

## Reviews

Eric Partridge: *A Dictionary of Catch Phrases*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977. xv, 278 pp. Boards £7.95.

My namesake, Eric Partridge, an authority on slang and unconventional English, has extended his repertoire to an indefinable phenomenon of English, the catch phrase. Cautiously, he describes this as a 'conversational gambit, a saying that has caught the public fancy, often indistinguishable from a cliché'. His dictionary ranges widely over the English-speaking world from the sixteenth century, the majority of the specimens coming from Britain, America and Australasia.

Incredible research lies behind the venture, since popular fiction, the music hall, radio, the stage and the underworld of letters, are all laid under tribute to provide this rollicking medley of information. Nothing like it has appeared since Yule and Burnell's *Hobson-Jobson* in 1886. One is left wondering at the patience and industry that have gone into tracking down the earliest instances; for the compiler was without any official collaborator. The longevity of lexicographers is proverbial, but any such dictionary-maker would be taxed to revise and augment this mine of largely proletarian material.

One stumbling-block will ever be the matter of origins; of necessity most will be tentative. *What's this in aid of?* has been current since 1918, and Partridge says plausibly that it derives from popular street collections during World War I. *All my eye (and Betty Martin)* is a teaser, no doubt of twin birth. *My eye*, it is said, comes from French slang *mon oeil!* In England the phrase *All my eye* occurs in both Goldsmith and Surtees. *Betty Martin* seems to have been a nineteenth century after-thought, occasioned by a notorious actress, named Grace, who seduced a Mr Martin into marrying her; one of her habitual expressions was claimed to be *My eye!* The truth about folk etymologies, like this, will never be known.

This citation, however, illustrates an essential element of the catch phrase, that it should be used 'without reference to the original situation'. Proper names nearly always present a real problem, for instance in 'Bob's your uncle'. *One for the road* is readily assigned to the world of the commercial traveller.

A full page is devoted to *Does your mother know you're out?* which both the *Oxford Dictionary* and Benham's *Dictionary of Quotations* trace back to 1838. That the query occurs also in an ancient Greek graffito suggests to Partridge that certain thought patterns recur 'throughout the ages and in all countries'. The best catch phrases have an Anglo-Saxon pithiness and are longer-lived than most people believe. *Gently*, *Bently* was taken from the BBC radio show *Take it from here* in the 1940's, and is still with us; *I'm not so green as I'm cabbage-looking* comes from Cuthbert Bede's *Adventures of Mr. Verdant Green* (1853), the same year as *Pop goes the Weasel*; but even these are striplings compared with *Hay is for horses*, which appeared in Swift's *Polite Conversation* (1738).

The most prolific catch-phrase inventor is thought to have been Ted Kavanagh, the script-writer for Tommy Handley in *ITMA* (1939-49). Cinema was undoubtedly the most productive area in America. In the theatre, Albee and Noel Coward are the playwrights who contribute most fruitfully to the language. The material is practically inexhaustible; there is no reference, for instance, to *The best things in life are free* (song title); *Thin as a boarding-house blanket* (bowls cliché); *He's the fundi* (folk-word for 'expert'); *You've made my day* (social compliment); *You think you got troubles* (caption for cartoon). This list is a typical cross-section of the sources available.

This is an altogether fascinating volume, much too entertaining to be classified as a reference book.

A.C. Partridge

Patricia Hill, *Password*. Penguin, 1978. 33 pp. Paperback R1,65.

In January this year Penguin published three additional issues of their language teaching booklet (nos. 7, 8, 9). Judging from format, illustrations and much of the content, they are designed for fairly young learners of English (Standards 5 to 8 in South African terms, I would say) or for slightly older students in foreign countries learning English as a second language. This is not specifically stated as editorial policy, but the articles about Britain invite comparison with conditions in 'your country'. Furthermore, while the language is extremely simple, the content often deals with topics with which an older child is more likely to be familiar. One story deals with urban terrorism and another with the subconscious mind, while the science fiction stories assume a fairly sophisticated social consciousness.