

Harmless drudgery

Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary:
New Edition 1972
A. M. Macdonald (ed.)
(Chambers, £2.50)

The lexicographer's lot is not a happy one. He knows before he starts that his years of painstaking effort in collecting, collating, sifting and editing are unlikely to impress the man in the street. According to a recent survey of dictionary-users and their criteria, most people already have an old dictionary floating around the house somewhere, and do not feel that there is any point in getting a new one; and if they *do* buy one (as a Christmas present, for instance) their choice is conditioned more by what is on display in the shop at the time of purchase, whether it falls within a predetermined price-range, and the colour of the cover, than by such matters as breadth of coverage, depth of treatment, and consistency of method. A surprisingly large number of people know only one dictionary—usually the one their parents had—and replace this, uncritically, with another from the same stable when they come to set up house on their own.

Chambers are well aware of such things, and have chosen to launch this new edition of their dictionary (first published in 1901) with a clear appeal to the man in the street's conscience. The brochure announcing the dictionary says one thing only on its front page: "How long is it since your dictionary was up-dated?" And the claim of the dictionary to be a guide to the usage of the Seventies obviously impressed the *Sunday Times* Colour Supplement writers a few weeks ago, when they extracted a quantity of the new words and senses it contains, and devoted several columns to discussion and interview with the editor and her colleagues. It is a valid claim. The coverage of modern spoken and technical usage is certainly impressive, and the most noticeable feature of the book. It is unlikely to be bettered until the new supplement to the OED comes out next year. The new *Chambers* is about a fifth larger than the previous edition (1959), which means it must have a coverage of about 175,000 lexical items. Two pounds fifty for a quarter of the English lexicon is not at all bad value for money.

But the serious dictionary-user (i.e. the one who reads reviews of new dictionaries) wants more than up-to-date coverage. After

all, there are some half-a-dozen middle-range dictionaries of this kind on the market, all of which are in the process of revising or are recently revised. *Chambers* has the edge for coverage at the moment, but if it is to stay ahead of the field in, say, five years from now, then it must contain other distinctive features. In particular, in my view, it should state its lexicographical principles and procedures explicitly and apply them consistently, and the lexical items it has chosen to include should be treated comprehensively. *Chambers* does not do so well on any of these counts. Taking page 305 as an example (which I choose because it is the one the publishers have chosen to reproduce as part of their publicity brochure), we find many examples of unsystematic treatment. Selection of items for head entries is excellent, for a dictionary of this range: the page goes from *credence* to *creosote*, and there is only one important omission (*credo*, in the sense "his credo is . . ."). But *within* each entry, there are numerous inexplicable omissions. For example, within *credence* we are given *creditableness*, but not *creditability* and *creditless*; within *creed*, we have *creedal* but not *creedalism*; within *creep*, we have *creeped* but not *creeperless*, and no mention of *creepage*, *creepily*, and *creepiness*; we have *cremationist* but not *cremationism*, *crenulated* but not *crenulation*, *creodont* but not *creodonta*, *creolised language* but not *creolise* or *creolisation* on their own (and no mention of a -z- spelling), *creophagous* but not *creophagy*, *credit card* but not *credit manager* or *credit rating*; and why is the plant *creeping Jenny* singled out for inclusion (but in one of its spellings only) at the expense of the two or three dozen other plants all called "creeping" something or other? The editors as much as tell us in their "Notes to the user" that, in the interests of space saving, they are not going to be particularly systematic: "Where elementary word-building is concerned, we have sometimes left the reader to make words for himself" (vi). This is weird dictionary practice, which invites lexicological anarchy. If p.305 is typical, the number of omissions is far more than this comment would lead one to expect, and not by any means all of them are "elementary". And the obvious danger, of course, is that the reader does not know when to stop. Will the *Chambers* team permit me to coin *cremationary* and *decremationalize*, for instance? These are plausible forms, but, as any scrabbleman knows, it is *general* usage that counts, and the dictionary should try to define the line between the general and the idiosyncratic. *Chambers* leaves one guessing too often.

A good dictionary also provides plenty of information about restrictions on usage. *Chambers* does use quite a large range of usage-labels, but unfortunately gives us no information about the editorial principles used in allocating these to lexical items—and from the evidence I doubt whether there were any. For example, the labels *figurative*, *colloquial* and *slang* are used liberally, but the difference between the last two is by no means clear from their application, and many words which have no labels at all

should be given one—if anything is colloquial on p.305, it is *creepy-crawly*, for instance. Again, the existence of the *Chambers Technical Dictionary* should not make you think that technical terms will not be covered by this one (p.305 gives *cremaster*, *crenate* and *cremocarp*, for example); but the annoying thing is that whereas in the Technical Dictionary these words are given clear usage-labels (showing that they come from Zoology, Botany and Botany respectively), they are given no such label here. Well, are these words technical or aren't they! For such reasons, the reader is advised to take the stylistic labels in this dictionary with a strong pinch of salt.

For the rest, the dictionary is no worse than other dictionaries of a similar range. For example, it gives little information about structural meaning (there are a few "opposites" provided, but the lexicon is not systematically treated); and it shares the usual failing of all British dictionaries in giving plenty of data about Americanisms and next to none about Britishisms (e.g. on p.305, the British use of *creek*, the British nautical use of *creeper*, and the dialect British use of *creepie* are not noted). As with all space-saving dictionaries, finding an item is by no means easy within long entries, as senses, usage-labels, part of speech, derivatives and what-not are all packed together into a paragraph of continuous prose—try finding a particular item under the headword *all*, for instance. This new edition has also increased the type-size of the explanatory text, in the

interests of ease of reading, but as far as I can judge the boldface lexical items have not been increased in proportion, with the ironic result that an entry is often *more* difficult to read—it was much easier to spot an item in the middle of a long entry in the old edition than in this one. On the credit side, I have always admired the succinctness of Chambers' etymologies, and there are some valuable new design features in the new edition (e.g. the neat listing of some of the more common prefixes at the foot of the page). But, all in all, this dictionary is not sufficiently adequate or innovative to woo me away from my usual sources. I don't doubt, though, that its striking red cover will result in many a sixth-former having an impressive Christmas present this year.

David Crystal