

TAILPIECE

'The Queen's English' (an Elizabethan problem)

ENGLISH WAY DOWN SOUTH

Every schoolboy knows that Sir Walter Raleigh, a dandy in matters of dress, threw down his cloak so that Queen Elizabeth could walk dry-shod over a puddle. Raleigh may or may not have been knighted for his characteristically gallant act; he was certainly signalled out for marks of Royal favour until he came to a bad end in the Tower. Among the gifts he received from the Queen was a patent for colonization of the New World.

Raleigh's colonizing ventures on the coast of North America were never particularly successful. After Virginia was viewed and named, the first party of colonists sent there in 1585 was forced by Indian attacks and famine to sail back to England a year later. The second party despatched by Raleigh in 1587 had vanished by 1591, perhaps marrying into or being killed by the Indians. At the beginning of the 18th century, however, England could boast of a thriving colony in the area known today as North Carolina. But not for long. After the War of Independence, the 'Tar Heel' State of North Carolina was admitted to the Union. Then, in the bloody civil strife between Unionists and Confederates over slave emancipation, North Carolina sided with the Confederate forces and paid the penalty when the Unionists were victorious.

Jim Murray, in the *Los Angeles Times* (April 5, 1973), wrote that 'when the North conquered the South in the

late unpleasantness between the two, it tore down the rebel flag, broke up the Confederacy, sent the carpet-baggers in, but it never could do much about the language'. Murray provided a list of translations for visitors way down South that included these examples:

- watt*: primary colour, as in 'the flag is raid, watt, and blue'.
- height*: where you don't like someone.
- mine*: principal or chief.
- mane*: Homo sapiens; your best friend is your mine mane.
- rod*: what you do in your auto.*

Southerners, especially those in North Carolina, insist that their language is nearer the English of Elizabeth I, and thus less corrupted, than the language spoken in the other States of America. Of course, the Southerners have added peculiarities of their own to the English they inherited from Raleigh's settlers. As a further guide for outsiders, the Department of Natural and Economic Resources of the town of Raleigh, North Carolina, has issued *A Dictionary of the Queen's English*. The preface to this tiny compendium (11 cm X 8 cm) has the following:

The correspondence and writings of Queen Elizabeth I and such men as Sir Walter Raleigh, Marlowe, Dryden, Bacon and even Shakespeare are sprinkled with words and expressions which today are commonplace in remote regions of North Carolina.

You hear the Queen's English in the coves and hollows of the Blue Ridge and Great Smokey mountains and on the windswept Outer Banks where time moves more leisurely.

However, the characteristics of North Carolina speech are not all holdovers from the Elizabethan era. Like most Southerners, we speak not prose but metaphor, and our dialect and idioms are devised for function, not beauty.

The Raleigh *Dictionary* is divided into three sections. The first gives examples of pronunciation and idiom. Here are a few:

- arn*: She has to arn the clothes.
- claphat*: Hasty. He always acted in a claphat manner.

* Quoted by Fromkin and Rodman: *An Introduction to Language*, 1974.

- fitten*: This food isn't fitten to eat.
jine: He decided to jine the army.
peart: Miss Jones seems to be feeling right peart (ie well) today.
tee-toncey: I'll have just a tee-toncey (ie tiny) piece of pie.
smidgen: Use just a smidgen (ie bit) of salt when you cook an apple pie.

The second section of the *Dictionary* gives examples of typical North Carolina expressions that have been home-brewed through the years. These caught the eye:

- briarpatch child*: A child born out of wedlock. 'He has two children at home and a briarpatch child.'
giggle-soup: Alcoholic beverage, usually home-made. 'They drank so much giggle-soup they could hardly stand up.'
jularker: Beau; boyfriend. 'The young lady's jularker was all dressed up when he came calling.'
picayunish: Nit picking. 'He was so picayunish that every little detail had to be just right.'
piddle diddle: To procrastinate. 'He'll piddle diddle if he isn't pushed.'
swivet: Hurry; rush. 'He was in a terrible swivet.'

Metaphor is the life-blood of a language, and the *Dictionary* contains a choice selection in its third section of the more colourful expressions to be heard in the backwoods of the rural regions or on the main streets of the State. So, if you are off to Carolina in the morning, as the song goes, be prepared for this sort of thing:

- run up and butt*: Frustrated or wasted effort. 'He tried to repair the car, but all he did was run up and butt.'
as poor as Job's turkey: Extreme poverty.
as crazy as a bullbat: In late afternoon during summer, bullbats fly in many patterns chasing the insects.
as ugly as a mud dobber: A mud dauber is an insect that makes its home in mud cocoons in barns and out-buildings.
as rough as a cob: Rural folk shed corn by hand and are, therefore, familiar with the roughness of corn cobs.

to fling a Joe Blizzard fit: Originated from the fits of temper displayed by a Harnett County man named Joe Blizzard.

Raleigh himself would have delighted in the quirks and vagaries of North Carolina speech, for he was strong on regional expression. In his *Brief Lives* (1669-96) John Aubrey recalled that Raleigh 'notwithstanding his so great Mastership in Style and his conversation with the learnedest and politest persons, ... spake broad Devonshire to his dying day'.

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