Turn to page 1,850 of the 1975 edition of the New Columbia Encyclopedia and you’ll find an entry for Lillian Virginia Mountweazel, a fountain designer turned photographer who was celebrated for a collection of photographs of rural American mailboxes titled “Flags Up!” Mountweazel, the encyclopedia indicates, was born in Bangs, Ohio, in 1942, only to die “at 31 in an explosion while on assignment for *Combustibles* magazine.”

If Mountweazel is not a household name, even in fountain-designing or mailbox-photography circles, that is because she never existed. “It was an old tradition in encyclopedias to put in a fake entry to protect your copyright,” Richard Steins, who was one of the volume’s editors, said the other day. “If someone copied Lillian, then we’d know they’d stolen from us.”

So when word leaked out that the recently published second edition of the New Oxford American Dictionary contains a made-up word that starts with the letter “e,” an independent investigator set himself the task of sifting through NOAD’s thirty-one hundred and twenty-eight “e” entries in search of the phony. The investigator first removed from contention any word that was easily recognized or that appears in Webster’s Third New International; the remaining three hundred and sixty words were then vetted with a battery of references.

Six potential Mountweazels emerged. They were:

- **earth loop**—n. *Electrical* British term for GROUND LOOP.
- **EGD**—n. a technology or system that integrates a computer display with a pair of eyeglasses . . . abbreviation of eyeglass display.
- **electrofish**—v. [trans.] fish (a stretch of water) using electrocution or a weak electric field.
ELSS—abbr. extravehicular life support system.
esquivelience—n. the willful avoidance of one’s official responsibilities . . . late 19th cent.: perhaps from French esquiver, “dodge, sink away.”
eurocreep—n. informal the gradual acceptance of the euro in European Union countries that have not yet officially adopted it as their national currency.

The six words and their definitions were e-mailed to nine lexicographical authorities. Anne Soukhanov, the U.S. General Editor of Encarta Webster’s, was the first to weigh in. “Ess-kwa-val-ee-once—I want to pronounce it in the French manner—is your culprit,” she said. Six other experts also fingered “esquivelience,” citing various rationales. “It’s just trying a little too hard,” said Wendalyn Nichols, the editor-in-chief of the newsletter “Copy Editor” and a onetime editorial director of Random House Reference. “If it’s derived from esquivier, it wouldn’t have that ending. Nothing linguistically would give rise to the ‘l.’” The Times’ crossword-puzzle editor, Will Shortz, explained, “I simply can’t believe such a thing goes back to the nineteenth century.”

Steve Kleinedler, a senior editor of the American Heritage Dictionary, said, “The stress pattern is strange.” The most personal of the rationales belonged to Eli Horowitz, an editor of the literary anthology “The Future Dictionary of America,” who complained, “I had to read it a few times, and I resent that.”

There were two dissenters among the experts. “‘Esquivelience’ is too elaborate,” said Sidney Landau, the author of “Dictionaries: The Art and Craft of Lexicography” and the editor of the Cambridge Dictionary of American English. “If someone made that up, they’re nuts.” Landau chose “ELSS,” he said, “for the simple reason that it’s short. A dictionary wouldn’t want to waste more than a line or two.” Meanwhile, Garret Thomson, a self-described “code monkey,” or programmer, for Pseudodictionary.com, a site that calls itself “the dictionary for words that wouldn’t make it into the dictionaries,” picked “electrofish,” calling it “clunky-sounding.”

A call was placed to Erin McKean, the editor-in-chief of the second edition of NOAD. Upon being presented with the majority opinion, McKean confirmed that “esquivelience” was a fabricated word. She said that Oxford had included it in NOAD’s first edition, in 2001, to protect the copyright of the electronic version of the text that accompanied most copies of the book. “The editors figured, We’re all working really hard, so let’s put in a word that means ‘working really hard.’ Nothing materialized, so they thought, Let’s do the opposite.” An editor named Christine

http://www.newyorker.com/talk/content/articles/050829ta_talk_alford
Lindberg came up with “esquivalience.” The word has since been spotted on Dictionary.com, which cites Webster’s New Millennium as its source. “It’s interesting for us that we can see their methodology,” McKean said. “Or lack thereof. It’s like tagging and releasing giant turtles.”

As for “esquivalience”’s excesses, McKean made no apologies. “Its inherent fakeitude is fairly obvious,” she said. “We wanted something highly improbable. We were trying to make a word that could not arise in nature.” Indeed, “esquivalence,” like Lillian Virginia Mountweazel, is something of a maverick. “There shouldn’t be an ‘l’ in there. It should be esquivariance,” McKean conceded. “But that sounds like it would mean ‘slight differences between racehorses.’”

— Henry Alford

Click here for INTERNATIONAL ORDERS >>
Click here to GIVE A GIFT >>