

SEARCHING FOR SERENDIPITY

BY MARTIN MORSE WOOSTER



Science fiction novelist Charles Platt has called for the creation of “quantum fiction”—fiction with short chapters that can be read in any order. Such fiction, Platt maintains, would be ideal for busy readers who lack the leisure to read sustained narratives.

Dictionaries are quantum nonfiction. Leafing through one is the best way I know to spend an idle half hour. Because dictionaries can be read in any order, the odds one will come across unexpected insights are higher than in more conventional books where one has some notion of the direction and nature of the plot.

For years, I tried to deny that buying and reading dictionaries was a hobby. “This isn’t a frivolous form of collecting,” I would tell myself. “I am buying valuable works of reference which will help me in my work.” But gradually, my shelves began to bulge with arcane references on subjects to which I had little reason to refer: Texas, Mormonism, *The Language of Nuclear War*. Now I admit it. Dictionaries are fun.

For example, consider Stephen Murray-Smith’s *Right Words: A Guide to English Usage in Australia* (Penguin Australia, 1990). In his entry on “Have a nice day,” Murray-Smith quotes H.L. Mencken, who told anyone who wished him a nice day, “I’ll thank you to mind your own business; I’ll have whatever sort of day I choose.” Who would have expected to find such a delightful quotation in a book designed to teach Australians how to avoid British and American pleonasms?

Owning dictionaries on a wide range of subjects gives me the comfortable illusion that I have access to all knowledge. On dull or dark days, this illusion cheers me. Billionaires can buy or sell companies around the world on a whim; George Bush can send hundreds of thousands of soldiers to a dry and dusty desert on a moment’s notice; and whenever I choose, I can walk across a room, leaf through my copy of Paul Dickson’s *Words* (Delacorte, 1982), and read 2,231 synonyms for *drunk*.

Dictionary compilers are usually possessed by a particular topic. Sometimes they are academics who use their obsession to sum up the state of knowledge in a particular field; sometimes they are autodidacts who write about a subject as a hobby or a

labor of love. Consider how an American journalist and a British scholar cover the same topic—politics.

William Safire’s *Safire’s Political Dictionary* (Random House, 1978) is an invaluable, massive guide to the slogans, catch phrases, and neologisms of American political life. Safire writes in a chatty, garrulous, “tell-ya-a-story” voice. He’s clearly in love with his subject and likes nothing better than imparting bits of obscure information.

In the entry for *happy warrior*, for example, Safire quotes the Wordsworth poem from which the phrase originated (“Who is the happy Warrior? Who is he/That every man in arms should wish to be?”). In his entry for *opportunist*, Safire shows how Robert LaFollette, Sr., Harold Wilson, Francis Bacon, and George Romney used the term; as a “dazzling display of anti-opportunist rhetoric,” Safire quotes Hua Kuo-feng’s attack on Maoists: “Their necks function like ball bearings and their waists like spring bands, and wind gauges are planted on their heads.”

If Safire’s voice is that of an ebullient American, Roger Scruton, in *A Dictionary of Political Thought* (Harper and Row, 1982), writes in the donnish manner of a British mandarin. Scruton is a well-known conservative, but in his dictionary—a guide to common terms used in political science and political philosophy—he dispassionately examines all political views. There is nothing in his discussion of Marx or Marxism to which the adherents of that discipline would object. (They might, however, cringe when Scruton discusses “marxizing,” the practice of salting an article with Marxist phrases in order “to establish one’s credentials as a serious member of the intellectual left.”) Scruton is particularly useful in his discussions of French and German political traditions.

Safire and Scruton leave little room for competing political dictionaries, since few people are as passionate about language as Safire or have as deep an understanding of political philosophy as Scruton does. But Garland Publishing has found one niche that needs to be filled—dictionaries about American

The Encyclopedia of the American Left, edited by Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, New York: Garland, 880 pages, \$95.00

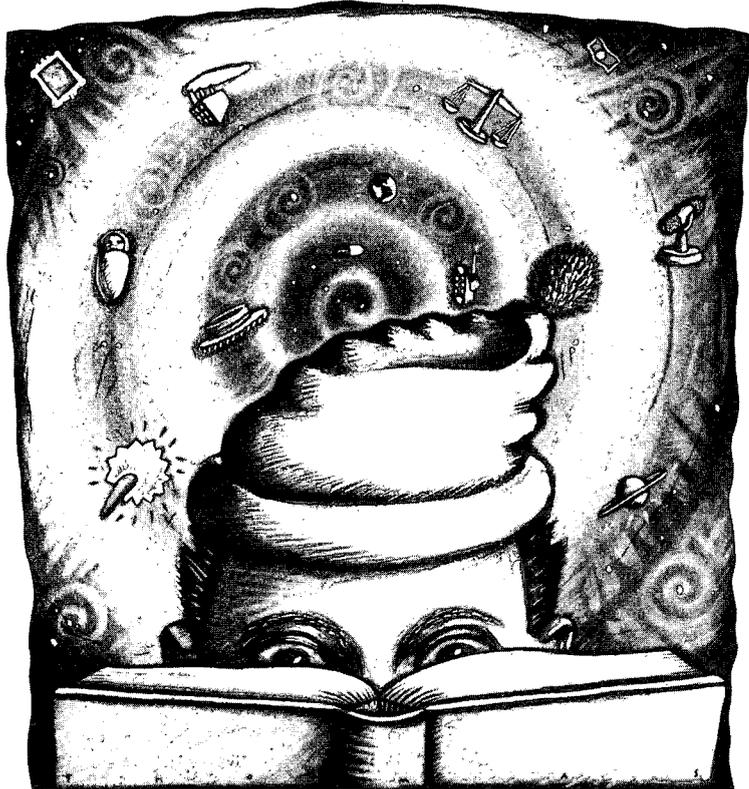
A Dictionary of Common Fallacies, by Philip Ward, Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 582 pages (2 vols.), \$44.95

Slang!: The Topic-by-Topic Dictionary of Contemporary American Lingoes, by Paul Dickson, New York: Bantam, 264 pages, \$9.95

The Untamed Tongue: A Dissenting Dictionary, by Thomas Szasz, Peru, Ill.: Open Court, 261 pages, \$34.95

political movements. Surprisingly, *The Encyclopedia of the American Left* is the first dictionary to exhaustively examine all facets of American leftism. In an article in *The Nation*, editor Paul Buhle explains that he and his comrades spent so many years putting together *The Encyclopedia of the American Left* that laboring on the volume "has converted us, I'm afraid, into doyens of Red Trivia."

Indeed, seasoned redbaiters could spend many instructive hours using the book to inform themselves about the suppressed revolutionary pasts of many prominent Americans. Aaron Copland, as a member of the Composers' Collective, "asserted the importance of mass singing as a vehicle for communicating the 'day-to-day struggles of the proletariat.'" Broadway tunesmith E.Y. "Yip" Harburg hoped that



his most famous musical, *Finian's Rainbow*, would cause audiences to "consider seriously the writer's not-too-thinly veiled critique of capitalism." Even beloved American poet James Whitcomb Riley churned out campaign lyrics for longtime Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs ("the kindest heart that ever beat/betwixt here an' the judgment seat").

The editors rejected many writers who were either too opaque or, as Buhle notes, still carry "the grudges of 1937." Although comprehensive, the book does not cover American leftists who recanted their ways and defected to the conservative or the neoconservative cause. Thus Max Shachtman, one of the intellectual grandparents of neoconservatism, is included, because he remained a leftist even as his disgust with socialism rose. But Max Eastman does not have his own entry; neither does Morrie Ryskind. The late Sidney Hook, however, does receive coverage, probably because he feuded

with nearly everyone and thus could not be ignored. *The Encyclopedia of the American Left* is essential reading for anyone interested in its subject, although you probably should ask your local library to order a copy, since at \$95 the book is far too expensive for most toiling members of the working classes.

A less expensive and more entertaining dictionary is *A Dictionary of Common Fallacies*. The author, Philip Ward, is an autodidact who spends much of his time attacking pseudoscientific nonsense. But what makes the book idiosyncratic and very browsable is that Ward considers "fallacies" to mean "the popular beliefs which have been shown to be false by those without a vested interest in deceiving the multitude for power, wealth, or prestige." This definition is sufficiently broad to cover all the topics Ward thought interesting. A more honest title for the book would have been *The Dictionary of Topics I Felt like Writing About*.

Thus Ward refutes obscure superstitions, such as the notion that British pubs called "The Black Horse" were places where King Arthur fell into a drunken stupor. Ward also proves that bulls aren't enraged by the color red (it's the bullfighter that gets the animal mad, not the cape) and that lemmings don't jump off cliffs and drown because of a death wish (no one has ever seen a lemming commit suicide). Ward throws folklore, social criticism, science, history, and even musicology into his two volumes. *A Dictionary of Common Fallacies* must have been as enjoyable to write as it is to read.

While most dictionary compilers, such as Saffire and Ward, create murals in their books, exhausting a single subject, other compilers are miniaturists, writing about several topics in a single volume. The best of these is Paul Dickson. In his latest effort, *Slang!*, Dickson covers 24 different topics in one book. There are

chapters devoted to auctions, cars, bureaucracy, science fiction, war, and real estate, among other subjects. *Slang!* is the literary equivalent of Doctor Who's time machine, a book that packs the informational power of an entire bookshelf in a single volume.

As might be expected, the chapters are very thin; Dickson would have done far better to give 40 pages each to six or seven topics. But even though there is much in *Slang!* that is familiar, Dickson's skillful research ensures that most readers will find material that is surprising. Did you know that in the television world, "HINT" is an acronym that refers to "Happy Idiot News Team," used to describe particularly asinine newscasts?

A final category of dictionary consists of collections of aphorisms by a single author on many topics. Writers publish these books, usually called "philosophical dictionaries," late in their careers, recapitulating the themes which have occu-

pied them throughout their lives. For example, in Jaroslav Pelikan's *The Melody of Theology* (Harvard, 1988), the distinguished Yale historian sums up his thoughts on such subjects as Martin Luther, evil, libraries, and, yes, dictionaries.

Thomas Szasz's latest work, billed as a "dissenting dictionary," is such a collection of aphorisms, divided into 30 topics. As one would expect from Szasz, the most profound aphorisms are critiques of psychiatry and the psychiatrist's world view. "Two

of the most important contemporary religions are communism and psychiatry," Szasz writes. The philosophical foundation of both dogmas is the belief that "human behavior is determined by scientific laws and that individuals have no free will."

Whenever Szasz writes about psychiatry, his work is rich

and full of insight; when he shifts to other subjects, including politics, his writing dulls. For example, in the section on "Liberty," we learn that "freedom is what people want for themselves and few want for others"; we also discover that,

during the last 20 years, Americans have been allowed to buy gold bullion but not to pay people less than the minimum wage. Such statements are true, but they are not fresh or original.

After all, the lasting pleasure of reading dic-

tionaries comes from the joy of discovering writers who are able to surprise the reader by providing either new views or interesting information. The best dictionaries do not age and are endlessly rereadable. They are lifetime companions.

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BUSINESS WITHOUT BORDERS

BY GEORGE MELLOAN



A year of political upheaval in Central Europe and the Soviet Union has forced intellectuals in the West to reflect on a word many had relegated to the dusty attics of their minds: *capitalism*. Large numbers of Poles, Czechoslovakians, East Germans, Hungarians, Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians who have mounted the barricades to demand freedom find that word very exciting. They may not have a thorough understanding of capitalism; it is sufficient in their view that it is very different from the socialism they know all too well.

Thus they are forcing Western thinkers to reconsider something many have treated with disdain. The peoples of the East are saying that they believe that private capitalism is more than just an expression of human greed. Their own experience, in countries that to one degree or another managed to extinguish property rights, tells them that what philosophers such as F.A. Hayek and Milton Friedman have argued is true, that private ownership of property and political liberty go hand in hand. A man's home or business is his castle, but only if he, personally, has a clear title to it. In a

capitalist system, he also can buy a share of a private enterprise doing more business than all of Poland simply by phoning a stockbroker.

Since dramatic political change can hardly be ignored by the Western intelligentsia and since the message is so clear and emphatic, this is a good year for books about capitalism. In past years, with so much intellectual focus on socialist dialectics and statist economic nostrums, it has been easy to ignore the quiet evolution of capitalism. It evolves under the motive power of an internal dynamic. Individuals, voluntarily joining together in search of financial gain and psychological fulfillment, are a powerful source of energy and creativity.

As it happens, this revival year for capitalism has produced three new books that, in very different ways, offer insights into why modern capitalism is such a successful and important component of social and economic organization in the democracies. They also provide a sense of where capitalism now stands in its evolutionary development. All three are good antidotes to the noxious claim that capitalism is the enemy

The Borderless World, by Kenichi Ohmae, New York: Harper & Row, 223 pages, \$21.95

The Competitive Advantage of Nations, by Michael E. Porter, New York: Macmillan, 855 pages, \$35.00

Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism, by Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 860 pages, \$35.00