

## **The Macquarie Dictionary, fourth Edition**

*Reviewed by Neil Lovett*

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A little over thirty years ago I was involved in, if not the first, then about the third stirrings of the conversion of a British dictionary (itself an adaptation of an American one) into Australian English. Long after my departure from the project it was published as the first edition of *The Macquarie Dictionary*. It was a good dictionary, with two admirably distinctive aspects: the editorial committee avoided abbreviations in definitions and insisted on pronunciation guides in an appropriate band of the International Phonetic Alphabet for all common Australian speech sounds. These qualities are preserved in this very good 4th Edition. Since its almost tentative first appearance it has made a journey of intergalactic proportions. It is now a little over 4.2 kilograms of thoroughly researched and massively supported information on what Australians say and write, and how we say and write it.

The front matter is clear, informative and very useful. The principal tasks of lexicographers are pretty obvious, to list the lexicon and explain meanings of and interrelationships between words. For the team at Macquarie, years of practice and the immense help of computers have honed their skills to a high level. Consider just two definitions:

**break** *verb* *t* 19. to disclose or divulge with caution or delicacy

**function word** *noun* *Grammar* a word, like *the* or *of*, which may add meaning to, or show relationships between, content words in a given sentence but does not refer the mind to any entity outside the sentence.

The first I chose for its sensitivity, the second for its complete, concise explanation of what would be for many readers an unfamiliar term.

Throughout the dictionary usage notes follow words which raise debate or controversy. They are blessed with reliable information and commonsense advice.

Two other general matters for brief comment. I appreciate greatly the etymological device of giving the name of the specific Aboriginal language for words so derived, instead of the inadequate, even offensive *Aboriginal*. Can you imagine the etymological note *European*? On the other hand, I thought the statement of information drawn from the Bible as fact rather than belief could offend some Australians.

I do not pretend to have read every word. For a relatively random way of selecting initial letters for a sample reading, I noted the season and chose the Italian *Buon Natale*, so my close reading has been of words beginning with *a, b, e, l, n, o, u* and *t*. My previous acquaintance with *Macquarie* led me to look also at sport, regionalisms and any perceptible Sydney bias.



Tom Keneally launches *The Macquarie Dictionary*, fourth edition

From time to time I felt that what seemed to me the interesting aspect of an item didn't make it to the definition. Banksian rose is thornless. A baseball cap has an adjustable inner circumference (to accommodate variations in self-esteem, I suppose).

As sports to check I chose croquet, which I play, and cricket, which I coached for many years. The very few references to croquet are full of errors. The hoops are described as *arched*. They're not. The balls are described as *wooden*. They're not. The croquet shot is described as *driving away an opponent's ball*. This is not necessarily so.

In cricket some definitions lack the detail necessary for accuracy. A *back cut* is not any shot played off the back foot: it is necessarily a *cut shot*. *Bodyline* is not bowling down the leg side: it is bowling at the body with a packed leg side field.

The encyclopaedic entries are less convincing than the dictionary proper. There are some curious inconsistencies. The Barossa Valley is *a grape growing district*, Margaret River *winegrowing*, Hunter Valley *noted for its vineyards*, Coonawarra *noted winegrowing area*, Mudgee *vineyards*, Rutherglen *major industry is winemaking*, McLaren Vale *grape growing* and Griffith *wineries*.

South Australia's Riverland, a huge producer of wine, has no reference to the industry.

Still on wine, *chianti* is defined in terms of the very ordinary red or white stuff in funny bottles wrapped in straw or raffia. In six separate month-long visits to Florence, I saw only one of these. I think most people nowadays would want to buy chianti classico, in undecorated Bordeaux style bottles.

Although Samuel Johnson, Noah Webster, James Murray and Eric Partridge are encyclopaedic entries for lexicography, Robert Burchfield, Grahame Johnston, George Turner and Bill Ramson are not. It would have been gracious to include them.

The dictionary has a strong bias toward Sydney. Sydney blue gum is present (albeit with an incomplete range): Adelaide rosella is not. Sydney expressions are very well represented. It must be difficult, living and working in Sydney, to realise that four Australians out of five live somewhere else. The South Australian use of *butterfish* as a synonym for *mulloway* is not recorded; Adelaide's distinctive bluestone seems not to be described. In giving regional names for *Emex australis*, *prickly jack* is suggested for South Australia, but checking with four croweaters from various parts of the state I could get only *three corner(-ed) jack*.

After beginning by being full of praise, I have spent some time on quibbles. To put this into perspective, I have raised here very few matters from a handful gleaned from close reading of over 500 large pages of small print. This is a very useful reference tool for the English language as a whole, and especially for the Australian variety.

And for us old-timers is the bonus of a page of SMS translations.

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