

Chockers with Deadly Lingo

Stunned Mullets and Two-pot Screammers: A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms (Fifth Edition)

By G.A. Wilkes

Oxford University Press, 422pp, \$45, 2008.

ISBN: 978-0195563160

Reviewed by Ed Wright

Teaching a course on Australian popular culture this semester, with a section on archetypes such as the digger, the battler and the fair-go, has forced me to wonder what being an Australian actually means. While many of the values enshrined in these archetypes continue to resonate with me, it's nonetheless impossible to go past the fact that as an Anglo-Celtic male with five or six generations of settlement under his belt, these values are not just theoretical, but are part of my individual psychological make-up; transmitted not just through the study of Australian history at school, but also via the oral folklore of my specific family history. For my students, however, as for Australians in general, this is increasingly not the case. As I have taught the course, I have asked myself what is something all Australians share. We all inhabit the same geographical entity, of course, but other than that the only thing perhaps that truly identifies us as distinct from other nationalities is our language, the vernacular that makes our version of English unique.

Of course the state of the vernacular is in constant flux and in a world where someone is just as likely to call you 'dude' as 'mate,' it would be a mistake to impose some kind of nationalistic hankering over a slang that is absorbing new ways of saying things everyday. At the same time, it's hard to avoid the sense that the immense collective creativity of Australian colloquial language is an undervalued national asset.

The fifth edition of *Stunned Mullets and Two-pot Screammers*, Professor G.A. Wilkes's Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms, is an excellent reminder of the riches to be found in Australian English. For a relatively slim volume (at least as far as dictionaries are concerned) it proves extremely comprehensive and along with the *Macquarie Dictionary of Australian Slang* is the best bet for those in need of a dictionary of this kind.

In his introduction, Wilkes notes that the first edition came out in 1978 and was the culmination of ten years' work. The fifth edition, therefore, is the product of four decades of work. The span of this constructive effort is patently clear. To begin with, the dictionary has a wonderful spread of colloquialisms, both

current and obsolete and from all walks of Australian life. The browser will learn that poddy-dodging is a kind of cattle rustling, that noodling consists of fossicking in the rubble of old claims for opals, that poached eggs and silent cops are the raised round metal disks (often painted yellow) that are sometimes used at corners to divide the sides of the road. While it was interesting to learn that the word 'bludger' originally referred to a pimp, it was more surprising to discover that a little Aussie 'battler', aside from its iconic meaning, could once have been used to describe a small homegrown prostitute. For those fascinated by the almost infinite variety of the scatological, there are few places where you can learn that bronza, bracket, freckle, clacker, blurter and crack (though 'chuffer' is lacking) refer to the same part of the human anatomy, or that a Gosford is a mid-thigh mini-skirt, so named because of its NSW central coast proximity to The Entrance.

It's unsurprising that much of the stuff here is crude: crudity and creativity are far from mutually exclusive. It's also interesting that in a culture known for its dry understatement and the tall poppy syndrome, colloquial language has been one place where excess and creativity have flourished. A phrase such as 'ugly as a hatful of arseholes', when you visualise it is simply surreal, as is 'sparrows flying out your backside' to describe the male orgasm, or a 'long streak of pelican shit' as a way of describing someone very tall. These are just some of the joys to be discovered in Professor Wilkes's dictionary.

Perhaps the most impressive thing about *Stunned Mullets* is the examples of usage that come with each entry. Each of these shows the date of the quote and who said or wrote it. For 'done like a dinner', for instance, there are six instances of usage quoted, beginning with the mid-nineteenth century, and finishing with a Greg Combet quote in 2002. These historical principles help give shape to the evolution of a colloquialism's meaning. The only drawback perhaps is that there is less actual explanation of how these terms came into being. This is a dictionary that tends to take the Common Law approach to language where meaning is inferred by usage, but unlike the Oxford for instance, the point at which a term has entered the language is not always provided.

Wilkes has taken his examples from an awesome array of sources. They are drawn mainly from literature and the press, those media in which the vernacular is preserved. Within these constraints the sourcing is wonderfully diverse: Patrick White, letters of colonial times, or tomes such as Patsy Adam Smith's 1969 *Folklore of the Australian Railwaymen*. Wilkes shows a predilection for Australian crime fiction, a genre which in turn has long been a champion of the colloquial. Peter Corris, Shane Moloney and Garry Disher are just some who are cited with regularity. Other authors notable by the frequency of their appearance in these pages are those who have chronicled the lives of the nation's underclasses

such as Kylie Tennant and Frank Hardy. While *Stunned Mullets* provides a history of colloquial usage, it's also a de facto history of Australian publication.

Although Wilkes was a long-standing university Literature Professor, the sources for *Stunned Mullets* go far beyond this with phrasal geniuses such as Rex Mossop and Barry Humphries featuring. In his introduction, Wilkes mentions the legions of people who have provided material for the dictionary, including his local butcher. Politicians also get a good run: John Howard has left us with the 'barbecue stopper' and his self-description as a 'cricket tragic', while Mark Latham, a politician who imploded, is nonetheless immortalized here for memorable utterances as 'a conga line of suckholes'. Paul Keating and Gough Whitlam are others who have added to our colloquial language in ways that are unlikely to be equalled by Kevin Rudd.

There are a number of other dictionaries of Australian slang and colloquialisms, all with their merits. But for reference or for the simple pleasure of browsing, *Stunned Mullets*, with its comprehensiveness and wonderful history of usage, is very close to being a national treasure.

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