

Foreword

Eric Partridge began his memoir *Adventuring Among Words* with a memorable metaphor. 'Every adventure of the mind is an adventure vehicled by words.' And he went on:

Every adventure of the mind is an adventure *with* words; every such adventure is an adventure *among* words; and occasionally an adventure is an adventure *of* words.

On this count, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* is Partridge's greatest adventure – the largest and most frequently and most thoroughly revised of all his works. And the arrival of a paperback printing of Paul Beale's sensitive and scrupulous eighth edition is an opportune moment to reflect a little on the adventurer.

Eric Honeywood Partridge was born on 6 February 1894 on a farm in Waimata Valley, near Gisborne, North Island, New Zealand. In 1907, he moved with his family to Brisbane, where he went to grammar school. He left at sixteen, and spent some years as a trainee teacher at schools in Queensland and New South Wales. A scholarship to the University of Queensland enabled him to read first Classics, and later French and English. But the First World War interrupted his studies: he joined the Australian infantry in April 1915, and served in Egypt, Gallipoli, and on the Western Front. He then returned to university, between 1919 and 1921, and received a BA. In 1921 he was made a Queensland Travelling Fellow, and went to Oxford, where he worked simultaneously for an MA on eighteenth-century English romantic poetry and a BLitt in comparative literature, both of which were in due course published. A short period of teaching at a grammar school in Lancashire followed, and then appointments at the Universities of Manchester and London. He was married in 1925, and had a daughter.

The year 1927 proved to be a turning-point. He gave up his academic career, partly because of some difficulties with public speaking (a vocal cord weakness) and partly because of his preference to become, as he liked to put it, a 'man of letters'. His love of writing had appeared early. By the time he was thirteen, he had attempted a novel and several short stories. Verse translations from French poetry were privately circulated in 1914, followed by several wartime writings, and the mid-1920s saw a number of literary studies. From 1923, he found a second home in the British Museum library, where desk K1 would eventually be acknowledged as 'his' – for over 50 years! In 1927, he founded the Scholartis Press as a private venture, publishing over 60 books, and directing it until 1931, when the pressures caused by the economic recession of the time caused bankruptcy. Under the pseudonym of Corrie Denison, he wrote three novels.

The year 1932 was another turning-point, for it was then his freelance writing began in earnest. A remarkable number of essays and articles appeared during that decade. His first

major work on slang appeared in 1933, followed in 1937 by the first edition of the present *Dictionary*. During the Second World War he joined the Army Education Corps, and later transferred to the correspondence department of the RAF. In 1945, he was back at his British Museum desk, and began a further productive period of essays and lexicographical projects. *A Dictionary of the Underworld* was completed in 1949 and *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* in 1958. He also spent more time as an editor, in the 1950s founding the *Language Library* series for Andre Deutsch – a series (now published by Blackwell) through which I had my only personal encounter with him, when I joined him in 1977 as co-editor. He used to call me ‘the working editor’ (for he was then 83) but he was always busy himself on the never-ending task of dictionary revision. He had to leave London towards the end of 1976 for health reasons, and moved to Devon. His last major project, *A Dictionary of Catch Phrases*, appeared in 1977, and he died on 1 June 1979, still working away on a revised edition of this book.

When I compiled a bibliography of his books for a memorial volume, *Eric Partridge: In His Own Words* (Deutsch, 1980), it consisted of over 75 items but this figure hardly does justice to the size of some of the works included (such as this *Dictionary*), or to the scale and frequency of the revisions. Every dictionary was continually being monitored and emended, and would eventually appear as a new edition, with the language describing the revisions as carefully phrased as the revisions themselves. His craft, as he put it, was one of ‘perpetual revision’. The original *Dictionary* was followed by a *Supplement* in 1938. A second edition, ‘revised and enlarged’, also appeared that year. A third edition, ‘revised and much enlarged’, came in 1949, and other editions followed in 1951, 1961 (by which time the work had become two volumes), 1967, and 1970. After his death, the seventh edition was revised as a single volume, in 1983, and the present, eighth edition appeared the following year.

The reminiscences of his many friends testify to his extraordinary fascination with words, and his remarkable memory for etymology and usage, so that he could respond to casual enquiries about words with an enviable immediacy. As Winston Graham, a fellow author and member of the Savile Club, put it, ‘It was as if all the books he had written were filed away page by page in his head, like a miniature British Museum Reading Room, and he only had to take down the correct volume’. Partridge described himself as an ‘addict’, someone ‘serving a life sentence’ in the service of words. ‘Once a lexicographer, always a lexicographer’, he would say, and always took care to distance himself from Johnson’s caricature of a lexicographer as a ‘harmless drudge’. ‘Lexicography’, he said, ‘is always fascinating. And often it’s fun.’ He stressed the excitement, too, of delving into the unknown, which is so often the case when investigating the origins of words. It is standard traditional dictionary practice to report ‘etymology unknown’. This never satisfied Partridge. As Anthony Burgess put it in his memorial essay: ‘Eric’s etymologies were often, as he admitted, shaky, but he preferred a shaky etymology to none at all.’

We have only to look at the sheer scale of the *Dictionary*, and the question inevitably comes to mind: how does one begin to put together such a work? And what sort of person must one be? Partridge had answers to both these questions. In *The Gentle Art of*

Lexicography, there is a chapter entitled 'How it all began'. And how it began was in a totally amateurish way.

I bought a little note-book and industriously entered all those strange names and words and phrases which came my way or which I learned by eager enquiry. "If you wish to know, ask!"

The pocket-sized notebook is the obligatory tool of the infant lexicographer. But it needs to belong to a temperament which is dogged, meticulous, organized, insightful, and courageous. For Partridge, a dictionary was like a mountain to be climbed, with the success dependent upon the planning.

For *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* ... I spent three well-occupied weeks in planning the book: the period to be covered; the scope – involving the solution of some very knotty problems of delimitation and classification; the alphabetical system to be followed ..., the order of procedure within every single entry – whether, for instance, etymology should come first or last, and to what extent, if any, quotations should be used. ... I read widely, moved in many circles, and listened hard; necessarily, I listened very discreetly, wherever I might be prosecuting my researches.

This last observation, of course, was a matter of survival, I imagine, when he was finding his informants for the *Dictionary of the Underworld*. The word 'courageous' is not lightly chosen.

But Eric Partridge's courage was multi-faceted. Take his choice of career. It would have been a relatively easy matter for him to have followed a safe career in academia, with a healthy and secure salary; but he chose to become a freelance wordsmith, living entirely from his royalties. Moreover, he decided to do this in the years of the Great Depression, maintaining his vision even after the financial failure of his publishing company. Then there is the question of the courage one needs in choosing a subject-matter. It is easy to forget – in an age when virtually 'anything goes' as far as words are concerned – just how daring Partridge was in embarking on a career in which slang would be centre-stage. The public intuition about language of the inter-War decades was still largely Victorian in temperament. Colloquialism, slang, argot, cant, bawdiness, and obscenity were considered either trivial or taboo. The *Oxford English Dictionary* had largely avoided including them. The taboo words caused the greatest anxiety, of course. Even as late as 1960 we find a public furore when Penguin dared to publish an unexpurgated edition of *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. Imagine what it was like, then, twenty years earlier, when the first edition of the *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* came out. It was the 'unconventional' element which attracted most attention. Words were being included that were normally hidden from the kind of polite readership associated with dictionary-users. Not just f**k and c**t, as they would tend to be printed (if allowed at all), in those days, but all their derivative forms and idioms, numbering several dozen. One mention was bad enough. Several dozen was really going too far.

Partridge of course knew what the reaction would be, so much so that he took pains to state plainly that he was simply a dispassionate recorder of the offensive subject-matter: the sentiments, he would say, are not his own, but 'the sentiments of the persons by whom such terms were first invented, or those by whom they are used'. And in the preface to his first

edition he states:

My rule, in the matter of unpleasant terms, has been to deal with them as briefly, as astringently, as aseptically as was consistent with clarity and adequacy; in a few instances, I had to force myself to overcome an instinctive repugnance; for these I ask the indulgence of my readers.

But his readers were not indulgent. There was a widespread opinion that, if you study words like *fuck*, it must be because you are perverted. And anyone who enquired about them must be perverted too. I can still remember the strange looks I got when, as an undergraduate with a Partridgean fascination with words, I tried to find the present *Dictionary* in my local library. It was in the catalogue all right, but it had been withdrawn from the public shelves. This was perfectly normal practice, in those days. The suspicion lasted for decades, and I would not be surprised to find some libraries still suspicious of Partridge today.

In the memorial volume, both Anthony Burgess and Ralph Elliott felt that this preoccupation with words which were not entirely 'healthy' was the reason that Eric Partridge never received any British public or academic recognition for his lifetime of lexical labour, and I agree. If he had dealt with the 'big words' of the language, the ones which attract intellectual respect, or the styles associated with refined usage, as did Sir Ernest Gowers, things would surely have been very different. Partridge died before this neglect could be corrected. But in terms of personal achievement, his stature in the history of linguistic ideas remains outstanding, and his contribution to the study of demotic English speech has had no parallel. Along with Fowler and Gowers, he is one of the triumvirate of usage pundits with which the middle decades of the twentieth century are associated. In terms of single-mindedness and sheer hard work, even to the extent of it affecting his health, I would rank him alongside the founding editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Sir James Murray. Partridge's personal and idiosyncratic approach was in many ways the opposite of that espoused by the *OED*, with its concern to establish citations from primary sources and to develop authoritative standards of presentation for historical lexicographical data. But there is room for both approaches in lexicography, and the present *Dictionary* deserves its now prominent place on library shelves. As Randolph Quirk puts it, in his essay for the memorial volume, 'Partridge's work is the best we are likely to have for a long time'.

Lord Quirk's observation was made in 1980. Two decades on, and the statement remains no less true with this eighth edition, which in its paperback form will bring the work of a remarkable lexicographer within the reach of a new generation of word enthusiasts.

David Crystal