

through a Swiss bank, two Australian public servants went to Zurich where they learned that the bank had not even heard of Khemlani. In the collapse of the Whitlam government, John Stone and other senior members of the Treasury played a large part; and in Tilley's view their part was justified.

An early and unexpected effect of the brief Whitlam era was the formation in 1976 of two separate departments, Finance and the Treasury. Sir Fred Wheeler, a big gun of the 1970s, is described as 'perhaps the last of the old-style pub-

lic servants who effectively ran much of the business of government behind the scenes'. When he retired as head of the shrunken Treasury, he assured his Christmas party that the ministers – he called them 'bastards' – rarely understood 'the system over which they preside'. Not knowing that a journalist was listening, Wheeler must have been both dismayed and proud when his accusation appeared in *The Canberra Times*.

Tilley writes at length, and mostly appreciatively, about two of the most influential treasurers in our history,

Paul Keating and Peter Costello. Thereafter come the tumbling years marked by a high turnover of governments and of treasury secretaries and the frequent failure of budget forecasts. Policy, too, is a victim. The reality, writes Tilley, is that, 'policy development has been dominated by political manoeuvring'. ■

Geoffrey Blainey has written many books on Australian and international history, his latest being a memoir, *Before I Forget* (2019). His first book, *The Peaks of Lyell*, was published in 1954.

'A system of our own'

A lexicographical version of the Civil War

Bruce Moore

THE DICTIONARY WARS:
THE AMERICAN FIGHT OVER THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
by Peter Martin

Princeton University Press (Footprint), \$43 hb, 368 pp, 9780691188911

The title of this book refers to the battle for market dominance between the editors and publishers of two rival dictionaries, the one edited by Noah Webster and the other by Joseph Worcester. This battle took place largely between 1829 and 1864, and it was played out in the newspapers and by means of pamphlet warfare, with such titles as *A Gross Literary Fraud Exposed, Relating to the Publication of Worcester's Dictionary in London*.

The title also alerts us to the fact that its wider narrative begins in 1783, the final year of the American War of Independence (1775–83), and ends in 1864 in the midst of the American Civil War (1861–65). 1783 was the year Noah Webster (1758–1843) published his first influential work, the *Blue-backed Speller*, aimed at teaching schoolchildren to spell. Royalties from this work underwrote many of Webster's later lexicographical enterprises, and the development of the *spelling bee* in American schools was a significant offshoot

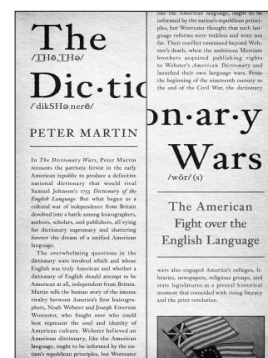
of the *Speller*. 1864 was the year of publication of *An American Dictionary of the English Language* by Noah Webster, the edition of Webster's dictionary that marked its triumph over all competitors.

Webster's first dictionary war, like the War of Independence, was with Britain. The political revolution began in 1775 during Webster's first year at Yale. After graduation, law did not provide a satisfactory living, so he turned to teaching and the publication of school textbooks. He became particularly concerned about the influence of British textbooks in American schools, and about the high prestige of Dr Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* in America. Following America's successful political break from Britain, Webster came to the belief that there needed to be a linguistic break as well. An American national language should be seen as central to an American cultural War of Independence. In 1789 he wrote: 'As an independent nation, our honor requires us to have a system of our own,

in language as well as government.'

An American dictionary became a necessary part of this linguistic and cultural revolution, but it was not until 1828 that Webster produced his major dictionary. Along the way, he converted to Calvinism, spent ten years pursuing some outdated theories of etymology, and developed some fairly cranky ideas about the reform of spelling and orthography. Some of the reforms introduced in this dictionary stuck, and we would all recognise them as distinctive features of American English, such as the change from *-re* to *-er* at the end of words such as *metre* and *theatre* or the absence of consonant doubling in the past tense of some verbs (*traveled* for *travelled*). But other proposed reforms such as *aker* for *acre*, *porpess* for *porpoise*, *tung* for *tongue*, and numerous others, did not survive.

In 1829 an abridged version of the dictionary was produced by the publisher Sherman Converse. He organised editorial assistance from the



young scholar and lexicographer Joseph Worcester and from Webster's son-in-law Chauncey Goodrich, professor of rhetoric at Yale. Through a series of manoeuvres, Webster was sidelined from most of the editorial process, enabling the editors to correct many of his weaknesses in spelling and orthography, pronunciation, and etymology, and reducing the length of some of the long-winded definitions that often had a heavy Christian emphasis. Thus began the dictionary version of the Civil War that would later break out into a series of skirmishes between American lexicographers, scholars, universities, families, and publishers.

Joseph Worcester is not well known now, but he was in every way superior to Webster as lexicographer and scholar. Webster was angry with what Worcester and Goodrich had done in the abridged version, but he was even angrier when Worcester produced his own rival dictionary in 1830. Webster accused Worcester of plagiarising material from the 1829 abridged version that he had worked on. Accusatory pamphlets were flung about on both sides. Peter Martin shows us that Webster's charges were nonsense.

Webster died in 1843 ('clutching a copy of his speller', Martin tells us), and through a complex series of legal and financial events the control of the dictionary eventually came into the hands of the publishers George and Charles Merriam. Worcester continued to produce dictionaries that were well reviewed, and the Merriams saw Worcester as the greatest threat to the success of their Webster's dictionary. The second greatest were the Websterian weaknesses that were still in the dictionary. To solve the first threat, the Merriams embarked on a campaign of denigration and vilification of Worcester and his dictionaries: more pamphlet warfare, the 'planting' of newspaper articles, and the generation of 'scholarly' articles by mercenary academics. To solve the second, they continued the process of de-Websterising Webster's lexicography. At the same time, however, they encouraged the canonisation of Webster himself as the great linguistic nationalist and teacher of the nation.

Entrepreneurship (we might now

call it 'fake news') triumphed over truth. The Merriams won, and Webster's became the standard American dictionary. Its influence is evident in the fact that James Murray and Oxford University Press kept it closely in mind when making decisions about the length and extent of the *OED*.

Ironically, the Merriams were too successful, since the courts eventually decided that 'Webster' had become a generic name for 'dictionary', and that any publisher could include the term 'Webster' in the name of any dictionary. You've probably got a 'Webster' on your shelf – take a squiz at its publishing details!

There were no comparable dictionary wars in Britain, although the editors of the *OED* certainly had their battles with the Oxford syndics. In Australia we had a mini-war between the Macquarie group with their Webster-like nationalism and the group led by Bill Ramson that produced the *Australian*

National Dictionary (modelled on the *OED*). In an account of this skirmish in his book *Lexical Images* (2002), Ramson describes the fourteen-page telex from the Macquarie Library's Kevin Weldon, railing against the decision to offer the publishing rights of the *Australian National Dictionary* to OUP, as 'a uniquely Australian document'.

But Australian telex warfare is no match for the virulent publishing warfare that dominated American lexicography in the first half of the nineteenth century. *The Dictionary Wars* is a fascinating account of these battles, and gives appropriate attention to Joseph Worcester, the greatest casualty of the conflict. ■

Bruce Moore, editor of the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary* (2016), was director of the Australian National Dictionary Centre from 1994 to 2011.

Crossing the Tasman

Five New Zealanders explore the 'West Island'

Brian Matthews

WEST ISLAND: FIVE TWENTIETH-CENTURY
NEW ZEALANDERS IN AUSTRALIA

by Stephanie Johnson

Otago University Press, \$39.95 pb, 284 pp, 9781988531571

Australians and New Zealanders know it as the Tasman Sea or more familiarly The Ditch: for Māori, Te Tai o-Rēhua. Significant islands in this stretch of water are Lord Howe and Norfolk. As seen from New Zealand, the island most Australians probably don't know offhand and, when they are told about it, might feel inclined to reject its name as, well, cheeky: it's West Island – Australia in short.

Stephanie Johnson's *West Island* is breezy, carefully and impressively researched, ambitious, labyrinthine, yet, in the end unobtrusively well organised and, finally, confronting. It might bring

to mind two vaguely similar literary enterprises – Howard Jacobson's marvellous television documentary *Brilliant Creatures* and Ian Britain's book *Once an Australian*, both looking at Germaine Greer, Clive James, Barry Humphries, and Robert Hughes. These might usefully compare with *West Island* if this sort of narrative were identifiable as belonging to a genre (which it isn't). They nevertheless all share some interesting common ground: it's not just the intense interest in expatriates; there is also the task of following a number of individual lives without losing a sense of narrative unity and concentration,