

# A Group of Canadian Dictionaries

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*Dictionary of Canadian English: The Senior Dictionary*, eds. W.S. Avis, P.D. Drysdale, R.J. Gregg, M.H. Scargill. (revised edition) Gage, 1973. 1284 pp. \$11.95.

*A Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles*, eds. W.S. Avis, C. Crate, P.D. Drysdale, D. Leechman, M.H. Scargill. Gage, 1967. 926 pp. \$18.95

*English/French French/English Dictionary*. Gage, 1974. 682 pp. \$5.95.

*Canadian Junior Dictionary*, eds. W.S. Avis, R.J. Gregg, M.H. Scargill. Gage, 1977. 670 pp. \$10.95.

To give a child a word-hoard, to set him to work on the loom of language, is to offer an inestimable gift. Choosing a dictionary is a significant act—surely as important as choosing sports equipment or school clothes. It is now possible to purchase a group of Canadian dictionaries, which add to the general value of any lexicon some concerns peculiar to Canadian users.

Maybe it is hard to imagine how “Canadian” a dictionary can be, or why it is important to establish Canadian usage. The Editor of Gage’s *Senior Dictionary* responds to such doubts: the Dictionary is “a catalogue of things relevant to the lives of Canadians at a certain point in history. It contains therefore some clues to the true nature of our Canadian identity.”

Professor W.S. Avis of Royal Military College, the Senior Editor, in his introductory essay on “Canadian English” makes trenchant points about where we stand vis-a-vis British and American usage, and goes on to note elements of language which are indigenous to our own country. He explains, for instance, some differences in pronunciation (*ration* rhymes with *fashion*, not *nation*, for us) and in meaning (a *boot*, in Canada, is not the trunk of a car) and he tackles the touchy question of standard spelling of such words as *honor*, *jail*, *connection*, *wagon*, *centre*, *plough*, *catalogue* and *cheque* (our standard seems to be veering toward American usage in the first four cases; toward British in the last four). Avis and his fellow-editors, Professors R.J. Gregg and M.H. Scargill, academic linguists, philologists and etymologists from West Coast Universities, and Patrick Drysdale, one of Gage’s editors, spent years collecting and evaluating examples of standard Canadian usage.

The Introductory Essay can thus announce firmly, for instance, that standard Canadian pronunciations include ar'tik (Arctic), spe'sez (species), e'vl (evil), and o pin'yaen (opinion). Words peculiar to Canada include many derivatives from French (Metis, Lacrosse, travois) and Indian languages such as Cree and Algonquin.

Canadian angles appear in many of the dictionary definitions. *Corduroy*, for instance, is defined as "cotton cloth", and "road made of logs". The entry on *rye* covers (1) a hardy plant, (2) seeds, (3) flour, (4) whisky, and adds "In Canada, a blended whisky made from rye and other grains; Canadian whisky". Similarly, *catamaran* is defined as a boat, a raft, and as "Canadian—a type of platform on two runners".

For some words, the etymology opens a vista of history: *shanty*, for example, comes from French-Canadian *chantier*, which derives in turn from Latin *cantherus*: a frame-work, a beast of burden. *Tamarack*, which sounds Indian, turns out to be derived from Algonquin. *Concession* is traced to its Latin root; but a Canadian twist is added in the last part of the definition which refers to "concession roads". . . surely a use not imagined in the ancient world!

It is fun to look up a common word such as *slip* to see the range of meanings, and then to recognize the aptness of the Canadian additions.

The *Senior Dictionary* has been adopted as the "official" dictionary at my own University (Guelph); the result has been some cessation of hostilities over the variant spellings of such words as *programme* and *centre* (the Dictionary says to follow American usage on the first, and choose program, but to follow British in *centre*). Clearly the *Dictionary of Canadian English: The Senior Dictionary* would be a good authoritative reference book for every school library, and a fine basic resource for class-room and home use.

More strictly for specialists is Gage's companion volume, *A Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles*. This is a well-designed reference book, handsomely presented in a box-case. It has no competitors. Its first issue in 1967 was an epoch-making event, a "contribution to centennial thinking". "Canadianisms" are "words in use in Canada, turning up in Canadian sources, or words with special significance or history in Canada". The book also contains words with meanings "distinctively characteristic of Canadian usage though not necessarily exclusive to Canada".

Some words relate to our flora or fauna or our topography; others to our political, economic, or social history. Among the entries under "B" for instance, appear the definitions of such words as *baby bonus*, *bunchgrass*, *bush-whacking*, *Bluenose*, *beer parlour*, *backpacking*, *bombardier*, *Brier*, and *boulevard*—all words redolent of Canadian life and its peculiarities.

This is a great book for browsing. It stirs a sense of Canadian history, for example, to read through the historical run-down of uses of such a word as *burntland*: attributed to McGregor in 1832, to Alexander in 1849, to Gourlay in 1896, and to Ernest Buckler in 1952.

It's fun to trace the emergence of words like *face-off*, *zombie*, *youngster*, *Yankee*, *right-of-way*, *gondola* (as a broadcast booth in a hockey game), or to stumble over definitions of *found-in*, *funny-money*, or *Stanfields*. Interesting that a word like *anglophone* is not here—a post-centennial neologism, perhaps?

Such a book would help Canadian students think about their own country, their language, and their unique experiences in history. It's a book for consulting on special occasions—but those occasions could be important ones.

Another item in the Gage package of Canadian dictionaries is something termed a “Canadian Edition” of their *English/French French/English Dictionary*. It is hard to see what the Canadianism consists of here. None of the common Canadian words appear: *coureur du bois*, for instance, is not in the French section, just to mention one word that readers of Canadian books in French might expect to trip over. The English section is missing most of the special terms that make the *Senior Dictionary* so valuable. The list of abbreviations in the introduction is exclusively British: R.A.F. appears, but not R.C.M.P.; place names include Orkneys, but not North-West Territories. “Parts of the automobile” include *windscreen* and *windscreen washer*—but our old friend the windshield and its wipers are absent.

Setting aside the Canadian question, it is hard to accept this dictionary as really filling the gap between the traveller's phrase-book and the ponderous complete translator's dictionary. In an admittedly random test, I looked up a few words that my daughter had stumbled over in preparing an analysis of a poem by Beaudelaire: *eblouissant*, *encor*, and *tamariniers*. *Encor*, presumably a poetic or archaic form of *encore* doesn't appear. *Eblouir* is given as “dazzle, verb, transitive” which doesn't fit in the context where the verb is clearly intransitive. *Tamariniers* does not appear; *tamarin*, translated into English as tamarinds, does not add that this is a tropical fruit tree (we needed another dictionary to find that out). In short, the *French/English English/French Dictionary* does not seem to be a valuable member of the Gage Canadian dictionary series.

The glory of the series, however, is the new *Canadian Junior Dictionary*. This is the kind of dictionary any child could use and enjoy. Under *aft*, for example, there is a great picture of a boy in a boat with *fore* and *aft port*, *stern*, *starboard*, all clearly marked; and—to carry the nautical search a little farther—under *schooner* there is a picture of the Blue-nose, with indicators showing *mainmast*, *mainsail*, *mainstay*, *shrouds*, *stay*, *bulwark*, *foremast*, *jib*, *bowsprit*, and *proW*. For a searcher in a different mood, there is *adenoids*, again with diagram, and with clear explanation:

'tissue in the upper part of the throat, just behind the nose, that usually shrinks and disappears in childhood, but can swell up and get in the way of natural breathing and speaking'.

The *Canadian Junior Dictionary* tackles the question of *honor/honour, judgment/judgement*, etc. in the same way as the *Senior Dictionary* does, giving the preferred spelling with the second as a alternative, or, if you look up the less-favored variant, directing you to the standard form for a definition. The Junior Dictionary is very helpful in adding notes clarifying the differences between confusing pairs such as *affect/effect*. Illustrative quotations are good: "The stories of starving children so *affected* him that he sent all his spare money for relief". But how easily bias can appear in such quotations! The illustration for *aggression* is "Russia was guilty of aggression against Czechoslovakia"; the next definition of *aggressive* is illustrated thus: "an aggressive country is always ready to start a war".

I have some reservations about the Junior Dictionary as to modernity and linguistic range. Words of course come into fashion with astonishing rapidity; but it is disappointing not to find any reference to *cloning*, or to *terminal* (as related to a computer). Similarly, Canadian children would be expected to know a good number of French-derived words: but I looked in vain for *ennui*, *elite*, and *naivete*, all good anglophone words.

This dictionary is useful in elucidating Canadian meanings. It is pleasant to see Canadian definitions of terms like *Collegiate* and *consolidated school*.

Most children consult the dictionary for two reasons: to check the spelling of a word they know, and to discover the meaning of a word that is new to them. Any child checking the spelling of hard-to-remember words like *access*, *aggravate*, *all right*, *abhor*, will like the clear print, clear syllabication. Any child, looking up new words, will find effective definitions, not as rich as those in the *Senior Dictionary*, but adequate for most users up to the middle years of High School.

But there is a third use of the Dictionary. The occasional child will turn to it to norish an addiction to words for their own sake. This is the kind of child who will play Scrabble, do cross-word puzzles, put on charades, and write exciting compositions. For such a child, the *Junior Canadian Dictionary* will keep the addiction going. Better still, present such a child with the *Senior Dictionary*. We need that kind of word-love, word-precision, word-power.

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