

'Let them eat cake': how reputations can be won and lost on the turn of a phrase'

How do we capture the essence of a famous personality? And what phrases do we use to recall particular eras and events?

A new title from Oxford University Press, *What They Didn't Say: A Book of Misquotations*, shows quotations are on the move in our language. It looks at how they shape the way we see famous people and how they can sum up for us a certain notable event or period.

What They Didn't Say examines misquotations from every section of society, from royalty (Napoleon's '**Not tonight, Josephine**', Prince Charles's '**Whatever love means**', and the alleged conversation between Paul Burrell and the Queen about '**dark forces at work**') to politics (James Callaghan's '**Crisis? What crisis?**' and Jo Moore's '**A good day to bury bad news**'); from literature (Sherlock Holmes's '**Elementary, my dear Watson**') to the film and television industry (Alfred Hitchcock's '**Actors are cattle**', Greta Garbo's '**I want to be alone**', Mr Spock's '**It's life, Jim, but not as we know it**' and Ginger Rogers's '**Backwards and in high heels**').

Misquotations flourish because they can often encapsulate - more than the original remark - the public profile of a particular person. A written source may confirm 'the opposition of events' as Harold Macmillan's view of the greatest difficulty for a Prime Minister, but '**Events, dear boy. Events**' catches the tone of his personality. And '**I rob banks because that's where the money is**' evokes the public persona of the debonair American bank robber Willie Sutton, known as 'the Actor'. (Sutton later denied having made the remark, but he was astute enough to know that in the business of newspaper headlines a good legend beats the truth every day.)

Misquotations are often much more than mistakes, and often much more interesting!

Reputations under the microscope: five lives

'**Let them eat cake**' is a phrase that remains inextricably linked with Marie Antoinette, Queen of France, even though there is no record of her making such a comment. Her reputation as ignorant and careless is encapsulated in this one (mis)quotation.

'Something must be done'

In contrast, King Edward VIII was to embody youthful hope and action in the British public's mind. In November 1936 the new King toured the distressed area of South Wales. According to the *Western Mail* of 19 November, the day after his visit, the King said, '**These works brought all these people here. Something should be done to get them at work again.**' The sentence was reported in various forms, but the one line

‘something must be done’ was the one which lodged in the public mind. Ironically, the visit was shortly afterwards followed by the King’s abdication, on 10 December 1936.

‘Events, dear boy. Events’ is the popular version of what is said to have been Harold Macmillan’s response on being asked what was his biggest problem as Prime Minister. Although there is no verifiable source for the comment in this form, this phrase is taken as typifying Macmillan’s public persona, and his deliberately cultivated old-world manner.

‘The lady’s not for turning’

In her speech to the Conservative Party Conference in October Margaret Thatcher reworked the title of Christopher Fry’s 1949 play, *The Lady’s Not for Burning*. Ronald Millar, Thatcher’s speechwriter at the time, sums up why the phrase caught on in his 1993 autobiography *A View from the Wings*:

‘The lady’s not for turning’ has stood the test of time precisely because it’s not a one-liner. In itself, it’s quite unremarkable ... but it caught on because it pinned the lady’s character down in five short words. It was Thatcher and was instantly seen to be her by the public.

‘Pray for Shackleton’

A saying, reflecting the reputation for competence and effectiveness of the explorer Ernest Shackleton, which implies that when all other hope is gone, there is still a final resort.

Elizabeth Knowles is Publishing Manager for Oxford Quotations Dictionaries and is a historical lexicographer, having previously worked on the 4th edition of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. She is editor of the current 6th edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* and has contributed to a wide number of television and radio programmes.

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For more information or to interview Elizabeth Knowles, please contact Juliet Evans on 01865 353911 or email juliet.evans@oup.com

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