

avoid the catastrophe that now faces us as a result of increasing secularization, hedonism, and scientism in the world.

And what of myths and archetypes? In an essay on these subjects Mahapatra states that the images and symbols of modern poetry become desiccated and dead if they do not revitalize themselves at the secret fountains of myth. In keeping with his unwavering interest in poetry and literature, he discounts an overemphasis on art as ideology. He affirms that a commitment to literature can reconcile tradition and freedom and can help overcome the separation of the elite and the masses, and this without imposing any form of bondage. In other essays he tackles such questions as the encounter between the East and the West and the need to reconcile modern science and primitive ritual.

It would be hard to disagree with most of what Mahapatra says on these and other issues. Yet when all is said and done, the book remains severely flawed. First, it is marred from start to finish by misprints, faulty syntax, and idiomatic lapses, so much so that one is tempted to put the book down unread after the first few pages. Next, the author seems unaware of the findings of the cultural-historical method, some of which are now common knowledge. Thus he refers to the Kondhs of Orissa, with their cultivation, human sacrifice, and earth-goddess worship, as the most primitive tribe in India and the world. Surely he is aware that anthropologists regard food-gatherers and hunters as the world's most primitive peoples. Third, laudable as the views in Mahapatra's essays may be, they are mostly derivative and secondhand. This would not have mattered so much if the author had contributed something of his own through in-depth analysis, careful synthesis, or detailed interpretation, but he does not.

There is much more that could be said by way of critical evaluation. But to cut a long story short, whoever already shares the views of the author will, if he has the stamina to make his way through this book, find his opinions fortified and his spirit refreshed

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MIEDER, WOLFGANG and STUART A. KINGSBURY, editors. *A Dictionary of Wellerisms*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994. xix + 187 pages. List of sources, bibliography, indexes of speakers and situations. Hardcover US\$24.95; ISBN 0-19-508318-0.

In Charles Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), a Sancho Panzatype named Sam Weller indirectly instructs the title character in the complexities of society and human nature through his use of witticisms that involve slightly incongruous plays on words. The term Wellerism has been used ever since to describe this relative of the pun. *A Dictionary of Wellerisms*, researched in the U.S. and Canada for the American Dialect Society from the 1940s to the 1970s, brings together the first complete collection of examples in English, drawing on literature, journalism, popular culture, and the Margaret Bryant collection of proverbial speech.

Wellerisms usually follow a triadic structure, consisting of a statement, the identification of the speaker, and an incongruous follow up: "'Ruff,' said the dog as he sat on the cactus." Variations include deletion of the third element ("'I'm bored stiff,' said the dead man") and rearrangement of the sections ("As the people said when Lady Godiva rode naked down the streets sidesaddle, 'Hooray for our side!"). Occasionally a short dialogue develops: "'I see,' said the blind man. 'You lie,' said the dumb man. 'Quiet,' said the deaf man."

Though the dictionary presents only those Wellerisms found in English, the introduction gives a summary of the genre's long history. The first recorded instance, found in a

Sumerian cuneiform tablet circa 2500–1100 B.C., reads, “The ass, after he had thrown off his packs: ‘The burdens of former days are forgotten.’” The authors credit Plato with the following example: “‘The water will tell you,’ said the guide when the travelers asked him how deep the river was.” From eleventh-century Latin comes: “‘Something is better than nothing,’ said the wolf as he swallowed the louse.” Sixteenth-century proverb collections, which include entries from Martin Luther, represent the first regular appearance of the form. Many items from this period reflect the intense religious and social reform of the times, with references to the devil, clerics, and the obscene. Several are reduced from folktales and fables, such as “‘The grapes are sour,’ said the fox as he couldn’t reach them.” European scholars have found Wellerisms in Germanic, Baltic, Slavic, and African languages.

The earliest English Wellerism is attributed to the Venerable Bede in 731. Several centuries later Chaucer also contributed a few. The advent of the sixteenth century brought utterances from Shakespeare, Jonson, Defoe, and Swift. Franklin published his only Wellerism in 1735: “‘Great wits jump (agree),’ says the poet, and hit his head against the post.” English and Scottish proverb collections from 1546 to 1737 include many examples. The golden age ranges from 1840 to 1880, when Wellerisms were coined for fun and popularized by such publications as *Punch* (England) and *Yankee Notions* (U.S.). In this century the joke has largely replaced the Wellerism as a humorous form, though the latter enjoys its advocates, notably the late detective writer Leslie Charteris, creator of a series featuring an actress and a bishop in the 1930s.

The subject matter for Wellerisms runs the gamut of human experience. References to religion (“‘Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian,’ as the Jew said to the roasted pork”), history (“‘I shall be indebted to you for life,’ as the man said to his creditors when he ran away to Australia”), and literature (“‘She stoops to conquer,’ as the man said when his wife reached down for the poker”) feature prominently. Infidelity (“‘Business before pleasure,’ as the man said when he kissed his wife before he went out to make love to his neighbor’s”), prejudice (“‘Excusez,’ as the duck said to the frog”), and race (“‘Dis-cord is horrible,’ as the musical Negro said when he was about to be hung”) predictably appear. Sources from popular culture give readers a glimpse of everyday life, past and present: advertising (“‘I’d walk a mile for a Camel,’ murmured the hungry lion as he watched a caravan crossing the Sahara”), music (“‘Music by Handel,’ said the Frosh as he wound up the Victrola”), and so forth.

The majority of entries, however, belong to the category of harmless wordplay. The blind man, the most prolific protagonist, figures in sixty selections (“‘Icy,’ said the blind man as he opened the icebox door”); the monkey leads the animal kingdom with twenty-six appearances, but other animals also appear (“‘Didn’t see that U turn,’ said the ram as he went over the cliff”; “‘Just an udder day,’ said the cow, as she rolled over for the night”) Ordinary household items and accessories also have their say: “‘You go on ahead, I’ll bring up the rear,’ said the girdle to the hat.”

This otherwise well-designed book is marred by an overstrict adherence to a system of organization based on a seemingly arbitrary selection of key words. The result is a lack of unity, with related Wellerisms rarely occurring together. The sixteen examples featuring the actress and bishop, for example, are scattered throughout the text. Fortunately, the problem is relieved somewhat by the excellent indices of speakers and situations. An equally fine bibliography of foreign language collections and related scholarship augments the list of sources located beneath each entry.

The dictionary is just as suitable for linguists, sociologists, and folklore scholars as it is for the reader with an appreciation of sophisticated humor. While it is true that Wellerisms are no longer published in the British and American popular press, this book ensures that the tradition will endure.

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