with TVO, an educational television network in Ontario, Ms. Barber remarked that a good lexicographer must be a generalist able to "pop from nuclear physics to ballet to basketball." It was perhaps ironic that she became a lexicographer, she observed, because she was a "terribly untidy person." But, she added, "I love imposing order on the language."

Katherine Patricia Mary Barber was born on Sept. 8, 1959, in Ely, a city in Cambridgeshire, England. Her father, a member of the Royal Air Force, and her mother, who met him during travels in Britain, were Canadian.

Ms. Barber was in grade school when her father retired from the military and the family returned to Canada, settling in Winnipeg, the capital of Manitoba.

Her love of language could be traced to both parents, her brother said. Their mother was a high school English teacher, their father an avid reader. In her girlhood, Ms. Barber recalled, she was enthralled not by Nancy Drew mysteries but rather by Fowler's guide to modern English usage.

She received a bachelor's degree in French literature from the University of Winnipeg and, later, a master's degree in French letters from the University of Ottawa. She worked on a bilingual Canadian dictionary before joining Oxford University Press to write entries for the Oxford English Dictionary.

Oxford University Press reportedly invested $2 million in the first edition of its Canadian dictionary. But in 2008, Ms. Barber and her staff were laid off when the publishing house shuttered the Canadian dictionary division in Toronto, citing "changing market conditions."
Ms. Barber, whose other passion in life was ballet, later operated a travel company that arranged trips to Europe around ballet performances. She wrote two books of her own, "Six Words You Never Knew Had Something to Do With Pigs: And Other Fascinating Facts About the Language From Canada's Word Lady" and "Only in Canada, You Say: A Treasury of Canadian Language."

Survivors include two brothers and a sister.

Ms. Barber once remarked that her purpose in life was "to convince people that there is more to Canadian English than 'eh.' " But even "eh" received a complete treatment in the Canadian Oxford.

It is an interjection "inviting assent," "expressing inquiry or surprise," "asking for something to be repeated or explained" or "ascertaining the comprehension, continued interest, agreement, etc., of the person or persons addressed." The last listing is "the only usage of *eh* that can be categorized as peculiarly Canadian," according to the definition, "all other uses being common amongst speakers in other Commonwealth countries and to a lesser extent in the United States."