

The story of English, by Robert McCrum, William Cram & Robert MacNeil. Faber & Faber/BBC Publications. 384pp. £14.95.

This, unusually, is the book of a film as yet unseen. The TV series, 'The Story of English', starts soon on BBC2 in nine 55-minute episodes, and this book has been compiled by the script-writer (Robert McCrum), the producer/director (William Cram), and the presenter (Robert McNeil). It is the biggest linguistic media event for years, the first thorough photographic account of the world's most widely-used language.

The book follows the plan of the series, and gives a guided tour, often whistle-stop, of the way English has grown around the world. We begin at the beginning, with the Celts, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings and Normans. We move on through the Renaissance, the Reformation, Shakespeare and early American settlements. We come back to England for the age of Johnson, and move north for the English-Gaelic conflicts, the exodus to northern Ireland, and the further exodus to America. We return to Ireland for the history of conflict there, and then emigrate again to America and Liverpool.

Next we leave for Africa, but in no time are back in America via the slave trade, the development of Caribbean pidgins and creoles, and Black American English. We stay for the War of Independence and the Canadian migration, and see the forceful impact of immigrant languages. World War I brings us back to Europe with the US troops; then we are abroad again, via Cockney London to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, and finally to the West Indies, West Africa, India, and Singapore. We end the tour with a look at language change and decay, at Plain English and Americanisms, and are left wondering what the future will be.

The emphasis is very much on explaining regional development in social terms. This book is about social history as well as language - and that is how it should be. Unlike so many writers on English, the authors have grasped the essential point - that language means people, and it changes because people do, as they travel the world meeting new accents, words, and usages. The overriding theme is the variety of the language - the many 'Englishes' which identify where people are from, who they are, and who they want to be like.

The influence of television is everywhere - in the documentary style ('The African past is still vivid for Janey Hunter'), and the end-of-chapter links which get us from, say, the Celtic fringe to Africa, just as magazine programmes would. And there are many full-colour illustrations - but these give me mixed feelings.

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I have no worries about the 34 clear and colourful maps displaying the movement of English around the world, apart from an error (in the very first map, where no mother tongue use is shown in South Africa) and a discrepancy (the map showing the Indo-Europeans coming from the Black Sea doesn't tie in with the text, which plumps for north-central Europe). It's the 156 pictures which upset me.

Let me put it this way: what is a picture of Anne Hathaway's cottage doing in a book on the English language? The problem wouldn't be noticed on television, of course. As the presenter talked about Shakespeare's role in the history of English, the camera would rove around Stratford, searching out good scenes to make interesting television and to avoid the much-feared 'talking head'.

But books are, in effect, printed talking heads, and irrelevant pictures stand out. The pictures should be as informative as the text - but in this book only a dozen are about language directly (such as a comic strip in Indian English). The rest are of famous users (Shakespeare, Dennis Lillie), places (the Appalachians, Londonderry), or events (slave ships, Culloden). It's a pity more use wasn't made of the more visual aspects of English (such as the graphic range of written language).

The authors have produced a text of great clarity and accuracy, and supported it with useful footnotes, further reading, and an index. There is the occasional bit of emptiness, such as 'English as a world language is sustained by another elusive quality - its own peculiar genius', but I can live with that. The only blunder I spotted was the claim that English 'has a grammar of great simplicity and flexibility' - hardly an appropriate remark, remembering the 1800-page grammar of one of the series consultants, Randolph Quirk, which shows just how complex English grammar really is. And I wouldn't pay much attention to the view that an educated person's vocabulary is only 15,000 words.

The book tries to tell the whole story of English, but of course it falls far short of that. It stresses, rightly, the development of the spoken language, but treats less well of the written language. It is good on regional varieties, but less systematic about occupational varieties (science, religion, law, etc.). It is very good on vocabulary, but grammar gets little attention, and much of the discussion of pronunciation is opaque (why didn't they issue a tape or record to go with the book?).

But still, more than any other book on the language, this one holds a mirror up to nature. It is a realistic and responsible account of English in the world, with its many new varieties and hybrid Franglaisian forms. And it leaves us with an understanding of the biggest problem of all - the tension between the demands of a universal standard and those of regional diversity. Such are the issues dealt with in this appealing, informative, and elegant book.