



Review

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Tony Crowley, *Liverpool: A memoir of words*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023. Pp. 224. ISBN 9781837644384.

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The spirit presiding over this compact but wide-ranging book is that of the influential cultural historian Raymond Williams. In his 1976 work *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Williams presented over 100 alphabetically arranged semantic and discursive histories of words which he regarded as ‘key’ to understanding developments in Western culture and society from the late eighteenth century to the present. In *Liverpool: A Memoir of Words*, Tony Crowley – whose Oxford thesis on the history of the term ‘Standard English’ was examined by Williams (Crowley 2003: x), and whose championing of a socially embedded, ‘materialist’, politically committed approach to the study of language can perhaps be traced back to Williams’ groundbreaking analysis of ‘Standard English’ in *The Long Revolution* (1961) – also provides a set of keywords. But whereas Williams was concerned to illuminate etymologically complex and semantically difficult words unlikely to feature in the active, everyday vocabulary of most people (e.g. *naturalism*, *hegemony*, *dialectic*), Crowley’s concern is vernacular and quotidian, though this does not mean that his words – drawn from the ‘common language’ (pp. 22–5) of the citizens of Liverpool – are any less significant or complex than Williams’.

The introduction establishes the conceptual frameworks which support the rest of the book, showing how all varieties of language are inseparable from the social conditions (including relations of power) from which they emerge. Here he characterises Liverpool English (popularly known as *Scouse* – though this is not Crowley’s preferred term) as profoundly shaped by the city’s history of migration; a vernacular formed by incomers using ‘trade and military routes that crossed land, sea and ocean’, from as near as Lancashire and Cheshire and other areas of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, but also from much further afield in Europe and beyond, from ‘the Arab world, Africa, India, the United States of America’ (pp. 6–9). Crowley remarks that ‘multiculturalism’ was a ‘historical fact (rather than a political goal)’, so that growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in Liverpool was a ‘complicated, multivalent, sometimes joyful, sometimes antagonistic, sometimes divisive, sometimes communal, mode of lived experience’ (p. 7). In the twenty-six chapters which follow, Crowley examines these complexities through the lens of language, interweaving his ‘own experience of growing up in Liverpool (and of “being from” Liverpool) with social history and the history of words’ (pp. 24–5).

Each chapter is headed by a keyword (indicated below in small caps) which seeds a discursive, organic merger of biographical vignette, sociology, social anthropology, social history, politics, economics, dialectology and critical discourse analysis. For any reader born in Britain in the 1960s, the memoir element of Crowley's work will strike some familiar chords, particularly for those from a working-class background. Many of us will remember collecting fuel for the communal bonfire (BOMMIE); growing up in a home where 'there was an overwhelming childhood sense that there never was and never would be enough' CASH (pp. 41–7); unsupervised 'playing out' and its associated games (recounted in OLLIES and JIGGER); the forms and variations of unregulated 'street' football, from 'great ranging games ... with as many a side as wanted to play' to more 'intimate' set-ups involving just a handful of players (FOOTY); the casual violence routinely meted out by teachers (HARD); wary suspicion and resentment towards the police (ROZZER); Monday night teas based on the left-overs from the Sunday roast (SCOUSE); clothes as a source of stigma and social anxiety (TOGS); drinking as an initiation into the adult world (VAULTS).

But the biographical strand of Crowley's book also (of course) evokes the particularities of growing up in LIVERPOOL, charting places, experiences, modes of social organisation and 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977) which are specific to that city. So, we learn about labour conditions in the dockyards and the significance of the city's river frontage (EASY SIX; MERSEY); religious sectarianism (PRODDYDOG); the origins and meanings of local ethnonyms (SCOUSE; WOOLLYBACK); the particular importance of football (FOOTY; KOP); cultural ties to the USA (ACE) and Merseyside's long history of immigration and emigration (DEKKO).

In relation to this latter point, Crowley is particularly concerned to show how Liverpool vernacular is a variety of speech 'forged by people from all over the world who were in various forms of contact (including emigration, trade, cultural communication) with and within a town that grew from a small fishing port in the early eighteenth century to become "the Gateway of Empire" not two centuries later'; as Crowley points out, when you 'scratch the local' you often 'find the global' (p. 5). By way of illustration he shows how, for example, *ace* – in its modern adjectival sense – is what is sometimes called an 'Americanism', and its use in Liverpool English as a term of approbation is the starting point for a discussion of how Liverpool's transatlantic identity meant that 'American English was one of the most important historical influences in the formation of the city's vernacular' (p. 28). A word with similarly 'global' attributes is *dekk* (derived from a Hindi imperative meaning 'look!'), which is presented as a member of that class of words which – like *akkers*, *baksheesh*, *cushty* and so on – demonstrates the porosity of language boundaries and are a 'linguistic embodiment of colonial history' (p. 55). KOP is similarly implicated: this chapter shows how an Afrikaans word for *hill*, by way of the sacrifice of Liverpool soldiers at the battle of Spion Kop in the Second Boer War, becomes the name of the famous stand at Anfield football ground.

As a lexicographer of Liverpool English (see Crowley 2017), the extended word histories he provides are scholarly, detailed and always fascinating. But Crowley is also aware of the limits of etymological enquiry. For instance, his YONKS chapter provides a

sample of words with unknown etymologies which includes amongst its mysteries *coggy* (Catholic), *cooey* (back alley), *delly* (type of button), *gozzy* (cross-eyed). The -y element in these items is indicative of a type of word-formation process which Crowley regards as a stylistic feature characteristic of Liverpool English and for which he coins the term *plazzymorph* (pp. 81–7). This is a kind of hypocorism which is not quite hypocoristic enough to fully warrant that label, since in Liverpool they ‘are sometimes not diminutives and are in fact longer than, or the same length as, the original terms’ (p. 82). Examples of plazzymorphs (a word which itself contains a plazzymorph for ‘plastic’) abound in the book, and feature prominently amongst Crowley’s keywords, as in BOMMIE, FOOTY, OZZIES (hospitals), OLLIES (originally from *alabaster* – a type of marble), PRODDYDOG (Protestant), QUEG (queer), SCOUSE (from *lobscouse*). Crowley argues that the coinage of plazzymorphs in Liverpool speech is the manifestation of speakers choosing to signal their affiliations with a city well known for its cultural informality, irreverence and lack of deference. These cultural characteristics and behavioural dispositions are also reflected in the way certain areas of meaning and experience have been overlexicalised in Liverpool English, with a proliferation of synonyms and quasi-synonyms in the semantic domains of insults (GOBSHITE, *balloon*, *soft*, *shithouse*, *blert*, *no mark*, *divvy*, *scally*); fighting and violence (*barney*, *lumber*, *scrap*, *shindy*, *belt*, *bottle*, *cane*, *chin*, *deck*); sex and sexuality (QUEG, *bag off*, *bash*, *minge*, *joxxy*, *yen*); the police (ROZZER, *busies/bizzies*, *cops*, *scuffers*); drunkenness (*bevved*, *bladdered*, *boxed*, *kaylied*, *parlatic*, *raddled*, *wellied*).

As the range of lexical items covered in the book shows, Crowley’s ‘memoir of words’ is a lively, unabashed account of the Liverpool vernacular, underpinned by a deep knowledge of the social and historical contexts from which it has emerged and authenticated by the powerful bond which Crowley has with the city, its citizens and its modes of speech. At times Crowley is warm and funny, at others scathingly angry about the social and linguistic prejudices faced (and often defiantly resisted) by the folk of Liverpool, historically and down to the present day. *Liverpool: A Memoir of Words* is beautifully written and free from the academic jargon which often mars works which, like this one, approach language from a ‘critical’ perspective. Both academic and general readers will find plenty to enjoy in this excellent book.

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