



Men of few words? Not these Kiwi blokes



AMONGST New Zealand's most distinctive but least-known exports are world-class lexicographers, all born and bred in the central region of the country.

Perhaps the best known are Eric Partridge and Robert Burchfield, but along with them are others who were born and educated here but went on to develop and practise their craft and compile significant dictionaries elsewhere. Amongst these is Bill Ramson, who was born in Dannevirke in 1933, who directed the Australian National Dictionary Centre at the Australian National University in Canberra for many years, and who edited *Oxford's Australian National Dictionary*, first published in 1988. Grahame Johnstone, born in Marton in 1929 and educated at Victoria University, is known best for his work in his adopted land, Australia, particularly for the first *Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary*.

Robert Burchfield was born in Whanganui in 1923 and studied at Victoria University in the forties, although his time there was interrupted by war service. He went on to study at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar and stayed there to lecture in English literature, working closely with J R R Tolkien. In 1957 Burchfield was appointed editor to the four-volume supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which took three decades to complete and during which time he also became chief editor.

His name within international lexicography is associated with habits of workaholic proportions, an inclusive approach to new words and usages, and

with his insistence that all varieties of English be given a place in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. He was editor of the third edition of the English style guide, *Fowler's Modern English Usage*, to which he made some radical changes and which earned him some enemies.

Among his many other publications was the 1983 *New Zealand Pocket Oxford Dictionary*. Along with other lexicographers, he made the odd mistake, including his claim that facial eczema was a contagious dietary disease.

A hallmark of each of these New Zealand-born lexicographers was an established reputation of "colourful character", and along with their known ability to communicate with anybody and everybody in pub and paddock, they had a formidable knowledge of the history of the English language. Sidney Baker, born in Wellington in 1912, and educated at Victoria University, moved to Australia and developed a reputation in slang lexicography. Although now dated, his published work in the previously neglected area of New Zealand and Australian slang during the 1940s and 1950s remains of valuable historical interest. Like Eric Partridge, he wrote fiction and biography.

Partridge is a particularly colourful figure in lexicography. He was born in rural Poverty Bay in 1894 and died in 1979. He moved with his family to Queensland, where he graduated from Queensland University and began life as a teacher. His education was also interrupted by war service, in his case in World War I, after which he moved to Oxford.



Partridge is best known for his dictionaries of slang and his numerous texts on English language and general etymology. His interest and expertise in slang was far-reaching, publishing studies of the slang of military services, especially the slang of the Royal Air Force, and then back in time with his research into Shakespearean slang and the publication of Shakespeare's *Bawdy*. This latter work, full of explanations of the obscure allusions, colourful puns, and risqué imagery of Shakespeare, has been of inestimable value for teachers and students of Shakespeare alike.

In addition to his scholastic works, he wrote fiction under the pseudonym Corrie Denison, along with books on tennis. His autobiographical work, *Frank Honywood, Private* (1929), on the experiences of surviving in the trenches during World War I, is a convincing account of the part played by friendship in overcoming such ordeals.

Harry Orsman, our homegrown lexicographer who remained to work in New Zealand, was, similarly, a colourful character with a wide interest in both formal and informal lexis. His monumental *Dictionary of New Zealand English* published in 1997 and now out of print, was the result of more than 45 years of painstaking research work, a remarkable achievement before the ease of web-based access to lexical evidence that we now have.

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