

Take Your Pixel

by JONATHON GREEN

WHEREBY it is mutually agreed as follows concerning a work of non-fiction original to the Author at present entitled: A Dictionary of Slang...

There are, so my publishers assure me, only fifteen months to go. Fifteen months of a project that has effectively been in train since the early 1980s, came up to speed a decade later and which in its final, commissioned form is just a decade old this year. Commissioned by one publisher, passed on to three more through a succession of takeovers, it has now gained a new sponsor – who in the way of the modern media prove to be a subset of that same group who owned the very first. The research has taken in well over fifty person-years (twenty five of mine and the much-appreciated dedication of a number of colleagues), and the editing team's efforts will undoubtedly up that substantially. It has generated around 130,000 definitions which are in turn underpinned by around 535,000 citations or usage examples. There are 12.6 million words (which is upwards of 60 million characters). The whole thing is likely to occupy three volumes, and they will be large, double-columned, small-printed – 'dictionary-sized' as the catalogues put it – which is of course quite right and proper since the project in question is my large slang dictionary. I have no intention of retiring, but it is undoubtedly the culmination of a life's work – perhaps not on chronological terms, but in the sense that nothing I have ever undertaken has expanded so completely to fill every crevice of the daily round. Will I be pleased? I hope so. Will my lexicographical peers approve? We shall see? Will the book be of some value? That is the intention? And will it be actually... used? Now there's the rub.

When I set out to amass slang, around 1982, the nearest 'computers' that most of us experienced came at a distance, via the chips embedded in a variety of industrial, commercial and domestic appliances, with none of which we interfaced at first hand. Other than the American uber-nerds who had around the mid-1970s started buying the newly available kits for something called the Altair the nearest thing to a 'computer' that was practically available was the handheld calculator. There were some fancy-dan typewriters which were straining to promote themselves as 'word processors' but the world of the 'personal computer' and with it such things as spreadsheets and more important for me database programs, was unknown. The initial database for my first dictionary of slang resided on 5x3 inch file cards. There were 11,500 (an A-Z total slightly less than that of those headwords now assembled

at the letter 'S'): when in late 1983 I obtained an IBM PC and, luxury of luxuries (and cost of costs) an external hard disc of some 20 megabytes I faced the task of transcription. Well, if nothing else it taught me how to use the machine.

But the point remains: the machines may have been creeping very slowly into view, but dominating the foreground were those centuries' old four-square, pick-'em-up and hold-'em-in-the-hand, delivery strictly over the counter and in one and only one format, those children of Gutenberg: books. And never more so than on the shelves marked 'reference'. In 1982 the OED had only just published the third of its post-war supplements and there would be another in 1986, before the 20-volume second edition appeared in 1989. (And for those who resist the online OED that 1989 edition remains the one you get). The new DNB, another massive Oxford project, was still far in the future, and wherever one looked, from the new edition of Grove's encyclopaedic study of classical music to Colin Larkin's equivalent for pop and rock, to Frederick Cassidy's *Dictionary of American Regional English* (4 vols. and still counting), to a variety of national lexica, collections of technical jargon... the whole nine yards of reference shelving were still groaning. And the groans, one might note, were definitely those of satisfaction. Might one add complacency?

I bought my first machine as a servant, a facilitator, a colleague even (albeit one whose ways were not as mine and who offered me a single choice: compromise or die). As a computer-savvy friend told me very early in the day: it is a machine, as such it is stupid, very stupid; and if it is clever then it is only insofar as you make it so. But it is fast. Very, very fast. When I finally tossed out my file-cards, some 44,000 had been amassed for various books, and they made a decent dent in a convenient skip, the computer's CPU box took them all and begged for more. It neither requested extra space (rather, as the years passed, the machines would actually shrink, while the storage they offered vastly expanded) nor slowed in its enthusiasms (again, as years passed it would hugely accelerate), and, best of all, the grotesque £7000 price that I had to find for that first snail's-pace system, would never need to be amassed again. The one thing it didn't do, of course, was the work. Like the creative writer's blank page one had

the machine's yawning screen (black with green text back then), a pristine database form demanding a new piece of grubby slang. And that has never changed.

As I say, a hyper-efficient companion (and here I take the utopian view – that of the three component light grey lumps no permutation seemed to be designed to make it possible that any two might work with a third, that the box-shifter who sold me the thing knew even less of its working than did I, that . . . we all have our techno war stories). But essentially a slave. And definitely not someone who was going to kick me out of house and home, to render me penniless, to dump a quarter of a century's dedicated labours . . . in the skip.

I exaggerate, but as publication draws (reasonably) nigh, it is impossible to overlook certain factors, notably the imminent death, at least as regards reference publishing, of print. Or if not of all print, then certainly that of large, heavy, cumbersome multi-volume dictionaries. The OED has announced that 1989's 20 volumes will be the last to appear in hard copy. The mighty engine of Little Clarendon Street grinds on to great effect, but those who wish to access its products must pay if they want to play. Were the dictionary to return in paper it appears it would – at the moment – and there are at least two decades of revisionary work to go – take up 40 volumes. Never 'appen, as we say down here below the lexicographical salt. And I understand why. I have the OED – the thirteen 1933 volumes and the four post-war supplements, I can see them across my room; I like to handle them, listen to the rattle of those rag-paper pages (still in so much better nick than my own, far more recent wood-pulp efforts), gaze at the delights of their typography (does the world hold anything more fair than a double page – that's six columns – completely occupied by a totally undifferentiated succession of 6-point citations), even to smell them. But use them? Look. Stuff. Up? In a book? Gertcha!

Back in the day it never crossed my mind that my multi-volume explorations of slang would not join the reference party on library shelves across the anglophone world (I acknowledge that the price was always going to disqualify it from lining up with the Xmas stocking-fillers, and even, other than the major university ones, being stocked by most bookshops; and I have a single-volume, no-cites version for them). Researchers would approach the shelf, pluck down the volume, riffle the pages, find (I trust) that which they sought. There might even be . . . royalties.

Cue hollow laughter. If I cannot drag myself from my desk to take the five steps to the enshelved OED, why should I ask anyone else to make some special exception for my efforts. (That the thing is now twenty years out of date isn't much of an encouragement either). How much easier to crank up firefox, hit the bookmark, log on, key

in the text, and grab the stuff. You can even cut and paste, and never fear: even if once may be plagiarism many are safely research. And after all, isn't the online world the ideal environment for those multi-volume works of reference. No more file cards, even sanctified between hard covers; just the sibilant rattle of the keyboard. Oh happy days.

Oh really. Because while I am loathe to come the elitist – and as the representative of that most marginal of lexes and cultures, that of slang, should I even consider such a thought – but the essence of reference is that the information works. That it can be trusted. That, as far as is possible, it is accurate. Dare I even say authoritative. Because however much users may recoil from such terms, if the reference 'books' aren't authoritative then what, pray, is their point. And the vast bulk of the internet, at least in my experience of the slang it has to offer, simply doesn't qualify. Some is of course beyond reproach: the man who seems to have sat down and scanned one of my collections of slang into his website and, interspersed every headword and its definition with the words 'is the slang for' (now there's a foolproof guarantee against M'Learned Friends) deserves, perhaps, some kind of left-handed compliment, if nothing else for perseverance. Though I would like a credit. Nor is he alone, but others have at least had the decency to make some effort to disguise the original typography. Hey-ho.

Enough with copyright; my question remains: if you want accuracy in your slang dictionary, are you going to find it online. Look for it, undoubtedly, but find it? Looking at those slang dictionaries on offer it seems pretty clear that in most cases they are reminiscent (and this doubtless covers every variety of expertise) of a friend's discovery when writing (yet another) biography of the Beatles. Thousands of books on offer, of which two, just two seemed to be originals. All else was derivation, and thus it is in online slang dictionaries. One basic word-list and a good many websites. As for quality, well, the basic stuff can work as far as it goes: X means Y. But the detail?

Never so more than in the net's most popular 'slang dictionary': the Urban Dictionary. Forgive me if my heart sinks on every occasion that I see yet another print journalist parading their explorations in that morass of barely, usually wholly unformed juvenilia. At least *Viz* magazine's *Roger's Profanisaurus* (and its current iteration, the *Magna Farta*) makes one laugh. And surely no-one, however tempted, would quote it as an authority. But the Urban Dictionary: headwords that are so ephemeral that their coiners have very likely forgotten what they meant when they uploaded them, inaccurate definitions, popular etymologies of no apparent relevance . . . an unmediated mess. One may forgive the lack of lexicographical professionalism, but you are supposed to get this stuff *right*. As it is what we have is, as Eric Partridge would have termed it in the 1937 edition of his slang dictionary,

total 's—t'. But matteradam. It's online. Bells, whistles, fireworks, *tech*. Never mind the informational quality feel that lovely bandwidth. And it's so democratic; no top-down dicta. I mean maybe the word means this, maybe it means that, maybe it means... let's ask the users. Fine but if we 'asked the users' the etymology of *fuck* would read 'fornicate under the command of the king', *niggardly* and *nitty gritty* would be terms of racial abuse and Thomas Crapper, as in *crap*, would be the originator of the flush toilet which preceded him by several decades. No, UD's system of little thumbs – up for 'agreed' down for 'disagreed' – is about as far from élitist pontification as one can get. It is also about that far from producing a reliable 'work of reference'.

To which the justified reply is: you don't like what we've got, do it better. Well, I do try and I intend that my portmanteau of researches will find their way online too. There are tedious ideas of 'payment' to be overcome – and perhaps such things are as insubstantial as UD's 'definitions'. TBD as they say on contracts.

Because online is undoubtedly the place for reference. wikipedia improves, and offers some dictionary facilities; from my point of view their coverage of the theoretical side of slang is pretty good, though the historical assessment is sketchy. But that's the usual thing; the nearer one is to the story the more it falls apart. And with wikipedia I could always go the DIY route. One of these days perhaps. But if what I seem to see is either rudimentary, plagiarised or downright useless, isn't there something of worth? The answer is yes, undoubtedly, but writ small rather than global. Michael Quinion's *World Wide Words* provides an unrivalled analysis of an ever-

expanding list of terms that have provided interesting and thus debatable etymologies. He is to be trusted. Grant Barrett's *Double-Tongued Dictionary* runs herd on some of the same kind of cutting edge slang that UD purports to offer, but in this case with a standard of supporting evidence – definitions, wide-ranging citations all fully attested – that would satisfy the most demanding user. Neither pretends to omniscience, but they do what one wants: to the best of their abilities, they offer reference to which one can reliably refer. They are not alone, try, for instance Paul McFedries *Wordspy* which specializes in neologisms; but in all cases the truly useful websites tend to the specific rather than the general.

This is not, despite any appearances to the contrary, a *cri-de-coeur*. I believe that print is far from dead and those libraries will still be picking up my work. And looked at objectively it can only be illuminating to consider the changes imposed on a project that started, as it were, in the days of steam radio and will come to fruition in those of GPS-enabled mobile phones. The debate over the future of hard-copy, printed books, reference or others, continues, and remains unresolved. As for reference books, while one's heart is ever lost to the sensual pleasures of the quarto volume, one's head acknowledges the advance of technology: the net provides unprecedented opportunities of access and delivery. It also, for the imaginative creator, opens the way to whole new systems of presenting our material. But as too many people have noted for the quote to be properly attributed ninety-nine percent of everything is crap. For the net one can even add a few points. The task is to render oneself eligible for a place among that small selection of material that is not. Because *plus* is definitely changing – and it won't be *la même chose*.

[2008]