

# In other words...

**THE ADVENTURE OF ENGLISH  
500AD to 2000: The Biography of a  
Language by Melvyn Bragg**  
Hodder £20 pp354

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Once upon a time, there was a television series on the history of English, beautifully shot on location around the world and presented by an informed language enthusiast. There was a glossy follow-up book, full of maps and series shots. Great idea. Anything that helps to raise public interest in the English language is, for me, a Good Thing.

That was *The Story of English*, BBC, 1986. But the English story keeps changing; every year researchers discover new things. The latest series is on ITV, with Melvyn Bragg, and there is a book as well. Great idea, I thought again. A chance to bring a new television generation up-to-date. The first sentence in this review applies again.

But not the second. This is a straight textual read, albeit with inserts of glossy illustrations, so, apart from some passing mentions, you would never know there was a television series. Bragg has, he tells us, written it from scratch. So we must forget the series, and judge the book on its own merits. Do we need a new popular introduction to English, as we already have Bill Bryson and others (including my own efforts), which Bragg readily acknowledges? Yes, but with a caveat: there has to be some "value added".

Bragg, as a novelist and a Cumbrian, *inter alia*, should give us elegant words, imaginative analogies and dialect-roots anecdotes. And we do get them. "New words are new worlds." English is "a hunter-gatherer of vocabulary". "Accent is the snake and the ladder in the upstairs downstairs of social ambition."

His main trope is that language is "a living

organism" — nonsense, of course, for there could be no language without people — but it is intriguing to see it so ingeniously developed. English is a "hungry creature" as it travels around. When sidelined by French it nurses itself "like an exiled and wounded animal", and then it takes "sweet revenge" on French by borrowing its words.

But I want more than literary tropes from a retelling of English linguistic history. So much has happened in the past couple of decades. The language has become global and changed dramatically. And recent research has debunked numerous old myths. All of this should be in a new-millennium account. This is where I have problems. My sense of *déjà vu* is overwhelming. It is the same old story. All the myths are here. It is as if the past decade of research into the history of English hasn't been.

Here are some one-liner examples. Between Old and Middle English the language was "buried"? Not so; we now know there was considerable monastic copying in English throughout. Chancery "became the English word standard"? Not so; we now know it was just one factor. We "don't find everyday words" in Cawdrey's 1604 dictionary of "hard words"? Not so; it has words such as boat and buggery. The accents of east-coast America are 400-year-old "pickled" English accents? Not so; sociolinguistics has taught us that accents never pickle. Wordsworth used "ordinary speech"? Not so; no Cumbrian shepherd ever spoke like Wordsworth's Michael.

The Shakespeare myths surface again.



Talking the same language: Bragg, above, and Chaucer, from *The Canterbury Tales*

"Well over 2,000 of our words today are first recorded by" Shakespeare? No, we now know that many of these supposed first uses antedate him and, anyway, half of them never survived to modern times. "His personal vocabulary was as big as entire languages". No, no language is so small, and anyway, Shakespeare used only about 12% of Early Modern English words. "The average educated man today" has a vocabulary of less than half Shakespeare's — around 10,000 words? No, at least four times that.

It feels as though we are still in the 1980s. It is a pity, because I support the spirit of this enterprise, and share Bragg's linguistic egalitarianism, his respect for dialects, his sense of the expressive richness that borrowed words bring. His retelling is strong on Tyndale (given his rightful place, in a separate chapter), on Wycliffe, on the American Wild West, and on globalisation (although several important countries, such as Canada, don't feature). Or, at least, strong in relation to the use of vocabulary. This book is really a history of the lexicon, with the occasional

nod at other issues. It is, as its last sentence affirms, "a history of words".

With so well-known an author, this book will put the subject in front of readers who might never have bothered with it. That's good. But perpetuating myths? That's not so good. Nobody would ignore the latest research in retelling a topic in arts or political history. It should be the same with linguistic history. Bragg is a great storyteller, but he is telling an out-of-date story. As we say in English, we don't want *déjà vu*, but *nouvelle vague*. □

David Crystal's books include *Shakespeare's Words* and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. *The Adventure of English* is available at the Books Direct price of £16 plus £1.95 p&p on 0870 165 8585

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Bragg's radio series about English