

Computerized dictionary

English language quantified

THE *Oxford English Dictionary*, generally known as the OED, plans to leap into the twentieth century by investing £7 million in the computerized production of a new edition, a merger of the existing 12-volume dictionary with the four-volume supplement still not yet complete. Announcing this plan earlier in the week, Oxford University Press said that the merging of the OED and supplement into a single printed work (to be published in 1988) is merely the first phase of an ambitious programme leading to the availability of the dictionary in an electronic form and eventually to the use of computers for novel lexicographical purposes.

Oxford seems to have been able successfully to turn the respect and affection in which the OED is held into tangible support for the computerization project. IBM (UK) Ltd is lending for the first phase of the project computer hardware (a 4341 processor and up to a score of terminals), software and the services of two specialists on secondment. This assistance, valued at £1 million over the duration of the first phase, compares with the £6.5 million in cash and kind committed in a year by IBM to the support of computer development projects in the United Kingdom.

The Department of Trade and Industry has also provided a grant of £288,750 from its fund called Support for Innovation. The donkey work of "data capture" (or keyboarding) will be carried out on a commercial basis by International

of which might be sufficient to contain the 1,000 million characters in the new edition. Oxford will pay a royalty for its use of the software, which the University of Waterloo will be free otherwise to exploit.

For users of the dictionary, the chief disappointment will be that the new edition, to be called the *New Oxford English Dictionary*, will be innocent of the entries accumulated since the appearance of the first supplementary volume nearly twenty years ago. Keyboarding will begin in September this year, but between now

Nuclear power

UK peers give Europe advice

THE European Commission should play a stronger role in environmental and energy policy-making, according to a new British report from the House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities. The committee concludes there is a clear need for an authoritative international assessment of safety and other environmental aspects of nuclear power aimed at reassuring public opinion. It suggests that the commission might join forces with a body such as the International Energy Agency, in order to avoid the appearance of making propaganda.

In the meantime, it suggests that European reliance on the pressurized water reactor could have the "grave disadvantage" that a serious fault or an accident in one of these reactors might cause public opinion to swing against the nuclear energy programme in general. Because of the need to support diverse energy sources, their lordships are concerned to protect and encourage the role of nuclear power, so they suggest that the EEC should give serious consideration to advanced gas-cooled reactors (AGRs) as a possible future design. One of Britain's AGRs, at Hinkley Point in south-west England, is described as "a model of efficiency".

The House of Lords Committee reserves some scornful words for the present policies of the European Commission's Directorate-General XI, which concerns itself with environment, consumer protection and nuclear safety: "Public concern — well-intentioned but not always well-informed — leads to regulatory action before the relevant facts have been established". The Commission directive on sulphur emissions is cited as an example.

The general European objective of reducing oil imports is endorsed, however. The committee sees a danger that lower oil prices at present, which it sees as only temporary, might provide member states with an excuse to delay the move away from dependence on oil. It is also worried by the prospect of greatly increased

and then the dictionary staff will be chiefly concerned to develop the means by which the entries in the OED and the four supplements can be accurately logged and merged, given the variety of typefaces and alphabets used and the need for subjective judgement in telling how supplemental entries supplement the originals.

As things are, the project is cautious about the extent to which the resource being computerized may be used as an automatic source of novel dictionaries, but there seems a good chance that scholars will eventually be able to use the dictionary as a means, for example, of monitoring the rate at which nouns are being converted into adjectives or even verbs. □

imports of coal into the EEC, which are thought likely to be necessary in the 1990s. It therefore says that "profitable home production of coal should be encouraged", a delicately-worded statement that might be taken up by either side in the current British miners' strike.

Tim Beardsley

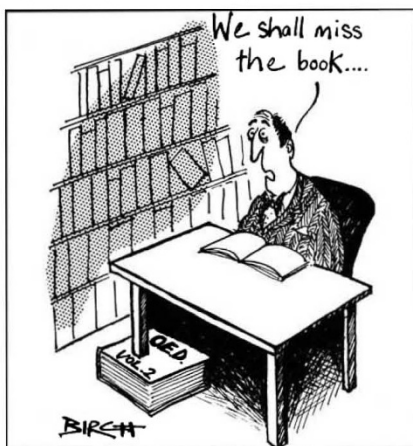
AFRC cuts meet disapproval

BRITISH Members of Parliament have taken up the cause of scientists employed by the Agricultural and Food Research Council who are threatened by redundancy. A report from the House of Commons Agriculture Committee published last week chides the government for imposing on the council cash limits that have forced a programme of contraction.

The committee's predecessor in the last parliament recommended a shift towards more food research, a move since implemented by the council. But the new committee now protests that it was never intended that this should be at the expense of mainstream agricultural research.

The council's submission to the Advisory Board for the Research Councils on scientific opportunities for 1985-86 includes a similar request for more provision for food science without this being at the expense of other work. Plant biotechnology is another area where the council wants to see increased provision.

The government's response to last year's Agriculture Committee report was to propose a new priorities board to advise on the strategy for scientific research related to agriculture, though in the words of Mr Michael Jopling, the Agriculture Minister, "it is expected the advice will usually be followed". But this does not satisfy the Public Accounts Committee, which complains that agricultural research is still "dangerously poised between many pinnacles of bureaucracy". Tim Beardsley



Computaprint of Fort Washington, Pennsylvania.

In preparation for the later phases of the project, Oxford has also made an arrangement with the University of Waterloo, Toronto, Canada, which has undertaken to develop software for the computerized handling of lexicographical data. One obvious possibility is that the dictionary, supplemented by recently accumulated material, will be made available on magnetic tape or by means of a data bank, but there is also a possibility of making the whole work available on optical disks, one