

there is a whole history of reference books before it in the Western tradition, from the early glossaries and commentaries on Homer, the Byzantine and Roman grammarians (here surprisingly fully discussed) and what Green calls the 'protolxicographers' such as Isidore of Seville, down to the great printed Latin dictionaries of the renaissance such as the polyglot (eleven-language) work of Calepinus (1435–1511). These formidable compilations can be shown to have had a direct input into the vernacular tradition in lexicography: even in the time of the diarist John Evelyn the word *calepin* was being used in English as a generic noun for 'dictionary', and it survives in French ('petit carnet de poche') to this day.

The primary subject of Green's book is stated to be the *general-purpose dictionary*, the kind of volume on everybody's shelves. This being so, the reader may be surprised to find two whole chapters (very entertaining chapters they are) devoted to the subject of slang, though slang is at most a very very marginal feature in general-purpose dictionaries. But the author gives us a run-through on the main line of English lexicography from Cawdrey onwards. The 'hard-word' dictionaries have a chapter on their own' so does Johnson; two chapters are devoted to nineteenth-century philology and the OED (again, one asks, a *general-purpose dictionary*?). The account is breezy in style (Johnson's dictionary, we are told, was 'a freewheeling, buccaneering affair', and John Wesley's 'deliberately downbeat'). There are plenty of opinions one would want to call in question ('dialect has not survived the mass media'), and the whole book is unfortunately marred by factual and textual errors; for instance the total confusion about the dictionaries of Bailey and which edition Johnson must have used, and the mangled Latin titles (*Summa theologiae*, *Breviloquus*, etc.).

There is a final chapter called *The Modern World*. Curiously, this contains little serious discussion of developments in the common dictionaries of the twentieth century (Chambers, COD, Collins, to name three); though it must be said that here (as elsewhere) the Americans come off better; and that obscenities, taboo, feminism and PC all receive an airing. Perhaps Jonathon Green's reason for keeping mainly to the earlier works is that our reference-books today are less colourful; as the author puts it, 'the dictionary and its makers have experienced a gradual demystification': no more calepins, no more Johnsons, or even Partridges, but rather editorial teams backed up by computers. As the subtitle of the book may suggest, his real focus is on the men (and women) behind the dictionaries. It is certainly useful to read that the lexicographer Edward Phillips (the poet Milton's nephew) 'was a sober, silent and most harmless person, a little versatile in his studies, not at all infected by his uncle's principles'; even, perhaps, that

henhouse. But the diverting biographies provided so lavishly for the compilers seem all too often to crowd out effective illustration of contents; we are seldom given more than a few sample words, and there is hardly anywhere in the book any discussion of definition or other lexicographical techniques as they developed through the centuries. Four quarter-page facsimiles from the body of various dictionaries are provided among the photographic illustrations. Significantly enough, on three of them the text is almost too small to read (the fourth, easy-to-read one shows the four-letter-words in Florio, 1599). Yet Sir James Murray is given a full-page for his portrait, and even Eric Partridge, puffing his cigarette, ranks half a page.

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A History of the English Language. By Norman F. Blake. Basingstoke & London: Macmillan, 1996. xv + 382 pp. £40.00 (hb), £12.99 (pb). ISBN 0 333 60983 2 (hb); ISBN 0 333 60984 0 (pb)

As Blake makes clear, this history of the English language is intended 'for undergraduates and the general public' (p. vi), with a view to helping 'to develop that growing interest in the history of the language which has been manifest over the last few years' (p. vii). These goals have largely been fulfilled: the book will be usable as a set text for an introductory course on the history of English at most European universities, while, at the same time, being of interest to the general reader. To his credit, Blake has managed to achieve all this without having recourse to the oversimplification and popularisation that plague many recent linguistics textbooks. In addition, this new history of the English language will also attract the attention of more specialised audiences for Blake's approach to the subject differs in several respects from the approach of most other histories of the language.

The book is divided into eleven chapters. In Chapter 1, in accordance with his views expounded elsewhere,¹ Blake argues that the history of

¹ N.F. Blake, 'Premises and Periods in a History of English', *English Historical*

English is essentially a history of the variety known as the standard, 'though it must look outside that variety from time to time, if for no other reason than that other varieties have had some influence on the standard' (p. 4). In the same chapter he explains the distinction between a 'standard' language and a 'standardised' language; this latter he defines as one that 'has achieved a reasonable measure of regularity in its written form', but which, unlike the standard, is not adopted more widely throughout the country and 'remains either regional or personal' (pp. 7-8; see also Blake 1994: p. 39 ff). An example of a standardised language would be the variety of English used in a group of manuscripts copied by the Lollards in the fourteenth century (cf. pp. 169 ff).

Blake organises his discussion of the development of the language into nine periods: the prehistory of English before King Alfred; the growth of the first English standard from King Alfred onwards; its gradual decline and eventual demise by the middle of the thirteenth century; an 'interregnum' lasting from approximately 1250 to 1400 when a new standard began to emerge under the Lancastrian monarchy; the rise and consolidation of this new standard between 1400 and 1660; the years from 1660 to the end of the eighteenth century during which the focus was chiefly on regulating the standard and making it conform to the dictates of reason; from 1798 (the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* and onset of Romanticism) to 1914, a period that appears to reinforce the attitudes prevalent in the previous period while also promoting attitudes that undermine them; and, lastly, the years from 1914 to the present day during which the standard has been under attack and has fragmented into different varieties. His account closes with useful suggestions for further reading and a detailed glossary of technical terms.

As will be apparent, Blake abandons traditional divisions into Old, Middle and Modern English to focus instead on 'episodes which more accurately reflect the shifting attitudes to and developments within the standard' (p. 8). Blake is not the first scholar to question the adequacy of the conventional tripartite division into OE, ME and ModE; the issue of periodisation is one that has merited considerable attention in recent years.² Strang³ is an early example of a history of the language that breaks with

² J. Fife, 'On Defining Linguistic Periods: Gradients and Nuclei', *Word* 43 (1992), 1-14; N.F. Blake, *English Historical Linguistics*, pp. 37-46; J. Fisiak, 'Linguistic Reality of Middle English', *English Historical Linguistics*, eds. F. Fernández et al., 1994, pp. 47-61; J. Bax, 'Periodisation in Language History: Early Modern English and the Other

established practice and describes English at 200-year intervals (and in reverse chronological order: 1970-1770, 1770-1570, and so on). But Blake's periodisation seems to be much better justified since his proposed periods effectively coincide with changes in the standard, or in the social attitudes towards it.

As regards the internal organisation of the individual chapters, they cover both the external and internal history of English and include an illustrative passage followed by detailed linguistic commentary. This is a very useful feature of this work, though I cannot fully concur with Blake's decision not to provide the translation into present-day English of the specimens of Old and Middle English.

Throughout the different chapters, the discussion of the internal linguistic features is adequate considering the intended readership of the volume, though inevitably it will have to be supplemented with further reading for anyone with a specialist interest. With this limitation, it is nevertheless clear that in his treatment of the various linguistic systems (orthographic, phonological, lexical and morphosyntactic), Blake has taken care to pay due attention to recent research, as is apparent, for instance, in his account of the Great Vowel Shift (pp. 209 ff), or of the grammaticalisation of the auxiliary *do* (pp. 223-224, 264).

However, given Blake's emphasis on the development of the standard, and in so far as the spread of any standard arises from external factors, it is not surprising that he should devote special attention to the historical, sociological and cultural background of English at its various stages. This is one of the strong points of this work, particularly because of Blake's detailed treatment of aspects of the external history of English which are poorly discussed — or simply not discussed at all — in other textbooks. Witness in this respect Blake's comments (pp. 113 ff) on the ME practice of copying and glossing OE texts, which contributed to keeping the OE standard alive well into the medieval period. Or the section (pp. 175 ff) on the role of the Signet Office in the creation of a standardised spelling in the fifteenth century.

Blake has written a very readable, clear and comprehensive history of English which has something new to say on the subject and will therefore prove of great value to anyone interested in the development of the English language and in its standardisation process.

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