

The Disappearing Dictionary- A Treasury of Lost English Dialect Words
David Crystal

This is a work of love. It is a celebration of Joseph Wright

Joseph Wright was a 19th century philologist who compiled a huge dictionary of dialect words. As Crystal says in the introduction, the breadth and quality of Wright's work should place him in a category with Samuel Johnson, Noah Webster and James Murray. Unfortunately, there is simply not that vast of an interest in dialects.

Although English is spoken worldwide, Crystal/Wright's focus was on the British Isles. It is there that the language has of course the longest history, and also there that regional dialects were able to differentiate themselves in the days before widespread travel and literacy.

After a relatively brief introduction, Crystal goes directly into the dictionary itself. Here is a typical entry:

bemoil (verb) Lincolnshire, Staffordshire, Worcestershire Covered in mud – from a French verb meaning 'drench' or 'soak'. The word was probably known in Warwickshire too, judging by the way Shakespeare used it in Act 4 Scene 1 of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Grumio describes how Katherina fell off her horse in a really muddy place – 'how she was bemoiled'.

This is not a dictionary of slang or obscenity. Even some Shakespearean usage (viz, quim-faced) is not present. It is exactly as advertised, an extensive collection of dialect words. It will be of interest to philologists and lovers of classic literature who want to know exactly what an author meant by now-obscure usages.