

Hunting New Zealandisms

I SUPPOSE most people, when they are stumped by a difficult word, ask themselves—or ask somebody else—What does the Oxford Dictionary say? Generally we feel that the Oxford Dictionary is the final authority, the Court of Appeal on spelling and meaning and usage. In a sense, the Oxford Dictionary is not one dictionary. It is a family of dictionaries. Most of us are content with a single small member of the family. But all the Oxford dictionaries are derived from the Oxford Dictionary, which is an awesome affair in 12 volumes, over a foot high, filling four feet of shelf room.

It is a monument of learning, begun in 1842 and completed in 1928. Two of its editors were knighted for their labours. Scholars and students of the English language cannot do without it. But the one thing it does not do is say the last word. Nobody knew better than its editors that it was out of date as soon as it was printed. The English language never stands still. It is a living speech, evolving hundreds of new words even as the editors struggle to record the old ones. On the completion of the dictionary, a supplement was planned. It came out five years later. It was no mere pamphlet of corrections and additions. It was a mighty tome of 868 pages.

And now the job begins all over again. A second supplement is in preparation, edited by a New Zealand Rhodes Scholar, R. W. Burchfield. This will be a supplement with a difference. The volume of 1933 was concerned with the growth of English in England. This supplement will in addition include what has happened to the language throughout the English-speaking nations of the Commonwealth. "We are on the lookout," the editor wrote to me the other day, "for words and expressions peculiar to New Zealand. What we want is a list of—for want of a better word—New Zealandisms."

In spite of what the pessimists about modern education say, ordinary New Zealanders are remarkably language-conscious. Radio talks on English usage, like *Say It In English* and *The Queen's English*, would need to be offered nightly to answer all the queries sent

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in by listeners. The Oxford Press is likely to find itself overwhelmed by language-hunters eagerly reporting a new specimen. For some years now, at the University of Wellington, we have been trying to put the hunt for New Zealandisms on a scientific basis. Harold Orsman spent two years on a research fellowship collecting New Zealand usages in likely and unlikely places, from early printed books and newspapers to the slang of the playground and the factory. His tape-recorder has been in the bush and the bar, as well as the class-room, and it has heard some remarkable usages.

The hunt proceeds on two lines. Contemporary usage must be recorded from the living speech. No evidence can be despised. Today's slang may be tomorrow's received standard. But words have histories, and the histories can be discovered only by patient collection of usages in early New Zealand writing. There have been some surprises. That billy you boil on a picnic—did you know it is almost certainly the same word as the "bully" in "bully-beef"? Orsman has found in the records of the 50's that the settlers used for containers empty "boulli-tins"—once they had eaten the "boulli" or "bully" they had contained. The addition of a wire handle produced an article of universal utility—and a New Zealandism, the original of which has long been a puzzle.

New Zealandisms are of many kinds. The most obvious, to the outsider, are the Maori words. Many of them are simply the names of natural objects, for which there was no point in inventing a new name—kiwi, tui, kauri, rimu, kowhai have ceased to have any particular Maori feel about them. There is another group of words—probably about 300—which are widely understood, but which remain closely associated with a Maori context. We know what a "mere" or a "marae" or a "hangi" is, but they remain essentially Maori in idea. One common group, however, of Maori words has come right over into New Zealand English—where, haka and mana (e.g.) have all acquired (when used in English) overtones and extra meanings that were not in the original Maori. They are true New Zealandisms.

Some of the 19th century borrowings from Maori do not even look like Maori, so thoroughly have they been assimilated. The Maori letter *p* is not the English letter *p*, though it may look the same in spelling. If you do not believe this, try an experiment. Get a Maori friend to light a match and, while he holds the flame two inches from his mouth, to say "pipi." The flame will burn upright with barely a flicker. Now you do the same. Unless you are a Maori scholar, the flame will be puffed out by the "wind" (or the aspiration, to be technical) of your letter *p*.

The early settlers (before they saw much written Maori) did not hear the Maori *p* as their *p*. They heard it as a *b*. The result is a word (still heard in some districts) like "bungie" or "bunger" alongside the more recent "punga" (from the Maori punga). The Maori *r* is like neither the English nor the Scots *r*. It is produced by a single tap of the tongue on the roof of the mouth. It sounds to most English-speaking people like a *d*. It was so heard in the 19th century. Keri Keri regularly appears as Kedi Kedi in early New Zealand books. One of the earliest climbers of Tongariro wrote it in his diary as Tongadido. This bearing of *p* as *b* and *r* as *d* has produced what is in every sense a tenacious New Zealandism—biddy-biddy from the Maori piri piri.

But the Maori element, though colourful, is only a minor part of our New Zealandisms. New English words have evolved here to cope with new concepts. Early settlers and whalers brought dialect words with them which took root in New Zealand and became part of the standard speech, while in England the same dialect words withered away. English words acquired quite new meanings in a new setting.

Some of the trickiest New Zealandisms are only noticed by New Zealanders when they travel. More than one New Zealander has been invited to "tea" in England and arrived hours too late, the meal finished and the guests gone. "Creek" and "paddock" are New Zealandisms, because they mean something quite different in the English of England. It is of some significance that Katherine Mansfield uses both words only in their New Zealand sense.

One of the trickiest is "spell." Here, we "have a spell" or "give somebody a spell," and know what we mean. The Englishman hears both phrases with complete incomprehension. He has the word in his speech, of course. But it is something quite different. The meaning of "spell" in the sense of "a period of rest from work" was last heard in England in the 18th century. It was retained in the language of the sea. Sailing ships and the whalers brought it to New Zealand. It came ashore and remained as a lively and useful word, not even regarded as a colloquialism. "Bail" in the "cow-bail" is another word from the English dialects that has forgotten its dialect origins and has pushed its way upwards into good New Zealand usage. Having settled here, it then began a new un-English life of its own. From bailing up a cow you go on by metaphor to bail up a wild pig and then (with a little help from neighbour Australia's bushrangers) you bail up the gold-coach.

A word that owes nothing to English usage is "bach" in its several senses. It appears as early as 1882 in the verb-



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form "bachelorise," meaning to look after yourself without the help of a wife, and so to rough it. Round about 1900 the verb was shortened to "bach." Some time later the verb became a noun: a "bach" was a make-shift shanty where you "bached" or roughed it. When this usage first developed, we are not sure. The first printed reference we can find is in 1927, but we suspect the noun was already in existence in speech. The next shift is a shift in meaning. From being a mere shed, the bach has become a place at the seaside, and today many a bach has a refrigerator and wall-to-wall carpets. The original "roughing-it" meaning is disappearing. Not only is a bach a true New Zealandism, it is that unusual thing, a regional New Zealandism. Otago-Southland does not use the word, preferring another New Zealandism "crib."

New Zealand English has diverged from the English of England more than is generally realised owing to the influence of American usage. "Sedan" car often appears in the advertisements, where an English advertisement would print "saloon." We say a steep "grade" where an English speaker would say "gradient." Our farmers break up the land with discs. The weight of English authority comes down heavily in the spelling "disk." Words like "glamorise," "preservatise," "hōspitalise" are slipping into the language daily.

New Zealandisms are of various levels. Some are acceptable in good writing—I have already mentioned Katherine Mansfield. Others have a limited local or occupational use. Many are slang expressions or colloquialisms that may not yet have appeared in printed form. But they are as distinctive a feature of the local scene as the landscape and the vegetation. One of these days there is going to be a dictionary of New Zealand usage, and in the meantime at least a selection of the more interesting New Zealandisms are to find their way into the Oxford supplement. If any *Listener* reader cares to add to our list, quoting either from his own knowledge or his reading, both I and the Oxford Press will be grateful.



"BACH—a makeshift shanty where you 'bached' or roughed it"