

BOOK LAUNCH

748

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

W & R CHAMBERS LIMITED

CHAMBERS' ENGLISH DICTIONARY

LAUNCH SYDNEY MONDAY 31 OCTOBER 1988

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
W & R CHAMBERS LIMITED
CHAMBERS' ENGLISH DICTIONARY
LAUNCH SYDNEY MONDAY 31 OCTOBER 1988

The Hon Justice Michael Kirby

Launching a dictionary requires special skill. There is, after all, no story-line to tell. Nor is there a structure of the book to criticise. Logic on the part of the authors gives way to the inflexible demands of the alphabet. It is a tyrannous order which is stamped on every page of every dictionary. The only variations in this regard arise from the disorder occasionally caused by different spelling traditions. Even this point is dealt with in this new dictionary with a very useful translation chart for American and non-American English spelling. In Australia, we have a modest hybrid. For example, the Australian Labor Party adopts the American spelling, doubtless a rare conservative remnant from the earlier hopeful days of days of spelling reform.

How does one judge a dictionary? It is not a mere spelling check. Nowadays that can now be done automatically by the word processor. Nor is it a collection of naughty words. Though which adolescent has not thumbed the pages of a dictionary to see - shock horror - that wicked words are there, with all their sexual overtones? They are all there in Chambers' English Dictionary. At least, most of them that I know are there. Mind you, "hooker" was not there, except as a

two masted Dutch vessel or a small fishing-smack. The other meaning, in occasional use in Australia, can involve a smack though not, I think, of the kind the editor contemplated! I will not make a "hoo-ha(h)" ("a noisy fuss") about this omission.

Some dictionaries pride themselves on having just everything. But the price is that you have to take out a magnifying glass which comes neatly packaged with the printed work. I disdain to mention the publisher of that notable work. Still other dictionaries concentrate on local variations. There has been a flowering of Australian dictionary publications in recent years. This is also a good thing. English is rapidly asserting its dominance as the international language. When asked what language the astronauts would use to communicate in Space, the Russian scientists declared "No problem! English". English is the language of international aviation. English is the language of international business and commerce. English is the language of science and technology. What a blessing it is to be born an Anglophone. Anyone who has attended international technical conferences will realise the advantages of working in one's mother tongue, which we Anglophones enjoy and others do not.

Variations slip in as might be expected. Local phrases occur. Despite Paul Hogan, I doubt that the English-speakers of the United States or Zimbabwe would know some of the choicest innovations of Australian English. That is where local dictionaries, such as the Macquarie Dictionary have a valid place. Likewise, there are important American

dictionaries including the great Webster's. There must also be an Indian English Dictionary, though I have not seen it. To some extent the English language, donated to the Subcontinent by the Raj, is frozen there as it was left in 1947. Words abound which have gone out of vogue in the language of other lands of the old Empire. "Tiffin" is still a word in common use in India. I looked it up in Chambers. It referred me to "tiff". The first of three meanings given was "a thin liquor". How that became "a light repast" is not entirely clear. Perhaps in the heat of those plains you always needed a thin liquor with your light repast. But there it appears as an Indian variation in Chambers.

Some readers of dictionaries are interested in the etymology of words. Some people with an idle moment just like to wander with the eye through the corridors of a dictionary. Even highly educated people will find on every page words they just did not know. Many of them are additions to our universal language from the languages of other people who now share our tongue. Open any page of this dictionary and you see the evidence of the British Empire. The sun may have set upon it. Its political strength ebbed away in our lifetime. The captains and the kings, have for the most part, departed. What is left? A few contrite hearts perhaps. Also English sports, English bureaucratic habits. The cup of tea. English law. And above all the English language.

Lawyers, of course, are people of words. Their vocation involves words. They have to give meaning to the words of Acts of Parliament. They have to draft documents and judgments.

They express their ideas in words. Knowing the meaning of words is therefore very important to them. Elucidating ambiguous words is a very important function of the judge today; whether those words appear in laws made by Parliament or in laws made in earlier times by the Judges of England or of Australia.

That is why no lawyer or judge can work without dictionaries close at hand. A dictionary can provide the key to unlocking the thought processes of the mind of a judge in an earlier time dealing with a similar problem. It can also provide a key for unravelling the ambiguities of the legislation enacted by Parliament.

That is why I, for one, welcome this new dictionary. It is the successor to an honourable tradition. It is a descendant of the Chambers' Twentieth Century Dictionary. That tradition began in 1832, as the British Empire was approaching its apogee. [Defined as a heavenly body's point of greatest distance from earth; the culmination of (fig) - the opposite to perigee]. The brothers Chambers in Edinburgh published a weekly journal for working people. The Foreword to this edition faithfully records that it was handed around amongst the shepherds in the Galloway Hills of Scotland. It led on to the "Cyclopaedia" with its marvellous collection of important and trivial information and the dictionary, first published in 1872. During much of this century it was known as "Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary". But now the 21st century approaches. So it has reverted to its old name.

The Preface points out that it is this dictionary which

is the accepted reference dictionary for National Scrabble Championships. I asked myself why this should be so. The answer was not hard to find. A clearly paginated and well thumb indexed dictionary provides a ready means for the desperate player to find - or not to find - a suggested winning word. The clear black print leaps out from the page. It is a most efficient publication. Search though I might, I could not find a single typographical error. And that is a miracle in such a book.

It contains many new words. Some proper names have joined the language. "Hoover" is there, with or without capitals to mean a vacuum cleaner. Salk is there. So is his rival Sabin. Video is there. It stands as a reminder that the dictionaries of the 21st century will probably be on a microchip carried in the pocket.

And as if an excellent dictionary were not enough, there are found in these pages:

- * A detailed chart of pronunciation
- * A note on the English of different lands
- * A list of common foreign expressions
- * A list of frequently used abbreviations and symbols - even a list of the dreaded acronyms and some common first names.

I was reminded - and not surprised - that Michael comes from the Hebrew "who is like the Lord?"
- * There are also notes on the Greek and Russian alphabet, and Roman numerals.
- * For the numerate there are conversion tables and other mathematical data.

And as if that were not enough, there is even a breakdown

in "ISO" paper sizes. I immediately rushed to the list of abbreviations to find what "ISO" meant. There appear the Imperial Service Order, an unlikely source of paper size expertise. Was this the ultimate triumph of the imperial bureaucracy in India, I asked? But reading on, I found that ISO also stood for "International Organisation for Standardization". Why that was not IOS is not made clear. Presumably a French intrusion.

"We must be free or die that speak the tongue that Shakespeare spake". That was the proud boast of Wordsworth. Here are the words that Shakespeare spake - and many more. It is a treasury of the universal language. Wars, conflicts and hatred arise from failures of communication. The Jumbo jet, telecommunications and informatics provide the machinery for communication throughout the world today. The English language provides the universal medium.

Chambers English Dictionary is an excellent, convenient, well priced working tool. It can take its place with honour with its predecessors and with other dictionaries. Its marketing edge appears in its splendid presentation, handy size and compact distillation of the words of our language. It is a triumph of publication which brings credit upon all who produced it. I am pleased to launch it in Australia.

Chambers' English Dictionary. W & R Chambers Ltd and Cambridge University Press, 1988 i-xvi i-1732, Appendices 1734-1793 frontispiece showing "model of dictionary layout" standard ed \$39.95; hard cover \$49.95.