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REVIEW

Prize-Problem Partridge

Eric Partridge, *The Selected Works of Eric Partridge*. London Routledge, 2015. Seven volume set hardback re-issue. £640. ISBN 978-1-13-891237-3; Set comprises: *Slang To-day and Yesterday*. London: Routledge, 1933. Pp. 476. Hardback £105, ISBN 978-1-13-891210-6; *The World of Words*. London: Routledge, 1938. Pp. 354. Hardback £95, ISBN 978-1-13-890441-5; *Précis Writing*. London: Routledge, 1940. Pp. 222. Hardback £85, ISBN 978-1-13-891233-5; *A New Testament Word Book*. London: Routledge, 1940. Pp. 216. Hardback £85, ISBN 978-1-13-891225-0; *A Dictionary of Abbreviations*. London: Routledge, 1940. Pp. 102. Hardback £65, ISBN 978-1-13-891212-0; *Comic Alphabets*. London: Routledge, 1961. Pp. 136. Hardback £65, ISBN 978-1-13-890435-4; *A Dictionary of the Underworld*. London: Routledge, 1949, 1968. Pp. 886. Hardback £130, ISBN 978-1-13-890446-0

Reviewed by Jonathon Green

Writing in *Slang To-day and Yesterday* (1933), his pioneering history of the lexical subset that would become his life's work, Eric Partridge, who in time would become the 20th century's leading expert in its lexis, pondered the etymology of the word 'slang'. It was, he confessed, a 'prize-problem word'. 82 years on, and 36 since the death at 85 of the man whose many fans would nickname him 'The Word King', it is hard to avoid feeling that in terms of his work and the reputation it brought him, it was Partridge too who represents a 'prize problem.'

Like his near contemporary, *OED* editor Robert Burchfield, Partridge was born in New Zealand, and like many fellow-countrymen first experienced Europe in the trenches of the First World War. It was here he met cockneys and their often slangy language, and it was that language that would fascinate him and inform his professional life. Lexicography did not come first. After the war he attempted publishing with his Scholartis ('scholars and artists') Press but the firm foundered in the Depression.

Fortunately two of its titles – Partridge's own edition of Francis Grose's *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785), and Godfrey Irwin's *American Tramp & Underworld Slang* (1931) - came to the notice of the reference publisher Routledge. They in turn had the rights to the last great slang dictionary: Farmer & Henley's seven-volume *Slang and Its Analogues* (1890–1904). They turned it over to Partridge, requesting an update. *Slang To-day and Yesterday* may be seen as his first tentative essay at learning his subject; its fruit was the substantial *Dictionary of Slang & Unconventional English* (1937, *DSUE*) which appeared in 1937; a further seven revisions would follow. In a 40-year career Partridge wrote widely, notably the *Dictionary of the Underworld* (1949, 1968) and many smaller works, all word- or language-related, a sample of which are reissued here. He was, as his nickname attests, the 'go-to' authority for all forms of non-standard Englsh. In 2005, under new editors, a full-scale revision of *DSUE* would incorporate the one thing Partridge had omitted; American slang, although this two-volume work was backstopped at 1945.

Retrospect has not been invariably kind. His methods have been criticised as dated, his lexicography as lacking rigour. The co-editor of the revised *DSUE*, Tom Dalzell, has suggested that despite his popular reputation as an unrivalled expositor of slang, from a dictionary-making perspective Partridge's real value was not in the work itself, but simply that he persisted in slang collection. Is that fair?

In a brutal dissection of Partridge's work, published in 1951 under the title 'The cant of lexicography', the folklorist Gershon Legman, himself no mean eccentric and almost invariably pitted against mainstream scholarship, eviscerated the British slang-gatherer. Partridge, he suggested, was little more than the collator of other (and the inference was, better) men's work. Worse, he was a plagiarist or, equally reprehensible, one who failed to acknowledge many of his sources. Legman also trashed – accurately on the whole – a selection of Partridge's etymologies in the *Underworld* lexicon.

It is hard to deny Legman. Partridge's dictionaries are overly skewed towards the gathering of his



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doi:10.1017/S0266078416000328

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078416000328 Published online by Cambridge University Press

predecessors' work. But this is not plagiarism, merely practicality. Legman was no lexicographer: only in some fantasy world in which the language might be virginally reborn ready for each new dictionary, can the lexicographer not incorporate his or her predecessors. The problem of etymologies is less excusable. Partridge may, as Anthony Burgess put it, have been the truest of philologists, quite literally a 'lover' of words, but his attemps at scholarly philology too often eschewed all necessary displine. Cheerfully refusing to admit linguistics into his lexicography, he always wants to make some kind of statement. For him something was always better than nothing – even if that something might err towards guesswork. Reading Legman's accurate refutations is to squirm.

Partridge also missed a vital trick: he refused to acknowledge the growing influence of America. This was just about feasible in 1937; it was a gross error after World War II. Nor, it is apparent, did the ageing Partridge 'get' youth with its cults, its music, its rebellion and soon its drugs. Slang, of course, is always a teenager, while the lexicographer grows ever older. Partridge was always happiest in the past. No sin. But for the dictionary's reader it is often the latest slang that counts. If that is missing or misconstrued, as it increasingly was as edition followed edition of the *DSUE*, the lexicon is reduced in value.

Thus his faults. And yet he enjoyed undeniable fame. First, perhaps, because of his absolute humanity. It may have led him to absurdity – such as his inclusion of an entry for *miniskirt*, and his embarrassing definition thereof – and on occasion to a level of casual racism that can only be excused by his age; but in an era when teams and corporatism were becoming the norm in dictionary-making, Partridge was always out there alone. Such is the slang lexicographer's tradition: the craft attracts solo artistes. His was also a endlessly alluring language. His voluminous correspondence underlined how fascinated people were with his work.

He was, in the end, too much of a 'gentleman scholar' for modernity. Too keen on dusty pages, insufficiently well-versed in the flash of the new. That too comes from the solo path. He grew old, slang stayed forever young and by the end, as part of the endless game of Pacman that is dictionary-making, the new lexicon inevitably 'swallowing' its predecessor, it was time for something and someone new.

This set of reissues, neatly bookended by two of his best, shows a valuable cross-section of Partridge's achievement. The wartime volumes on *Précis* and on *Abbreviations* are mainly curiosities now, and *New Testament Words* could usefully have been substituted by the superior *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (1947) or his *Dictionary of Forces Slang* (1948); but his discussion of *Comic Alphabets*, one representative of many 'minor' works, shows the breadth of his knowledge. So Tom Dalzell is surely right. If Partridge was perhaps not the star many believed, he kept the ball rolling with great skill. For that alone he deserves our appreciation.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078416000328 Published online by Cambridge University Press