

Obituary

ERIC HONEYWOOD PARTRIDGE

When the Academy elected Eric Partridge into an Honorary Fellowship in 1974, he was eighty years old. Ten years earlier the University of Queensland had awarded him an honorary Doctorate of Letters. Both honours, reminding him of his early links with Australia, brought him much pleasure.

As a writer of dictionaries, one of Samuel Johnson's 'harmless drudges', Partridge may well prove to have been the last of a race of giants. Computers now compile what was once laboriously assembled by devoted scholars, and even Dr R. W. Burchfield, a lexicographer of no mean stature, now has at his disposal in handsome premises in St Giles, a team of assistants and technical aids that have ushered in a new era, far removed from the Grub Street of old, for the great family of Oxford dictionaries. There is undoubted gain in accuracy and comprehensiveness, but what is lost is the personal voice of the great lexicographers of the past: Nathaniel Bailey's, Dr Johnson's, Noah Webster's, and, in more recent times, those of Murray, Bradley, Craigie, Onions, Henry Cecil Wyld, and Eric Partridge himself.

Like his predecessors, Partridge was a prodigious toiler. He never ceased to revise and enlarge and all his major works have run into several editions. At the same time a voluminous correspondence kept him in touch with scholars around the world, many of whom took pleasure in supplying him with addenda and corrigenda which he never failed to acknowledge. His great strength as a lexicographer was aptly summed up in a commemorative leaflet issued by ten British and American publishers on the occasion of his seventieth birthday: 'He has gained his considerable reputation by combining two abilities rarely occurring together: that of being a lucid and witty writer and that of being a scholar who, independent of schools and cliques, entertains while he informs.'

Dictionaries are seldom thought of as providing scope for wit and imagination, let alone entertainment, yet even in so unlikely a corner of English letters as a dictionary of etymology Partridge manages to display these qualities. That they are even more in evidence in his many shorter works—smaller dictionaries, books on language, guides to 'Good English', essays on various topics—is less surprising. He had a keen sense of humour and took a great delight in the more colourful branches of English; and it is these which, as a lexicographer of slang, cant, and other unconventional forms of the language, he made very much his own.

Although born a New Zealander, it was in Australia that Partridge first became aware of those aspects of English that were to remain a major interest throughout his life. At school in Toowoomba, as undergraduate at the University of Queensland, then as a teacher in that state and in New South

Wales, and especially as a soldier in the Australian Imperial Force during the First World War, Partridge's ears were, literally, opened to the riches of informal modes of speech. Oxford, where he gained his BLitt with a thesis on 'The Influence of English Literature upon the French Romantics', did not divert his attention from the English language and its history, nor did it stifle his interest in less urbane linguistic manifestations. This interest received further stimulus during Partridge's service in the Army and then the Royal Air Force during the Second World War.

His dictionaries have established themselves as classics in their kind; his *Usage and Abusage: A Guide to Good English* has taken its place alongside Fowler and Gowers in countless homes and offices throughout the English-speaking world. The publications of The Scholartis Press, which Partridge founded and directed in the late 'twenties, have become collectors' pieces. The Language Library, which he started in 1952 and of which he was sole editor for several years, continues to thrive, now with over forty titles to its credit. Let these achievements speak for themselves.

With Eric Partridge's death on 1 June 1979, the Academy has lost a distinguished scholar and man of letters, whose Fellowship conferred honour upon donor and recipient alike.

R. W. V. Elliott