

Christian Kay

1940-2016

Christian Kay, who retired as Professor of English Language at the University of Glasgow in 2005, was a pioneer in the study of what is now fashionably known as 'big data'. Her field was the linguistics of English, with a special focus on the history of the language, and in 2009 a lifetime of patient research came to fruition with the publication of the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary*: the world's largest thesaurus, the most complete thesaurus of English, the only complete historical thesaurus of any language, and one of the greatest achievements of twentieth-century scholarship in the humanities.

As with all such projects the *Historical Thesaurus* was a team effort. It was first conceived of in 1964 by Michael Samuels, then Glasgow's Professor of English Language, but he was quickly joined by a team of scholars, including Christian Kay, who arrived at Glasgow in 1969 as a research assistant, and later moved to a lectureship and, in 1996, to a chair. Christian rapidly took on the leadership of the whole programme, managing a large team of linguists, lexicographers and programmers. Her efforts in advancing the project were exemplary, securing funding and employing over two hundred researchers and production staff over some forty years. The result is one of the greatest-ever public achievements in the humanities.

When the *Thesaurus* appeared in 2009, praise was immediate. A *Times* editorial commented how "as English is the richest language, so this mighty publication is its treasury". The *Daily Telegraph* referred to it as "a masterpiece worth waiting for.. the definitive thesaurus", while the *New York Times* commented on how "historians, sociologists, philosophers and literary critics will soon wonder how they got by for so long without it... indispensable". The *Daily Mail* identified Christian's role: "what a rare treasure this marvellous, modest academic has imported into British cultural life". The substantial royalties accrued from the project have been, at the wish of its editors, assigned to postgraduate studentships for research into the linguistics of English.

Christian retired as Professor of English Language in 2005, but remained highly active as a researcher and facilitator of other's research, not only on *Thesaurus*-derived projects, but also as the very first Convener of the Board of Scottish Language Dictionaries, the modern descendant of the Scottish National Dictionary Association. As Convener, she worked hard to promote the study and analysis of Scots and Scottish English, being responsible – as a world-leading lexicographer -- for the co-ordination and supervision of the academic research which makes up the *Dictionary of the Scots Language*, the principal repository for the study of Scots words and their history which brings together, in a powerful online format, the learning originally printed in the *Scottish National Dictionary* and the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*. Christian was an adviser to several organisations working on Scots, Scottish English and Scottish Gaelic, and retained her enthusiasm for this aspect of Scottish culture to the end of her life, serving post-retirement as a co-investigator on such projects as the *Corpus of Modern Scottish Writing*. Glasgow awarded her the honorary degree of DLitt in 2013.

Christian confessed late in life that she 'wasn't very good at being ill'; she overcame this self-perceived flaw by ignoring it. Until the end she engaged with authority and enthusiasm in discussion of research projects with colleagues, and that she had some years before decided that she would in her will donate her body for medical research was entirely in character. She had a gift for sustained, deep and generous friendship, and for being a sympathetic listener to anyone in difficulty. She is survived by a sister and a brother. She never married.

Jeremy Smith