

Where would writers be without wowzers

THE FIRST round of the New Zealand *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* (September 9, TV One) was revealing in that it showed a lack of familiarity with New Zealand English usage by both a contestant and the audience, and a lack of familiarity with up-to-date and appropriate dictionary sources and definitions by the programme's producers.

The word in question was wowser, a term that New Zealanders have used since the 1800s, when the principal context was the prohibition of alcohol. Then, the word meant a person disapproving of the pleasures of others, including the drinking of alcohol, but who was not a "teetotaling prude".

The word probably has its origins in the British dialect term wow, the verb to howl or bark as a dog, to whine or grumble. Because of its obscure origins, people have suggested it is an acronym of the prohibitionists' catchcry, We Only Want Social Evils Reformed.

But the wider usage covers kills, puritans, goody-goodies and spoilsports in every context, as illustrated by a letter writer to *North and South* in 2005: "Well, call me a wowser but I don't want my bright, curious nieces sucked into premature sex and alcohol experimentation — or stupid fad diets, for that matter."

And this year in the same publication: "He's no wowser. If you can afford it [gambling] and it's fun, fair enough."

Wowzers have been everything to everybody, we might say, considering the range of citations we have for the term in the New Zealand English database at Victoria University's Dictionary Centre.

This is where such a database comes into its own — not only does it give citations of a word's use, but shows us how it is used, how often it is used and by whom, and, as we



Dianne Bardsley

can show in many cases, it provides a reflection of the changing attitudes and values of a society over time.

Soon after its introduction, wowser became synonymous with hypocrite. In *Truth* of April 2, 1910, editors gleefully cited a letter written by an 84-year-old woman to a Wanganui newspaper. "A wowser is a crepuscular-minded person of religious proclivities, having one eye on Paradise and the other on the main chance."

"He generally — but not always — belongs to one of the non-conformist churches. His pursuits are the holding of conventions and bun-rushes, at the latter of which he consumes marvellous quantities of indigestible tea and buns. When he drinks whisky, he does it in secret."

The term wowser seems to have given churchmen a bad name — a minister of religion (aka a harp-and-halo man) being known as a wowser-bird, particularly among members of the armed forces. But New Zealand also gained a bad name, being referred to as Wowserland and a wowser-ridden land.

Where would some of our most entertaining writers be without the word? In 1965 satirist Allen Curnow penned the eight-verse poem *The Verb to Wowse*, in which he suggested, "In exposing the Vices, the Excesses To which Others are prone The Wowser who

knows how to wowse can take His Mind off his own."

Maurice Gee (*In My Father's Den*) included it in his most damning judgment through the lips of a narrator, "That cretin, I thought, that half-man, that self-castrated, mother-worshipping, obscurantist, priestly, wowser prick." We New Zealanders even had the terms crypto-wowzers — closet puritans — and sowzers — the sowser worshipping at the shrine of four gods: drink, gambling, pleasure and display — being distinguishable for their implacable hatred of the wowser.

At the Dictionary Centre we have several citations for wowserism and wowser. What we call wowserism, a writer in *Truth* (1908) claimed, was the chief cause of the weakness of the British Government. New Zealand and Australian troops during World War I introduced the term into Britain, but it failed to take hold in British English as it had here.

American linguist H L Mencken had wowser-envy; he respected the term and widely encouraged its use as an alternative to blue-nose. In 1936 he commented, "I tried to introduce it into the US after the [First] World War, but without success."

A lot of wowzers those Americans must have been early last century. And it's tempting to refer to those who decry linguistic change as wowzers, too.

■ Dianne Bardsley is the director of the New Zealand Dictionary Centre at Victoria University's school of linguistics and applied language studies.

Send your questions about language to
words@dompost.co.nz

