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The story of English spelling is the story of thousands of people - some well-known, most totally unknown - who left a permanent linguistic fingerprint on our orthography. It's a story whose events cover the best part of 1,500 years. And, of course, it's not over yet.

The story starts with the missionaries who first wrote down English as best they could using the Roman alphabet. They made a reasonable job of it - once they'd found extra letters to cope with the sounds they didn't have in Latin, such as th, in both thin and this. The spelling of Old English was largely phonetic: all letters were pronounced. They sounded the w in write, the g in gnat, the k in know.

Then the French arrived, with their own ideas. Out went some of the old forms and in came new ones. Cwen became queen; mys became mice. Medieval scribes continued to spell words as they were pronounced, but as English had many regional accents, the result was a huge amount of variation. More

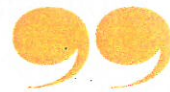
than 60 spellings of night are known from the middle ages - nite, nyght, nicht, nihte ... Things couldn't carry on like that. As government became more centralised, the need to develop a standard system became urgent. But whose standard? That of widely-read authors such as Chaucer? The emerging civil service? The English translations of the Bible? The printers? The modern system emerged out of all of them.

Each new factor brought idiosyncrasies as well as order. William Caxton's Flemish typesetters didn't know English well, so spelled some words in a Flemish way. That's where the h in ghost comes from. It was gost in Middle English. They put it into goose too - ghoose - but it didn't catch on. That's the great mystery of English spelling: why some spellings have appealed and others haven't.

There was still a great deal of variation, though, so in the 16th century spelling reformers came up with their Big Idea: etymology. If the word meaning "money owed" appeared in



The internet allows more people to influence spelling



such varied ways as det, dett or deytt, people obviously needed help, and this would come from the word's history. The word was debitum in Latin, so they recommended a silent b. You might think such an arcane idea would never catch on, but it did - along with the b in subtle, the l in salmon and the p in receipt, and many more. In trying to simplify the system, the reformers ended up complicating it.

The big dictionaries of later years, such as Johnson's and Webster's, did their best to standardise spelling, but with only limited success. Today, there are many differences between British and American English. And publishing houses (and newspapers) vary over such words as realize and realise, judgment and judgement, flower pot, flower-pot and flowerpot. Encyclopedias make different choices over foreign names - Tutankhamen, Tutankhamun, Tut'ankhamun; 15% of words in our dictionaries have alternative spellings.

And we ain't seen nothin' yet. Spellings are made by people. Dictionaries - eventually - reflect popular choices. And the internet is allowing more people to influence spelling than ever before. In 2006 there were just a few hundred instances of rubarb on Google. By 2010 there were nearly 100,000. This month there's around 750,000. People are voting with their fingers. The original medieval spelling without h is reasserting itself. It will be a standard alternative one day, and - who knows - may eventually supplant rhubarb entirely.

Spell it Out: The Singular Story of English Spelling by David Crystal is published next month by Profile