

WG on Eric Partridge



Eric Partridge (1894-1979)

Author and lexicographer Eric Honeywood Partridge was born in Waimata Valley, near Gisborne, North Island, New Zealand, the son of John Thomas Partridge, grazier, and his wife Ethel Norris. In 1907 the family moved to Brisbane, Australia, where Partridge was educated at Toowoomba grammar school. His studies of first classics and then French and English at the University of Queensland were interrupted by periods of school teaching and then, after he joined the Australian Imperial Force in April 1915, military service in Egypt, at Gallipoli and on the Western Front, where he was wounded at Pozières during the Battle of the Somme. His interest in slang and the "underside" of language is said to date from his wartime experience.

Partridge returned to university in 1919, received his BA in 1921, then became Queensland Travelling Fellow at Balliol College, Oxford. Having decided to settle in the UK, after teaching at Manchester and London Universities, in 1927 he founded publishing firm, Scholartis. Upon its closure in 1931, Routledge and Kegan Paul commissioned Partridge to write a dictionary of slang. His *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (1937) was followed by other works on language (slang and etymology in particular). He published novels and short stories under the pseudonym Corrie Denison and also wrote professionally on tennis, which he played to a high standard. In 1925 he married Agnes Dora Vye-Parminter, with whom he had a daughter. During World War II he joined the army education corps and later the correspondence department of the RAF. He died in Moretonhampstead, Devon, aged 85. A year later, a remembrance called *Eric Partridge In His Own Words* was published on both sides of the Atlantic. Edited by David Crystal, the book comprises thirty selected excerpts from Partridge's lexicographical writing followed by a brief account of his short career as a publisher. But preceding all that are appreciations from English professor Ralph Elliott, linguist Randolph Quirk, Anthony Burgess and, as transcribed below, Winston Graham:

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Eric Partridge and I were elected to the Savile Club in the same year, 1950. There we met casually, and exchanged names and views once or twice. I knew him of course as a distinguished etymologist, but I didn't then know that he had included a passage from one of my novels in his book, *British and American Usage*, which was to be published the following year. Then one day he invited me to his birthday party, which he was giving for a few friends at the Club, and our acquaintance ripened into the warm friendship that persisted until the day he died.

He was a quietly spoken, easy, friendly person, *extremely* modest in manner, so that his later Christmas cards telling the world of his numerous publications seemed to belie the man one knew. I think if asked about these he would have drawn a distinction between self-advertisement and legitimate pride of achievement – of which he had reason to have plenty.

Although he had friends of all kinds, he was most at home among bookmen, and really only happy when talking about words and phrases and synonyms and syllogisms and all the varied and variable features that go to make up a living language.

As a club, we are fond of words, their derivation, their use and misuse, the way they change in mid-life and take on new or contrary subtleties of meaning; so the cry was always being heard: 'We must ask Eric!' For many years he used to lunch and dine at the Savile on Thursdays, but as he grew older it became lunch only; otherwise, he said, he was not fresh enough for the invariable cross-London journey to the British Museum Reading Room early next morning, a part of his regime that must never be interfered with. But almost always, while he was sitting talking before lunch, or at the table in the dining room, some member would come up to him and say: 'Oh, Eric, I wanted to ask you; we had an argument last night about the use of the word Blank.' Or: 'Tell me, Eric, I came across it the other day: is the word Blank a recent importation from the Greek and if so when was it first used in English?' And always he knew. It was as if all the books he had written were filed away page by page in his head, like a miniature British Museum Reading Room, and he only had to take down the correct volume.

He was a very generous man. My grandfather used to say: 'My happiness lies not in the greatness of my possessions but in the fewness of my wants.' Of few people was this truer than of Eric Partridge. If a little money came to him unexpectedly he would find some reason to give it away. It probably never entered his head, until I suggested it to him, that he might use this money taking a taxi to and from the British Museum to avoid the fatigue of the journey; and when I did he just smiled and shrugged it off. His birthday parties at the Savile were annual events and became quite famous. They were quiet, discreet parties, usually for a dozen or so. Nothing showy or designed to impress, but thoroughly agreeable evenings of food, wine and conversation. They were the only parties I have ever been to at which the host *gave* presents to the guests instead of receiving them. Most often the presents were books of his own, which he would distribute at the end of dinner; but twice he bought and gave away books that I had written.

At these parties I first met Alan Steele, Peter Cochrane, Christopher Fry, Randolph Quirk, Oliver Stoner, some of whom have since become friends of my own. So it came as a special pleasure to be able to organize (with Maurice Goldman's willing help) Eric's eightieth birthday luncheon. At Eric's request, he being then very frail, the numbers were restricted to twenty. So many Savilians wished to be present that I received a lot of black looks from those who could not join in.

A memory of Eric would not be complete without mentioning his enthusiasm for, and expert knowledge of, cricket and tennis. His absences from the British Museum Reading Room while Wimbledon was on were no doubt made more excusable to himself during the years when he was contributing a page to *Time and Tide* on the tennis fortnight; but his visits to Lord's and the Oval were one of the few self-indulgences he permitted himself. A member of both the Middlesex and Surrey County cricket clubs, he was most often to be found at the Oval watching Surrey with a keen and appreciative eye. On one occasion in the late fifties he correctly forecast all the winners at Wimbledon.

After his retirement to Devon the Club no longer saw him, and neither did I. But we continued to correspond, and the last letter I had from him was two weeks before he died, from the hospital, from which he wrote to assure me that he hadn't had a stroke, but it was unfortunate his illness had interfered with his revision of *A Dictionary of Catch Phrases*, but that he hoped to resume work on it that week. His last sentence was: 'Thank you for all your news about the Savile. Do keep me in touch.'

Eric Partridge has left a lasting monument to himself in all the books he has written; but for a little while yet a further monument will remain in the warm and affectionate regard of his friends.

From *ERIC PARTRIDGE in his own words*, edited by David Crystal, Andre Deutsch, 1980

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