

A Concise Dictionary of English Slang and Colloquialisms (Second Edition)

B A Phythian

London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976

Reviewed by

John Rogers

RELC

If you had a hole in your trolley-bobs, you might find a hussif useful. If you were clemmed, you might enjoy a tram-stopper or a lobsouse. If you were spitting feathers and had a few sniffers, you would have to be careful not to get squiffy, pie-eyed, three sheets in the wind, half-slewed, tight as a newt or plastered. And then, if you were Harry flakers, you could always do some Egyptian P.T. If you can't work out the meanings of the strange words in the preceding sentences from the context, you can cabbage some time by looking them up in Brian Phythian's dictionary. (Translations are supplied at the end of this review.)

Slang and colloquialisms have always presented problems for language learners. Unless one is absolutely sure about the appropriateness of a slang expression, the best advice is probably not to use it. It's often very colourful (as this dictionary makes very clear) but it's not essential. First, though, what is slang? *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as:

"Language of a highly colloquial type, considered as below the level of standard educated speech, and consisting either of new words or of current words employed in some special sense."

It also defines "slang" as:

"The special vocabulary used by any set of persons of a low or disreputable character; language of a low and vulgar type."

If this second definition is correct, then I suppose we'd have to say that anyone who uses any of the expressions or idioms in this Dictionary of Slang is of a low or disreputable character, which means that I am, you, readers of this review, are, and, almost certainly, most of our relations, friends and students who ever use

English! However, another Oxford dictionary is more tolerant towards slang and, by extension, towards the people who use it:

"Words, phrases, meanings of words, etc., commonly used in talk but not suitable for good writing or formal occasions, especially the kind used by and typical of a class of persons."

(*The Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*)

But this doesn't really tell us which words and phrases "used in talk" aren't suitable for "good writing." And what, we might well ask, is "good writing"? Is this book review "good writing"? Would it be less good writing if I used some of the expressions from the first paragraph or some of the following entries from this Dictionary of Slang: that's the way the cookie crumbles, I'm up a gum-tree, I should cocoa, not fit to hold a candle to...? These would probably seem inappropriate for a book review in a serious journal.

On the other hand, many of the expressions in this dictionary seem to me to fall into the category of clichés, rather than slang. "Slang", as the compiler tells us in his preface, is one of the most volatile components of language, which is itself alive and always changing. But this dictionary is full of the tireddest old clichés, which may once have been slang but are no longer volatile, like:

pour oil on troubled water, off the beaten track, paddle one's own canoe, once in a blue moon, want one's bread buttered on both sides.

There is at least one example of this kind of cliché on almost every page.

And this is perhaps the dictionary's most serious shortcoming: on every page, tired, over-used clichés are

Concise Dictionary Of English Slang And Colloquialisms

Brian Arthur Phythian



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Reviews of the two volume New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English 2005 The king is dead Long live the king The old Partridge is not really dead it remains the best record of British slang antedating 1945 Now however the preferred source for information about English slang of the past 60 years is the New Partridge James Rettig Booklist American Library Association Most slang dictionaries are no better than momgrams or a rub of the brush put together by shmegegges looking to make some moola The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English on the other hand is the wee babes Ian Sansom The Guardian The Concise New Partridge presents for the first time all the slang terms from the New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English in a single volume With over 60 000 entries from around the English speaking world the Concise gives you the language of beats hipsters Teddy Boys mods and rockers hippies pimps druggies whores punks skinheads ravers surfers Valley girls dudes pill popping truck drivers hackers rappers and more The Concise New Partridge is a spectacular resource infused with humour and learning its rude its delightful and its a prize for anyone with a love of language

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