

A Borrowed Language

A HISTORY OF FOREIGN WORDS IN ENGLISH. By Mary S. Serjeantson. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1936. \$6.

Reviewed by J. B. DUDEK

THE scholarly author of this volume—M.A. (Liverpool); D. Phil. (Oxon.); Reader in English Language in the University of London—has assembled, within its 354 pages, including indices, an astonishing catalogue of facts, many of which will doubtless strike the average reader as belonging to the “Believe It or Not” order. Compiling it must have been an appalling job. Just for what kind of public the book is intended is not easy to guess. It supplies a demand for a brief account of words taken into English from other languages, but the expert would say at once that so broad a subject cannot possibly be treated adequately in one book of this size. The non-technical person, on the other hand, stumbling along through page after page of queer words like *agaynes*, *assald*, *case-ring*, *celmert*, *cyrtel*, *dihtan*, *iurne*, *lop-estre*, *meyme*, *plett*, *radde*, *segne*, *seolc*, *trahtian*, and *wrasse*, will begin to wonder if he is being spoofed. I once heard of an old lady who bought a dictionary and, after reading it from cover to cover, brought it back to the seller with the complaint that there was no plot to the thing. Well, to this book there is a plot, long and involved; but discovering or pursuing it, in a maze of verbal curiosities, dates, and quotations, is sometimes apt to be a little exasperating. Tersely, this is not a book that he who runs can read.

The beginning of the story goes back to before there were Englishmen in England. The reader is led laboriously through the period of Latin borrowings, through that of expansion under Scandinavian and French influences; then through the fourteenth and fifteenth cen-

turies, which brought in words from other European languages, and finally through the sixteenth, when the great influx of new words from such widely separated regions as the Far East and the Americas began, up to modern times. The date of the first recorded appearance of each word in English is meticulously shown, whenever possible, and there are plentiful quotations exemplifying actual use of the individual words. Attention is not limited to foreign words existing in the English of today. If anything, too much is devoted to those that now belong to an English as dead as some of the languages from which they were originally taken. In dealing with the modern period, the author admits that her choice of words to be discussed may seem arbitrary, but explains that she has tried to include (only?) “those which the ordinary English reader is most likely to come across in not too specialized literature.”

Consequently, the volume is full of surprises. For example: ask any one the derivation of *intelligentsia*, and the answer, off hand, would probably be that it is from the Latin *intelligere*. Quite so; but, *intelligentsia* itself, according to our present author, got into English in 1920, via Russia!

Except implicitly, there is, in general throughout the book, scarcely enough distinction made between actual loan words and those which, in their ancient or modern English form, are cognates of words extant in other languages. *Abbat* (abbot), *cardinal*, and *cuntesse* (countess), for instance, are set down as definitely borrowed from the French. Since dates are assigned and references given, it is impossible to disagree with the learned author. But, these three words, ultimately Latin—not to dig for deeper roots—have their equivalents in, respectively, the German *Abt* and the Czech *opat*, the German *Kardinal* and the Italian *cardinale*, the Italian *contesse*, and so on. Were they, as a matter of fact, real

importations into English from any particular current language at a specifically determinable time, or are they simply, as they exist simultaneously in several languages, attributable to a common source? But, I forget that Doctor Serjeantson writes as a historian rather than as an etymologist. To preclude or answer all such questionings as mine would have taken her too far afield. As it is, she has undertaken to spade quite enough territory.

All in all, Doctor Serjeantson has acquitted herself well of an almost superhuman task and has amassed, in *condenso*, some very valuable and interesting stuff. The reader with the necessary patience to go through this book carefully will be amply repaid for his pains. He will probably, by then, be asking just how much of the English language is really English.

“Walk—Don’t Run”

THIS WAY OUT. By Henry Pratt Fairchild. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1936. \$1.

Reviewed by ROBERT C. BROOKS

IN CASE of Emergency Choose the Nearest Exit and Walk—Don’t Run—Directly to It.” With regard to the “Emergency,” i.e., our present deplorable economic condition, Mr. Fairchild has recently published, under the auspices of the People’s League for Economic Security, a “pictorial economic primer” entitled “Rich Man, Poor Man,” to which the present timely opuscle is a sequel. “Walk—Don’t Run” means that as “the Nearest Exit” peaceful, democratic socialism should be chosen rather than violent, dictatorial communism. Mr. Fairchild’s argument is a marvel of lucidity and sweet reasonableness; however it suffers somewhat from the defect of its qualities, namely over-simplification. By the methods proposed in “This Way Out” and on the basis of a four or five-hour work day, five days in the week, the author maintains that every family in the United States “might have an income in goods and services equivalent to a purchasing power of at least five thousand dollars a year.” As a beginning to this most desirable consummation he suggests the immediate taking over by the government of all profit-making corporations, compensating present stock owners by certificates. For the first year these certificates would yield their holders the equivalent of the average annual dividends paid on their shares for the preceding ten years; for each succeeding year the amount paid them should be diminished by one-twentieth; at the end of two decades the certificates are to become valueless. Mr. Morgan recently expressed a dolorous fear that the great fortunes of the present day would be wiped out within thirty-five years. In effect what Mr. Fairchild proposes is to reduce the time to twenty years, meanwhile making the process as gradual and painless as possible.

Details and possible difficulties in Mr. Fairchild’s plan for compensation, and also his argument that in general profits are impossible under our present eco-

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conomic system, will doubtless receive full discussion in technical economic journals. Similarly political scientists should examine the author's contention that under "a thoroughly communalized economic order"—we could still have "the popular ballot, a two-chambered Congress, a Cabinet, a Supreme Court, a President—in short, all the particularly American forms and instruments of democratic government."

In spite of the defect noted above—or rather because of it—"This Way Out" is admirably adapted for reading by adult education groups of every description. Issued as a pamphlet in a cheap paper edition the Socialist party should find it a tremendously effective campaign document. Incidentally the sixteen full-page cartoons in the style of "Coin's Financial School" which accompany the text are admirably drawn (why is the artist's name omitted?), and add materially to the popular appeal of the book.

Pittsburgh Epic

PITTSBURGH MEMORANDA. By Haniel Long. Writer's Editions, Box 750, Santa Fé, New Mexico. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JOHN GOULD FLETCHER

THE difference between the American poet and his cousin, the English poet, is a difference between concentration on form and concentration upon utterance. The things that live in American poetry are, for the most part, examples not of polished form but of intense utterance; and this applies to all American poets from Emerson to Robinson. Perhaps it is because here in this continent the gap between the brute facts of life and the poetic impulse itself lies deeper than elsewhere, that the American poet has so rarely found in himself the ability to construct works of large scope, in which the form is appropriate to the content at every point.

Haniel Long has written, in a form that shifts easily from prose to verse and back again, a work of epic dimensions and has labelled it modestly "Pittsburgh Memoranda." It is a contribution to the poetry of higher social import than, say, the poetry of 1913-1930, which is now being written and which characterizes our time. No one can accuse Mr. Long of living in an ivory tower, and thinking out his thoughts. Nor can any think of him as an escapist from the machine age. His theme is the history of Pittsburgh from the Homestead Strike to the present day.

What one notes about this poem is Mr.

Long's great sense of fairness. Though he is obviously opposed to Andrew Carnegie spending abroad the millions that his miserable and dispossessed hirelings amassed for him, he is fair to Carnegie. He also is fair to John Brashear, the maker of telescope lenses in a city without light, to George Westinghouse who played the industrialist's game gracefully while it lasted, and to many more. This fairness may account for a certain lack of emphasis in the poem—a lack further marked by the apparently effortless alternation between poetry and prose. Long attains a certain dignity, but it is the dignity that was attained by the more important poems of Landor before him—it has gravity, but not intense force.

Nevertheless, there are passages here which are as good in their sustained realization of substance as anything in American poetry for the last twenty years. By sticking close to fact, Long obtains—in

the Stephen Foster episode, the Mrs. Sof-fel episode, the episode of the two Pittsburgh boys who went into the World War and did not return—effects of great pathos and sometimes almost unbearable poignancy. Nor is there anything wrong in the form in which he chooses to tell the story. For medium he uses a slow-cadenced, even-tempered prose, interspersed with blank verse comment. It serves excellently its purpose. Now and then the poet's voice is heard admonishing us, to have courage and faith; and to cultivate, not the impulse to outward conquest over nature, but the "all-healing inward." For, as he says:

Our fathers died victorious over the outward.

Peace to them. Courage to us,
Who fight not Indians but insanity.

John Gould Fletcher first made a name in the pre-war revival of poetry.

~~~~~ A BORZOI BOOK ~~~~~

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~~~~~ ALFRED A. KNOPF · N.Y. ~~~~~