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**Laugesen, Amanda - *Rooted: An Australian History of Bad Language*, Sydney: New South Publishing, 2020; (pp. 314) ISBN 9781742236636**

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Such an evocative title! The quintessential Australian swear word is emblazoned on this history of Australian profanity, a cultural phenomenon that, if not dear to all Australians' hearts, is something generally recognised as integral to our identity. The relationship between language and identity is something with which the author, Amanda Laugesen as director of the Australian National Dictionary Centre at the Australian National University, has been closely involved for some time. She has published extensively on numerous aspects of Australian language, including convict argot, the language of Australians at war and sexist language. *Rooted* is more than a history of our characteristic take on bad language; it is an absorbing and comprehensive social history, relating changes in language to our history more broadly – unacceptable bad language, acceptable bad language, discriminatory language and slurs, to name a few.

The book's title took me back several decades to the death of my mother. Deathbed vigils take time, emotional fortitude and – sometimes – comic relief. A friend of hers had flown from Melbourne to our home in Adelaide, joining us to say her goodbyes. What to say in the intense moments that followed? A teacher of English as a second language, she told us a story about an exercise in applying prefixes she had set her students, mostly recent migrants. One of the test sentences used the migrant experience as a subject – one that she thought would resonate with her students. There was a gap for the appropriate prefix: 'When I first arrived in Australia after my long journey, everything was very strange and I felt \_\_rooted'. The missing prefix was, of course, 'up', but instead of 'up', she got 'totally', 'completely' and 'absolutely' – showing just how well her students had learned Australian English.

To resort to a bad pun, the story demonstrates how well swearing is rooted in the Australian vernacular. I was interested to learn that it ‘entered Australian English in the 1940s and quickly established itself in the Australian lexicon.’ (184) The enthusiastic uptake of the word by new English speakers in the 1980s testifies to this, particularly the suggestion that in using the word in their English exercise, they had no sense of it being offensive, an observation Laugesen makes in reference to similar situations described in the book.

The often fuzzy boundary between acceptability and unacceptability has been central to the evolution of Australian swearing, a theme Laugesen explores in depth. The shifting of the boundaries is introduced early in the book with the story of the arrest in 2019 of Danny Lim, a Sydney identity known for his quirky sandwich-board messages. In this instance, Lim’s sandwich board was deemed to have crossed a line from quirky to offensive when he wore one bearing a thinly veiled version of the word *cunt*. Neither mainstream Australia nor the magistrate agreed that the word was offensive – a public outcry against Lim’s arrest, and a court victory, confirmed this, and not for the first time. Lim’s conviction a few years earlier, using a similarly thinly veiled use of *cunt*, in reference to the then prime minister Tony Abbott, had been overturned on appeal. On that occasion the judge had noted Australians’ characteristic relationship with bad language, saying that the word was less offensive here than in other English-speaking countries.

Through this anecdote, Laugesen sets up a theme, to which she returns throughout the book, of the importance of context – historical and social – in gauging offensiveness. In a settler society that had its origins as a penal colony, Australia had more reason than most to have had a lively relationship with swearing from its outset, as well as with establishing boundaries around language. The relationship between language and public order is present in any society, but more so in one where the majority of convicts lived among the free settlers, rather than behind prison walls. This was part and parcel of distinguishing between convict and free, respectable and rough, white and black, so that a distinction was drawn early, for instance, between obscene language *per se* and the public use of obscenities. Beyond the demands of policing boundaries within the various white communities, Laugesen discusses its application to race relations, beginning with contemporary missionary perceptions of the corrupting effect of bad language on Indigenous people.

The social-historical nature of *Rooted* means that the relationship between language and power is thoroughly analysed, including the ways in which racial language became popularised through publications such as *The Bulletin*. Of interest to me was Laugesen’s discussion of the confluence of racially degrading language with the Australian tendency to informalise words through common diminutives, as in the example of *Abo* to refer to an Aboriginal person. An example not used in the book is from 1938, when Aboriginal activist Jack Patten edited a publication titled *The Australian Abo Call*, described on its masthead as ‘The Voice of the Aborigines’, without irony or any sense of reclaiming a racial slur. Although Laugesen discusses elsewhere in the book how oppressed and marginalised groups have carried out this political act of reclamation and thereby diminished the power of the slur, the *Australian Abo Call* example suggests how racial slurs, like other forms of bad language, depend to some

degree on context for their meaning. The book mentions other short-form epithets regarded as offensive, such as 'reffe' and 'leso'. The effect of the diminutive is literally to make a name smaller, thus figuratively to trivialise or diminish the importance or dignity of groups of people, something of which we are acutely aware today. In earlier generations, where the dominant discourse was far more unambiguously white, a racial diminutive such as *Abo* was part of that discourse, and more easily categorised within the general Australian love of the diminutive, along with *milko*, *servo*, *bottle-o*, and so forth; the normalisation of the word in such a discourse allowed for the use of *Abo* in a range of contexts, not always offensive in intent.

The matter of intent in language is one of Laugesen's themes, and related to those of context and acceptability. Thus, for instance, a very clear distinction is made between Danny Lim's use of the word *cunt* and when the word is used with aggressive intent, such as in sexist and racist trolling on social media. The Lim case highlights how a word once deemed deeply offensive in any context has now taken on different meanings in different situations. Laugesen discusses in detail the process by which this word in particular has gained acceptability as just another swear word.

*Rooted* teases out the dual nature of Australia's relationship with swearing, beginning with the policing of social boundaries in the convict era, but particularly evident in the 20th century, where some of the most blushing colourful language could thrive in some parts of Australian culture while being relentlessly repressed and censored, along with some fairly mild forms of bad language, in others. The book follows this duality as a theme throughout Australian history, ratcheting up the tension between swearing as a marker of Australian identity, and the countervailing forces of respectability, during much of the twentieth century. This contradiction is strongly evident in Chapter 5: 'The First World War Digger and his Bad Language'. The forging of the Anzac Legend in the war and post-war years both reinforced the national character as a white, male one, and swearing culture as integral to national identity. Laugesen explains how the rough edges of the Australian national type, hewn out of the Australian bush by war correspondent C.E.W. Bean, could be incorporated into a broader image of heroism and nobility, an image for which Bean was largely responsible. And although his *Anzac Book* was to some extent an exercise in smoothing out some of those rougher edges, even the slightly prissy Bean realised that bad language was integral to the digger image, and all the more forgivable when seen as part of the larger picture of First AIF heroism.

Responses to digger language were nevertheless ambivalent. It is as if middle Australia could not make up its mind about whether to censor it or embrace it as a fundamental part of Australian identity. This ambivalence is captured in Laugesen's account of the emergence in the interwar years of a number of dictionaries and glossaries of Australian slang which approached swearing in different ways, ranging from bowdlerisation to a more whole-hearted embrace of digger obscenities. In the latter type, *bullshit*, *fuck*, and many variants on these were published and reviewed, with fairly broad acceptance. Laugesen makes the very salient observation that this acceptance went hand-in-hand with the veneration of the digger as hero, but that while mainstream Australia was prepared to indulge a certain amount of bad language from our national heroes,

this had its limits. The emergence of realist war novels presented digger language as 'stripped of its humour and having moved into a stronger category of profanity that ... became far less acceptable' (158).

The ambivalent attitudes towards digger swearing sets the book up for the next phase of this Australian history in the book's Part Three: 'Censoring and Liberating Bad Language, 1920-1980'. A resurgent repression in such matters occurred globally, but Laugesen argues for its particular strength in Australia's 'quarantine culture'. Even so, she notes that bad language remained a marker of Australian identity, particularly white male identity. This again emphasises ambivalence, and could also be seen as a reflection of the gender order that, along with censorship, came under increased attack from the second half of the 1960s. So, while the more repressive decades of the 1920s to the 1950s were reflecting a more widespread censure of representations of sexuality, particularly homosexuality, they were on the cusp of social change. Laugesen describes how the tension between liberalism and repression was increasingly resolved toward the latter by the end of the period. In the case of the censorship regime, a 1961 change in the law that permitted a defence based on literary or artistic merit facilitated a wholesale collapse by the end of that decade.

In her account of the changes in attitudes to swearing between 1920 and 1980, Laugesen skilfully navigates their many contradictions, indicating how a number of social and cultural factors came into play in the shake-up of attitudes to bad language that was one aspect of a shake-up of social and sexual mores generally. The sense of conflicting forces pulling at one another is palpable: post-war loosening of moral strictures, changes to Indigenous policies that caused the suppression of Indigenous languages, responses to post-war European immigrants that led to a flurry of xenophobic slurs, and anxieties about youth culture. In an echo of the lexicons of First World War soldiers, the first glossary of prison argot was published in 1944. This mix of repression and of new frontiers being broached came to a head in the late 1960s, when the collapse of Australia's censorship regime led to a plethora of expletives embraced as distinctively Australian: *to shit someone*, *shit a brick* and *ratshit* are just three of many additions to the English language to which we can proudly lay claim.

As an Australian history of bad language, *Rooted* is a thoroughly researched, thoughtful and entertaining account suitable for academic historian and general reader alike.

## About the reviewer

**Bridget Brooklyn** is a lecturer in the History and Philosophical Inquiry discipline in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts, Western Sydney University. Her research interests are late 19th and 20th century Australian social and political history, particularly women's political history. She is currently researching the life and work of conservative political activist and eugenicist Dr Mary Booth. Recent publications are 'Mnemosyne and Athena: Mary Booth, Anzac, and the language of remembrance in the First World War and after'. In A. Laugesen & C. Fisher (Eds.), *Expressions of War in Australia and the Pacific: Language, Trauma, Memory, and Official Discourse* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020),

and 'Mary Booth and British Boy Immigration: From Progressivism to Imperial Nationalism'. In: Payton P., Varnava A. (Eds.), *Australia, Migration and Empire. Britain and the World*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

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