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Peter Martin. *The Dictionary Wars: The American Fight over the English Language*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp 358. ISBN 9780691188911 (cloth).

A word of Shavian wisdom has it that “England and America are two countries separated by the same language.” Across the centuries, quite a few authors, British and American alike, expressed emphatically similar convictions as regards the distinctiveness, indeed the uniqueness of the variety of English language native to their country. Today, when we think of language as the cornerstone of national identity, we rarely do so in terms of conflict, battling fields, or as a site of belligerence. For while we take for granted the role of language in forging a nation and fostering national identity, in the global context marked by internationalisation and multilingualism, we have perhaps ceased to relate to it as either a great divider or unifier. Doubtless, in American culture history, patriotism and language are inextricably linked, defining with unblinking certainty what it is to be ‘truly American’. And undisputedly, in nineteenth century America the fight over language was not just a reality, but it made intellectual history.

Taking us back to the early American Republic, the study under review is an original, unlikely chronicle of the beginnings of American language. Single-minded in pursuit, Peter Martin embarks upon a long and arduous journey, that of exploring the quest for the enhancement and enlargement of American English. Capacious and highly aspiring, the volume captures the concerted effort of lexicographers, publishers, authors, eminent literary figures and luminaries to create ‘the definitive American dictionary’. It is a compelling narrative of language rivalry, loyalty and devotion that traces the lasting tribulation and underpinning ideologies of the adventure of the vernacular in early American nationhood. Centred on the American plight of cultural authenticity and

independence, *The Dictionary Wars* is a record of liberation, of “the clearing away of ‘British cobwebs, poison and dust’” from American society, a process in absence of which the American independence would be incomplete, Martin reiterates, quoting Thomas Paine (3). The book illustrates with a great deal of verve, consistency and *panache*, the fervent debate on the need for the English language to reflect the specificities and new circumstances of the American nationhood, culturally and at all levels of lexical and orthographical innovation, in so doing, boosting American self-confidence, indeed American pride. While focusing on the mission of asserting difference, Martin cannot but evoke the Janus-faced dimension of cultural affiliation embedded in the transatlantic connection:

Yet, for more than a century, after the Revolution, the majority of literate and cultured Americans did not want to turn their backs on British culture, “their ancient heritage” – especially its literature and the historical tradition of its language. About seventy long years after Paine’s statement, the popular English novelist Anthony Trollope elegantly expressed this powerful, persistent, and apparently inescapable linkage: “an American will perhaps consider himself to be as little like an Englishman as he is like a Frenchman. But he reads Shakespeare through the medium of his own vernacular, and has to undergo the penance of a foreign tongue before he can understand Molière. He separates himself from England in politics and perhaps in affection; but he cannot separate himself from England in mental culture.” (3)

Opening the volume is a vivid profile of pioneer, linguist and political reformer Noah Webster, a catalyst to this process of emancipation, whose work defined itself against Samuel Johnson’s 1755 revolutionary *Dictionary of the English Language*. Martin offers a telling description of the effort of the American *literati* to overcome the legacy of the ‘colossus of literature’ and ‘literary dictator’, a tough, albeit necessary, act to follow. Old Doc’s dislike of the Americans, Martin illustrates, fired the imagination and lofty ideals of philologists, philosophers, statesmen, newspapermen, and, above all, of lexicographers Noah Webster and Joseph Emerson Worcester. Beyond the meaningful light it sheds on the iconic figures of ‘Doc Sam’ and ‘Uncle Noah’, and the culture wars waged directly or indirectly in their name, the work does a fine job at encapsulating the all-pervasive sense of mission, that of galvanising public opinion in the interest of the growth of American nation. Martin

renders the ensuing controversies, the collusion, fight over control, copyright, and profits of the Webster family members with an impressive degree of accuracy, and historical, grammatical and anecdotal evidence. In marking out the significant departures achieved by the Merriam brothers, Martin provides an ample overview of the stereotypes and misconceptions, eulogies and neologies in place, as well as of the inevitable, deep-seated cultural affiliations with Britain. It is one of the present volume's highest merits that it reveals the assiduous, deliberate and painstaking effort of American scholars to come out of the shadow of an overpowering British tradition.

In the age of 'globish', computational linguistics and machine translation, of instant text and accurate voice translators operating with no human involvement, where the business of compiling lexicons, multi-field, single-field, or sub-field has become a highly specialised area of expertise, the question arises to what an extent can we relate to the American 'dictionary wars' other than from a purely historical point of view. The immediately accompanying question would be: is the distinction between British and American English relevant at all in the world of international English, indeed of 'globish', as some would say? It would be presumptuous to assume that linguistic distinction, ability and proficiency in one's mother tongue, native language facility and versatility make the same difference they used to in pre-digital culture history. However, if there is one particular inescapable question that cannot be disregarded it is the part language plays in the construction of one's identity.

As well as providing an unparalleled account of the making of American English and the ineffable Anglo-American connection, Martin's study is an invaluable contribution to the field. It is a prolific reference work of commendable scholarship drawing on laborious documentation, consistent, informative, and copious in exemplification, one that reads like a passionate saga and an academic resource at one and the same time. Somewhat eclectic in structure, and perhaps too minute in detail, it manages to avoid the tedium effect of some *niche* studies and open our eyes as to the myriad ways in which language matters.

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