

Katherine Barber, Who Defined Canadian English, Is Dead at 61

As the founding editor of the Canadian Oxford Dictionary, she turned to “trashy novels” and parliamentary debates to find Canada’s version of the language.

Ian Austen – The New York Times, May 18, 2021



Katherine Barber in 2001. As editor of the Canadian Oxford Dictionary, she helped find words that were uniquely Canadian. Several spinoff versions followed its publication in 1998. Michael Stuparyk/Toronto Star, via Getty Images

In Canada, it's possible to find a man lounging on a chesterfield in his rented bachelor wearing only his gotchies while fortifying his Molson muscle with a jambuster washed down with slugs from a stubby.

But until Oxford University Press hired Katherine Barber as the founding editor of its Canadian dictionary in 1991, there was no authoritative reference work to decode contemporary Canadian words and meanings. (That sentence describes a man on a sofa in a studio apartment wearing only underwear while expanding his beer belly with a jelly doughnut and a squat brown beer bottle.)

Ms. Barber died on April 24 at a hospice in Toronto. She was 61. Her sister, Martha Hanna, said the cause was cancer.

Before Ms. Barber was hired to assemble a team to create the Canadian Oxford Dictionary, there had been no research-based attempt at codifying the country's form of the English language to create a general-use dictionary. At that time, Canadian dictionaries were minimally adapted versions of American or British texts.

The group consulted dictionaries of regional Canadian dialects as well as specialized dictionaries like "A Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles," a scholarly collection published in 1967 that traced Canadian English back to its origins but did not include Canadian pronunciations, Canadian spellings of words common to most varieties of English, or many words that were then contemporary.

To hunt for Canadian entries and the distinct Canadian meanings of words, Ms. Barber partly relied on a technique long used by Oxford. She assembled a small army of freelance "readers," who pored over catalogs, newspapers, magazines and almost anything else they could find for distinctive Canadian words. Ms. Barber always traveled with a notebook to record words on posters and signs that struck her as possibly Canadian.

Eric Sinkins, who worked with Ms. Barber, said that "trashy novels" also proved fruitful as sources.

“Katherine hated Robertson Davies,” Mr. Sinkins, who started as one of the dictionary’s readers and became a full-time lexicographer, said of the Canadian novelist who was once considered for the Nobel Prize. “Not because she didn’t like his work, but because his use of language wasn’t typical. And she was looking for stuff that was really typical.”

Ms. Barber also adopted another technique that proved useful. She effectively started the dictionary’s book tour years before it was published by getting herself interviewed, often on Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio programs, to discuss Canadian English. She used that airtime to ask listeners to send in words. She discovered “jambusters,” which is mostly used in Manitoba and northwestern Ontario, by asking radio listeners what they called jelly doughnuts.

Her witty conversations became so popular that she eventually gained a regular time slot on the CBC as the “Word Lady.”

While the dictionary was partly compiled with 6-by-4-inch slips of paper, as in the 19th century, Ms. Barber was sent to Palo Alto, Calif., and Oxford, England, to learn computational lexicography. That enabled her and her staff to sort through a vast database of digitized Canadian publications, parliamentary debates and books that had been collected as a linguistics project by a Canadian university.

Several entries that made the final cut involved words used in most of Canada – like “eavestrough,” for rain gutter, and “keener,” “a person, esp. a student, who is extremely eager, zealous or enthusiastic.” But others were regional, like “parkade,” a Western Canadian term for parking garage, and “steamie,” a steamed hot dog in Quebec.

While Ms. Barber apparently had no favorites, at least one of the 2,000 Canadian words and meanings that made it into the first edition of the dictionary might have reflected her personal interests.

Ms. Hanna said her sister had been a fan of the Montreal Canadiens hockey team and particularly of Serge Savard, one of its stars in the late 1960s and ’70s. “Spinarama,” “an evasive move, esp. in hockey,

consisting of an abrupt 360-degree turn,” appears in the dictionary without a notation that the technique was first attributed to Savard.

When the Oxford Canadian Dictionary appeared in 1998 – it was based on a revised version of the Concise Oxford English Dictionary – it was an immediate best seller, and Ms. Barber expanded her long-running book tour.

Because she did not drive, she called on friends and family members to take her to public speaking events laden with boxes of dictionaries to sell. The dictionary, and a 2004 edition that added about 200 more Canadianisms, became the standard word authority for Canadian news organizations and schools. Several spinoff versions were produced, including one for students.

“When the dictionary came out,” Mr. Sinkins said, “for some people it established for the first time that there was such a thing as a unique variety of English we can call Canadian.”

Katherine Patricia Mary Barber was born on Sept. 8, 1959, in Ely, England, about 16 miles north of Cambridge. Her father, Gordon, was a Canadian from small-town Manitoba who had served overseas with the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II.

After he completed a degree at McGill University in Montreal, Mr. Barber returned to England and became an officer with the Royal Air Force. Ms. Barber’s mother, Patricia (Clarke) Barber, was a high school English teacher from southern Ontario who met Mr. Barber during a holiday in England.

In 1967, the centennial of the founding of Canada’s current political structure, the Barber family moved back to Canada to be closer to relatives.

In addition to her sister, Ms. Barber is survived by two brothers, Josh and Peter.

Ms. Barber had a keen interest in languages, but not necessarily English. She studied French at the University of Winnipeg and was also fluent in German. After teaching English in France, she did graduate studies in French at the University of Ottawa. It was there that she was introduced to lexicography while working on a French-English Canadian dictionary project.

The Canadian Oxford Dictionary was a great success and remains in print. But the digital technologies that helped create it ultimately undermined its business model, as sales of print editions declined. The Canadian dictionary office was closed, and its staff members, including Ms. Barber, were laid off in 2008.

She continued to lecture and give interviews about words, and she maintained a blog about language until weeks before her death.

Her final blog entry was about the use of “beloved” in connection with “inanimate things and public figures with whom one has no personal attachment,” including restaurant chains, marijuana, hardware stores and television series.

Ms. Barber wrote two books, “Six Words You Never Knew Had Something to Do With Pigs: And Other Fascinating Facts About the Language From Canada’s Word Lady” (2006) and “Only in Canada You Say: A Treasury of Canadian Language” (2007).

After the dictionary was shut down, Ms. Barber turned much of her attention to ballet, a personal passion from the time she saw her first performance as a child in England. She founded a company that arranged tours for fellow balletomanes to watch performances in Europe and North America.

Throughout her career, she never dictated what words Canadians should use or how they should be spelled and pronounced.

In 1998, “As It Happens,” a CBC Radio program, asked her about a controversy over an elementary-school textbook’s suggestion that “lieutenant” should be pronounced as “LEW-tenant,” which is widely

seen as American practice in Canada, rather than “LEF-tenant,” the British form used by Canada’s military.

“There’s more than one way to pronounce it,” Ms. Barber said. “And we just allow those variants to coexist, much as we allow spelling conventions to coexist in Canada. That’s just one of the facts about Canadian English.”