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The Librarian Reports

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THE LIBRARIAN REPORTS

By WILLARD L. KING

Slang

(Chicago Bar Record)

Law libraries are short on slang dictionaries. Unless a colloquial expression has been construed by the courts and thus found its way into "Words and Phrases," or is so ancient as to be found in the general dictionaries (in which event it is probably Standard English), law libraries are almost barren of any material to shed light upon its meaning.

Recently we have had a slander case in Cook County which turned to a degree on the definition of "joy-ride." It was insisted on one side that this phrase had an innuendo of immorality, but this implication was strenuously denied by the defendant, who had used the phrase.

We have now acquired "A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English." [Eric Partridge, The Macmillan Company, 1937] Here may be found 999 pages of rich, ripe, racy slang. Unfortunately, the work is English and includes only such American slang as has been naturalized in Great Britain. It appears, however, that a substantial part of British slang is of American extraction. And we shall get the first comprehensive Dictionary of American Slang that is issued.

You will be unable to open this work at any page without being amused. If nothing else tickles your risibilities, you will enjoy the meticulous erudition with which slang phrases are defined and their origin and period traced. For example:

"Hoots in hell, not to care two. A military variant (—1914) of hoot, care a, q. v."

You may look up "*hoot, care a*" for yourself; I can't quote the whole book. Suffice it to say that a dispute seems to exist as to whether "*hoot*" in "*hoot, care a*" is derived from the Standard English "*hoot*," a cry of disapprobation, or from the U. S. *hoot*, "an abbr. of and used in the same sense as, U. S. *hooter*, an atom, the least bit (1839), Thornton."

Or take this:

"How! and. The U. S. variant, partly anglicised by 1933, of the English rather! Now verging on coll. By ellipsis, thus: 'Fred Perry is a great player.'—'And how [very great a player he is]!'; 'That's pleasant.'—'And how [pleasant]!'"

This dictionary also contains vulgarisms. In his preface the author estimates that these constitute one-half of one per cent of the words contained in the dictionary. This seems a gross underestimate. So frequent at times are the unpleasant words that I have about concluded that our ancestors must have left England because they couldn't stand the Cockney conversation. After you have read but a little in the book, you will conclude that D. H. Lawrence was a prim old maid and the French are a Puritanical people.

The author says that he has dealt with these vulgar words as "aseptically" as was consistent with clarity and adequacy. This is true. In fact, he uses asterisks in printing some words, with the explanation that it is illegal in England to print the word in full, and that it has heretofore been omitted from all English dictionaries—even from the exhaustive Oxford English Dictionary.

There are a few salty expressions that we might well use. For example, I am only awaiting a moment of Gargantuan hunger to use this:

I could take up the slack of my stomach and wipe my eyes with it. "I am very hungry: a nautical c.p. [catchphrase] frequent on ships where rations are inadequate: late C. 19-20."

The following might commend themselves to you:

Lend us your breath to kill Jumbo! "A proletarian c.p. of 1882—ca. 1910. Ware, 'Protest against the odour of bad breath' (See *jumbo* and *jumboism*)."

If a louse misses its footing on one's coat it will break its neck. "To have a very threadbare coat, clothes: proverbial coll. mid-C 14—mid-18. Langland, Palgrave, 'Gnomologia' Fuller. (Apperson.)"

It's too bad the English haven't caught on to our universal small-town expression regarding the village policeman: "He couldn't track an elephant through a ten-foot snow." But they don't have much snow in England.

Books and Services Received at Supreme Court Library

By FRED Y. HOLLAND, *Librarian*

- American Family Laws.* Volume V. Incompetents and Dependents. By Chester G. Vernier. Stanford University: Stanford University Press. Pp. xxxiii, 707. \$6.50. This final volume of the series covers statutes relating to infants, aliens, drunkards and insane persons.
- American Law Institute Proceedings,* Volume 14, 1936-37. \$4.00.
- Bankruptcy Act,* Collier Pamphlet Edition, 1938. Matthew Bender & Co. \$2.00.
- Brannan's Negotiable Instruments Law,* 6th edition. By Frederick K. Beutel. W. H. Anderson Co., 1938. \$10.00.
- Defending and Prosecuting Federal Criminal Cases.* By T. W. Housel and G. O. Walser. Dennis & Co. \$15.00.
- History of English Law,* Volumes 10, 11, 12. By Sir William Holdsworth. Little, Brown & Co. \$9.75 per volume.