Crying Fowler
By David Isaacson

Discriminating writers of English have long relied on H.W. Fowler’s *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Oxford University Press) as a guide to proper writing and speaking. Henry Watson Fowler, 1858-1933, was a British schoolmaster with very decided opinions about linguistic etiquette. The first edition of this work was published in April of 1926. It was reprinted in 1937 (with corrections), and in succeeding years. Finally, in 1965, it was revised, with some recognition of how American usage differed from British, by Sir Ernest Gowers, 1880-1966. Gowers, however, still retains much of the authoritarian flavor of Fowler. One usually thinks of Fowler/Gowers as laying down rules and laws rather than providing flexible guidelines for reflection, discussion, and judgment.

But, in 1996, a third edition, boldly entitled *The New Fowler’s Modern English Usage*, was edited by R.W. Burchfield. Burchfield is an eminent linguist who takes, on the whole, a contemporary descriptive, rather than a more old-fashioned prescriptive, view of usage. In other words, Burchfield is inclined to be liberal and permissive where Fowler/Gowers were conservative and forbidding. For instance, Fowler and Gowers both disapproved of the use of the adverb “hopefully” (1926, p. 230) but Burchfield allows it (1996, p. 366). Fowler saw no problem with the word “disinterested” used in the sense of “uninterested,” (the 1926 edition has no entry on the latter), but Gowers is saddened by the recognition that the old sense of “disinterested” to mean “impartial” has been lost: “A valuable differentiation is thus in need of rescue, if it is not too late” (1965, p. 134). Burchfield, ever the discreet and discrete objective recorder of usage behavior, notes that the “noun [dis-interest] has or has had three branches of meaning” 1 that which is contrary to interest or advantage…now rare or obsolete” …2 impartiality (recorded from 1658 onward and still current, but not in common use)…3 Absence of interest, unconcern…” (1996, p. 216).

As if anticipating objections from traditionalists, and not wishing to appear to be too liberal as compared to Gowers, Burchfield (depending on your point of view) either takes the long objective stance of the scholar, or “cops-out” by commenting that it is more usual to hear the word “disinterested” instead of “disinterest” when impartiality is meant. But Burchfield ends his article on this controversial word by saying: “The best course is to avoid using the noun ‘disinterest’ altogether until it has reached safe shores.” (1996, p. 217) I can easily imagine Fowler bristling at this weak-kneed conclusion as well as calling attention to Burchfield’s lazy cliché in the phrase “safe shores.”

The University Libraries’ Central Reference Department officially takes no stand on controversies of this sort. As far as funds and selection can take us, we attempt to present all sides of the word disputes. Fowler, Gowers, and Burchfield can all be found on the shelves of the University Libraries. While individual scholars may have their preferences among somewhat competing authorities such as these, we, as reference librarians, take an even more cautious approach than Burchfield. We provide the reference sources, but the patron, alas, must make the final choice as to his (or her) preference in word selectivity and usage.

One Way to Learn
Continued from page 1