

Professor Higgins, in his song about the English language, remarks wryly: 'There even are places where English completely disappears - in America, they haven't used it for years!'

Many of us would agree with him on this score. Of course, we know what Americans mean when they say 'trunk' for 'boot', and use 'purse' when we know the correct word is 'handbag'. And we smile tolerantly (or not so tolerantly, depending on our level of irritation) when they say 'laying' instead of 'lying', and say tomaty, and pronounce 'route' as 'rout' - we know, of course, that 'rout' has a different meaning entirely. And while the failure to aspirate the H in 'herbs' is a tad pretentious, we put up with it

- although I must admit I did giggle the first time I heard a chef say 'erb' on a cooking programme, until I discovered that this is the universal American pronunciation.

I am beginning to feel a little less superior, however, since reading Bill Bryson's **Made in America**,

subtitled **an informal history of the English Language in the United States**. In his highly entertaining and inimitable manner, he takes us on a trip through American history, mapping the evolution of Amerenglish. The founding fathers landed on American soil in the early 17th century, just about the time that the English language experienced a huge surge in the growth of its vocabulary. This was largely the result of two phenomena: the King James translation of the Bible in 1611, and the writings of William Shakespeare. Shakespeare was single-handedly responsible for the contribution of nearly two thousand words to the language - more than half of them still in use.

While all this was going on back home, the pilgrim fathers were facing an alien new landscape. They clung to the old, familiar words they had always known, but were forced to adapt them. In the words of Thomas Jefferson: 'The new circumstances under which we are placed, call for new words, new phrases, and for the transfer of old words to new objects.' Thus, the word pond, which in England denoted a small, man-made pool, came, in America, to be used for a large, natural body of water. They also began to coin words for natural phenomena which they encountered for the first time, such as ravine, hollow, bluff, swamp and range. Many of the new words were corruptions of those used by the indigenous inhabitants, others came from the French and Spanish, who had already established settlements in the New World. This habit of coining and adaptation has continued for the last 400 years.

The nineteenth century saw a burgeoning of new words and expressions, and during this period hundreds of terms entered the language. Words such as highfalutin, underdog, cagey, connoisseur and rip-roaring all date from this period, as do the expressions to make the fur fly, and chip on one's shoulder, greased lightning, to have an axe to grind, and, surprisingly, stiff upper lip. One imagines them applying this last to their rather uptight and formal cousins across the Atlantic.

It was during this period, too, that the term, OK, first entered the language. Bryson details the various attempts to explain the origin of this now almost universal expression. There have been numerous learned papers on the subject, although it seems that Professor Allen Walker Read, after twenty years of study, finally established, in the 1960s, that the first appearance of the expression was in the **Boston Morning Post** on 23 March 1839, as a jocular abbreviation for 'Oll Korrekt'.

The British stiff upper lip was not apparent in their attitude to the new version of their language emerging across the Atlantic. Our attitude of superiority dates back at least a century. As Bill Bryson puts it: 'The nineteenth century was, in short, our Elizabethan age, and the British hated us for it.' They objected vociferously to such expressions as

round-up, to make one's mind up, standpoint, influential, consensus, scrumptious, and no two ways about it.

The attacks began as early as 1735, and have not yet let up. When speakers of non-American English are not directly attacking American usage and pronunciation, they are patronisingly superior. A particularly inane comment came from a professional traveller and writer, one Captain Basil Hall, who announced that all these new words were unnecessary, 'because there are enough words already'. He was apparently blind to the fact that the great strength of English is its flexibility, its versatility and ability to absorb and transform whatever it comes across, making it the vibrant and colourful medium of expression which it has become.

One of the things which the British couldn't stand was the classlessness of American English. All women were ladies, and men gentlemen (or, horror of horrors, gents). And, ignoring the wide regional differences in pronunciation in the British Isles, they mocked the Americans mercilessly for their pronunciation.

The critics ranged from the venerable Dr Johnson, who objected to the terms creek, gap, branch and spur in a geography book, to Charles Dickens (despite the fact that he himself used a great many Americanisms in his travel book, **American notes**) and Frances Trollope, mother of Anthony, who observed, in her wildly popular work, **Domestic manners of the Americans**, that she had seldom heard a sentence 'correctly pronounced'. The masochistic Americans queued in their droves to buy copies of this book when it was published in 1832. Even Noah Webster received a broadside for including the term lengthy in his dictionary. 'If the word is permitted to stand', it was observed, 'the next edition will authorise the word strengthly'.

The coining of neologisms and new expressions has of late taken on a more sinister colour with the recent invasion of Iraq. Journalists are now 'embedded' with invading forces - one wonders what has happened to the principles of press freedom and objective reporting. Although the term 'collateral damage' is not new, it has taken on a more chilling resonance when referring to the havoc and suffering wrought on the people of Iraq. In contrast to these euphemisms, the pronouncements of world leaders seem to become more bombastic. Take, for example, George Bush's sweeping assertion that 'the forces of evil' have been unleashed, and that 'those who are not for us are against us'.

One would wish that these politicians would go back and re-read Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, delivered in November 1863 at a commemoration of a cemetery for Civil War soldiers. In contrast to the overstatement, ornate embellishment and circumlocutions so characteristic of speeches of the time, it is a model of brevity, simplicity, directness, honesty and sincerity. It is worth quoting in its entirety: '*Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*

*'Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.*

*'But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate - we cannot consecrate - we cannot hallow - this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.*

*'It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us - that from these honoured dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead should not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that*



## BETWEEN THE LINES

Cecily van Gend

*government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.'*

Every American schoolchild is required to learn it by heart, and it would do no harm for all of us, politicians and speechwriters in particular, to take note of its style and the sentiments expressed.

English is now so widely used throughout the world as to have become almost a universal language. This is entirely the result of its flexibility, powers of adaptation and willingness to embrace and

transform the new and unfamiliar. These are its great strengths, which have enabled it not only to survive, but to become a powerful, vibrant and colourful medium of communication, able to express the most subtle nuances of thought.

Each time we are tempted to feel superior or patronising about variations in terminology or pronunciation, we should remember the vast contribution to the language made by America and all the other countries where English is spoken.