

## PREFACE

I think there are few people (apart from lexicographers) who would describe a dictionary as leisure reading. Dictionaries are traditionally meant to solve your lexical problems—to check on a spelling, or a meaning, or (if you're a Scrabblor) to establish whether a word exists at all. It is a close encounter of the briefest kind: you open the book, find the word, check the point, and close the book. Most of a dictionary, therefore, remains forever unread—which is a shame, for there is nothing more fascinating than the biography of the words of your language. But the average dictionary is not for browsing.

The *Penguin Wordmaster Dictionary*, however, is no average dictionary. It has all the usual features of a work of this size, of course; but it also contains elements from other kinds of word-book, such as the thesaurus, the usage guide, the teaching lexicon, and the historical survey. It is difficult to know what to call it. 'Dictionary' comes closest, but that leaves out half of what is going on.

What makes this book so different is the way the editors have used expository panels throughout the work—panels which present a point of usage, the history of a word, an area of vocabulary, or the nuances of a definition. When you look a word up, you get a bonus, in the form of a panel. It makes you stop and read on, learning more than you bargained for. It's a novel and interesting idea, and one which is bound to prove attractive both to mother-tongue users and to foreign students of English.

The home user will surely be fascinated by the panels on the origins of words. Why on earth do we say that something is a *shambles*? What's the origin of *barmy*, *pantehnicon*, *quiz*, and *white elephant*? Why do we say *between the devil and the deep blue sea* (it's nothing to do with Satan)? Most dictionaries give only a brief and dry reference to the shape of a word in an earlier state of the language: this one goes further, into the meaning and social background as well. These etymologies have blood in their veins.

The foreign student will find the panel lists of words and idioms particularly helpful. Look at the various uses of *hang* and *hell*, for example, or the collections of phrases based on a single theme, such as parts of the body (see the panel at *toe*) or clothing (see the panel at *sock*). I can imagine these lists being much appreciated in classroom discussions of English idioms, especially as a great deal of care has been taken to make the examples of usage contemporary and convincing.

This is a dictionary to be read, as well as used. The test, quite simply, is to open it, at any page, and see if you can stop yourself browsing. I couldn't.

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