

From the Back Verandah

Did you catch the mini drama series *Oliver's Travels* on ABC TV a few months ago? A superb piece of writing by Alan Plater it is, and stars Alan Bates and Sinead Cusack are marvellous. For me it has everything: mystery and crime, romance and sex, crossword puzzles, jazz, failed academics, police whistleblowers, corrupt aristocracy in castles, computer hacking, monumental masonry . . . To say nothing of a tasty cocktail of intelligent humour and gentle wisdom, from the opening scene right up to the final Bikwilian line of dialogue.

A prolific and successful author in his own right, Plater is also noted for his adaptations. You may remember him for his work on TV gems like *Z Cars*, *Fortunes of War*,

A Very British Coup, the *Beiderbecke* trilogy and *The Barchester Chronicles* — to name just a few.

The ABC have the rights to *Oliver's Travels*, so it's likely that they'd repeat it should enough interest develop. Ancient rumour has it that it only takes five viewers to secure an ABC TV program repeat. So if you enjoyed the series, or if you're intrigued enough, why not ring the Publicity Department at ABC TV (in Sydney it's 9950-3000) and ask for another screening? Alternatively you can write to Triple Nine Four, ABC TV, P.O. Box 9994, Adelaide, 5001 or send email to 9994@your.abc.net.au.

— Fizzgig

Bikwil Addresses

Comment & contributions:
Bikwil,
18 Pembury Ave.,
NORTH ROCKS. 2151.

Email:
trogers@wr.com.au

We welcome PC disk submissions (Word 2/6/7/97, TXT formats).

BIKWIL

The Newsletter of Quiet Enthusiasms

Editor: Tony Rogers

ISSN 1328-7842

No. 2

July 1997

Another Newsletter Bites the Dust

Just kidding.

On one level, response to the first issue of *Bikwil* has been very encouraging. Since most of you guinea pigs want to be kept on the mailing list (including our friends interstate and overseas), in circulation terms our prospects look good. Thank you all. Of the compliments received a particular favourite was the one describing *Bikwil* as "whimsy for sanity's sake".

On the other hand, although some extra heroic readers have offered their services, to date an overall reticence about contributing is evident. Now, it's conceivable that

for a while *Bikwil* can continue being written by three or four people, but ultimately the life of a magazine like ours will depend on the shared experiences of its wider readership. So who else will volunteer a piece on something they personally feel enthusiastic about?

And what of you short story writers or poets out there? Or you cartoonists? Let's hear from you.

Or if you don't want to write yourself, why not suggest some new ideas for others to take up?

It goes without saying that letters to the editor are always welcome.

No kidding.

What's Inside?

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"All My Efforts to Get a Horse Have Been Unsuccessful"

Question: What do the following have in common?

- ◇ Crimean War (1854-5)
- ◇ Indian Mutiny (1858)
- ◇ American Civil War (1861-2)
- ◇ Austro-Prussian War (1866)
- ◇ Franco-Prussian War (1870-1)

Tentative answer: They were all wars fought in the second half of the nineteenth century?

Correct as far as it goes, yes. More interestingly: those wars were all reported on first-hand in *The Times* by the same remarkable man – William Howard Russell. It is now 143 years since his name first came to prominence with his reporting of the Crimean War, yet still he is regarded by many as the greatest war correspondent of all time, and indeed he may truly be said to have invented the art.

In addition to all his war despatches, Russell also reported on the Irish potato famine, the Crystal Palace Exhibition, the Duke of Wellington's funeral, the coronation of Czar Alexander II in Moscow, the wedding of the Prince of Wales, an attempt to lay the Atlantic Cable, a visit to Egypt and

Palestine he took on the invitation of the Prince of Wales, a visit to India, also with the Prince of Wales, and the later stages of the Zulu War (this time for the *Daily Telegraph*).

(The edition I am working from here is that of the Folio Society (*William Russell, Special Correspondent of The Times*, 1995), which is a selection of Russell's writings with an introduction by Max Hastings.)

Russell was born in County Dublin in 1820 and educated at Trinity College Dublin. His aim was to become a barrister, though at one stage he contemplated army enlistment, having been fascinated from childhood by the activities of soldiers in the nearby barracks. In the words of Hastings,

He seems to have been a rumbustious, cheerfully combative young man, prone to the usual range of adolescent enthusiasms for whiskey and modest riot.

It was in Ireland in fact that Russell did his first work for *The Times*, where he operated as a supplementary reporter during the parliamentary elections. Here his

In sweet collaboration
 other voices flowered
 into four-part song and rhyme:
 chorus after chorus flowed,
 sunbright sounds ascending,
 then descending like sown seed
 beneficently on fallow pastures.
 Tired hearts and spirits soared,
 composers long forgotten
 and old poets lived again
 and all was festival, call
 and response among the flowers.
 This September in St Mary's
 St Fiacre's presence shone:
 the cathedral was a garden
 of remembrance and renewal
 blessed with 'a breeze of roses'
 and above it all a petalled dove,
 so still, spread wide
 white wings of peace and love.

— Bet Briggs

The Reverence of Spring

This September in St Mary's
 was the time of flowers,
 everywhere of every kind
 in graceful symmetry
 arrayed by loving hands
 in memory of love,
 in homage and in praise
 of the fallen and the risen.
 To walk alone among them,
 pause and gaze in silence
 was to feel you'd come
 among gentle presences
 and shared unexpected calm.
 No current stirred them,
 neither air nor human flow,
 save something of their own:
 bud and blossom, leaf and stem
 instilled in stillness
 their radiant harmony of colour,
 their silent song of love.

flair immediately became apparent, when he chose to make the local hospital his base. In this way he could meet the casualties coming in from various political meetings. Impressed, *The Times* offered him a position on its House of Commons staff in 1842.

By 1854 Russell had built himself a reputation at *The Times* as an elegant writer who was able to paint in vigorous words time and place and person, so when the Crimean conflict broke out the editor John Delane selected him as the newspaper's representative. It was his reporting of this war that made Russell's a household name among the reading public in England, a popularity he never lost for the remaining fifty years of his life.

But this early fame came at a price. Before the Second World War the conditions under which newspaper reporters attached to armies had to operate were quite inadequate, to say the least. They had to look after themselves as best they could, to get as close to the action as possible by their own efforts, to compose their news bulletins wherever they could and as rapidly as possible, and then make their own arrangements for despatching them. Thus in the Crimea Russell endured all sorts of hardships: he had to supply his own

horse and his own tent, and for a while his own rations.

There can be little doubt that it was Russell's comments on the plight of the sick and wounded in the Crimea that convinced Florence Nightingale to travel out to Turkey and establish efficient and sanitary nursing facilities first at Üsküdar (now part of Istanbul) and later at Balaklava in the Crimea. And who knows? Perhaps Russell's graphic portrayal of the heroic though futile Charge of the Light Brigade in October 1854 directly inspired Tennyson's celebrated poem.

Certainly, Russell's eyewitness reports (assisted by Delane's thundering editorials) helped bring down a prime minister – the Earl of Aberdeen – in 1855. *The Times* drew attention to military and administrative incompetence in the conduct of the war, and other papers took up the cry. As a result, public confidence in the whole system was undermined, first in the higher command, then in the dubious methods of military promotion, and finally in the aristocracy itself. In vain did alarmed conservatives fulminate against the vulgar power of the press.

Just as he told the Crimean War as he saw it, in the future Russell never shrank from criticising what

appalled him. British colonialism, in particular. En route to India to cover the Mutiny, for instance, he reported how he was forced to hear from “pundits” on board all manner of repugnant racial prejudice:

As you listen to this chaos of opinions, you see a row of animated machines sitting crouched down on the floor of the cabin, swaying listlessly to and fro, as they pull the punkahs. Their slender, well-knit frames, bright eyes, and glistening teeth, give those poor “niggers” some claims to be thought, as Mr Carlyle would say, not quite unlovely, but they have a dark hide — they are low Mohammedans, and, to the intelligent Briton, they are as the beasts of the field. “By Jove! sir,” exclaims the major, who has by this time got to the walnut stage of argument, to which he has arrived by gradations of sherry, port, ale, and Madeira — “By Jove!” he exclaims, thickly and fiercely, with every vein in his forehead swollen like whipcord, “those niggers are such a confounded sensual lazy set, cramming themselves with ghee and sweetmeats, and smoking their cursed chillumjees all day and all night, that you might as well think to train pigs. Ho, you! punkah chordo, or I’ll knock — Suppose we go up and have a cigar!”

The fact is, I fear that the favourites of Heaven — the civilisers of the world — *la race blanche* of my friend the doctor, are naturally the most intolerant in the world.

Listen next to his scathing comments on slavery in America. On those “gentlemen”

. . . who indulge in ingenious hypotheses to comfort the consciences of

the anthropoproprieters. The Negro skull won't hold as many ounces of shot as the white man's. Potent proof that the white man has a right to sell and to own the creature! He is plantigrade, and curved as to the tibia! Cogent demonstration that he was made expressly to work for the arch-footed, straight-tibiaed Caucasian. He has a *rete mucosum* and a coloured pigment! Surely he cannot have a soul of the same colour as that of an Italian or a Spaniard, far less of a flaxen-haired Saxon! See these peculiarities in the frontal sinus — in sinciput or occiput! Can you doubt that the being with a head of that shape was made only to till, hoe, and dig for another race? Besides, the Bible says that he is a son of Ham, and prophecy must be carried out in the rice-swamps, sugar-canes, and maize-fields of the Southern Confederation. It is flat blasphemy to set yourself against it. Our Saviour sanctions slavery because he does not say a word against it, and it is very likely that St Paul was a slave-owner. Had cotton and sugar been known, the apostle might have been a planter! Furthermore, the Negro is civilised by being carried away from Africa and set to work, instead of idling in native inutilty. What hope is there of Christianising the African races, except by the agency of the apostles from New Orleans, Mobile, or Charleston, who sing the sweet songs of Zion with such vehemence, and clamour so fervently for baptism in the waters of the “Jawdam”?

— TR

(This article on William Russell will be concluded in the next issue of *Bikwil*.)

Web Line

One of my frequent Internet destinations is the ABC's Radio National page. To quote from the site,

Radio National presents lively debate about subjects that affect everybody: health, science, education, environment, law, religion alongside the most innovative music, performance and arts shows on Australian radio. It features popular presenters including Robyn Williams, Geraldine Doogue, Phillip Adams and Louise Adler, and well-known shows such as *Late Night Live*, *The Planet* and *Background Briefing*.

This website lets you explore Radio National and its extensive specialist programs.

There are eight sub-pages:

- ◇ What's New (highlights, awards, competitions, new series)
- ◇ Latest Program News (transcripts, program information, what's on this week)
- ◇ What Is Radio National?
- ◇ Who Is Radio National? (faces behind the voices)
- ◇ How Do I Tune In?
- ◇ Program Guide
- ◇ Explore Your Interests (subject browsing)
- ◇ Tape Sales

For me the most useful feature of this site is the *Latest Program News* section, in particular the *Transcripts*. Sometimes the currency can lag by up to two weeks, but if you're patient, you'll eventually get full, free transcripts for:

- ◇ The Health Report
- ◇ The Law Report
- ◇ The Religion Report
- ◇ The Media Report
- ◇ The Sports Factor
- ◇ Background Briefing
- ◇ Ockham's Razor

Occasionally the RN site provides transcripts of one-off programs and series, though these will be deleted after a month or two. Thus, last year I obtained the complete text of the 1996 Boyer Lectures by Pierre Ryckmans (*The View From The Bridge — Aspects of Culture*). Recently on offer were transcriptions of the public forum *What Future Medicare?* (Geraldine Doogue & Norman Swan, April 17) and the 13-part series *Rethinking Australia: Intellectuals and the Public Culture* (Robert Dessaix, April-June).

— TR

Internet site referred to above:



<http://www.abc.net.au/rn>



There are words misspelt, as in many signs graced with a spurious apostrophe (“Fresh Banana’s”, “Latest Video’s”).

Then there are grammatical indiscretions, “between you and I” or “different than”, for example.

Not forgetting meanings currently attached to words like “pristine”, “protagonist” or “quantum” that are offensive to some of us.

Yes, infringements all of them, but now I’m starting to realise that there are far more disagreeable things being done to the language. After all, English words have been shifting in meaning for over a thousand years, often in the direction of literal to figurative. Think of the history of what “oblivious” once meant, for example, or “toilet”, “potpourri” or “sanguine”.

To say nothing of grammar, spelling and pronunciation changes.

The more critical offences I’m referring to here occur in the unthinking and lazy confusion of two similar words, each with its own valuable set of meanings; in short, malapropisms.

Examples abound on radio and TV, places where one of the tasks is to communicate, too. And not just from sporting commentators

either, who frequently have to talk off the cuff, and fast, (though they needn’t try to sound so highbrow at the same time). This sort of thing:

- ◇ deprecate *versus* depreciate
- ◇ disinterested *versus* uninterested
- ◇ flaunt *versus* flout
- ◇ home *versus* hone
- ◇ imply *versus* infer
- ◇ militate *versus* mitigate
- ◇ oversee *versus* oversight
- ◇ supine *versus* prostrate *versus* prostate.

To quote Fowler,

What is required is the habit of paying all words the compliment of respecting their peculiarities,

and nothing could be more peculiar to any pair of words than their separate meanings, surely.

But is there really a “serviceable distinction” (Fowler again) to be found among the various types of errors, or am I just imagining it?

I’d be very interested in your views. Do you agree for instance that malapropisms like “hone in on” for “home in on” are more to be shunned than, say, the use of “pristine” to mean “pure”?

All opinions to be expressed in the true *Bikwil* spirit, of course — restrained and minimally negative.

— Harlish Goop

*Have I ever conducted any Stockhausen?
No, but I once trod in some.*

Sir Thomas Beecham

*I have noticed that trouble invariably follows when God
appears to be interesting Himself in foreign politics.*

Jerome K. Jerome

Quintessential Quirky Quotes

*I was recently on a tour of Latin America,
and the only regret I have was that I didn't
study Latin harder in school so I could con-
verse with those people.*

Dan Quayle

*Never eat anything at one
sitting that you can't lift.*

Miss Piggy

*Nycilla dyes her locks, 'tis said,
But 'tis a foul aspersion;
She buys them black; they therefore need
No subsequent immersion.*

Marcus Valerius Martial

A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

Newspaper readers will have noticed regular language columns and occasional letters to the editor bemoaning the state of modern English usage. Their writers are part of a brotherhood whose mission is to keep the language immaculate.

Brotherhood? Yes, they're male, as Henry Fowler himself appreciated as far back as 1926 (*Modern English Usage*):

Men, especially, are as much possessed by the didactic impulse as women by the maternal instinct.

Of course, with such a distinguished forbear, it's no wonder that these pedagogical fellows will, with little provocation, invoke their hero passionately. You've seen it — the Fowler-would-turn-in-his-grave lament. And in Fowler's prolonged and unavoidable absence, they cry, someone with authority had better step in and stop the rot, preferably the government.

But, unlike the Germans briefly under Hitler and the French in perpetuity since 1635, neither the Americans nor the English (let alone the Australians) have ever been able to bring themselves to establish government-funded lan-

guage protection institutes.

By way of compensation, we are favoured with a steady stream of handbooks on all that is incorrect and inadmissible with the use of this word or that syntax, or this pronunciation or that spelling. And while we await the next such publication we can be sure that our ever vigilant band of language custodians are there ready with their pens and email to besiege newspaper editors with details of the latest object of their loathing.

I should know. I'm a recovering language dogmatist from way back. They say that at birth I clapped my hands on hearing a doctor say, "It's a 'diphtheria' epidemic, nurse, not 'diphtheria'."

In Primary School I once got caught at recess expounding to a bored group of classmates the precise difference between metonymy and synecdoche, with copious examples drawn from 19th century English poets. Then, in High School after a year of Latin and French I added German to my obsessions. That poor German teacher. In my first week I drove him mad with continual questions on the exceptions to the gender rules for common nouns. He tore his hair out with frustration, went bald and then went bush, but not before finding time to write in a

term report "Tends to overemphasise the trivial".

That's all in the past, though. For the last 25 years I've been a member of Pedants Anonymous. "Just take it one datum at a time," they taught me, and my doctor says it's working. Except that once in a while I feel this urge . . .

Back to my cravings in a moment. First we'd better look at the history of English language commentary, because one's internal struggle has reassuring precedents.

In the 16th and 17th centuries English was treated descriptively by grammarians and dictionary makers. But in the 18th century (thank you, S. Johnson and Company), what contemporary linguists call prescriptivism became the order of the day, and this attitude lasted until the early 20th century. Needless to say, the prescriptive approach imposes rules not only on what is to be prescribed, but also what is proscribed.

By the second half of the 20th century descriptivism had regained ascendancy, under the influence of modern linguistics. So these days the job for grammarians and dictionary makers is to record the facts of language diversity, and not to preach or legislate.

Opposition to the descriptive ap-

proach persists however, as we have seen. Indeed, when the going gets rough the battle is compared in ideological terms to a political conflict, with the armies of elitism and conservatism on the one side ranged against the forces of radicalism and liberalism on the other.

Mind you, I'd have thought that the difference is psychological rather than political, more a clash of temperaments (which politics itself may be anyway, unconsciously). But that's another story.

History lessons aside, doctor, how can I cope with my relapses into language usage faultfinding?

Wait on. Should I reluctantly accept some annoyances, perhaps, so as to concentrate my strength on challenging real abominations?

What's that, doctor? I'm on the right track, now, am I? You reckon I should be trying to preserve what Fowler called a "pedantry scale"?

Well, if there are degrees of language misuse, how to rank them?

Start with a category list? O.K.

There are words mispronounced, e.g. "controversy", "aitch".

There are plurals used in the singular ("criteria", "media").

There are invented words, too, like "irregardless".