

Murphy's Law

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Printers have persecuted me without a pause.
Psalm 119:161

Some readers have wondered why I claim to only edit the *Society of Editors Newsletter* “in places”. Some suggest that I am too modest, or that I deliberately include a mistake or two in each issue, on the Islamic principle, or simply to make you feel superior. It is for none of these reasons. It is because of my deep respect for Muphry's Law.

Muphry's Law is the editorial application of the better-known Murphy's Law. Murphy's Law dictates that (a) if you write anything criticizing editing or proofreading, there will be a fault of some kind in what you have written; (b) if an author thanks you in a book for your editing or proofreading, there will be mistakes in the book; (c) the stronger the sentiment expressed in (b) and (a), the greater the fault; (d) any book devoted to editing or style will be internally inconsistent.

A recent example of (a) is a review in the *Age* on 29 February of Julie Lewis's *Olga Masters: A Lot of Living*, in which Laurie Clancy criticizes the proofreading; the review consistently misspells Dorothy Hewitt's surname. You can probably recall with no trouble, but some anguish, examples of (b); I will mention only the absence of a list of illustrations from Lloyd Robson's *History of Tasmania, volume 1* and hurry right along in case the F.A.W. gets wind of this and demands that I return its plaque.

Shirley Purchase's *Australian Writers' and Editors' Guide* is the dictionary I consult first on any matter of Australian style, and it rarely fails me. In her acknowledgements our distinguished colleague uses the word “meticulous” to describe another

distinguished colleague's proofreading. There is a touch of black magic about that word, perhaps reflected in its entymology (Latin *meticulosus*, fearful, from *metus*, fear). Some scholars contend that it should be specifically mentioned in Muphry's Law: “using the word *meticulous* to describe editing or proofreading guarantees faults in the work”; others maintain that it is amply covered by (a) and (c). Certainly I can think of no other reason for the novel *Coonardoo* being attributed to “K.S. Prichard” when AWEG's entry for Katharine Susannah Prichard says emphatically “(not Pritch-)”.

In *The Complete Guide to Editorial Freelancing* (Dodd, Mead & Co., New York, 1974) Carol O'Neill and Avima Ruder acknowledge the assistance of 160 editors and friends, which is very generous of them. Or could it have been a marketing ploy? (*We should sell at least 160 copies of this one, Mr Dodd. I am sure you are right, Mr Mead.*) It's a fairly useful sort of book, worth the sixty cents I paid for it some years ago, but I have trouble getting past page 38. On this page the authors remind us that “Country names change, and a book that uses an old-hat appellation will seem dated” (a sentence typical of their light-hearted style, which I would have edited in places). They then tell you where to look for up-to-date place names and give a few examples of countries recently renamed, among them Cambodia, now “Sri Landa”.¹

Muphry's Law is no respecter of persons. The editor of the English translation of the *Jerusalem Bible* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1996) does not thank his proofreader, but he does list the “principal collaborators in translation and literary

review”, among them such eminent people as JRR Tolkien and James McAuley. My copy is not just a first edition – it is a copy that got through before the press was stopped to correct a little mistake in Genesis, chapter 1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep, and God’s spirit hovered over the water.”

Over the century’s Muphry’s Law has been particularly evident at work in the Bible. The misquotation that heads this piece is from the *Printers’ Bible* (c. 1702), so called because in that verse “printers” replaced the princes that David was complaining about. There have been other misprints: the original King James version of 1611 was riddled with them. In an edition of 1823 Rebekah’s damsels (Genesis 24:61) inexplicably became “camels”. An Oxford edition of 1820, known as the *Large Family Bible*, renders Isaiah 66:9 as “Shall I bring to the birth and not cease to bring forth” instead of “cause to bring forth”. There have been other misprints: the original King James version of 1611 was riddled with them. In an edition of 1823 Rebekah’s damsels (Genesis 24:61) inexplicably became “camels”. An Oxford edition of 1820, known as the *Large Family Bible*, renders Isaiah 66:9 as “Shall I bring to the birth and not cease to bring forth” instead of “cause to bring forth”. Another, in 1804, had a son coming forth “out of thy lions”; nothing to do with Daniel – it should have been “out of thy loins” (1 Kings 8:19). The *Wicked Bible* of 1632 left the word *not* out of the seventh commandment: “Thou

shalt commit adultery.” An edition printed in the reign of Charles I replaced the word *no* in Psalm 14:1 with *a*: “The fool hath said in his heart there is a God.” The first Bible printed in Ireland, in 1716, transposed two letters in John 5:14: “Behold, thou art made whole: sin on more.”

These curious facts I have on the authority of the Reverend Doctor Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, tireless compiler of curious reference books, including two of my favorites, the *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* and the *Reader’s Handbook of Famous Names in Fiction, Allusions, References, Proverbs, Plots, Stories, and Poems*. Brewer died in 1897, before he had finished correcting the proofs of a revised edition of the *Readers’ Handbook*. My copy includes his daughter Nellie’s preface to that edition, and I will end this ramble by quoting from it.

I thank, too, most warmly, the proof-reader, who has shown so much patience, and has helped me in every possible way in what might have been a very hard task; he made it not only an easy but an exceedingly pleasant one.

And, bless her kind heart, she seems to have got away with that – almost as if Muphry had smiled upon her.

1. Sri Lanka was the name given by an infamous religious sect to its commune in the mountains near Trilby, Virginia – which, oddly enough, is where the original old-hat Appalachians came from.