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REVIEW ARTICLE

A pair of Partridges[1]

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Tom Dalzell, with Terry Victor, *The new Partridge dictionary of slang*. London: Routledge, 2005. 2 volumes. Pp. xvii + 2189. ISBN 9780415212588/0415212588.

The renegade subset of the English language that is defined as 'slang' is, to pun quite unashamedly on both slang and its standard cousin, a 'bastard', a term that here stretches its usual definition as 'illegitimate' to mean, as the *OED* has it, 'having the appearance of, somewhat resembling; an inferior or less proper kind of; . . . things resembling, but not identical with, the species which legitimately bear the name'. Like standard English it is a language, variously, if inaccurately, synonymized as an argot, a cant, and a jargon, but it is undeniably a rougher-edged variety of that language. A bastard in both registers. It deals, unsurprisingly, with the rougher edges of life. As the essayist J. Y. P. Greig put it in 1938, the content of slang concentrates on 'sex, money and intoxicating liquor', and if one adds the vocabulary of 'recreational' drugs (which after all are no more than an alternative form of intoxication, albeit one that has drawn the short straw of illegality) there is no reason to feel that anything has changed. Nor had it done in the five centuries of slang-gathering that preceded Greig's analysis. A broad-brush taxonomy of the slang lexis covers crime (notably murder, nonterminal violence, robbery, confidence trickery, and prostitution, as well as the whole world of punishment, especially as regards police and prisons, wherein a whole new subset of language has been coined); intoxication (especially the state of drunkenness); insults whether personal, national, religious or racial; sexuality (including parts of the body and the uses to which they are put, plus of course defecation and allied bodily functions). It is unreservedly sexist: there are few positive words for women, and those only in terms of their sexuality. The word 'mother' is most commonly found combined with 'fucker', the oedipal polysyllable. There are few abstracts, no philosophizing other than the occasional cynical aphorism. Of caring, sharing, and compassion, as slang itself might have it: 'sweet fuck all'. It is a rude, brutal vocabulary which revels in its lack of correctness, political or otherwise (it is as orthographically unruly as it is socially: the most 'spoken' of all vocabularies, its spelling defies regulation, and who is to say how centuries-old terms were in fact pronounced?); it is, to its credit, honest in its declarations: the word's most likely etymology lies in various Scandinavian terms meaning 'throw'; to extend the image, it is a language that is wholly 'in your face'.

[1] I would like to thank Julie Coleman and an anonymous reader for comments on an earlier draft of this review.

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Yet it is not without wit, nor is the prevalent coarseness there merely for its own sake. It has a purpose. Of humanity most human it reflects our innate tendency to say 'no', to run counter to what has been established. If there is a standard, then we evolve an opposition, a contrary, counter-form; if the standard is linguistic, then slang is a counter-language.

The collection of slang, albeit originally of cant, the criminal jargon used by Europe's tribes of mendicant villains, is quite as old as that of standard English. And if one steps outside England, the tradition is even older. A list of Germany's equivalent to cant, *Rotwelsch*, had been published, a decade before England's first example, as the *Liber vagatorum* or Beggars' Book – itself a generic for all such contemporary glossaries – with a preface by no less a figure than Martin Luther; seventy years before that in 1453 the trial of France's fifteenth-century Coquillards, a further set of wandering criminals, had also revealed and tabulated the secret language that they used. And again around 1450 the French clerk turned criminal François Villon produced a string of ballads, couched in near impenetrable slang, that reflected the language of *his* confederates. Still, with its first glossary appearing *c*.1535 English slang collection predates by nearly seventy years the first purely English dictionary, Robert Cawdrey's *Table alphabeticall* of 1604. (There had already been a number of Latin–English/English–Latin dictionaries on offer, but Cawdrey's compilation was the first all-English example.) This glossary, the *Hye-way to the spitell-house*, by the pioneer printer Caxton's former apprentice Robert Copland, was set out as a poem: Copland has himself taken shelter in the porch of St Bartholomew's Hospital in London. Here he chats to the hospital's porter and notes the beggars hanging around the gate. The porter explains their lives, and the special language that they use; some 36 discrete terms are noted in the text. Copland's 'poem' was followed thirty years later by a similar collection from John Awdeley, *The fraternitye of vacabondes* (a nine-page pamphlet offering 48 terms) and in 1566 by the *Caveat for Common cursetours* by the Kentish magistrate Thomas Harman. Harman produced a consciously didactic work, designed to introduce the reader to 'the leud lousey language of these lewtering [loitering] luskes [idlers] and lasy lorrels [blackguards] where with they bye and sell the common people as they pas through the country. Whych language they terme Peddelars Frenche . . .' There are twenty-four small essays, each dealing with a different rank of villain, plus a list of some 114 terms. These are very briefly defined, usually with a single synonym. The *Caveat* concludes with a list of contemporary beggars and a cant dialogue. This was a more substantial work than its predecessors, but the principle remained the same: as Luther was supposed to have told the author of the *Liber vagatorum*, had I known these words, I might not have been tricked out of my money at the tavern last night. Perhaps, but the point was made: know this 'foreign' language and one would have a better chance to fend off crime.

Harman's vocabulary would remain the core of several subsequent glossaries, with a succession of 'rogue pamphlets' appearing over the next century and a half. Among these are *The bellman of London* and *Lanthorne and candlelight* (1608) by the playwright Thomas Dekker, and *Martin Mark-All, beadle of Bridewell* by Samuel

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Rowlands (or Rid), in 1610. Others include Richard Head's *The canting academy, or the devil's cabinet opened* (1673) and John Shirley's *Triumph of wit* (1688).

While Harman can be seen as a sociological researcher, and Dekker et al. as informative reformers, the 'coney-catching' pamphlets of playwright Robert Greene are nakedly sensational. The first such pamphlet, *A notable discouery of coosnage* [cozenage, or trickery]. 'Now daily practised by sundry lewd persons called Connie-Catchers [confidence tricksters] and Cross-biters [swindlers]. . .' appeared in 1591. Five sequels followed by 1592. Greene gleefully peddles his down-market sensationalism, larded with new canting terms – the vocabularies of the various branches of confidence trickery – and supposedly first-hand anecdotes, but carefully quarantined with pious horror. In one pamphlet, *The defence of connycatching* 'by Cuthbert Conny-catcher', he even attacks himself.

With *A new dictionary of the terms ancient and modern of the canting crew*, by the anonymous B.E., Gent.[leman] (*c*.1698), there emerges the first major development in slang lexicography since Harman. It is the first ever stand-alone 'slang dictionary', rather than an appended glossary. The title emphasizes canting but B.E.'s vocabulary, some 4,000 words, adds general slang, colloquialisms, and a variety of noncriminal jargons to the core material. There are other innovations: for some entries, however few, he offers citations and etymologies; there are a number of crossreferences and he adopts usage labels.

Like Harman, B.E. would be 'honoured' by his plagiarists. These include Capt. Alexander Smith, whose *Thieves' new canting dictionary*, in his history of highwaymen (1719), is unashamedly derivative. Similarly the *New canting dictionary* (1725) is no more than an adaptation. The glossary attached to the oft-reprinted *Life* of the self-styled gypsy king Bamfylde Moore Carew (1750 et seq.) is similarly sourced. And it is B.E. whose word list provides the basis of the 'Collection of canting words' included in Bailey's *Universal etymological English dictionary* (1737).

The eighteenth century did not merely produce adaptations of B.E. Among other works, all offering glossaries, are *Hell upon earth* (1703), *The memoirs of the right villainous John Hall* (1708), *The amorous gallant's tongue*, by 'G.L.' (1710 et seq.), *The Regulator* (1718) by Claude Hitchens, Daniel Defoe's *Street robberies considered* (1728), James Dalton's *Genuine narrative of Street robberies considered* (1728), the confessional *Discoveries of John Poulter* (1753), and George Parker's *View of society in high and low life* (1781) and *Life's painter of variegated characters* (1789).

In 1785 arrives the next way-station in slang collection: *The classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue*, by the antiquary and former militia officer Captain Francis Grose. A second, substantially augmented, edition appeared in 1788, followed by a third in 1796, the pirated *Lexicon balatronicum* (effectively the fourth) in 1811 and the fifth, edited by the boxing journalist Pierce Egan, in 1823. In his 4,000 headwords Grose incorporates his main predecessors, but expands much further into general slang, his 'vulgar tongue'. Grose now set the pattern for the next century. One other dictionary appeared in 1823, that 'of the Turf, the Ring, the Chase, the Pit, of Bon Ton and the Varieties of Life'. Its author was 'Jon Bee' (properly John Badcock), who had already

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challenged Egan's best-selling chronicle of *Life in London* (1821) with his own hugely derivative *Real life in London* (1821). Badcock's book is far more verbose than Egan, but lexicographically it is more curiosity than linguistic tool.

Four more noteworthy dictionaries appeared by 1900. The first, in 1857, is the brief *Vulgar tongue* by 'Ducange Anglicanus'. It comprises a pair of glossaries, the first collected by the author, the second from a report presented to the Government in 1839. In addition there is 'The Leary Man', a flash song, and a tailor's handbill written in slang, with a translation into standard English on the reverse. It is the first to offer rhyming slang. In 1859 appeared the first of the six editions (variously expanded) of John Camden Hotten's *Modern slang, cant and vulgar words*, latterly *The slang dictionary*. Hotten was variously a bookseller/publisher, a pirate of such American 'stars' as Mark Twain, and a cultivator of his 'flower garden', books of flagellant pornography. The dictionary has lists of rhyming slang and of backslang, both prefaced by a brief history and discussion. There is, for the first time, a 'Bibliography of slang and cant', listing some 120 titles, plus his own critical comments on each. Hotten stresses that this is above all a dictionary of 'modern Slang – a list of colloquial words and phrases in present use – whether of ancient or modern formation'. He omits obsolete terms and has opted, unlike Grose, to exclude 'filthy and obscene words' although he acknowledges their prevalence in street-talk. He touches on jargon, without describing it as such, and thus deals with the terminology of the beau monde, politics, the army and navy, the church, the law, literature, and the theatre. He has a list of slang terms for money, one of oaths, and one for drunkenness, and deals with the language of shopkeepers and workmen.

Hotten was *the* slang dictionary until 1890. His pre-eminence was somewhat breached in 1889 by *The dictionary of slang, jargon and cant* by Albert Barrère and C. G. Leland. But this two-volume work was barely published when it was displaced by the seven volumes of John Farmer and W. E. Henley's *Slang and its analogues* (1890–1904, revised edition, vol. 1 1909). Farmer, who combined slang researches with writings on spiritualism, and Henley, then one of Britain's leading poets, took slang lexicography into a new dimension. The book adopted the same 'historical' method as the contemporaneous *New* (later *Oxford*) *English dictionary*. All but a few headwords come with a number of citations, some 100,000 in all, set out as in a standard English dictionary, to illustrate usage and nuance. These quotes take in 'the whole period of English literature from the earliest down to the present time' and are arranged as far as possible from 'first use' to current use. As well as citations there are wherever possible foreign synonyms for the slang. English synonymy is also paramount: those listed at *monosyllable* (the vagina), for instance, run to thirteen columns, while those at *greens* (sexual intercourse) runs to seven. There are errors, typically in the citations, where dates and even the quotes themselves may have fallen foul of the sheer volume of the undertaking, but the overall achievement of Farmer and Henley far outweighs such slips.

To list the collections of twentieth- and twenty-first-century slang is impossible. The range, from massively researched multivolumed 'historical' dictionaries, to fly-by-night

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glossaries posted on the internet, defies cataloguing. Nor is it possible to restrict 'English' slang to England. In dictionaries as in the vocabulary, American slang has taken over, and must take equal prominence. Similarly Australian slang, pioneered by the mid-twentieth-century work of Sidney J. Baker, has an important presence. The mass media, the internet, the role of English, or certainly Englishes, as a world language mean that its slang is equally multiheaded and its dictionaries reflect the fact. Today's anglophone slang is international, English-language rather than English. And its sources, including dictionaries, are increasingly widespread as the internet gains influence. 'Slang dictionary' obtains 75,000 hits on Google: slang collection, one might suggest, has barely begun.

As far as English slang was concerned, the dominant figure of the twentieth century was an expatriate New Zealander, Eric Partridge, born in 1894 on a farm in the Waimata Valley, near Gisborne, North Island. He moved with his family to Brisbane, Australia, in 1907 and there attended grammar school. His love of literature showed itself early: aged thirteen he had already written a novel (an English 'public school' story) and a number of short stories. He was also, thanks to a literary father, able to use dictionaries – 'those . . . sources of sober, never-disillusioning entertainment' – from the age of seven. He left school at sixteen and began working as a trainee teacher in Queensland and New South Wales before winning a scholarship to the University of Queensland. As it did for so many of his contemporaries, the First World War interrupted his studies, and in April 1915 he joined the Australian infantry. He served successively in Egypt, at Gallipoli, and on the Western Front where he fought in that bloody subsection of the battle of the Somme known as 'the second Pozières', in which he was wounded. Looking back, he saw the war, while 'in its general aspects a curse and a disaster', in the end to be 'a blessing' in the experiences, both communal and personal, that it brought. And for Partridge, as he admitted, it, and its successor, would be a professional and thus commercial boon too: there are few coiners of slang more profuse than the armed services.

Back in Australia he returned to university, took his BA and departed for Oxford University where he read for his MA in eighteenth-century English romantic poetry and for a BA in comparative literature. After Oxford he taught briefly at a Lancashire grammar school, and then at the universities of Manchester (1925–6) and London (1926–7). In 1927 came the great turning point in his life. Never a happy public speaker – despite what must have been the natural allure of his expertise for the talks producers of the BBC, he would rarely allow them to place him in front of a microphone – he abandoned teaching and turned to a new career: that of 'man of letters'.

To back this he founded the Scholartis Press (a blend of 'scholarly' and 'artistic'), which survived until 1931 when, like so many small businesses, it foundered in the Depression, leaving its proprietor bankrupt. His first office had been at 1b New Oxford Street, before the firm moved round the corner to 30 Museum Street, a stone's throw from the British Museum, where for fifty years he would become as permanent a feature as the Reading Room itself in which, at his regular seat K1, he worked. Scholartis was always a hand-to-mouth operation. Nonetheless, as Partridge reminded his public,

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writing a somewhat premature 'history' of the Press in 1930, 'We have made our way almost on our own; without acquaintances among reviewers, without friends among journalists, without taking another publisher's authors with us, and without previous experience.' There were nearly 100 titles in all, announced in annual catalogues which appeared under Ambrose Bierce's line: 'At best a book is not too beautiful, at worst it is hideous.' Most, including three novels by 'Corrie Denison' (Partridge's pseudonym), made no real mark on the literary world, but three of them indicated an important new interest for the editor-in-chief. *Songs and slang of the British soldier*, edited by Partridge with John Brophy, appeared in 1930; Partridge's edition of Francis Grose's *Classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue* appeared in 1931; and between them, in 1930, came the British edition of Godfrey Irwin's *American tramp and underworld slang*.

In 1932 Partridge began working as a freelance and a year later came his first attempt at lexicology: *Words, words, words!* This was swiftly succeeded by his first look at the topic that would dominate his professional life: slang. Commissioned by Routledge, where the publisher Cecil Franklin had noticed his language-related Scholartis publications, *Slang today and yesterday* appeared in 1933; the book that sprang from these relatively tentative explorations into the topic, *A dictionary of slang and unconventional English* (*DSUE*), was published in 1937. Seven expanded and amended editions would appear in his lifetime. An eighth, posthumous, edition (edited by Paul Beale) appeared in 1984. *A dictionary of the underworld*, dealing with English and American cant, was published in 1949; revised editions appeared in 1961 and 1968. *Origins*, his etymological dictionary, appeared in 1958 (revised 1961 and 1966). Partridge was a wide-ranging, prolific author, driven both by his desire, almost literally, to 'preach the word', and by the need for cash. His bibliography, excluding juvenilia and the Scholartis publications, runs to some thirty-five titles, a good many of them running to more than a single edition. Aside from the dictionaries as such, the majority were lexicological: writing about words in one form or another. Among them were *Shakespeare's bawdy* (1947), *Chamber of horrors*, 'a glossary of official jargon' by 'Vigilans' (1952), and *Comic alphabets* (1961). He also wrote on punctuation: *You have a point there* (1953) and, in an attempt to topple Fowler's *English usage* from its dominance of the field, *Usage and abusage* (1942). Partridge joined the Army Education Corps in World War II, later moving to the correspondence department of the RAF. Demobbed in 1945, he returned to work and continued in a career that left him unassailably as Britain's leading solo lexicographer. He died on 1 June 1979, a resident of a West Country nursing home, but still working on the revision of his *Dictionary of catch phrases*, the original of which had appeared in 1977.

In an age of teams, of academic sinecures, of publishing house reference departments and substantial advances, Partridge remains in many ways the classic lexicographer of his time. After all, like 'Webster' and 'Johnson', 'Partridge' stands among the dictionary's scarce eponyms. Even the *OED*'s Sir James Murray, other than for a brief period when a few Oxonians talked of 'Murray's dictionary', cannot claim that honour. The great teams of editors, researchers, readers, checkers, and the rest whose labours go to make up a modern dictionary, and who stand, mainly mute but for a line's

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acknowledgement, behind today's works of language reference, have their place, but it lacks the individual's cachet. The world of macro-lexicography, which dominates the marketplace, and is dominated by that market's demands in its turn, lacks what for want of a better word one must call the romance of the profession as carried out by a dedicated individual. Sidney Landau, in his treatise on lexicography, includes a grim page of potential costings: so many sub-editors, so many readers, so many this and that at so many dollars and cents for so many hours – the backbone, no doubt, of contemporary lexicography, especially as carried out behind the imprints of publishing houses, or the colophons of university departments. All very important, but all sadly devoid of the human element.

Partridge, above all, offers a human dimension. He has, in a world where wit is at a premium, a sense of humour. As Anthony Burgess put it, he was not a linguist but a philologist, quite literally a 'lover' of words. And on his amorous passage he trips, he stumbles, he falls. Cheerfully refusing to admit linguistics into his lexicographical work, he always wants to make some kind of statement. Today's *OED*, especially when it comes to slang, is filled with the hard-nosed, factual, but ultimately frustrating admission: 'Etymology unknown'. Such an admission was wholly alien to Partridge. For him something was always better than nothing – even if that something often erred dangerously on the side of guesswork. Indeed, Partridge's refusal to acknowledge defeat could lead to terrible howlers – his original etymology for *nafka*, meaning a prostitute and quite simply the London adoption of a synonymous Yiddish word, suggested the possible elision of the English 'naughty girl' – but he could be inspired. His etymological dictionary, *Origins*, was for many readers even more important than his studies of slang and cant. It is unlikely that without his efforts, flawed though they may be, there would have been anything like the breadth of slang lexicography that has characterized the twentieth century.

He was, says a source at his publishers Routledge & Kegan Paul, the original nutty professor: the big overcoat, the cigarette, the long white hair adrift, and the egg-stains on the tie fresh only on the good days. This may be unfair, but the image is not wholly unpleasant. The encomia gathered in the posthumous tribute *Eric Partridge in his own words* (edited by David Crystal, Macmillan 1980) do not completely disabuse one of the same feeling. What recurs is this element of basic humanity. One cannot, it seems, be much further away from the corpus-based productions (and producers) of today's dictionaries. Living, as he did, on advances and royalties alone, unblessed by any academic stipend, unwilling and unable (thanks to weak vocal cords) to capitalize on his knowledge by way of broadcasting, let alone television, it is not surprising that on occasion he bent rules that were more easily honoured by better-off writers. Lord Randolph Quirk has noted one such slip: his study of jargon, published in 1952, followed his attempt to oust Fowler's hegemony as the country's usage maven. Since the jargon booklet was supposedly authored by the anonymous 'Vigilans' it gave Partridge the opportunity for page after page of unashamed log-rolling. Aside from the regular references to Partridge's own *Usage and abusage*, as well as to other works of his, 'Vigilans' writes in his Preface of his 'special debt' to Mr Eric Partridge. Seven pages

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on, Partridge, as editor of the Language Library, the list on which the book appeared, is commending (without explanation) the efforts of his alter ego. This is lexicographical plagiarism taken into a new dimension; it is also all too human. Partridge may have attempted to pass this off as a 'literary jest' but it looks more like the effort of a man who quite literally could not afford to pass up the opportunity of a little self-advertisement. Yet if he took a little under what some might denounce as false pretences, he more than made up for it with his endless availability as an arbiter of linguistic queries. His correspondence was voluminous, and for all those who offered him material, there were dozens more to whom he provided much-sought answers.

All of which is acceptable in its way. But what of his lexicography? Partridge was virtually unique last century in his 'solo artistry' not simply because few other dictionary-makers have had the perseverance, the knowledge, the dedication or even the financial impetus to work in this way. Does anyone, the questioner asks, still write dictionaries by themselves? He did, and there is no doubt that viewed from 2006, his work suffered accordingly. If one takes *Webster* or the *OED* as a touchstone, then two slang dictionaries-in-progress (both 'on historical principles') must prove to be 'better' works. Their inclusion of citations alone gives them a substantial advantage. But Partridge's original work, read around the English-speaking world, America included, was a one-volume dictionary. Dealing with a demotic tongue, it appears in a reasonably demotic format. The author of the *DSUE* may lack, as Randolph Quirk has pointed out, 'the magisterial scholarship, meticulous authentication and consistency of presentation' that make the *OED* so monumental a work, but without Partridge there could never have been the same level of modern slang lexicography. The *OED* cites him more than 770 times.

Like any modern slang lexicographer, he was essentially a linguistic voyeur – kneeling at the keyhole to scribble down the vocabularies of worlds in which he could never take an active part – but his eyesight surpassed that of most contemporary rivals in its clarity and its breadth of vision. If only by gathering together the whole range of his predecessors, from the sixteenth century onwards, he unified a vocabulary that might otherwise have vanished. His own first efforts were based on Farmer and Henley's seven-volume work of the 1890s, passed on to him for revision by his publishers, but he moved far beyond their admittedly impressive efforts. He had, of course, the *OED* against which to assay his discoveries and theories, but as his many appearances in the second edition make clear, the debts were mutual.

The first edition of *A dictionary of slang and unconventional English* appeared in 1937 and for over half a century 'Partridge' remained the authoritative anglophone slang dictionary. It has now, with a brand-new editor and at least 50 per cent of a new title, appeared once more. Yet one has to ask to what extent it deserved such admiration. For all the encomia, Partridge's work, most notably in its over-riding methodology, has serious flaws. As the American lawyer and slang collector Tom Dalzell, who has taken on the onerous and indeed courageous task of revising the book, has noted, a close and retrospective reading of the original work promotes the feeling that Partridge's real importance as a slang lexicographer was less in his dictionary, than in the fact that he

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kept the 'slang business' going. His *Dictionary of the underworld* (1949, 1961) is a superior work, not least for its acceptance that no inclusive study of the topic could pretend that the ever-increasing lexis of American slang had no role to play, but his magnum opus was, and remains, the *DSUE*. Partridge's many fans might disagree with Dalzell's assessment, but a slang dictionary is a dictionary like any other, and must accord to the same rules if it is to establish itself as a reliable work of reference. It might be suggested that a slang dictionary is not read in the same way as, say the *OED*: few if any readers, for instance, use it to check spellings. But definitions, dates, and etymologies are of equal importance to those of Standard English.

The nature of slang lexicography, indeed the nature of all lexicography, resembles that of a scholarly form of Pacman with each new dictionary consuming the vocabulary of its predecessor. In some utopian world, if such a utopia was desired, each successive dictionary-maker might come upon a language fresh-formed and virgin, which he or she would then research and enter into a brand-new lexicon. It is not, of course, the case, nor could it be. As one commentator has suggested, the language resembles a train, constantly progressing, onto which each new lexicographer climbs, writes, and then gets off. The train continues. It may pick up new rolling stock, but the old wagons trundle on, at least for the lexicographer who seeks to create a work that covers all of a given language, or even all slang, from its earliest records onwards. Like standard English dictionaries, each one takes the leading role for as long as it lasts, but is rendered obsolete even as its successor appears, for all that its traces remain, for those who wish to disinter them, in the new volume. Thus when in 1933 Eric Partridge pitched into the making of his dictionary, it was on the firm basis of its major predecessor, Farmer and Henley's (*F&H*) seven volumes of *Slang and its analogues*, published between 1890 and 1904. Routledge, his publisher and owner of the rights to *F&H*, had been impressed by his annotated version of Captain Francis Grose's 1796 edition of his *Classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue*, which Partridge had issued in 1933. They wanted an updated *F&H* and handed him the job. There had been no dictionary of English slang since Farmer abandoned his attempt to revise his work in 1909 (only a first volume A–B was ever concluded); indeed the only 'recent' slang dictionaries to appear other than *F&H* had been the German scholar Baumann's *Londonismus* (British slang with German translations) in 1887 and Manchon's *Le slang* (a French–English equivalent) in 1923.

Nor did he draw only on *F&H*. While he read widely in such sources as were available, every one of his predecessors was duly taken to pieces and reprinted in his own work. As suggested, this is not in itself a sin, far from it, but it has a dangerous knock-on effect, notably as regards dating. Slang dating is inevitably tricky. Unless one sets down citations, the illustrative quotations that show the developing use of a term over the span of its existence, then dating becomes at best a random task. And even with citations there is no guarantee that the first one unearthed is truly the 'first use' nor that the last one found signifies the absolute end of a word's use. It is likely that with the ever-increasing range of digitized source material lexicographers really will be able to find a 'first use' (that holy grail of any major dictionary) but until that

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time, and even with the widest-ranging reading list and the most assiduous of readers, such research has to be essentially serendipitous. There is simply too much material to encompass, and when it comes to slang, the very nature of the vocabulary, its willed secrecy and obscurity (never more so than in its older usages) means that it may often only rarely be accessible. On the one hand, the villain had no desire for his language to be known, on the other, the vulgarity and coarseness of slang meant that prior to the twentieth century, and far from all of that, such words simply didn't get printed or used in any other medium. Thus dating is hard, and if one relies only on dictionaries, almost useless. To say a term is 'late eighteenth century to mid-nineteenth century' because its first lexicographical appearance is in Captain Grose in 1785 and Hotten includes it in 1859, but Farmer and Henley have dropped it in 1890 means nothing. Or nothing of value. Partridge was not allowed citations; his primary recourse had thus to be to his predecessors and his dating suffers accordingly.

The primary problem with the *DSUE*, when compared with *F&H*, or even Barrère and Leland, is that Partridge's is an indisciplined work. To an extent this lies in the cultural background that Partridge both represented and against which he worked, but also in his apparent inability to resist the lexicographer's great temptation, to overstep his brief. He did not help himself by entitling his dictionary not just one of slang, but also of colloquialisms and of the less easily classifiable 'unconventional English'. In short, there is simply too much of it. Take his lists of 'inevitable' nicknames ('Chalky' White, 'Dusty' Miller, 'Dodger' Green) which were apparently part and parcel of any 'other ranks' mess, are these truly necessary? And is what now seems the over-representation of all forms of military language not more properly jargon, i.e. 'occupational' rather than general slang? It is, but one cannot overlook contemporary culture. Partridge had fought in what was still termed the 'Great War' and in 1937 its language was still recognized by thousands of his contemporaries; indeed it was his experience of that language, as a New Zealander who had come from the sheep farms of the Antipodes to the battlefields of north-eastern France, that first alerted him to the fascination of slang. One might be less forgiving of the appearance of so much British public school slang, which should be (and in Morris Marples' slim dictionary of 1940 would be) corralled in a book of its own. And there are other clumps of jargon, which one felt emerged from his coming upon material that was too alluring to be ignored, even if again it should have been dealt with in a dictionary less supposedly focused on mainstream slang. Similarly, his *Dictionary of catchphrases* (1961) is fascinating, but those same catchphrases could more usefully have been omitted from the larger book.

There are also stylistic problems. There is no point in condemning the hyphenation, equally 'inevitable' at the time, of such words as *f–k* or *c–t*, though *shit*, which had already appeared in the *OED*, appears uncensored, even if *sh-t-house* and other combinations which had not were bowdlerized. In any case, in later editions when such hyphens were deemed no longer necessary, Partridge would take them out. Nonetheless, and perhaps paradoxically for one who chose to immerse himself in this particular species of language, he consistently professed himself unhappy with the 'dirty' words. Less acceptable, on too many occasions, is his 'personal' tone. It was all very well

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for a genius such as Samuel Johnson to impose his own agenda on certain of his definitions (even if the sneer at the Scots and their affection for oats was a chestnut already centuries old), or for that other eighteenth-century 'character' Francis Grose to define 'c–t' as 'a nasty name for a nasty thing' or include the phrase 'cold meat' simply to state by way of definition that 'a dead wife is the best cold meat in a man's house'. Grose's successor in slang collection, John Camden Hotten, had resisted the inclusion of too many homegrown comments. Farmer and Henley themselves, working in the shadow of the regularly appearing fascicles of the *OED*, had eschewed any such thing, The lexicographer may be a drudge when working; when published he or she becomes, writ however small, a minor deity, whose material, if it is to be of worth as reference, must be taken seriously; Partridge's sniggering definitions of such terms as 'miniskirt' (and what, one may justifiably ask, was the word doing in a slang dictionary in the first place?) help no one, least of all himself.

And while Partridge's coverage of his earlier material is as all-encompassing as he could manage, he falters badly as he attempts the modern, twentieth-century world. He was born in 1894 and the bulk of his life took place in the twentieth century but by the end of World War II, when the Americanization of British culture was accelerating, and with it the undeniable importance of American slang, he began to appear out of touch. His decision to exclude American material, just about acceptable in 1937, was soon to prove a fatal error, and although he never changed his position in the seven editions of the book that followed, there was a suspiciously large amount of what was termed 'Canadian' slang. Perhaps equally problematic was his apparent failure to come to terms with the new phenomenon, itself a part of Americanization: the teenager. For Partridge the essential creators of slang were the white working class, their criminal peers, and the forces. After 1950 all that changed. The predominant source of new slang, as much in the UK as in the country of its origin, would be that of America's black working class (as it remains), and if criminals were undoubtedly still as creative as ever, they were more likely that branch whose exploits were to be found in popular US *films noirs*. As for teenagers and all their cults – teddy boys, beatniks, mods, rockers, hippies – they almost completely passed him by. Similarly the expanding world of recreational drug use, all of whose participants, when noted at all, were simply unmodified 'addicts'. It is always a problem for the slang lexicographer: he or she grows older while the youthful coiners remain forever young; the gap grows and in time, inevitably, it becomes too great to be bridged. Again what had passed in 1937 would not stand muster a few decades later.

Partridge died in 1979; even then the brand was deemed good enough for a posthumous edition, edited by his friend Paul Beale, to appear in 1984. But that seemed that. Beale himself died and it might have been expected that as lexicography's Pacman played itself out, a successor would appear to 'eat' the *DSUE*. This happened – my own one-volume *Cassell dictionary of slang* appeared in 1998 – but that same year Routledge decided that the old brand could be given one more makeover and, thus polished, could return to the game. Looking at a book then more than sixty years old, and for all its extra entries still very much bearing the cultural stamp of its

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venerable first edition, it might have seemed that if the brand was to be revived, and if it was now to reflect a hugely altered world, the material it offered must suffer not merely a polishing but a complete ground-up reconstruction. For whatever reason – presumably budgetary – this course was not chosen. Instead it was decided at long last to Americanize the book, offering examples from 1945 onwards and in the context of purely English English, to add the slang terminology of the fifteen years since the eighth edition, plus anything else of post-war slang that Partridge might have missed. In addition, like Jonathan Lighter's ongoing *Historical dictionary of American slang* (*HDAS*, 1994 et seq.), and indeed my own multivolume work in progress, there would be illustrative citations. The dictionary thus created would run to two volumes. For its editor the publishers chose the Californian Tom Dalzell, whose day job is as a union lawyer and who has written two popular slang books: *From flappers to rappers* (1996) and *The slang of sin* (1998). His job was to add America to the mix; he was to be assisted by Terry Victor, otherwise an actor, who was to help bring the British material up to scratch. It appeared in late 2005.

The essence of a reference work is clarity, and that begins in the design. The scholarship, however refined, is as nothing if the page is a blur of text, further confused by abbreviations and barely comprehensible short titles which add to every consultation of the text a second trip to the bibliography. Routledge have been almost profligate with white space and the entries, laid out in double columns per page, are eminently readable. While these entries differ as to depth of information, the median example offers the headword, part of speech, definition, geographical label, date of first use (or first use as ascertained by such dictionaries as the *OED* or *HDAS*) when the word's origins predate 1945, and a representative list of citations. Phrases are listed with the pertinent noun. Unlike most dictionaries, where space is at a premium, the editors seem to have resisted abbreviation: parts of speech are spelt out in full, as are the names of countries – Australia, New Zealand – whence a slang term may come. Titles too are offered in full.

As regards simple labour, there is no faulting Dalzell and Victor's efforts: at 2,189 double-columned pages the book offers some 900 more than did the final *DSUE* of 1984, although the presence of citations, and the time limit of 1945, probably halves the number of entries. And the twin aims of updating and Americanizing have been carried out in ample measure. The respective page 1's have but a single word in common – *aap*, a S. African synonym for a marijuana cigarette – and of *NPDSUE*'s 20 other entries, 15 are labelled 'US' and two more are international. There is a single unequivocal 'UK', and that a rather dubious past participle. This proportionality seems to hold for the rest of the book, reflecting, as it doubtless should, the increasing postwar domination of English-language slang by American terminology. That much of Partridge's original material has vanished is unsurprising; as suggested above, so much of Partridge's original material predated 1945. And if Partridge seemed nonplussed by the postwar world, especially as seen in its young and socially deviant, Dalzell and Victor have had no such problems. One might argue, one might always argue, as to certain specifics, but the bottom line is that while slang evolves too fast for any printed work to be truly 'up-to-date', they have done their best to keep pace.

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Routledge's brief, one gathers, was to maintain the spirit of the original, even if the content would vastly differ. In other words, to continue with the inclusion of 'unconventional English', which Partridge defined as 'colloquialisms and catch phrases, fossilized jokes and puns, general nicknames, vulgarisms and such Americanisms as have been naturalized'. The new book offers this take: 'a term recorded here might be slang, slangy jargon, a colloquialism, an acronym, an initialism, a vulgarism, or a catchphrase'. The touchstone again is linguistic informality. All well and good, but the question must be addressed: was it a useful brief? However much one may admire the work involved, it is hard to deny that it might have been a mistake for the *NPDSUE* to plunge so wilfully into the trap of Partridge's breadth of inclusions. Take, for instance, jargon or 'occupational slang'. If one is to tackle such a lexis properly, one must tackle all of it. The odd example here and there, taken from this job or that sport and then from another, is not enough. Better, surely, to exclude it. The same problem pertains to the examples of dialect. To offer *dryfoot*, a term that is apparently restricted to a single Nova Scotia fishing village, or a use of *crash* meaning 'to give', that exists only in Leicestershire, seems otiose. What one might term Partridge's errors of over-enthusiasm have been listed above: they have reappeared, although his 'personal' touch has mercifully disappeared.

The primary 'novelty' is Americanization, and there is no doubt that bringing in an American editor has ensured that this most glaring of any of Partridge's omissions has been thoroughly laid to rest. There are, to take a random page, examples of American usage from Vietnam and Korea, from the drug culture, commercial sex, television, and prisons as well as from the wider American culture. Elsewhere are more sources. All the usual suspects of course, but not a moment before time. One may feel that the selection of terms too often strays into what a purist would have to term jargon (e.g. '*cold hole* during Vietnam an enemy tunnel that has been verified as empty'), but such too was the Partridge way. And thanks to collaborators in Australasia and the Caribbean, the fruitful slangs of both these anglophone areas have been included. Again, the purist might argue that the West Indian material might not really be slang – the lexicographer Richard Allsopp has no 'slang' label in his *Dictionary of Caribbean English usage* (1997), but divides language into 'Formal', 'Informal' and 'Antiformal' – but the purist would also enjoy the material on offer. And the linguistic fecundity of Australia, with a little help from their *Enzedder* cousins, has been in place almost since the First Fleet landed in 1788. No other country, after all, has as its very first dictionary of any sort one of criminal cant. It is ironic, sad even, that it is in the British material, the foundation of Partridge's own work, that this revised edition seems weakest. Indeed, on some pages, once one has excluded the rhyming slang, too much of it surely ephemeral, it is hard even to find it and when one does, all too often it seems to have been plucked too uncritically from a list or glossary. It is perhaps symbolic of the UK's role vis-à-vis the States that all that appears to remain of its slang is the rhymes, as beloved of tourists as such equally venerable phenomena as black cabs and red buses; but there must be, indeed there is, much more. Partridge, like no one before him, paraded the glories of that homegrown lexis; so comparatively lacking in UK product is the *NPDSUE* that

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rather than seeing the latter as a replacement for its predecessor, it might be best to read his 'old' and this 'new' dictionary as a single, expanded work.

Americanization aside, what the *NPDSUE* boasts that makes it 'new' is of course its citations, the examples of usage that have been a part of high-level lexicography for several centuries, most notably in the *OED*. Indeed, as one edition of France's *Larousse* suggests, a dictionary without citations is no more than a skeleton without flesh. Partridge himself did not have the opportunity to include them, although he part-remedied the omission in the *Dictionary of the underworld*. A dictionary based on such citation use is known, to lexicographers, as being written 'on historical principles', which means in this context not 'historical slang' but the history, through a succession of usage examples, of a given word, its main and sub-definitions, its development, and its nuances. Such a work is not vital for every user. The majority of those who consult slang or standard dictionaries do not require such academic extras. But once the lexicographer essays citations, then he or she moves up to that topmost rung of research, and must assume that those who use the dictionary will require authoritative information.

Sadly for those users, the *NPDSUE* fails to provide such authority. Dalzell and Victor have read widely and their bibliography (twenty-seven double-columned pages) offers a substantial range of sources. But their efforts are undermined by what must have been an insoluble problem. For 'historical principles' to be of use, for citations to offer more than just random examples of a headword's use, they have to be, as far as is possible, comprehensive and they have at least to attempt to go back to square one, that important 'first use'. But with a cut-off date of 1945, this simply cannot be done. Too often their cites turn up, as it were, after the action's over. To take the most obvious of examples, *fuck*, def. 1, 'to have sex': what real information does the user gain from the three cites, one for 1947, one for 1990, and one for 1997? That the term is marked '1500', i.e. the presumed first use, is if anything more frustrating. But these three quotes are not citations in any useful way, they are simply examples. Of course it is also very possible that for all the reading achieved, their deadline left them no time for all the extra reading that even an attempt at comprehensiveness would require. The creation of 'historical principles' dictionaries is a notoriously lengthy process: the *OED* took forty-plus years, Germany's *Deutsches Wörterbuch* a hundred more than that. A further problem, which cannot wholly be put down to restrictions of space given the generosity of the design, is that too often a citation lacks any text, offering merely a page reference. Such abbreviated cites are perfectly acceptable if the author is simply quoting another dictionary or glossary – merely to reprint a definition one already has is pointless – but not when there is actual illustrative text on offer. Citations should both show and tell, and simply telling is insufficient. A further inconsistency comes with those terms that have no citations whatsoever. Again, one can imagine quite justifiable reasons for such omissions, but again one has to feel shortchanged. If one can find a citation for *fritz*, as a verb, to break, surely one can find at least one for *Fritz*, a German. And if, as in *six inches of hot cock*, one is told that it is 'UK 1974' but given no other evidence thereof, a critic might justifiably ask the editors: why exactly should I believe you?

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Dating is of course one of the lexicographer's primary problems, and perhaps even more so for the slang researcher, given the nature of the language to be found. Unlike those composed in standard English, slang works, whether for reasons of class or perceived vulgarity, were far less likely to be published, at least until the last half century. And until everything is scanned and made available to sufficiently sophisticated search engines, so much research for citations has to be serendipitous, however much one attempts to pretend otherwise. The examples may exist, but one has to find them. It is as if there exists a world of latent citations, often earlier ones than we have, that have yet to be unearthed. Latency is theoretical, what appears in the *NPDSUE* is not. Setting aside the intrinsic importance of the phrase, if *I could eat a farmer's arse through a hedge* is dated here to 1988, how much real use is that fact if, as it transpires, the term can be found in 1954? Such doubtless unintentional misinformation is hardly unique to the book under discussion. Don't shoot the drudge, he really is doing his best.

In the end one has to admit to a sense that the book is forced between two stools – the single-volume, noncited 'popular' and the multivolume, fully cited 'historical principles'. That it does neither one thing nor the other has to be frustrating, and one suspects as much for the authors as the reader.

The *New Partridge* is not a bad book and like any slang compilation worth the name, it is often a fascinating one – such is the nature of this ever-alluring subset of the English language. But on the grounds of pure utility, and one has to assume that such grounds lie at the root of any reference work – what else ultimately is its point? – there have to remain serious doubts. If these stem from the authors' required following of the idiosyncratic style and system that made Partridge's efforts 'Partridge', then perhaps they might have been better advised to stand tough and discard that same over-embracing regime. In the event they have chosen otherwise and if the product of their estimable labours does due honour to their eponymic predecessor it has created a volume that is less a fully utile reference work than an agglomeration of 'unconventional' terms, of which slang is but a part. Such generalism may well have had a place in 1937, whether it does some seventy years later remains debatable. The verdict? If one may quote from volume 1, page 434: *close, but no cigar*.

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