

ON ARROGANCE & THE NON-PEJORATIVE USE OF THE WORD POMMY (A REPLY FROM THE EDITOR)

I only sighted a copy of Mrs Beswick's letter today (July 24, 1995), when it was faxed to me by the President, Peter Daly. If I had known of its existence it would have been printed in the first Bulletin after receipt. The Executive of the IHS were presumably trying to shield me from criticism, which is kind of them but unnecessary.

It is a privilege to be read at all and even greater to be read carefully. As a schoolteacher I am only too painfully aware that few people have time to read these days and that a surprising number don't really wish to anyway.

As to the charges laid, I must abjectly confess my guilt.

Yes, I am a highly opinionated person and hold the view that opinions are the very lifeblood of history. I am even guilty of the heretical view that if a choice had to be made between opinions and fact when it comes to the writing of history, then I'd prefer the opinions.

History without opinions is, in my opinion, history barely worth reading.

As Mrs Beswick appears to be aware, the opinions expressed by an author often reveal far more about the person expressing them and the times they live in than nearly all their tedious footnotes.

'Tone' is the key to all good writing and I am deeply distressed to learn that I have been conveying an 'arrogant' one in my various whingings [a wide variety of spellings of 'winging' ect are sanctioned by various authorities] in the columns of this Bulletin.

Yes, I suppose I must seem very one-eyed - particularly when it comes to heritage matters. But I am under no delusion that my opinions on such matters are any other than the views of a minuscule percentage of the population.

I long for the day when both Heritage Officers and Heritage Advisory Committees make my own rantings redundant by publishing reasoned statements in the Illawarra Mercury attempting defend particular buildings which either Council or Developers wish to demolish or alter.

If in frequently whinging about the failure of such bodies and individuals to publicly defend Illawarra's heritage, it often appears that I am suggesting I'm "Right with a capital 'R'" then I fully accept that, in expressing my views, I may also often be "Rong with a capital 'R'". (Like C.J. Dennis in his famous 1912 letter on spelling reform, I am of the view that if 'RONG' doesn't spell 'wrong', then what does it spell?) But I also feel there is little point in expressing an opinion unless you have at least some sense that it's a correct one.

And if this is 'arrogance' then I am willing to accept the label for I believe that the protection of our material heritage is more a matter of moral imperative than a question individual opinion and personality.

I have always been motivated by the passage quoted from John Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (a book I have come to love) found in the English Communist William Morris's Manifesto written as propaganda for the influential Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (the 'Anti-Scrape' Movement) which Morris himself helped initiate in the 1870s:

"It is...no question of expediency or feeling whether we shall preserve the buildings of past times or not. We have no right whatever to touch them. They are not ours. They belong, partly to those who built them, and partly to all generations of mankind who are to follow us. The dead still have their right to them: that which they laboured for...we have no right to obliterate. What we have ourselves built we are at liberty to throw down: but what other men [and women] gave their strength, wealth and life to accomplish, right does not pass away with their death; still less is the right to the use of what they have left vested in us only. It belongs to all their successors."

As for my reference to D.H. Lawrence and Rachel Henning as the 'two greatest whingeing poms ever to set pen to paper in Wollongong', I am sorry to think that my control of tone has let me down so badly.

Some readers would no doubt be aware that I possess considerable affection for both of these English writers.

In referring to them as 'Whinging Poms', I had thought my tone was playful and affectionate.

Indeed, one of the many reasons for my interest in DHL is that he is one of the prime sources in Australian history for establishing the derivation of the word 'Pommy'.

Chapter 6 of D.H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo* (Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 147) contains the following famous passage:

"A pommy is a newcomer in Australia, from the Old Country.

Teacher: Why did you hit him, Georgie?

Georgie: Please miss, he called me a Pommy.

Aussie (with a discoloured eye): Well y'are one, ain'cher? Can I help it that ch'are one?

Pommy is supposed to be short for pomegranate. Pomegranate pronounced invariably pommygranate, is a near enough rhyme to immigrant, in a naturally rhyming country. Furthermore, immigrants are known in their first months, before their blood "thins down,"

by their round and ruddy cheeks. So we are told. Hence we gain, pomegranate, and hence Pommy. Let etymologists be appeased: it is the authorised derivation."

As Bruce Steele, the CUP editor of Kangaroo, remarks: "DHL's reported derivation is now generally accepted by lexicographers: see *The Australian National Dictionary*, ed. W.S. Ransome (Melbourne, 1988)."

Although there are many people who probably do use the term 'pommy' in anything but an affectionate manner, I had no intention of vilifying either DHL (to whom I've devoted 20 years of study) or Rachel Henning (to whom I hope to devote the next 20), by referring to them as whinging poms. It was simply a means of deflating the reputations of both writers so that I did not appear to readers of the Bulletin as if I was continually worshipping at the altars of Saint David and Saint Rachel.

I am fully aware that often my outspokenness on heritage matters will probably offend many of those who couldn't care less about old buildings, but I would never have expected that my remarks on two writers whom I love would cause offence. This latter breach of etiquette was entirely unintentional, although I will certainly take issue with the view that Rachel Henning was 'a fine pioneer' if either my scholarly edition of her letters or my manuscript 'Rachel Henning at Figtree' ever see the light of day.

To those who remain unconvinced that the phrase 'whingeing pom or even 'pommy bastard' can ever be used affectionately, I would recommend hunting out an obscure book by H.J. Rumsey, published at Dundas, N.S.W., in 1920, entitled *The Pommies or New Chums in Australia*, whose title and introduction both clearly show the non pejorative uses to which the word Pommy can be put:

"The Pommies is now a common name for recent arrivals from Britain. During the last few weeks, I have scores of times heard the Prince of Wales affectionately described as a 'dear little pommy.'

I will be sad if the word 'pommy' loses whatever non pejorative connotations it might still possess. I will be even sadder if some anti-vilification law makes its use illegal, but I promise not to use the term in future Bulletins and hope that Joan Beswick can somehow overlook my indiscretions and see her way clear to maintaining her subscription.