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Thomas Paikeday is into dictionaries

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Paul Bury Paikeday

# Canadian lexicographer has a way with words

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Working from the basement of his Mississauga home, noted Canadian lexicographer Thomas Paikeday is quietly revolutionizing the way dictionaries are put together.

When you think about the making of a dictionary, the picture is probably one of bespectacled scribes poring over pages.

It's a surprise then, to see firsthand the working methods Paikeday is using in his compilation of the soon-to-be published Penguin Canadian Dictionary.

Seated in front of his microcomputer, Paikeday inserts a hard computer disk into the drive slot and types the word "cocoon" on the keyboard.

Instantaneously, a sentence containing the word and the way it's used pops up on the screen:

THE COCOON OF ROSEDALE

— 1 of 86 citations.

Paikeday's computer, outfitted with a customized program, has

searched the newspaper data base contained on the disk and told him the word he's looking for is contained 86 times in that year's issue of the paper.

Should he choose, Paikeday can command his terminal to retrieve and display all the examples of this word that is creeping into everyday usage.

"This is an ocean of words," says the 63-year-old Paikeday. "As a lexicographer, you must fish in that ocean."

There was a time when Paikeday, upon spotting a new word in a magazine or newspaper — or even hearing it in conversation — would write it down, along with the way it was used, on a "citation card."

The more citations for a word — the more commonly it is used, in other words, the better its chance of inclusion in one of Paikeday's dictionaries.

Today, Paikeday dismisses the

that proclaims itself on the cover as the first "100 per cent Canadian" dictionary.

"The whole idea of producing a dictionary here is doing something indigenous," he says, "something we can be proud of."

Based on the data base of Canadian English usage he began when working on the New York Times Everyday Dictionary in the 1970s, his latest project will be more user-friendly than the typical dictionary, Paikeday promises.

Even slang terms and mangled English are all likely to make their way in — even words like "irregardless" — a double-negative so blatantly ungrammatical it sets blatantly teachers' teeth on edge and sends fingernails screaming across the blackboard.

"The lexicographer's job is to help people find the meaning of words they hear or see in print," Paikeday says. "You can't afford to ignore words like 'irregardless.'"

## Local dictionary man makes his words count

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But when he came to Canada in 1964, neither teaching nor journalism appealed.

Instead, fate presented him with an opportunity. Gage, publishers of a rival dictionary Paikeday dismisses today as "reworked boilerplate" of American material, "just happened to be looking for someone with my qualifications."

He went to work helping prepare the Gage Canadian Dictionary and a career as a lexicographer began.

A short stint as an editor of educational materials for the Ministry of Education — "I got tired of the government bureaucracy, couldn't stand it" — was short-lived.

Paikeday first struck out on his own in 1976 when he took a contract from G.P. Putnam and Sons.

It's ironic, he thinks, that a lexicographer well-known in Canada had to go to the U.S. for his first contract.

Fourteen years later, Paikeday is proud to be the author of a book

voluminous citation file put together in a 13-year career as an independent lexicographer as a relic of "the horse and buggy days."

"Now I don't have to go through the process of reading, cutting the slips, filing them and so on," he says. "I just buy a disk."

"A lot of the drudgery out of lexicography and other tasks by the technological revolutions."

Paikeday's role as a pioneer among dictionary makers is a source of some pride — and not a little irritation at the critics who once scoffed, but are now following his lead.

In explaining the use of computers in his profession, Paikeday has written articles in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Globe and Mail* and the *Chicago Tribune*. He has also been the subject of articles in journals such as *InfoWorld*.

Many of his colleagues, some from as far away as Australia, "have visited the Mississauga house that is the headquarters of Paikeday Publishing to study his method of cataloguing words.

Like any academic endeavor, lexicography has more than its share of competition.

And not just money is at stake — dictionary publishing can be a lucrative business.

"They sell dictionaries by the millions in Canada," Paikeday points out. In the U.S., the Merriam Webster dictionary alone sells more than a million copies a year.

When he took on the job of putting together the New York Times Everyday Dictionary, Paikeday was working on a contract from Times Books.

But with the Penguin Canadian Dictionary, to be published this spring, he's taking considerably more risk.

"All the money I hope to make is on royalties," he explains. "This is purely a labor of love."

This wordstruck fascination with language is the common thread running through a varied career that has won Paikeday entries in Who's Who in Canada and Who's Who in the World.

After an academic career in his native India, Paikeday came to the U.S. for post-graduate study before returning home to teach English and work as an editor at the New Delhi Statesman.

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