

Book Reviews

The American Language by H. L. Mencken. The Fourth Edition and the Two Supplements, abridged, with annotations and new material. By Raven I. McDavid, Jr. with the assistance of David W. Maurer. Alfred A. Knopf, 1963.

Customarily, a reviewer who wishes to conclude his remarks about a book with the faint praise of damnation does so by making complimentary noises about the binding, the typography, or even the dust jacket. Since this is not to be that kind of review, these matters may be dispensed with now:

The type-face is handsome as ever; the paper is of good quality; the dust jacket is sufficiently similar and sufficiently dissimilar to that of earlier editions; and I've found only two typographical errors, which points to a fine job of proof-reading. *But* the binding is sorely inadequate for a heavy 1000-page book. One trip to school in a green bag broke the spine of the review copy.

The faint damns are done, and at the outset; let us now praise famous men. The adjectives occurring most predictably in reference to H. L. Mencken are "irreverent," "iconoclastic," "outrageous," and "blasphemous." Had he been a lad growing up in the rural Midwest at the time the Fourth Edition of *The American Language* (hereafter *AL*₄) was published in 1936, he would have been called *sassy*, and I'm not convinced that the more sophisticated adjectives serve the purpose any better. Sassy he was, and he sassed many who were sorely in need of it. He was sometimes, but not often, wrong. As a student of the language, he resisted the temptation to write a book on American English that was very clever and nothing more; he would have shied from the epithet "scholar" – at least in the Doctor Syntax tradition – as he scorned near beer, ladies' drill teams, and whatever else seemed to him phony and pretentious. Still it bothered him to live in a world that would tolerate and even participate in imprecision and approximation when facts were available. (He never quite got over the persistent reappearance of the "facts" of his famous bathtub hoax or the fact that his impassioned retractions were ignored.) Mencken demonstrated in the four

editions and two supplements of the *American Language* that truth and accuracy need not be dull, and that documentation can, if well used, make writing more lively and exciting than sweeping assertions and wild guesses that bear a dangerous ring of authority.

Here is a man whose collected works include six separate volumes candidly called *Prejudices*, another named *Heathen Davs*, and another called *A Book of Burlesques*. Such a man, over a period of more than 30 years, was also writing, revising, reconsidering, and refreshing this magnificent work on the American language. Let those who would chide him for his sassy asides remember that a family member whose position is secure has certain critical prerogatives and even obligations; let them produce, in whatever form, anything so close to a candid, public definition of America. Mencken knew, and McDavid knows, and their readers are bound to become aware that the language of a country is its truest and most revealing biography.

The current edition, as its abridger-in-chief, Professor Raven I. McDavid, Jr., states in the preface, is emphatically not to be regarded as a revision of *AL*₄ and the two supplements, but as an abridgement and a coalescence of this material, with only the most essential additions from current information. It takes a *polyhistor* like McDavid to do this, though even he did not undertake it entirely by himself. Professor David Maurer's specific contribution is, unhappily, not stated; but it might not be too far off to suppose that his distinguished works on slang, argot, jargon, and some of the more ephemeral and recondite aspects of American English are reflected here. Contributions past, present, and even future from a wide range of scholars are documented and acknowledged; McDavid has done a splendid job of putting the notes up to date, even when limitations of space made it impossible to do much with the text.¹

The task of abridging and editing a book such as this is assuredly not a simple one. McDavid has done it extremely well. Though he could handily write a book of his own on the subject of the American

¹ Indeed, he has turned the other cheek. One linguist, who shall here be nameless but who is cited in ten footnotes in this new edition, referred to "the late H. L. Mencken" in an article published in *Archivum Linguisticum* in 1951. It was the tragedy of Mencken's last years — he actually lived until early 1956 — that his body survived by so long the stroke that had deprived him of speech and writing.

idiom, he has here remained tastefully in the background, made only the imperative additions, and kept the spirit of HLM remarkably alive. Yet in remaining true to Mencken, McDavid has had to make certain compromises which cannot have been entirely pleasing to him. Accomplished phonetician that he is, he must have felt some distress at continuing with the neo-pseudo-Berlitz diacritical system for representing pronunciations. This cumbersome and misleading method, if it can indeed be dignified by the word, is particularly jarring in a book that elsewhere, by implication and imprecation calls for truly promethean attitudes from its readers, urging them to accept the facts of the language rather than pursue illusions of perfection, and chiding them for being squeamish and devitalizing the language with euphemisms. From a professional viewpoint then, Chapter VII, "The Pronunciation of American" is the weakest spot in the book. Fascinating as it is, it is needlessly unscientific; it seems to indicate somewhere in the background the same kind of reluctance that keeps contemporary American dictionaries from using even a modified form of the International Phonetic Alphabet in their pronunciation systems, despite the fact that the highly successful Cassell-Heath foreign language dictionaries have used it for years.

Readers of *Names* will perhaps be most interested in the chapters on onomastic matters and most impressed by the frequency with which the journal is cited in the footnotes. The notes here, as elsewhere, are extremely interesting reading, despite the monotonous "I am indebted here to . . ." and the confusing unexplained numbering – e. g., on page 584, where the notes are numbered 8, 9, 1, 2, 3. Sometimes the long lists of names – state nicknames, regional variants, re-spelled surnames, and the like, grow tedious and diffuse. I am reminded of a dear old lady of blessed memory who tried repeatedly to read the Bible from cover to cover, but always, as she was wont to say, "got bogged down in the begats." The justification for the lists lies, to be sure, on the solid ground that *The American Language* is a reference book as well as a pleasure-book.

How then, does one assess a book that is already an acknowledged success and has been so for a good many years? Mencken we have learned to take – or to leave alone, *de gustibus non est disputandum*; it would thus appear to be the reviewer's task to evaluate the work of Professors McDavid and Maurer. Anything that could be called

tampering with the original has been kept to a minimum in the skillful job of editing and abridging. Nearly every reader who is familiar with the earlier work will regret the omission, however necessary, of a bit of cherished vintage HLM such as the statistical possibilities on cocktail combinations or the sly joke about Levy being the most common surname in New Orleans. But many will rejoice in the expanded treatment of the *Linguistic Atlas* to which Mencken gave an unaccountably grudging, even waspish three pages in Supplement I. A prime example of just how up-to-date the new edition is may be drawn from the treatment of the origin of *O.K.*, a matter which Allen Walker Read has pursued so diligently and scrupulously over the years. Since Professor Read's latest material on this was published in *American Speech* in May of 1963, it must surely have been added here in proof. It is precisely this kind of awareness of even the most recent discoveries that makes Professor McDavid the ideal editor for the "new" Mencken; one feels HLM himself would be pleased.

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Editor's Report for 1963

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It probably would be a significant saving if contributors in doubt would send the Editor a brief description (with examples) of a proposed article, before the undertaking is completed. Within reason, the Editor will gladly offer cautious guidance on proposed items when such help is desired. In general, any sincere effort written in a carefully wrought style that makes a well-substantiated point within our purview, ought to have a good chance for publication in *Names*.

One of the most pleasant editorial experiences of the year was a visit to the printer's establishment in Heidelberg (August, 1963) where Herren O. Winter and A. Hemmerich conferred with the Editor. At this time certain technical problems were solved and a better general understanding on both sides was achieved. The Editor wishes to especially thank Herren Winter and Hemmerich – and also Dr. Walter Reuter of Fairleigh Dickinson University who translated the German correspondence – for their continued wholehearted technical assistance and cooperation in the publication of the journal.