

# OXONIAN WORDPLAY

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The Oxford University Press, publisher of the prestigious Oxford English Dictionary and its current Supplement, issued in 1984 The Oxford Guide to Word Games by Tony Augarde, a member of their dictionary staff. This 250-page book is a fascinating guide to all sorts of wordplay and word games, their origins, rules and variations. Included are acrostics, crosswords, rebuses, anagrams, tongue-twisters, and popular games such as Scrabble. However, since the author is a lexicographer rather than a logologist, the reader will search in vain for original material; Augarde has merely repeated whatever he encountered in his bibliography. Alas, this is skimpy; the author lists about fifty books out of hundreds that have been published. Although he includes Dmitri Borgmann's Language on Vacation, he fails to note the equally-excellent sequel Beyond Language. Word Ways is included in the list of periodicals devoted to wordplay, but The Enigma is not. Where are Shipley's three entertaining books on wordplay, and Gyles Brandreth's The Joy of Lex and its sequel?

As a long-time composer of anagrams, I was somewhat disappointed by his selection of "some of the best": disappointment (made in pint pots), evangelists (evil's agents), Hamlet (Thelma), Ireland (Erin lad), Mary Whitehouse (I may rue the show), nameless (salesmen), and boardroom (Broadmoor). These examples clearly reveal Augarde's poor taste in anagrams; he does not know the difference between an anagram and a transposition. Had he consulted Howard Bergerson's Palindromes and Anagrams (listed in the bibliography), he would have found much better examples of this ars magna.

The jacket illustration puzzled me. An androgynous figure is balancing on his right index finger a physically-nonrealizable array of ten blocks labeled with the letters AHMOVUWXTYIS. What reason was there to choose these? Nothing in the book refers to the cover directly. Will Shortz, senior editor of Games magazine, astutely informed me that these letters (except for S) have right-left symmetry, a property alluded to in passing at the end of Augarde's chapter on palindromes.

In his discussion of the longest words in English, Augarde states that pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanokoniosis, the longest in the Supplement, is the invention of Frank Scully in 1936. Actually, it was recognized earlier by the National Puzzlers' League. Everett Smith, an editor of the Christian Science Monitor, mentioned the word at the NPL winter convention, and I gave it to the reporter who mentioned it in a New York Herald Tribune article on Feb-

ruary 23, 1935. This contrived word has never appeared in medical dictionaries or medical literature.

A few additional criticisms, more or less at random:

- \* Why is Ava Gardner in the index, but not Martin Gardner? Surely he has contributed far more to wordplay than she has.
- \* Augarde claims that the riddle "What's worse than raining cats and dogs? Hailing taxicabs" dates from the nineteenth century or earlier - but I never heard of taxicabs prior to 1900.
- \* Augarde quotes without comment the word *metaphasis*, used by Reverend Spooner's biographer, yet this appears in no present-day dictionary I consulted.
- \* In his discussion on crosswords, Augarde says "the fewer unchecked letters in a word, the more difficult it is to guess them by solving interlocking words". This sentence is nonsense; the fewer unchecked letters, the easier it is to guess them once the checked letters have been filled in.
- \* Why not use the famous SEND + MORE = MONEY cryptarithm instead of adding GOLD to the equation? And why not mention square root cryptarithms, or numbers using other bases?
- \* How could Augarde describe the art of paronomasia without citing the beautiful triple pun *sons raise meat - sun's rays meet*?
- \* The Torquemada knock-knock clues are too obscure for me - is Abinadab a person with a head cold saying "I['ve] been a damn"? And Obadiah, "O, but I [w]ould"? Wordplay based on sound values is not likely to cross the Atlantic well.
- \* Augarde's description of the game of Ghost fails to give the most popular way of scoring this game.

To summarize, this book is a bland blend of wordplay material concocted from previous sources. Although I have found fault with various details, the book is on the whole ably and artfully done, and should be a useful introduction for beginners to the field of wordplay.

### *BUY, SELL, TRADE*

*Dr. E.B. Bossatti, 421 S.W. Crider, Dallas OR 97338 wishes to sell back issues of Word Ways (all volumes but 1969 available), as well as Borgmann's Language on Vacation and Beyond Language. Write him for price and details.*