

# George Chowdharay-Best: a Bibliography

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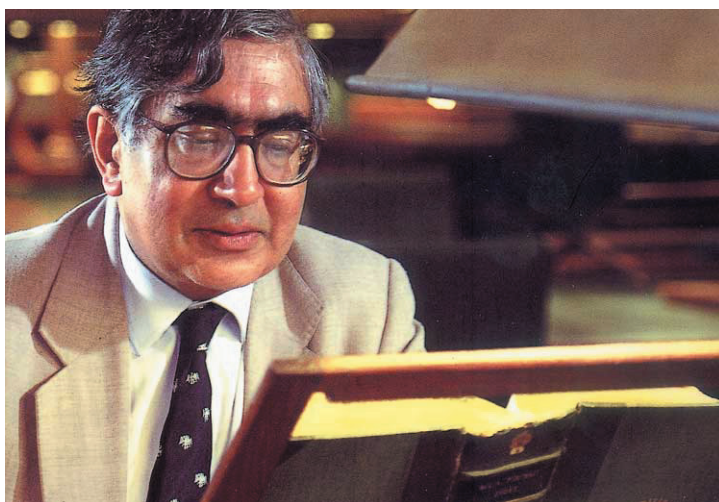


Fig. 1.  
George Chowdharay-Best in the  
North Library, Bloomsbury, 1993.  
Photograph by Phil Starling.  
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George Chowdharay-Best (fig. 1), lexicographer and historian, was born on 31 May 1935. He was the son of Dr Dharam Sheel Chowdhary, one of the first Asian doctors to practise in Britain outside the great cities, and of Savitri Chowdhary, whose book *Indian Cooking*, originally published in 1954 and frequently reprinted, has recently been reissued in Andre Deutsch's *Cookery Classics* series. Dr Chowdhary, having studied medicine at King Edward Medical College, Lahore, and requalified on arrival in Britain in 1932, was for more than twenty-five years a popular and respected G.P. near Basildon. Although he and his wife were committed Hindus, their son had an entirely English education, at Brentwood School and Queen's College, Oxford. His parents wished him to follow in his father's professional footsteps but, after taking his degree in Physiology in 1956, he decided against completing his medical training. For a while he thought of settling in India but was put off the idea by a meeting his mother arranged with Krishna Menon; the latter said, 'You will do very well in India, but the first thing you must do is join the Communist Party.' After his father died in 1959 he was baptized into the Church of England, remaining for the rest of his life a devout Anglican, and changed his name from Vijay Chowdhary to George Chowdharay-Best, Best being the surname of a girl he had hoped to marry.

His first publication was a letter on political mud-slinging printed in *The Times*, 8 September 1959, and during the early 1970s he became a notably assiduous writer of letters to the press. For some years his preferred platform was the *Financial Times* but he was not above having letters printed in the *Australasian Express* (a free newspaper catering for transient Antipodeans, available from unmanned stands in a number of streets in central London) and in *Time Out*. As his involvement in research intensified, so his letter-writing fell away somewhat, but revived in the mid-1990s with a score or so of letters to the *Daily Telegraph*. His subjects ranged from international exchange rates to traffic problems and from fishing rights to foxes in Basildon; many of his letters contained out of the way information, with page references to his sources, and the longest were as long as a newspaper article.

From March 1969 onwards he also began contributing notes on points of etymology to *Notes & Queries*, *Mariner's Mirror*, *Folklore* and *Asian Affairs* and in 1972 published an extensively footnoted article on 'Peeresses at the Opening of Parliament' in *The Table. The Journal of the Society of Clerks-at-the-Table in Commonwealth Parliaments*. In 1980 and 1981 he assisted Sir Olaf Caroe, the penultimate British governor of the North West Frontier Province, with his autobiography, and after Sir Olaf's death wrote a two-part appreciation for *Central Asian Survey*. His only book, written in conjunction with the late Sir John Biggs-Davison, M.P., was *The Cross of St Patrick: the Catholic Unionist Tradition in Ireland* (1984), a formidable work of scholarship on what many people wished to pretend was a non-existent subject.

Much of the research he undertook consisted very largely of sifting and discarding, so that a briefly expressed detail regarding dating or definition or derivation may have been the result of ordering up and consulting, and reordering and rechecking, as many books in the British Library as would suffice for the writing of a M. Phil. thesis on a less problematic and possibly more glamorous topic. His pieces on *Oxford English Dictionary* antedatings in *Notes & Queries*, for example, though only four or five (double column) pages long, not only contain more data than most twenty-page articles but also necessarily involved the examination and elimination of several times as much material as was printed.

Legal history was an early, and abiding, interest: one notes that his first publications on *O.E.D.* antedatings were based on the study of the Journals of the House of Commons and the works of John Selden, to which he had originally been drawn as sources for the history of law. The score of articles and notes he contributed to various journals from 1971 to 1981 not only testify to the depth of his scholarship but also indicate how much more of his work might have appeared in learned journals under his own name if he had not committed himself so whole-heartedly to the *O.E.D.* from the early 1980s onwards.

In the 1989 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* he is one of nine people named as collaborators assisting with literary research; from 1989 he was a full-time member of the dictionary's staff, first as an assistant editor and then as a senior assistant editor. He covered the whole range of English vocabulary but was regarded by his colleagues as particularly expert in scientific terms and loan words from Asian languages. A somewhat shy and formal man with an old-fashioned, almost romantic, respect for institutions, it was typical of George Chowdharay-Best that the work of which he was most proud should be subsumed in a great collaborative enterprise. With one or two exceptions all his later articles, though scholarly, were for non-specialist periodicals such as the *Salisbury Review*, the *Oxford Magazine*, or church magazines, and were often addressed, at least in part, to topical concerns.

He also gave loyal support to his wife Elspeth's efforts to arouse public awareness of the medical profession's growing partiality for euthanasia. Underlying his scholarly work was an intense political engagement which comes out in some of his earlier letters to the press and was recognized by all those who knew him personally: he was quintessentially one of those scholars whose work was not merely something he 'believed' in, in the weakest and most anaemic sense of the word 'believed', but was an integral part of a comprehensive vision of what life was for.

For many years he was a familiar figure in the British Library, rarely seen without a thick wad of slips of paper, each one of which bore notes on the etymology of some particularly recalcitrant word. Having over the years seen quite a number of the old regulars of the Round Reading Room at Bloomsbury fade, falter and fall away, he was to be the first of the long-term almost daily attenders of the new British Library at St Pancras to pass from view. He died on 21 April 2000.

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