

that the partisans, above all, should not ignore.

A final word on stereotypes: When it became clear that Anwar Sadat was actually going to visit Israel back at the beginning of his search for peace, the mood in Jerusalem's Old City bordered on the wildly euphoric. Stranger congratulated stranger, Arab embraced Jew, and for a short time people spoke of their hopes and dreams for peace

without embarrassment or cynicism. Sadat shattered some of the stereotypes, although the pieces soon picked themselves up and pasted themselves back together. Sadat, of course, is dead, but in these hard days for Middle East peace it may help to remember that no terrorist or army can put a bullet in people's dreams and be certain they will not rise from the grave. □

THE STORY OF ENGLISH

Robert McCrum, William Cran, and Robert MacNeil
Elisabeth Sifton Books-Viking/\$24.95

Stephen Miller

Survey mankind from China to Peru, as Samuel Johnson put it, and nowadays we often find it learning English. Such is the main point of *The Story of English*, a nine-part series aired on public television stations last fall. Indeed, as Robert MacNeil, the genial host of the program, says in its companion book, "English is now everyone's second language."

The spread of English fills MacNeil with awe and wonder; it also enabled him to travel far and wide to show us its variety. The viewer of this beautifully photographed series is taken to many exotic landscapes: a bleak island in the Outer Hebrides, spectacular cliffs on the west coast of Ireland, a vast ranch in the dusty Australian outback. In search of English, MacNeil went everywhere—if not from China to Peru at least from Singapore to Sierra Leone—and also to the San Fernando Valley of California, where we get a brief taste of "Valley Girl" English. The series has its share of professors explaining things, but much of it is devoted to MacNeil's encounters with sundry locals who unconsciously betray their distinctive brand of English while hauling in fish, shearing sheep, piloting a steamboat down the Mississippi, or downing a pint in a cozy pub.

The sights and sounds of the television program are so beguiling that they make it easy to ignore the weaknesses of the series, which are more noticeable in the book. (The book, which differs only slightly from the series, lists three authors but for convenience's sake I'll speak only of MacNeil.) One weakness is MacNeil's glib anti-prescriptivism. He worships the great god Flux. Because English is always in flux, he says, "its form and expression are beyond the

Stephen Miller writes frequently on politics and culture.

control of schoolteachers or governments."

True, but who ever argued that a living language could be controlled? Even Samuel Johnson, who is attacked by MacNeil for his prescriptivism, agreed that it is vain to assume one can prevent a living language from changing. But he refused to accept the argument that "if the changes we fear be thus irresistible, what remains but to acquiesce with silence, as in other insurmountable distresses of humanity." According to Johnson, "it remains that we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure."

MacNeil will have none of Johnson's palliation, since he doesn't buy Johnson's gloominess about change. In fact, MacNeil celebrates English because it is "gloriously impure." Although he complains about bureaucratism, he welcomes most changes, including those wrought by feminists, who have given us sentences clotted with "he or she" and such solecisms as waitperson. MacNeil dismisses those who do not eagerly embrace all change by calling them the kind of people who regard the split infinitive as "the end of civilization." But who gets upset about a split infinitive? Once again, MacNeil is attacking a straw man.

MacNeil, however, is less interested in ridiculing those concerned with correct usage than in deflating the claims of so-called Standard English—the English of the BBC. Standard English, he argues, is "nothing special," and in some potted history he claims that it came into existence with the rise of the middle class. Before the late eighteenth century, no one cared about pronunciation or spelling. Samuel Johnson's prescriptivist dictionary, he argues, was published "at

the very beginning of the heyday of the middle class."

There is some truth to this argument, but not much. What does it mean to say that Standard English is "nothing special"? It is special—not because it is superior to other forms of English but because it is the English that millions of writers use when they want to reach the widest possible audience. It is the English of the Indian novelist, R. K. Narayan, as well as the West Indian poet, Derek Walcott. Other varieties of English are mainly for local—and generally oral—use. As a Jamaican poet, Mervyn Morris, sensibly puts it: "One values greatly the Creole [the local variety of non-standard English] because it expresses things about the Jamaican experience which are not available for expression in the same force in Standard English." But we need Standard English, he adds, "because we do not want in the end to cut ourselves off from international communication."

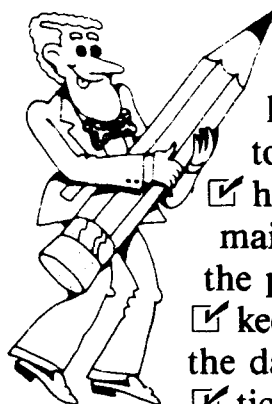
MacNeil does acknowledge this point, but his argument gets muddled. Sometimes he seems to be only concerned with the question of pronunciation. But here too he is attacking a straw man, since few would argue that only BBC pronunciation is proper. James Murray, the great lexicographer who gave us the Oxford English Dictionary, said: "Language is mobile and liable to change, and . . . a very large number of words have two or more pronunciations current. . . . It is a free country, and a man may call a vase a vawse, a vahse, a vaze or a vase, as he

pleases. And why should he not? We do not all think alike, walk alike, dress alike, write alike, or dine alike; why should not we use our liberty in speech also, so long as the purpose of speech, to be intelligible, and its grace, are not interfered with?"

At other times MacNeil seems to be arguing that all words, including Valley Girl slang, are acceptable, but on this question Murray and others would take a hard stand. Murray did not think that every word currently in use was appropriate for inclusion in the Oxford English Dictionary. Words, we might say, have their time and place, and most of the language of the Valley Girls should not be put in a dictionary—or used in most written discourse. Samuel Johnson called ephemeral slang "fugitive cant," which he said "is always in a state of increase or decay, [and] cannot be regarded as any part of the durable materials of a language." Both Murray and Johnson are talking less about correctness than clarity. Most slang words don't last long or travel well, which is why most writers use non-Standard English sparingly.

Geniuses, of course, can get away with anything. *Huckleberry Finn* is a great and very readable book even though written in a distinctly non-Standard English. But even those who championed Twain, such as Hemingway, did not follow his example. Standard English, then, should be used not because it is superior to other brands of English but simply because it is the English that most people understand—the conventional English. →

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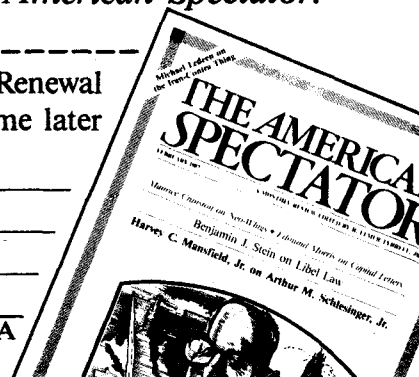
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MacNeil admits as much, but sometimes he implies that to choose Standard English over the native brand is to betray your roots. He says that David Hume was inordinately fond of things English because he tried to rid the English written by his Scottish friends of Scotticisms. But Hume, who spoke in a thick Scottish accent, actually disliked most things English, and his campaign against Scotticisms was meant to show the world that a Scotsman could write English as well as an Englishman. Writers from England, Hume strongly felt, had no special purchase on the English language.

Likewise, Standard English should not be thought of as white English. In a long chapter on black English, MacNeil rightly argues that it "is gradually being recognized as just another variety of English, neither worse nor better than the way English is spoken by Scots or New Yorkers." But to say black English is not inferior—is indeed a legitimate variety of English—still does not resolve the problem of its appropriateness in the world at large. As a black educator puts it, "we should never lose sight of the need to provide for our young people access to Standard English, which is really a gateway for them to the broader community."

Unfortunately, after quoting this woman, MacNeil goes on to say that Wilson Goode, the black mayor of Philadelphia, "has had to learn to talk white" in order to be a successful politician. But there is nothing "white" about Standard English, as MacNeil himself knows, since in the same chapter he says that many Southern whites speak a brand of English that closely resembles the English of Southern blacks. So black English is really a misnomer. Martin Luther King, I imagine, could speak it, but his famous speech, "I Have a Dream," was spoken in Standard English.

To defend Standard English is not to argue that it is a rigid and permanent body of "correct" words and usage. Purists who fret about the use of "hopefully" for "it is to be hoped" are, hopefully, few in number. Nevertheless, some changes should be lamented because they make English less precise and less elegant. Take "disinterest," which is increasingly being used to mean lack of interest rather than impartiality—being "above" interest. Thus the *Washington Post* reports that the New York business community views government employees "with disinterest or disdain," and Jane Brody of the *New York Times* writes that there is "a pervasive disinterest in sex." Those familiar with the old meaning of disinterest find this use of the word jar-

ring and confusing. More important, the new meaning of disinterest eliminates a very good old word, one that has played an important part in English philosophical prose, and one that lacks a good synonym.

One could give many other examples to show that the story of English is not so glorious as MacNeil suggests. Nevertheless, it is hard to work up any anger about the TV show or book, since much of the non-Standard English MacNeil puts on display is fascinating in its own right. One learns, for example, an Australian expression for a

woman's having had a hysterectomy: "She had a hizzie in her hizzie." Other Australianisms are also amusing if not quite clear—e.g., as mad as a gumtree full of galahs (MacNeil never tells us what a galah is). There are also some wonderful slang words that were coined on the American frontier: absquatulate (to go away or skedaddle—another superb word) and discombobulate, both of which sound as if invented by W. C. Fields. The book is a treasury of regional expressions—but it is a pity that MacNeil didn't fashion his arguments more carefully. □

FALLING TOWARDS ENGLAND (UNRELIABLE MEMOIRS CONTINUED)

Clive James/W. W. Norton/\$15.95

H. W. Crocker III

Clive James is to British television what Dick Cavett is to American television—an intellectual who wants to be an entertainer, a combination bound to disappoint. The jokes of the entertainer sound silly, shallow, and low-brow when one is seeking intellection, and the literary references, invocations, and commentaries of the intellectual sound like pseudery, cant, and show when one is expecting entertainment.

But whatever doubts one might have about Clive James—and an American audience probably won't have any, not having been widely exposed to him—can be blissfully washed away by this tremendously funny second volume of his "unreliable memoirs" ("unreliable," because where fact is too arid James has sensibly employed fiction to keep things moving, and because many of the characters are composites—though hard-working, lady-killing Dave Dalziel is obviously Bruce Beresford, James's former roommate and the director of *Breaker Morant*).

Falling Towards England is the story of a young man from the provinces (in this case, Kogarah, Australia) come to make his fortune in the big city—or, in James's case, to survive in London for two years so that he can establish his residency in England and win a scholarship to Cambridge. His entry into the land of hope and glory is a humble one. "My own luggage consisted of one very large suitcase made of mock leather—i.e., real cardboard"—filled with "a valuable collection of tennis shorts, running shorts, Hawaiian shirts,

T-shirts, Hong Kong thong rubber sandals, short socks, sandshoes and other apparel equally appropriate for an English winter."

He wallows in the usual horrors of an impoverished bachelorhood—he lives in filth, drinks too much, eats revolting food, is flummoxed by washing machines, and keeps his ludicrous clothes in a terrible state of disrepair. And as a twenty-two-year-old graduate of the University of Sydney, a radical socialist, a would-be poet, and a grand bohemian poseur, he sees fit to bore all his friends with his ideas on politics, art, the cinema, and literature.

He also has trouble with his landladies, including Mrs. Bennett, who "was eighty plus and walked with a stoop, which meant, since she was not very tall in the first place, that I often didn't see her before falling over her," and Hearty McHale, who "rather than see us enjoy ourselves would have called for an air strike to destroy her own house."

In addition, of course, he has trouble with women. When not, despite his socialist principles, dazzled by the beauty of the upper classes—"Sitting out there with those wonderful, hand-

woven, gentleman's-relish women under the same sun, I was made invisible by my appearance, like a satyr in an old engraving who blends with a gnarled tree-trunk and its attendant shrubbery"—he suffers the usual slings and arrows of a bachelor's outrageous misfortune: "Pandora invited me back to her flat for coffee. I told myself to stay calm and it would all drop into my lap. It did, too: a steaming hot mug of Nescafé. Nothing else. Perhaps it was a tactical error to give her my standard lecture on the evils of capitalism. I gave her the short version—less than three-quarters of an hour—but before it was half over she was saying 'Really?' in the middle of each sentence as well as at the end. When I tried to kiss her on the way out I rammed her spectacle frames. It was like being thrown against a wind-screen."

Most of his time, however, is spent in being fired from menial jobs for general incompetence, in shamelessly borrowing money from his friends, especially his girlfriends, and in building a personal library he can't afford. "I pursued the life of the mind as if the world owed me a living. If the mind develops at all in such circumstances, it is likely to do so leaving certain gaps, one of which will be the failure to realise that to borrow money without the intention of paying it back is a form of theft. I, on the other hand, believed that property was theft—a more glamorous idea altogether, and one which encouraged the notion that if you could induce an acquaintance to give you some of his property in the form of money you were practically a policeman."

At the end of *Falling Towards England*, James prepares to abandon his shambolic existence for the sheltered cloisters of Cambridge, expresses remorse for some of his many misdeeds, and even manages to exhibit a new political maturity. "The common ground between revolutionaries and parliamentarians is made of air. Its transparency can be rendered apparent by a very small fact. You can be in a demonstration, someone near you will pick up a stone and you will realise that you are in the wrong place. Being obliged to remember from that day forward that your fine ideas weighed less than a pebble will never be comforting, but always salutary."

It matters little whether the bulk of this unreliable memoir is fact or fiction. Scholars wishing to enshrine Clive James's place in the history of English literature—if such there be—can always devote themselves to ferreting out the truth (it's the sort of thing that keeps them out of mischief). But for the rest of us, the steam roller wit of this very funny book is its own reward. □



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