

# AMERICAN ENGLISH BELONGS TO THE PEOPLE

—says Professor A. J. A. WALDOCK  
in this talk for the ABC

*ENGLISH, as spoken by Americans, does not belong to grammarians and the makers of dictionaries, says the Professor, but to the American people themselves, whose slang has made it one of the most vigorous languages that has ever existed.*

AT the University of Chicago at the present moment a very important undertaking is in progress. A new American dictionary is being made.

It is to be a dictionary of all the new words that Americans brought into the English language up to the end of the nineteenth century. Rather strangely, the director of the works is a Scotsman, Sir William Craigie. He was chosen because of his great experience in the making of dictionaries.

The making of a really big, first-class dictionary these days is a tremendous affair. Sir William Craigie has literally hundreds of helpers. Immediately under him are five or six associate editors; under those are experts of various kinds; under those is a big staff of clerks; but that is not all.



"Beaten back by bushfire"

Scattered through the country are dozens of people busy reading American literature; they divide it up amongst themselves in small sections, and they send in the words they find on cards, or specially designed slips of paper.

These readers do not, as a rule, ask for any pay; they do their reading for

pleasure, and like the thought of helping in such an important undertaking.

## Words for New Things

Work on this new dictionary began in 1925: it is now up to the letter G. It is being published gradually in instalments. And after the letters A and B had been completed Sir William Craigie issued a report on what he was finding.

It is a very interesting report. What impressed him most was the creativeness of American English. The early settlers of America naturally found that in their new country they needed words that they had not required before—words for new things in their experience.

Here is an example. We all know the phrase "blazing the trail." Now blaze was one of those new words that the Americans found they needed. What they did (and this happened with dozens and dozens of other words) was to take an already existing word and give it a new meaning.

Perhaps you know what blaze meant originally; it referred to the white mark on the face of a horse (and of course it can still mean that). When you blaze a trail you cut pieces of bark from the trees to mark the way you have come: those white marks are blazes.

Right from the beginning the English language in America proved wonderfully adaptable in this way: it went on coining new usages for old words by the dozen. Many of the earlier words, of course, had to do with the country—rivers, woods, and so on. But then when the cities grew large, more new words were required for them.

American cities, as we know, are built in rectangular sections, and very soon it was found that a new word was needed—a word that would hardly have had much point in old English towns: the word is block—city block.

## Plenty of Surprises

Another interesting thing, that the makers of this new dictionary have found out, is that amongst all these hundreds and hundreds of words that have acquired new senses in American English—words like blaze and block and bluff and boom and break—every now and again you come on one that, instead of having taken on a new sense, actually preserves an old one that we have lost. One such word is citizen. Once upon a time in England citizen stood for something like our present word civilian.

You get surprises in turning over the pages of this new dictionary. You look for a word in one form and you find it in another. You have certainly heard for yourselves an American—either in real life or on the films—pronounce the word that we call aluminium; he will have called it (as you know) aluminum. Which is right?

(Continued on next page)



# I have ONE regret

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taking De Witt's earlier*

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Mrs. W. L. C.  
From signed statement  
and letters.

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