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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Sir,

Artefacts, bêtes noires, and hybrid vigour

Some years ago an interesting debate took place in a well-known British journal concerning the spelling of the word 'artefact'. This provoked some acrimony, until the discussion was terminated with the editorial prerogative and the declaration of the -e- spelling would be preferred, and that Americans following the spelling in Webster's Dictionary would just have to put up with their style being changed by editors who preferred manuscripts written in the English language as laid down by that stalwart arbiter of scrabble, *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Since that time I have religiously followed this spelling myself and have done my bit in stamping out this blight by failing outright any examination paper or thesis in which the word is spelled incorrectly more than once. I admit that this is a fairly drastic measure and has become something of a *bête noire*, but behind this uncompromising attitude lies the firm conviction that the insinuation of Americanisms into our language is but the first step in the undermining of our culture and traditions, and will ultimately drive us into moral turpitude and degeneracy. Imagine my absolute horror when the initial draft of the *Antiquities Act* appeared, and that revolting word artifact glared out of no less than 13 pages of type. I asked myself, how could the bastion of New Zealand style - the Government Printer - have allowed this blot to occur in New Zealand literature? I bought a copy of the *New Zealand Government Printing Office Style Book* and found that, although neither word was actually listed amongst their preferred spellings, it was noted that in the case of alternatives, that nominated first in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* was to be followed. To my profound astonishment, neither word appears in the body of the text in my copy; however, to my infinite relief, artefact is nominated as the preferred spelling in the Addenda (Fowler, *et al.*, 1946: 1450). More recent editions of the Concise Oxford (such as Fowler and Fowler, 1974: 64) include this preferred spelling in the main text. At this point I felt I was on safe ground in writing to the Government Printer and pointing out the error of his ways in the *Antiquities Act*. This I did and was later informed that the word artefact would appear in the list of preferred spellings in all subsequent editions of his style book.

At the risk of spinning out an already tiresome story, I must report that I have evidence that the other word is breeding like some particularly fertile species of cockroach, and unless we take some positive counter-action, the orthodox word may succumb to ignominious disuse like certain other beautiful English words such as epeexegetically. As evidence of this procreation I would point out that artifact (Ugh) occurs in untold profusion in a prestigious volume which appeared off the press only a few weeks ago with the *imprimatur* of no less than the Royal Society of New Zealand (Green and Cresswell, 1976). At this point I began to suspect that perhaps my grandmother was involved in this cultural sabotage (I have known for a long time that she is secretly an agent of the CIA). If this sounds similar to the insane General in *Dr Strangelove* complaining of the Ruskies diluting his seminal fluids, I assure you the parallel is quite superficial - I have never really believed all that nonsense. Strangely enough, the Royal Society goes full circle and blames its preferred spellings on the Style Book of the Government Printer (Collins, 1971: 84) - doesn't anybody ever consult a dictionary? Upon looking further, I then discovered that the finally published version of the *Antiquities Act 1975* retains the *-i-* spelling no less than 89 times (thank goodness the word doesn't occur at all in the *Historic Places Amendment Act 1975*).

The word artefact has led an interesting career in various 'English' dictionaries over the years. The recent *Supplement to The Oxford English Dictionary* (Burchfield, 1972: 128) traces the history of the word and notes its first occurrence in 1821. However, the word cannot be found even in later editions of that first great *Dictionary of the English Language* by Samuel Johnson (for example, the version by Latham, 1876). To add confusion to the issue, recent editions of *The Oxford English Dictionary* nominate the *-i-* version first in the body of the text (for example, Murray, *et al.*, 1933: 468), while insisting on the *-e-* spelling in their various Supplements, Addenda, and Corrigenda. Many of the Shorter Oxfords follow this procedure too (*vide* Onions, 1959: 103, 2478). This illustrates rather well, I think, how little editing actually takes place between editions, when the corrigenda never make it to the body of the text.

In other well-known 'style books', such as *Harts Rules for Compositors and Readers at the University Press Oxford* (Anon, 1967: 59), and Collins's *Authors and Printers Dictionary* (Collins, 1973: 21), artefact is clearly preferred; while even the Australian Government Style Manual (Howson, 1972: 9) declares the first nominated in the Concise Oxford as that which should be followed. It might be noted in passing that most of the respectable English archaeological journals use

artefact, although the occasional lapses may be found by the hawk-eyed reader (for example, see *Antiquity*, 1955: 149).

To obtain final confirmation on this subject, I wrote to the current editor of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Robert Burchfield (an ex-New Zealander), and he corroborated the predominance of artefact amongst British literature, and that of artifact in American.

On the strength of all this, one might well ask how the word artifact ever came about in the first place. Webster's Dictionary of (?) English has the main entry under artifact (Babcock, 1959: 124) and a cross reference to artefact (*ibid.*: 123) as a variation. Since this is the dictionary most frequently used by Americans, this may well explain the word's survival.

New Zealand is well known as a common meeting ground for British and American archaeological traditions, and perhaps in line with the theory of hybrid vigour - that the offspring of two dissimilar parents may be more successful than either - we should recompose the word using a diphthong (or should it be digraph) of *-e-* and *-i-*, rendered as artefact or even artiefact. However, I imagine this suggestion would quickly evoke an argument over which letter should take precedence. An alternative might be to maintain neutrality in the whole affair and use another vowel altogether - what about artafact, artufact, or artofact? If these look slightly horrific, than an alternative spelling of artefac given in Webster's Dictionary is not likely to appeal either (Babcock, 1959: 123).

Finally, those pedantically inclined might prefer simply to split up the word (*arte*, the ablative of *ars* meaning 'art' in Latin, and *factum*, the neuter past participle of *facere* meaning 'make' in Latin), and write them out separately (italicised of course) as *arte factum*, or perhaps the abbreviated form *arte fact.* (note the use of the period). If you don't have an italics font on your typewriter this will have to be underlined as arte fact., and if you happen to have a rather old Olivetti like mine, this will often appear of its own accord as artefact. I am bound to say that out of sheer laziness I may even write it as artefact now and again. It is thus possible that the ontogeny (or should it be genesis) of the English word actually reflects years of poor design of portable typewriters.

I think this whole issue might be best resolved at the next NZAA Conference over a tug-of-war. The two competing teams could think of wearing suitably printed T-shirts, perhaps: 'I Like I' and 'Punch an

Artifact a Day'. In the meantime, we should give some thought to another insidious trend which I have recently noticed in the way people are spelling the word balk/baulk....

Dr Cornelius Zeiker,
Director of the Franz Joseph
Institute for Nuclear Archaeology.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: It has always been the policy of the NEWSLETTER to use the 'e' spelling, although sometimes the editor has let the other slip by. We therefore agree with Dr Zeiker (whomever he may be).

A.G.B.

We have also endeavoured to settle for BALK, and will baulk extended argument.

A.G.B.