

ROBERT CLAIBORNE. *OUR MARVELOUS NATIVE TONGUE: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE*. TIMES BOOKS, 1983. 339 PAGES. \$17,25.

'Your manuscript is both good and original. But the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good'. So said Samuel Johnson to an aspiring author. If he had read Robert Claiborne's *Our Marvelous Native Tongue*, he might well have repeated himself, perhaps including *always* as his second-last word if he were in 'clubbable' company.

But, unfortunately, Mr Claiborne is not subservient to false pretensions. In his preface, he remarks: 'Any specialists in linguistics who may get hold of this work should be warned in advance that I have not tried to write a scientific treatise on their rather forbidding subject. I have neither the qualifications nor the desire to write for specialists; I have sought to keep technical terms and concepts at an absolute minimum, and where (as has occasionally happened) I have had to choose between academic precision and readability, I have unhesitatingly picked the latter.' Mr Claiborne also makes it clear that he has drawn his data from what he calls 'standard sources' (most of them American).

It is, in fact, when he is using such material that his book is at its best as he treads an orthodox path from Indo-European and Germanic to Old, Middle and Modern English.

But even here he can stumble. He does so when he writes: 'English, for instance, does not distinguish between the rather explosive P-sound of 'pit' and the softer one of 'tip' ...'. He stumbles again when, discussing the pronunciation of Old English, he solemnly says: 'we have no Old English tape recordings'.

For those who have some knowledge of the history of the English language Mr Claiborne is at his liveliest when he deals with American English, Black English in the United States, and dialects of British English that have developed outside the United Kingdom. Even so, some may wish to challenge, for example, statements that the source of pidgin English, wherever it is spoken, is West Africa, and that our ubiquitous *OK* developed from West African *o-ke* or *waw-ke*.

In the discussion dealing with the influence of New York Dutch on American English there are echoes of South Africa. Among the borrowings Mr Claiborne mentions are *stoop* (*stoep*), *spook*, *boss*, *boodle*, and *dom*, later absorbed into *dumb* (*stupid*). Mr Claiborne adds: 'The propensity of the Dutch Calvinists, like other godly

folk, to pry into their neighbors' affairs gave us the verb *snoep* ...'.

But, whatever the intrinsic interest of this section of the book, it is not comprehensive. And, if Mr Claiborne must drop a brick such as: 'The vehicle that most of us drive about in is a car to most Americans and Canadians, but a *cah* in New York ... and God only knows what in Sydney or Cape Town', the natural reaction is: 'He *ought* to know. If he doesn't, how can he comment competently on dialects?'

A sporadic failing is Mr Claiborne's love of the colloquial. This has resulted in misfortunes such as: 'Second, I would be prepared to bet that not one of them' ('vulgar' words) 'will be unfamiliar to any twelve-year-old kid of normal intelligence'; and 'A foreigner confronted with such goings on is likely to feel rather like the drunk in the old vaudeville sketch who keeps wandering on and off stage where two other actors are making with the jokes'; and 'John was unquestionably the nastiest piece of work ever to occupy the English throne'.

The last two chapters of the book are lively. The second-last is an analysis of jargon. The last considers the civil war between those advocating 'permissive' and those campaigning for 'prescriptive' English. Mr Claiborne also suggests reasons for the decline of literacy in the United States.

As the author says, his is not a book for the expert or the more advanced university student. But, despite its deficiencies, it may prove a stimulant for those nibbling or having to nibble at the remarkable history of English.

A. LENNOX-SHORT

E.S.C. WEINER. *THE OXFORD MINIGUIDE TO ENGLISH USAGE*. OXFORD: AT THE CLARENDON PRESS, 1963. XXIII + 412 pp. PAPERBACK. R3,95.

This pocket-size guide contains an amazing amount and variety of information. It is not intended for those learning English as a second language but for the average English speaker, who may have an unexpected difficulty. As the compiler states in his preface: