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By Jonathon Green

Reviewed by Colin MacCabe - 06 January 2011

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Coarse work

Green's Dictionary of Slang (in three volumes)

Jonathon Green

Chambers, 6,085pp, £295

Jonathon Green is a hack, perhaps the greatest hack of my generation. After a period at Oxford noted more for its consumption of drugs than its scholarship, Green descended on London in 1969 and proceeded to work on all five of the underground papers then available in the capital: *Rolling Stone*, *International Times*, *Oz*, *Friends* and *Time Out*. The counterculture was one of the great generators of slang in this century and I remember well the relish with which Green would summon up phrases that had caught his fancy: "front the bread" (provide money in advance), "off the pigs" (resist authority - especially the police), "get your act together" (to calm down and plan sensibly).

The counterculture's argot provides a classic instance of slang's function as both inclusion and exclusion: all language turns on a comprehension that includes and an incomprehension that places others outside the social pale. Slang doubles and redoubles this social tourniquet. Cockney rhyming slang provides the perfect example of a form of language that is designed to let two people talk to each other while a third can hear every word and understand nothing. Few types of slang are quite so clear in their social purpose, but slang always offers the warm bath of shared understanding, made all the warmer by the cold shower it turns on those we do not allow into the linguistic circle.

After the counterculture collapsed, Green's journey through Grub Street led to long employment by Felix Dennis and deep engagement in the world of fanzines - from kung fu to Crossroads - and into ever deeper sub-vocabularies. The fanzines led to compilation books such as *The Big Book of Being Rude*, *The Big Book of Filth* and *The Big Book of Bodily Functions*. All this work brought yet further immersion in slang, because a very high proportion of slang, as even the most cursory flick through this dictionary shows, is devoted to describing the penis, the vagina and the anus, as well as their possible combinations.

Thus, at random, we fall upon "grummet", whose etymology is a ring of rope but for which Green has found three citations with the sense of vagina in the 19th century. It is the citations that make this dictionary such an advance on its many illustrious predecessors, including the author's own considerable efforts. In these three volumes, Green has dared to put slang on the level of The Oxford English Dictionary, offering illustrative citations, arranged in historical order, for all of his headings and subheadings.

Such a venture runs into the problem that slang has a particular affinity with the spoken rather than the written language. And, indeed, with the exception of certain 17th-century dramas, the early sources are mainly specialised "canting" dictionaries that promised to furnish the innocent countryman with a guide to the evils of the city. It seems to be impossible to imagine slang without cities, without worlds in which anonymous figures can speak to you in words you cannot understand.

The rise of the novel led to an ever-increasing representation of forms of speech both low and high - and slang is always refreshingly low. The significant burst of written sources comes with universal literacy and pulp fiction at the turn of the 20th century. But then there is also cinema, as well as popular music, television and now the internet. Green, with an industry to match Dr Johnson's, has



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ploughed through his sources, and offers, in his Dictionary of Slang, both an extraordinary contribution to our understanding of the history of the language and one hell of a good read. If we take our three underground phrases and consult Green, we find that the use of "pig" as a word for the forces of authority dates back to the end of the 18th century and the struggles that pitted the corresponding societies against Pitt's repressive state. One further discovers that "get one's act together" comes from United States black English, probably the single most fertile source of slang in the 20th-century anglophone world and the source of such other staples of the countercultural vocabulary as "heavy" and "groovy". "Front", in the sense of to advance money, is first quoted as late as 1961, but "bread" in the sense of money dates back to 1938 - though all the quotations place it in that creative linguistic circle that surrounded black music.

It is here that one might note the main weakness of this breathtaking labour of linguistic love. Green has made his corpus almost all the anglophone world (excluding Indian English and world English), but the links and differences between the various types of English, and between American and British English in particular, are not clear enough. Thus, if you consult the entry for "pussy", you will find that the word dates back to 1699 and there are plentiful entries from 19th-century British pornography, but it is not signalled that all the early- and mid-20th-century examples are American. Yet when I, as an 18-year-old in Paris in 1967, was accosted by three marines on leave from Vietnam and asked if I knew where they could find pussy in Pigalle, although I understood from context and attitude what they meant, it was the first time I encountered the word, still more widely used in the US than Britain.

The other problem with using this dictionary is that much of the slang is obsolete. In some ways that goes with the territory: slang is always, by its very fugitive uses, going to change quicker than the standard tongue, fixed as it is in mainstream print. There are exceptions, such as "booze", which has been going strong since 1674, and which in the variant "bouse" goes back further still; and "cunt", the first citation of which is 1250 and the probable origin of which Green learnedly traces to Old Norse. Yet, for the most part, slang comes and goes over a couple of generations. It is easy to work out from the dates of the quotations which entries are no longer in use, but it would have been helpful to have had more guidance. These cavils should not, however, detract from what is a magnificent work of scholarship.

Colin MacCabe is associate director of the London Consortium, the postgraduate studies programme

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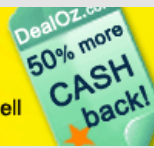
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