

Perry, William

(b. c.1747, d. c.1808)

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Perry, William (b. c.1747, d. c.1808), schoolmaster, surgeon, and lexicographer, was born about 1747. His birthplace is not known, though contemporaries referred to him as Scottish. He became a schoolteacher, owning and running a private school in Kelso, which he established in 1771 in Shedden Park Road. He was married, probably to Elizabeth Notman, with whom he had a daughter, Mary, who was born in Kelso on 20 January 1774 and baptized there on 26 March 1774. In 1774, describing himself as ‘Master of the Academy at Kelso’, Perry published in Edinburgh for David Willison his first book *The Man of Business and Gentleman’s Assistant*, dedicated to John Delaval. The book was recommended ‘not only as one of the best school-books we have met with; but as the best adapted to qualify grown persons, who have not been bred accomptants, for becoming *men of business*’ (*London Review of English and Foreign Literature*, 1775, 219).

In 1775 Perry moved to Edinburgh, where he opened a private academy at Tailor’s Hall, Cowgate, ‘to instruct youth in the English and French languages, Writing, Arithmetic, Book-Keeping, and Mathematics’ (*Caledonian Mercury*, 13 Feb 1775). All the subjects taught were to become the topics of his future publications. He also gave weekly lectures on oratory, which were regularly advertised from January 1776 up to January 1778.

In 1775 Perry published *The Royal Standard English Dictionary*. Largely based on Samuel Johnson’s dictionary (1755), it contained more than 28,000 entries. Perry followed the tradition of keeping the orthography unchanged but resorted to graves and acutes to mark accentuation, and to italics to denote mute vowels. His use of what has been described as ‘the most elaborate system of diacritic marking’ (Jones, viii) meant that, when compared, for example, to the dictionaries of James Buchanan (1766) and Thomas Sheridan (1780), his suggestions for a correct pronunciation were not always easily followed. The complexity of Perry’s system did not meet the favour of schoolteachers who, though praising his observations as ‘very just and highly beneficial for persons and advanced years’ (*The Instructor*, 1798, 1), ‘recognised the inappropriateness and impracticability of such descriptive detail in a classroom context’ (Jones, 65).

Perry’s pronouncing dictionary was popular among other orthoepists. John Walker described Perry as an ‘accurate, and ingenious writer on English pronunciation, at Edinburgh’ (*A Rhetorical Grammar*, 1787, 3n.) and in his own *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791) referred to Perry in more than thirty entries. Perry was also quoted at least fifteen times by William Smith in his guide to English pronunciation for foreigners. Unlike Walker, though, Smith was the only lexicographer to draw attention to differences in Perry’s descriptions owing to his being a Scottish speaker of English: ‘Mr. Perry is singular in marking this substantive with the soft *s*, as he calls it, or as if spelt *rize*. I believe it is very seldom pronounced so, unless by the native of Scotland’ (W. Smith, *An Attempt to Render the Pronunciation of the English More Easy to*

Foreigners, 1795, 87). However, following the fashion of the time, Perry chose the London accent as a reference model and in particular ‘according to the present practice of men of letters, eminent orators, and polite speakers in London’ (W. Perry, *The Royal Standard English Dictionary*, 1775, title page).

In 1776 Perry published *The Only Sure Guide to the English Tongue; or, New Pronouncing Spelling-Book* and *The Orator*, an anthology which was also a guide to correct pronunciation.

The preface to *The Only Sure Guide*, which was typical of all Perry’s prefatory materials, contained useful information not only on the content of the book itself, but also on the author’s pedagogical intentions: it was ‘not only intended for children when they first begin to read, but also for youth further advanced, who, either through inattention, bad example, or for want of opportunity, have been ill-grounded in the principles of our language, or contracted a vicious mode of pronunciation’ (W. Perry, *The Only Sure Guide to the English Tongue*, 1776, iv).

Perry also started a small printing enterprise in Edinburgh with the intention of printing and releasing his own literary works. However, the challenges of simultaneously managing this business while teaching and writing proved overwhelming. In November 1777, facing financial difficulties, he sought refuge at Holyroodhouse from his creditors, who included the bookseller Robert Jamieson and the spirit dealer John MacDermeid. He claimed an estimated annual income of at least £220 as well as deriving £200 per year from the sales of his books. Initially, his creditors agreed to grant him a twelve-month period to gather funds and repay his debts. In 1778 Jamieson sought the intervention of the bailie of Holyroodhouse and had Perry imprisoned there for bankruptcy. Perry responded with an advertisement addressed ‘To those who support and appreciate literature, who value liberty, and oppose tyranny and oppression’ (*Caledonian Mercury*, 8 April 1778), in which he lamented his situation, and highlighting that his creditors had imprisoned him, had him declared bankrupt, and seized his belongings.

After resolving his financial problems, Perry left Edinburgh to visit his brother in London, where he published his other works. In 1795 he released a pocket dictionary, *A General Dictionary of the English Language*, and *The Standard French and English Pronouncing Dictionary*. Between 1795 and 1805, Perry temporarily abandoned his writing career to enrol in a course at Edinburgh University in the years 1789–90 and 1791–2, attending classes in anatomy, surgery, and chemistry. He then became a surgeon in the Royal Navy.

Perry’s later works were *The Synonymous, Etymological and Pronouncing English Dictionary* (1805) and *Philosophy for Youth, or Scientific Tutor*, published in London in 1808, which was Perry’s last known work. In its preface, Perry defined it as ‘a useful manual’ addressed to people who have left school and ‘entered into the busy world’, but it could also be used as a ‘general introduction to our numerous academies, boarding-schools, and other seminaries of learning’ (Perry, *Philosophy*, i). There is no record of him after 1808, and it is not known when he died.

Perry was one of the most prolific lexicographers of the second half of the eighteenth century. Between 1774 and 1808 he published two manuals, one spelling book, one anthology, and three dictionaries, together with regular updates and revised editions of his dictionaries. His works were widely read in Britain. By 1805 his *Royal Standard English Dictionary* was said to have passed through 10 editions, each consisting of 10,000 copies. He also acquired a transatlantic reputation as ‘a manufacturer of

dictionaries' (P. Pica, 'Letter to the editors', *New England Magazine*, 1, 1831, 108). His success and influence abroad, especially in the United States, was due to his two books on pronunciation. His *Only Sure Guide to the English Tongue*, first published in America in 1785, reached its eighteenth edition there by 1801, sold a further 400,000 copies up to 1815, and came out revised and corrected by Israel Alger jun., in 1832, as *Alger's Perry. The Orthoepical Guide to the English Tongue, Being Perry's Spelling-Book Revised and Corrected, with Walker's Pronunciation Precisely Applied on a New Scheme*. Perry's works informed early American interest in codification and language norms, and his dictionary has been said to have 'influenced the course of American pronunciation' (Read, 71). It was a measure of Perry's standing that the American lexicographer Noah Webster, in criticizing observations by John Walker, contrasted them explicitly with those of William Perry, whom Webster considered a more accurate transcriber.

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