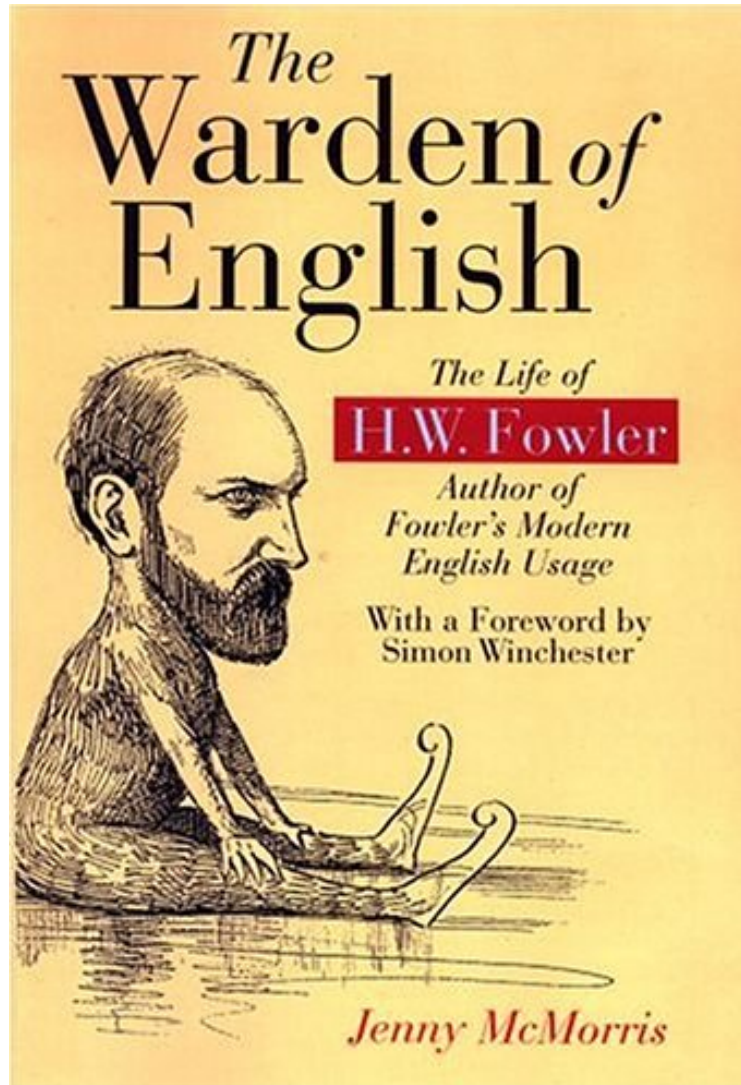


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## The Warden of English: The Life of H.W. Fowler

Jenny McMorris

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**Jenny McMorris : The Warden of English: The Life of H.W. Fowler** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *The Warden of English: The Life of H.W. Fowler*:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Three Stars By Bob O Rambling, verbose, too many side issues. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. ATTENTION TO DETAIL By Ocean Jaguar Fowler says it all

This poignant biography of H.W. Fowler appears on the 75th anniversary of the publication of his *Modern English Usage*, a work revered by writers everywhere. Based on meticulous research into previously unpublished letters and the Oxford University Press archives, this book brings to life a complex yet fascinating man. McMorris explores the

dogged work and the flurry of controversy and critical contention surrounding Fowler's work on *The King's English* and *Modern English Usage*. But McMorris also illuminates Fowler the man, who helped raise seven siblings, abandoned a prestigious post as schoolmaster to write in a cottage by the sea, and found true love and a devoted marriage at 50. Though considered a god among lexicographers, Fowler was self-deprecating to the point of sending money back to Oxford University Press when he felt he had been overpaid. And he coped calmly in the face of tragedy, writing cheerful letters days after losing an eye, and energetically nursing his wife through a fatal illness. Painstakingly thorough and delightfully readable, *The Warden of English* takes us inside the world of early twentieth-century literary publishing, as it chronicles the life of a giant of lexicography.

Following in the footsteps of *The Professor and the Madman*, a bestselling account of the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary by Simon Winchester (who appropriately provides an introduction here), Oxford University Press archivist Jenny McMorris profiles the human being behind another benchmark reference book. Though hardly as colorful as Winchester's "madman" (a convicted murderer who provided many of the OED's entries), Henry Watson Fowler (1858-1933) penned a cogent guide, *Modern English Usage*, so closely associated with his own forceful views on correct, idiomatic language that most of its numerous users don't bother with the title and simply refer to it as "Fowler." Greatly esteemed by writers and still frequently consulted 75 years after its initial publication, *Modern English Usage* was a labor of love for Fowler, a brilliant lexicographer who had the unusual gift of making such esoteric matters as syntax and split infinitives both accessible and entertaining to the general public. He was not, by all accounts, a particularly inspiring teacher during the 17 years he labored conscientiously as a Yorkshire schoolmaster, but once Fowler moved to the island of Guernsey and took up freelance writing he proved to have a gift for educating people in print. He emerges in the lengthy excerpts from the letters that McMorris has the good sense to quote as a charming, witty man, not at all the dusty scholar one might expect to produce (with younger brother Frank) books bearing titles like *The King's English* and *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*. McMorris's own no-frills prose suffers somewhat by comparison with her subject's, but her conscientious rsum of Fowler's long and productive life will engage readers who want a behind-the-scenes peek at the book publishing industry. --Wendy Smith  
From *Publishers Weekly* Smartly furnished with a brief foreword by bestselling author Simon Winchester, this is the "first full biography" of Henry Watson Fowler (1858-1933), the grammarian and lexicographer whose writing manual, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, is, as Winchester points out, reverentially called just "Fowler." McMorris, archivist for the Oxford English Dictionaries, had access to Fowler's letters, both to his publisher, Oxford University Press, and to his family, and wonderful letters they are. As she peppers her account with quotes from them, the reader is pulled between the wit and color of Fowler's writing and the more mundane prose of his dutiful biographer. In a letter promising to acquiesce to OED style, he writes, "I undertake that, as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so shall I open not my mouth when in revising you snip trim me into congruity." Happily, his editors knew when they had a good thing. Fowler was a late bloomer. He left an unsatisfactory 17-year teaching career and moved to the island of Guernsey to write with his younger brother Frank. The Fowler brothers were put to work by Oxford on dictionaries, but Henry's heart was in his "vade-mecum" of "grammar idiom," which took him 15 years to complete. McMorris shows Fowler's eccentricities: he swam daily, even in winter; he refused salary from his publishers; he enlisted for active duty in WWI at the age of 56. He rarely complained about personal troubles. When he lost an eye to glaucoma, he wrote his editor (in Latin), "The eye about to die salutes you." But he will live as the voice who railed against the "fused participle" with the passion of Joan of Arc. It is that singular voice that keeps the reader's interest here one hopes for the publication of his letters. Illus. not seen by PW. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.  
From *Library Journal* Marking the 75th anniversary of the publication of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, a book that is still widely used today, this is the first full biography of lexicographer Henry Watson Fowler (1858-1933). McMorris, archivist for the Oxford English Dictionaries at Oxford University Press, is painstaking in her attempts to chronicle Fowler's life, both professionally and personally. She tells of his dedication to his work and to his family, detailing the critical attention his work received as well as the ways he dealt with personal difficulties. While shy on bells and whistles, this is a thorough biography about a quiet, decent life punctuated by publishing achievements. Recommended for those interested in British lexicography and the lives of early 20th-century literati. Scott Hightower, Fordham Univ., NY Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.