fibonacci & mehitabel 1

Done for FAPA by John Bangsund, PO Box 1096, Thornbury, Victoria 3071, Australia AUGUST 1994

In December 1940 a 29-year-old Brisbane journalist and poet named Clem Christesen published a little eight-page magazine called *Meanjin Papers — Contemporary Queensland Verse*. 'Meanjin' (pronounced me-AN-jn) was said to mean 'spike', and to have been the Aboriginal name for a spiky piece of land that jutted into the Brisbane River. It wasn't a great name for a fanzine, but it has survived to puzzle people to this day. I first became aware of *Meanjin* in 1959, when I went to work as a sales assistant at Cheshire's, the best bookshop in Melbourne. By then *Meanjin* had long been Australia's most respected literary journal. Clem was a charming, irascible sort of man, and a brilliant editor. The University of Melbourne enticed him to bring his magazine south in 1945, and it has been associated with the university ever since, although the university did not own it until 1974, when Clem retired and the Meanjin Company Ltd was established. Jim Davidson was *Meanjin*'s editor from 1974 to 1982, Judith Brett 1982–87, Jenny Lee 1987–94. Until Judy's time *Meanjin* had never had an assistant editor. There had been many part-time assistants, but they were called secretaries, and most of their work was in fact secretarial. Judy's assistant, the poet Bev Roberts, was the first assistant editor. In 1988 I became the second.

One of Jenny Lee's policies as editor was that no-one who worked on *Meanjin* would be published in it. Early this year Jenny rang me and said that for her final issue (to be published before Christina Thompson took over as editor in July) this policy was reversed: everyone who had worked for *Meanjin* in her time as editor would be positively encouraged to contribute to that issue. I said I had a few ideas for something I might write for her, and she heard me out, then said 'What I want from you is a definitive essay on reference books.' I didn't exactly protest, but I think I said that, done properly, such an essay would take up the entire issue.

I didn't do it properly, and it runs fourteen pages. Also, I decided early that what I was writing was not an essay but a ramble — the sort of thing I write for fanzines. Bits of it *were* written for fanzines: I am not superstitious about recycling. As for the recycling of assistant editors, at the moment of writing I have no idea whether Christina (whom I have not met) will want to retain me in any capacity when she becomes editor.

ON LOOKING IT UP

A ramble on books and editing

A wise old preacher I knew once told me: 'Have few books, and know them well.' His name was Will Gale. He had entered the Churches of Christ theological college in Melbourne in 1904, the year it was founded, and he gave me this advice in 1957, when I was about to enter the college. He also gave me a little book by the classicist and religious historian T. R. Glover, which I enjoyed so much that I went out and bought every other book by Glover I could find. In 1904, even in 1957, in that church, you could pay no greater respect to a man's faith than to describe him as 'a man of one book', namely the Bible. Like many ministers I have known, Will Gale was well-read and had a substantial library, but he was a man of one book. If I had followed his advice I might be a better and a wiser man, but I didn't.

My father's advice was different from Will Gale's. Perhaps it was not so much advice as consolation on my complaining that I would never learn something or other that had just come up at school. 'To know things', he said, 'is not as important as to know where to look them up.' How ever he meant it, that advice stayed with me, and made me first a lazy student and in time a useful editor. (By lazy I do not mean indolent: I have always been prone to what Alejo Carpentier called 'that peculiar form of laziness which consists in bringing great energy to tasks not precisely those we should be doing'.)

My father had grown up surrounded by books, many of them in Norwegian, which he could not read; I too grew up surrounded by books, and couldn't wait to start a collection of my own. When I left school and started work in 1954 I resolved that I would buy a book every week. At that rate I would now have 2080 books, quite a collection. In fact I probably do have about that many books, but most of them are junk, books that no secondhand-bookseller would buy, that not even the local op shop would want to be lumbered with, but books that I will not throw out, because I am against throwing out books on principle, and you never know when one of them might come in handy.

I have bought and sold more books than I have had hot dinners. I never intended to sell any of

them, but for much of the last twenty-five years I have been self-employed (or unemployed: for freelance editors the difference between the two states is often mystical) and often enough, too often, my books have gone to pay the rent or some such extravagance. As recently as 1980 I had a library; now I have merely books. When I feel sad about this (once a day, on average, looking at those empty shelves: bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang) I try to remember a prayer composed by that great philosopher Kurt Vonnegut Jr. In 1967 he addressed a meeting at Ohio State University to celebrate a great moment in its library's history, and he began with a few jokes and this prayer: 'O Lord, we have with great labor accumulated two million volumes. Grant that all of us gathered here will live long enough to read and understand them all. Amen.' I find that strangely consoling.

In 1972 I applied for a job as sub-editor with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Reporting Staff, and was invited to sit their entrance examination. It was exhaustive and exhausting, page after page testing your knowledge of words and usage, and then a practical test of sub-editing: a dozen pages of unpunctuated gibberish, which I later learnt was a verbatim transcript of part of a speech by Senator J. A. Mulvihill (Labor, NSW). At this point many people who sat the test gave up: they couldn't make sense of it, and besides, if this was the sort of rubbish they would have to work on (and it was), they would rather not. I hacked into it, didn't finish it in the time allowed, and left the test thinking I might get by on the first part. I was wrong about that. For a start, my brief definitions of 'pungent', 'importunate' and some other words were inadequate. I was appointed a Hansard sub-editor because I had done the best job on Mulvihill that anyone had seen. (A remark at the time that my work consisted in 'making Montaignes out of Mulvihills' appealed to Stephen Murray-Smith and got me into his *Dictionary of Australian Quotations*.)

The word 'editor' has many meanings. It can mean the person who decides what is published. It can mean the person who takes a manuscript that has been accepted for publication and to some extent reshapes, restructures, perhaps even rewrites it. It can mean the person who imposes house style on a manuscript, corrects the spelling and grammar, corrects or queries facts and quotations, and points out inconsistencies of all kinds. In Australian publishing houses the first kind of editor is usually called a publisher or commissioning editor, the second a structural editor, the third a copy-editor. There are also 'commissioning editors' who might better be called publishers' scouts or procurers, and 'production editors', who are traffic managers, co-ordinating the work of editors, designers, printers and everyone else concerned in the production of a book.

In the normal course of her work the editor of *Meanjin* does all of these jobs. So do I, on a much smaller scale, as editor of the *Society of Editors Newsletter*. But what I do in book publishing is copy-editing (which I sometimes call 'nuts-and-bolts editing') and editorial proofreading (which is similar to the work of a printer's reader, but with more responsibility). If Jenny Lee is a kind of architect or engineer, I am a kind of technician, adjusting a bolt here, a nut there, checking that the building material supplied meets specification. What I am called on *Meanjin*'s title page — assistant editor — is exactly right. It's what I do best. (Apart from digressing. Digressing is what I do best of all.)

In an essay on East German writing (*Meanjin* 1991) Beate Josephi mentioned Erich Loest's *Die Stasi war mein Eckermann* ('— freely translated — "State Security was my Boswell" '). When I read this essay in manuscript I said to Jenny it was a pity that even a journal like *Meanjin* could not assume these days that its readers would understand a reference to Eckermann. She agreed. For some reason I mentioned this to a well-known freelance editor, tactfully explaining who Eckermann was, because I knew he wouldn't have heard of him. He looked thoughtful, then said 'Who is Boswell?'

When I was young I delighted in long and unusual words. I had a terrific vocabulary. By the time I was 30 I was making a deliberate effort to exclude these words from my writing, because I realized that my readers didn't know what I was talking about. I wasn't attempting to write plain English, because some of the things I wanted to say can't be said in plain English; I was attempting to write appropriate English. Since then I have forgotten many of the words I once knew. By the time I joined *Meanjin* in 1988 I had forgotten so many words, and through editing so much bad writing (washing my mind in other people's bathwater, as Cyril Connolly once put it) had lost so much confidence even in my ability to spell, that I could barely edit a paragraph without help from a dictionary.

Dictionaries are like watches; the worst is better than none, and the best cannot be expected to go quite true.
Samuel Johnson

In *Everything I Know about Writing* (Mandarin, 1994; a pleasant little book) John Marsden says he has forty dictionaries, which he uses all the time. If they

are dictionaries of English, forty is too many; if they are all sorts of dictionaries, forty is nowhere near enough. From my desk I can see over 150 books bearing the word 'dictionary' on their spines. A similar number have such words as 'encyclopedia', 'handbook', 'manual', 'companion', 'guide' and 'register' in their titles. A further 200-odd are in fact dictionaries, encyclopedias, guides, companions, even though the words do not appear in their titles: *Right Words*; *You Have a Point There*; *Bookmaking*; *The Elements of Style*; *The Drum*. Then there are atlases, directories, books about language and history and music, volumes of poetry more often misquoted than read, eight translations of the Bible, or parts of it, two Greek New Testaments, books old and new, some worth hundreds of dollars, some bought for sixpence in 1958 and yet to justify the expense. The books I have bought solely for pleasure or amusement are inside the house; the books in my cramped, dusty little office behind the garage, my *annexe horribilis*, with its leaking roof and rare insects, the books here jostling for dry space with computer, filing cabinets, desks, modest stereo system and spare copies of the last forty-four issues of the *Society of Editors Newsletter*, produced in this room and come to rest here somewhere in the boxes and bundles and mounds of paper I must sort out some day, these are the books I work with, the tools of my trade.

Robert Claiborne, in his *Life and Times of the English Language* (Bloomsbury, 1990), says that English has at least 400,000 words, possibly as many as 600,000. Sidney Landau, in his *Dictionaries: the art and craft of lexicography* (Cambridge University Press, 1989; a wonderfully entertaining book), seems to suggest that 10 million might be closer to the mark (there are well over 6 million chemical compounds, for a start): it depends on what you call a 'word'. The one great criticism of the *Oxford English Dictionary* is that it ignored so many scientific terms; almost a quarter of Robert Burchfield's huge *Supplement to the OED* (1972–86) is devoted to rectifying this. The language of science and technology has expanded enormously since 1986, and even the second edition of the *OED*, published only five years ago, is now outdated in its coverage of scientific terms. The awesome *McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Scientific and Technical Terms* (5th edn, 1994) defines 104,300 terms, and you can be sure that many of those are not to be found in *OED2*.

I do not have *OED2* or the *McGraw-Hill*. For science in general I get by with the *Oxford Dictionary for Scientific Writers and Editors* (1991) and the *Chambers Science and Technology Dictionary* (1991); for computer science I am better equipped, with *Prentice Hall's Illustrated Dictionary of Computing* (remarkably, published for the world market in Sydney, 1992), the Microsoft Press *Computer Dictionary* (2nd edn, 1994) and the *IBM Dictionary of Computing* (10th, but first commercially published edition, McGraw-Hill, 1994).

Sovereign among my tools of trade is the mighty *Oxford English Dictionary: being a corrected re-issue with an introduction, supplement, and bibliography, of A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (13 vols, 1928–33). Inadequate or outdated as it may be, the *OED* is an inexhaustible source of pleasure and instruction. At the time of the Newcastle earthquake, for example, I realized that I had misspelt 'tremor' all my life; I looked to Fowler for light on the vexed matter of *-or* versus *-our*; Fowler referred me on to *OED*; and I came away converted to the *-or* cause. Earlier, I consulted *OED* to reassure myself that my 'program' is a better spelling than *Meanjin*'s 'programme'; *OED*'s entry for the latter reads, in full, 'see Program'.

Not everyone can afford the *OED* (I got mine for $100, but that was a fluke), and I don't use it every day. The dictionary I use every day, the one indispensable dictionary, is the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (1993). This is not a revision of the *Shorter Oxford* (1933–73) but a completely new abridgement of the *OED* and Burchfield's *Supplement*, and of material gathered during and since the production of *OED2*. In a sense, it is an abridged edition of an *OED* not yet published. It disappoints me on just one word: 'programme'. As far as the *New Shorter Oxford* is concerned, you can even 'programme' a computer. What James Murray considered a nineteenth-century affectation seems set to survive into the twenty-first century, one of those words that Fowler called 'sturdy indefensibles'.

Apart from size, purpose and methodology, dictionaries may be divided into diachronic and synchronic, canonic and encyclopedic. The *OED* is diachronic, tracing words to their first appearance in English, and defining words as they have been used in the past as well as the way they are used now. The *New Shorter Oxford* also is diachronic, but confines itself to half a million definitions of words in use between 1700 and the present (or still to be encountered in Shakespeare, Milton and the King James Bible). Both *OED* and *New Shorter Oxford* are canonic, dealing only with 'pure' words, not with terms more properly the province of encyclopedias. Where to draw the line between canonic and encyclopedic has been the subject of constant discussion between lexicographers for many years. Randolph Quirk, for example, considers 'Chomskyan' and 'Kafkaesque' to be encyclopedic, but both may be found in the *New Shorter Oxford*. Like the vast majority of dictionary users, I don't care whether words like 'Chomskyan' are

lexicographically pure: I just want to check their meaning and spelling. If I want to know more about Chomsky I turn to an encyclopedia.

A perfect example of a synchronic dictionary is the *BBC English Dictionary* (HarperCollins, 1992). It gives only the current meaning of words, omitting even etymologies. It is also an encyclopedic dictionary, with an emphasis on world politics: no sign of Chomsky or Kafka, but basic facts about George Bush and Saddam Hussein; Robert Mugabe and F. W. de Klerk get entries, but not Nelson Mandela or Desmond Tutu, Green Berets but not Greenpeace. Most dictionaries grow old gracefully; this one seems to have passed its use-by date before publication.

Another way in which dictionaries differ is the form of their entries. The *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary* (1983) is typical of the traditional British approach in its use of 'clustered' or 'nested' entries. In this system, to quote Landau (p. 247), 'compounds, idioms, and other multiple lexical units, as well as some derivatives, are embedded within a consolidated paragraph alphabetized under a word with which they share a common element or from which they are derived'. Under 'green', for example, *Chambers* has first an unnumbered series of definitions, then seventy-four derivatives, idioms and so on. If the word or idiom you want starts with 'green', you must scan a paragraph that extends over a column and a half (unless it's 'greengage', which for some reason has a separate entry). The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* of the same period (7th edn, 1982) varies this system by numbering seventeen primary meanings, then grouping derivatives under the appropriate numbers — which is slightly more confusing than *Chambers*. This system was abandoned in the 8th edition (1990).

In the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* (2nd edn, 1992, based on *COD* 8th edn), 'green' has twelve numbered primary definitions, with seven sub-definitions, followed by thirty-seven derivatives and idioms (green ban, green belt, Green Beret, green card, green cheese and so on), then 'greenish', 'greenly' and 'greenness'. The entry 'green' is followed by thirty entries for words beginning with 'green', from 'greenback' to 'greeny'. This is basically the system followed by American 'college' dictionaries, and in Australia by the *Macquarie Dictionary* and the *Collins English Dictionary (Australian edition)*. (For the record, *Macquarie* (2nd edn, 1991) has thirty numbered definitions of 'green', two sub-definitions, and seventy-five following 'green' words. *Collins* (3rd edn, 1991) has almost exactly the same, but the word-list is not identical.)

Macquarie and *Collins* are encyclopedic dictionaries; *ACOD* is canonic; they are all synchronic dictionaries. For as long as I can remember the *Concise Oxford* was my favorite desk dictionary, until about 1982, when I discovered *Collins* (1st edn, 1979). I liked *Collins* mainly because of its encyclopedic content and its form of entries, and because it had an Oxford-like character but was more adventurous than Oxford in some ways (in dropping hyphens from well-established compound adjectives, for example). I admired *ACOD* (2nd edn) when it appeared, and often used it in preference to *Collins* (3rd edn) simply because it was so much easier to lift. I had never felt any need for *Macquarie*, but having deliberately used it as first point of reference for six months now, I am very impressed by it. *ACOD* and *Macquarie* are recommended by the AGPS *Style Manual* — an endorsement *Collins* will not get while it continues to place the *-ize* form of verbs before *-ise*.

Other dictionaries I like are the *Australian National Dictionary* (Oxford Australia, 1988), which in effect is an Australian supplement to the *OED*; G. A. Wilkes' *Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms* (Sydney University Press, 2nd edn, 1985); *Australian Aboriginal Words in English*, by R. M. W. Dixon, W. S. Ramson and Mandy Thomas (Oxford, 1990); the *Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary* (1991), which makes *COD* superfluous by including all of its canonic entries and more; the Hutchinson *Dictionary of Difficult Words* (revised edn, 1993; I have used the 4th edn, 1958, for many years); Joseph Shipley's *Dictionary of Early English* (Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1963); James Orchard Halliwell's *Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words* (first published 1847; 7th edn, Routledge, 1924); Eric Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (2 vols, 5th/7th edn, Routledge, 1970); and Ebenezer Cobham Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (first published 1870; 5th edn, Cassell, 1959).

Thesauruses (Oxford prefers the plural 'thesauri', but you are likely to be ridiculed if you use it in Australia) should not be allowed into the hands of minors or journalists. They are not dictionaries of synonyms, as some think, but collections of related concepts, and useful books if you know how to use them. They come basically in two forms. The *Oxford Thesaurus* (1993) is arranged as a dictionary, alphabetically, with a comprehensive index. The more traditional thesaurus, based on Peter Mark Roget's original *Thesaurus* of 1852, is arranged thematically by concept. In this form the index is vital to finding the word or expression you want, but the groupings of concepts then encourage browsing, perhaps setting off ideas you didn't have when you opened the book. My favorite Roget-style thesaurus is the *Bloomsbury Thesaurus* (1993).

The one thing you must do before using a word or expression you have found in a thesaurus is look

it up in a dictionary. And before you even reach for a thesaurus, remember Fowler's advice: 'The obvious is better than obvious avoidance of it.'

There are hundreds of books about style and usage, and they seem to have just one thing in common: contradiction. I can say this with feeling, having written *Meanjin*'s little style guide with Jenny Lee. There would be no need for our guide if there was one book we could recommend without reservation to *Meanjin* contributors.

In Australia, every editor must have the *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers* (Australian Government Publishing Service, 5th edn, 1994), because every other editor uses it. Fortunately, it is a very useful book of its kind. With the *Style Manual* on your desk, along with either the *Macquarie Dictionary* or the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*, you can't go wrong. Nick Hudson's *Modern Australian Usage* (Oxford, 1993) is for people who understand that 'there is a difference between not being wrong and being right' (p. vi). Hudson continues, in his preface: 'This book is for people who want to make up their own minds. It reports variance, and attempts to give readers the information they need in order to discuss the issue and find the solution which best suits their own situation.'

Most people don't turn to books on style and usage for discussion, but for the same thing they expect from dictionaries: rulings, authoritative answers. For them, Viking has published the *Penguin Working Words* (1993), a useful, worthy and (especially compared with Hudson) rather dull book. The dustjacket of *Working Words* conveys the publisher's aim precisely: you might miss the subtitle, 'An Australian guide to modern English usage', but you won't miss the *Macquarie Dictionary*, *Working Words* and AGPS *Style Manual* pictured together on a busy word-worker's desk. If you want advice on how to use punctuation with quotation marks, look elsewhere: *Working Words* is way out of step with normal style.

In my thirty-five years' experience of publishing houses and printeries of all kinds I have found that there is always one resident expert on words, punctuation, style and usage. Some of these oracles are just better informed than anyone else on the staff, and some few are unsung geniuses. (Bill Winter, head reader at Wilke's, was one. I had the good fortune to work with him in 1967–8, and learnt far more from him than the craft of proofreading.) Oxford University Press seems to have been singularly blessed with geniuses, and two of them established standards in their time that have been revised but not outmoded since. Horace Hart was Printer to the University (later Controller of the University Press), 1883–1915. Between 1893 and 1904 he compiled fifteen editions of his *Rules for Compositors and Readers at the University Press, Oxford* before Oxford made it available to the public. My copy is the 38th edition (1978); the 39th appeared in 1983. It is a pocket-size book of 180-odd pages, and it is indispensable. Its companion volume from 1905 to 1981 was the *Authors' and Printers' Dictionary* by F. Howard Collins, usually referred to simply (if confusingly) as *Collins*. Its last edition was the 11th (1973). In 1981 *Collins* became the *Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors*, a little book every bit as useful, and specifically recommended for use in conjunction with *Hart's Rules*. The latest edition of *ODWE* is hard to come by in Australia, mainly because it has for all practical purposes been supplanted here by the *Australian Writers' and Editors' Guide* (Oxford, 1991), adapted from *ODWE* and edited by Shirley Purchase. *AWEG* has quickly established itself as an essential desk reference.

Cambridge University Press produced its own special genius in the person of Judith Butcher, author of *Copy-editing: the Cambridge handbook* (1st edn, 1975; 3rd edn, 1992). This wise and valuable book covers far more about usage, style and publishing processes than its title suggests, but all from the viewpoint of the working editor. Every editor, from the least experienced to the most venerable, needs Butcher's *Copy-editing*. It is the bible of the trade.

To the great credit of the Society of Editors (Victoria), we now have a locally produced book on editing that outclasses anything I have seen except Butcher. The Society commissioned two of its most experienced editors, Elizabeth Flann and Beryl Hill, to write a book for use in training courses and to serve generally as a basic text for Australian editors. They met their brief, and excelled it. The *Australian Editing Handbook* was published by AGPS early in 1994. One sentence in this book stays indelibly in my mind — 'Think of all the people who might read the book, and let them be part of it' — the essence of inclusive language and appropriate English.

Just to list all the books about style and usage that I like would take up too much space. I love Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, and still use the edition I bought in 1961 (the last before it was revised by Ernest Gowers). The *Longman Guide to English Usage*, by Sidney Greenbaum and Janet Whitcut (1988), I find very useful. John B. Bremner's *Words on Words: a dictionary for writers and others who care about words* (Columbia University Press, 1980) is exactly what its title says; it is also one of the most amusing dictionaries I possess, and one of the few I have read from cover to cover. Bill Bryson's *Dictionary of Troublesome Words* (Penguin, 2nd edn, 1987) is a similar lot. His

introduction begins: 'This book might more accurately, if less convincingly, have been called *A Guide to Everything in English Usage That the Author Wasn't Entirely Clear About Until Quite Recently.*' Bryson's *Penguin Dictionary for Writers and Editors* (1991) is admirable, but in Australia no match for Oxford's *AWEG*.

Bryson, Bremner, Hudson, Shipley, Landau . . . I suppose it shouldn't surprise me too much that so many eminent writers on the origins and use of words should also be humorists. Landau's hilariously polite explanation of the origin of the word 'f**k' (*Dictionaries*, p. 183) rightly belongs in any decently researched anthology of twentieth-century wit and humor.

The book I am most often asked by fellow editors to recommend to them is a good, straightforward, *adult* book on English grammar. Until fairly recently I was unable to oblige, being as much in the dark as they were. Like most of my colleagues', my study of grammar ended at school; like them, I have an instinctive feel for what sounds right, and basically edit by ear. You need that ear to be an editor: don't underestimate it. But you need that constant urge to know more, too, and the more you use words the more you feel the need to *name* what you are doing, in short, to know something about grammar.

To understand the terminology of grammar, the *Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* (1994) is a great help, a most useful book. To get a grasp of grammar, the three best books I have found (in ascending order of time and concentration required) are Gordon Jarvie's *Bloomsbury Grammar Guide* (1993); Sidney Greenbaum's *An Introduction to English Grammar* (Longman, 1991); and *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, by Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik (Longman, 1985). The first is a well-conceived crash course, or refresher. The second is a thorough and eminently useful text. The third is what it says it is: comprehensive. If you have a question about grammar, you'll find the answer somewhere in its 1800 pages (and you should find it quickly: its exemplary index takes up 115 of those pages). It is unbelievably expensive, but not utterly beyond the reach of the determined editor, and once you have it you'll consider it a cornerstone of your library.

Their's not to reason why,
Their's but to do and die
Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Authors are notoriously sloppy when they quote other authors. There's nothing much that an editor can do about this when the author quoted is unfamiliar, and unrepresented in the local library. If you are really suspicious you can ask for a photocopy of the material quoted. Most editors don't have time for that, and are more concerned with misquotations of well-known authors and the misattribution of quotations. In this basic sort of checking we are fairly well served by a number of dictionaries of quotations; most editors I know have at least two or three. For a nice balance of comprehensiveness and accuracy, the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* is hard to beat; the fourth edition (1992) is superbly organized and indexed, a model of its genre. *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (14th edn, 1968) is useful, if not entirely to be trusted: it silently corrects Tennyson's 'Their's', for example. Meic Stephens' *Dictionary of Literary Quotations* (Routledge, 1990) is eminently browsable, and naturally, since it is so specialized, contains quotations missing from the *Oxford*. The *Faber Book of Aphorisms* (1964), selected by W. H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger, is another dangerously diverting collection of quotations.

The four books mentioned are organized in four different ways. *Oxford* is alphabetical by author, and thoroughly indexed. *Bartlett* is chronological by birth date, with an index of key words and a separate index of authors. Stephens is alphabetical by subject (Manuscript, Masterpiece, Meaning, Metre), with key words and authors indexed. The Faber book is an anthology, arranged by concept (Humanity, Religion, Nature, Education, Society), with author index only. The different approaches reflect the different uses of collections of quotations. The subject approach prompts me to mention an enormous collection of quotations that is sometimes overlooked: the multitude of citations in *OED*. The title of my column in the *Society of Editors Newsletter*, 'Threepenny Planet', comes from Dean Swift; recently I went looking for the exact wording of the whole quotation ('I was born under a Threepenny Planet, never to be worth a Groat'), and for a while I thought I must have imagined it, until I remembered to look at *OED*'s entry for 'planet'.

For Australian quotations, Stephen Murray-Smith's *Dictionary of Australian Quotations* (Heinemann, 1984) is essential, as is the *Macquarie Dictionary of Australian Quotations* (1990). The citations in the *Australian National Dictionary* are useful. Sometimes I find what I'm looking for in Bill Wannan's *Australian Folklore: a dictionary of lore, legends and popular allusions* (Lansdowne, 1970), but useful and entertaining as that book is, it is not a work of scholarship to be trusted implicitly.

My background in biblical studies impressed on me the need for accurate quotation – and more, the need for *honest* quotation. The theologian

Alexander Campbell once said 'A text out of context is a pretext.' He was speaking of biblical texts, verses from the Bible, but the principle holds good in all fields of scholarship. The editor must try to weed out the texts that are pretexts, the authentic quotations that misrepresent the author quoted, but I don't know of any book that can help in this regard. It is the instinct for the pretext, among other things, that makes an editor an editor. Wide reading helps. 'The text is sacrosanct,' Frank Crowley insisted when I was working on his *Colonial Australia in Documents* (3 vols, Nelson, 1980). When I pointed out that three of his documents, attributed only to the *Edinburgh Review* of a certain date, all came from one review by the Reverend Sydney Smith, he was, to say the least, anxious. His research assistants were obviously not fans of 'the Smith of Smiths'.

The *Hutchinson Dictionary of Biography* (2nd edn, 1993) is attractively presented and a pleasant book to have. It has portraits of many of its 8000 subjects, and carefully chosen quotations on most pages. I find it a rather endearing book, fun to browse in, but it is not my first choice among dictionaries of biography. For the moment, my first choice is the *Chambers Biographical Dictionary* (5th edn, 1990), edited by Magnus Magnusson. It has 20,000 entries, and I have yet to fault it (except in its necessary omissions; you can't include everyone; I am pleased to find Alexander Campbell, sorry not to find André Campra). I regret that I have not yet seen Barry Jones's new *Dictionary of World Biography*. On a good day I reckon our man could out-magnus Magnusson, and his perspective on 'world' biography should be more pertinent to our concerns than any British writer's.

For Australian biography there's no point messing about in the foothills: editors in particular should go straight to the top and acquire, or at least use, the magnificent *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Melbourne University Press, 1966–). So far twelve volumes have been published covering the period 1788–1939, and the first of a projected four volumes covering the period 1940–80. There is also a very useful index volume for the first period. The thing to remember when consulting *ADB* is that it is constantly being revised, so before or after reading an entry, certainly before quoting it, it is wise to check the corrigenda. (Example: Baudin – *'for* Thomas Nicholas *read* Nicolas Thomas'.) I used to keep the corrigenda pamphlets in a folder, but they have now been replaced and consolidated in the index volume. One of the early corrections has deservedly become famous: *'for* died in infancy *read* lived to a ripe old age at Orange'. Only a truly great work of continuing scholarship could so correct itself.

Another useful source of information is *A Biographical Register 1788–1939: Notes from the name index of the Australian Dictionary of Biography*, compiled by H. J. Gibney and Ann G. Smith (2 vols, ADB/Australian National University, 1987).

A few words about encyclopedias: forget the rest, hold out for the *Columbia Encyclopedia* (5th edn, 1993). Isaiah Berlin prefers it to *Britannica* (*Times Literary Supplement*, 22 April 1994). So do I. It's in one enormous volume of over 3000 pages. Put it next to your *New Shorter Oxford* and you have a formidable reference library – over 14 million words – in just three hefty volumes. Careful how you heft.

In a book I proofread recently there was a reference to 'the fire that occurred at the Chernobyl nuclear power station in 1984'. I altered 'fire' to 'explosion', and 1984 to 1986, and wondered how any writer on the subject could be so careless as to write such a sentence, or any editor to let it stand. In the same book the estimated current population of an Asian country doubled in the space of three pages, and a map of Australia showed Sydney south of Canberra. The latter would probably have been corrected before the book was published, but the other misinformation (and a lot more like it) might well have gone uncorrected. In another book I proofread, Papageno was described as 'the garrulous bird-catcher in Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*' (which reminded me of a statement I once heard that Kiri Te Kanawa first came to public attention when she sang Desdemona in Verdi's *Aida*; just about anyone would attract some attention by doing that). In O'Neill and Ruder's *Complete Guide to Editorial Freelancing* (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1974) the aspiring editor is advised to keep track of changes to the names of countries – good advice, but the authors' examples unfortunately include 'Cambodia, now Sri Landa'. Between drafts of her latest novel, *Tunnel Vision*, Sara Paretsky changed her mind about the location of some of the action, moving it from a county west of Chicago to another south. When I proofread the book for Penguin (the first edition was published here to coincide with the author's presence at Adelaide Writers' Week) I noticed that, among other oddities, some references to the western county remained; Paretsky's American editor hadn't noticed.

How can such things happen, such clangers and confusions go undetected? Easily. Editors and proofreaders are as fallible as anyone else, and some know more than others. But some publishers don't allow editors the time to get everything right. Freelance editors in particular often find themselves working down to a budget rather than

up to a standard. Some publishers seem to regard copy-editing as a necessary nuisance, and spend as little as they can on it. As for proofreading, many don't bother at all: they leave that to the authors. The editor is often also the proofreader and the indexer, and few people have the skills to do those three jobs properly, especially on one book, so mistakes are not just overlooked but magnified. Increasingly, publishers are turning to 'desktop publishers' to typeset and lay out their books — in effect handing over a manuscript (and usually a disk) to the cheapest DTP shop on the block and saying 'Here, make a book out of this.' Publishers have an extraordinary faith in DTP, and their accountants seem to encourage it. Again and again, the results are somewhere between barely passable and disastrous, but they persist. I'm sure they think they are at the cutting edge of the new technology, and in a sense they are, but that edge is often more like a rift, where publishers' expertise is cut off from the expertise of the DTP people — or a sort of remote border post, where the languages spoken are similar but the cultures are different, and mutual ignorance prevails.

That there are many successful and honorable exceptions to this sad picture I need hardly say, but while publishers spend their energy, time and money grappling with new technology they have less to spend on the actual content of their books. There have been times when I could have saved publishers hundreds of dollars and days of anguish if they had let me spend a few hours cleaning up their disks before they went to the typesetter. Many freelance editors have equipped themselves to provide this kind of service (to act as guides and translators at the border post, to continue that metaphor), but there are publishers who don't understand how valuable a service it is. An absurd example: the copy-editor carefully writes 'en' over every hyphen that should be an en rule, or dash; the DTP typesetter, who has learnt that material underlined is to be in italics, just as carefully replaces all of these hyphens with *en* (1946*en*53, Sydney*en*Hobart); the proofreader, who is as conscientious as the editor, replaces all the errant *ens* with dashes; the typesetter dutifully turns them all back into hyphens. Absurd, but I've seen it happen.

In early 1976 I fled Canberra and became a senior editor at Rigby Ltd in Adelaide. It was my first experience as editor of a commercial publishing house, but it wasn't too different from the Australian Government Publishing Service. When I returned to Melbourne in 1978 I realized that Rigby's were behind the times in some respects. They employed a proofreader and a fact-checker, and they had a good reference library. Not only that, but when an editor finished work on a manuscript, he or she would give it to a fellow editor to read. This was called 'second editing', and it was a useful practice. Given these admirable luxuries, I applied my absolute best to every book I worked on, until I was gently chided one day for my slowness. Surprised, I asked what was more important — getting it *right* or getting it *out*? The publishing manager, Mike Page (a lovely man, self-taught, interested in everything, a prolific writer), looked down at the cigarette he was rolling, and said 'Both.' That was my first real lesson in commercial publishing — the almost inevitable conflict and compromise between content and schedule.

In another context (related, but not directly related) Arthur Delbridge, editor-in-chief of the *Macquarie Dictionary*, is fond of quoting a line from T. S. Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday, 1930*: 'Teach us to care and not to care.' That is a hard saying. A large part of the craft of editing, and the business of freelance editing, is knowing when to care, and how much to care — when to overlook the lesser infelicities of expression, when to let the author *be* the author, when to stop looking things up and just get on with the job.

NOTES

This version of 'On Looking It Up' varies slightly from that published in *Meanjin* 2/1994, mainly in retaining the whole of a few sentences that were shortened to suit page layout. The two sentences about Sara Paretsky's *Tunnel Vision* were omitted because Jenny thought I had made the point without them; I agreed, but have restored them here.

Quotations in the text: The Carpentier is from *The Lost Steps* (tr. Harriet de Onís, Gollancz, 1956); Shakespeare from Sonnet 73; Vonnegut from 'Teaching the Writer to Write: or, A lousy speech in which I manage to tell everything I know in less than an hour', in John Ayotte's *Kallikanzaros* 4, March–April 1968; Connolly from *Horizon*, November 1949, quoted in Michael Shelden's *Friends of Promise* (Hamish Hamilton, 1989); Johnson from Hester Lynch Piozzi's *Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson* (1786); Tennyson from 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'. The Campbell has often been quoted in publications of Disciples/Churches of Christ, but I do not know its source. Thomas Babington Macaulay called Sydney Smith 'the Smith of Smiths'; Smith said of Macaulay 'He has occasional flashes of silence, that make his conversation perfectly delightful.'

Word count: 7150 Press any key to continue

(Which one is the bloody any *key?)*