

“Lesbianism” and the Dictionary

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In 1931, the editors of the first *Supplement* to the *OED* (published in 1933) discussed whether to put in the sexual sense of *lesbian* for the first time, and decided to leave it out, on the grounds that it was ‘not very important’. My paper will discuss the way dictionaries have treated this and other terms for female homosexuality, looking at when they were put in the dictionary and how they were defined (e.g., as a ‘vice’, as an illness etc.), and come to some predictable conclusions – e.g. that supposedly objective records of words are often influenced by cultural preferences, whether or not conscious or stated.