Book review

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Skunk Works: a personal memoir of my years at Lockheed
by Ben Rich (with Leo Junos)
Little, Brown & Co., Boston, 1994
pp 370 including index

The story of Webster’s Third: Philip Gove’s controversial dictionary and its critics
by Herbert Morton
Cambridge Univ Press, New York, 1994
pp 332 including notes and index

[1] These are not biographies of two notable twentieth century Americans although, of necessity, biographical detail is included.

[2] Gove was of old New England stock while Rich was a naturalised Jewish immigrant whose British family arrived in California from the Philippines several months before the bombing of Pearl Harbour and the entry of the USA into WW II. The teenage Rich worked alongside his father in a Los Angeles machine shop and his delayed commencement of tertiary education saw him relinquish his intention to study medicine and instead graduated as a mechanical engineer in 1949. For Gove the delayed entry of the US into the war permitted him to complete his Ph D thesis where his post-graduate research was conducted in wartime Britain during 1939-40. His service during the war was in the US Navy. Upon demobilisation he wrote on “spec” to the G & G Merriam company — the publisher of Webster’s Dictionary.
In 1951 the Merriam company appointed Gove as the Editor-in-Chief for the proposed new *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* scheduled for publication in 1959 to replace the 1934 *Webster’s Second*. With a scheduled “life” of 25 years between successive editions, Gove’s *Third* came in two years late in 1961 and the yet-to-be published *Fourth* is already a decade overdue. The birth pains of the *Third* were no more than could be expected of such a major undertaking. What was unexpected was the massive campaign of vilification directed against the Dictionary and its editor upon publication of which remnants still exist today. One outlandish allegation was that the Dictionary was a communist inspired plot to subvert the American way of life. This possibly originated from the witty observation made by a *New York Times* critic who noted the similarity between the name and that of the communist Third International formed in 1919. Unfortunately the humourless epigone took this suggestion seriously. There was also a proposal for patriotic citizens to band together to buy out the Merriam company with a view to reprinting the *Second* edition pending the preparation of a *Fourth* and pulping the *Third*.

Well able to oversee the publication of the *Third*, Gove was ill-equipped to respond to the critics and by the time he got into stride, his defence (as with that of others) was published in obscure professional journals of little moment compared to the likes of the thundering *New York Times*. To little avail did the defenders point out to the *New York Times* that many of the faults it found in the criticised edition were also in its favoured familiar and comfortable *Second* edition. Similarly, if the *New York Times* critics found fault with the “permissive” *Third*, the newspaper’s own usage of words was countenanced by the *Third* but not by its approved *Second*.

It would seem that the critics of the *Third* had not read (if a dictionary can be read) it and were not familiar with the *Second*. This did not stop the assistant managing editor of the *New York Times* from issuing a directive to staff that they were to continue using the 28-year-old *Second*. Unfortunately, other critics, including the American Bar Association, adopted the complaints of the *New York Times* without verification and added to the chorus of condemnation.

The criticism was born of the time. A different dictionary with a different editor would have received the same unless the publishers merely reprinted the venerable
Second. British observers pronounced favourably upon the Dictionary and were bemused by the US furore.

[7] Today the Third stands on its own, vindicated by itself although showing its age. A remarkable achievement, as was the Second, as will be the Fourth. Morton’s story of the Third is a worthy companion to Caught in the Web of Words, James A H Murray and the Oxford English Dictionary (1977) by Murray’s granddaughter.

[8] “Skunk Works” is not accorded an entry* in the Third or even the 20 volume second edition of the OED (1989). It does appear in the 1987 second edition of the Random House Unabridged Dictionary. It is a secret experimental division producing innovative products and not subject to the oversight of head office with the attendant red tape and office politics. The term is derived from the clandestine liquor still operated by Injun Jo (or Big Barnsmell) to produce Kikapoo Joy Juice from worn-out boots and dead skunks in Al Capp’s comic strip Li’l Abner. Its current usage sense derives from the clandestine division of the aircraft manufacturer Lockheed which produced the U2 spy plane, the SR-71 Blackbird and the “stealth” fighter-bombers that figured prominently in the bombing of Baghdad in the 1991 Desert Storm war.

[9] Unlike Gove’s, the tribulations in Ben Rich’s professional life were not in the public gaze and all occurred in pre-production: until the bugs were ironed out production did not commence. Joining Lockheed in 1950 at age 25 Rich was seconded to “Kelly” Johnson’s legendary skunk works in 1954 for a few weeks to assist in the design of the air intake for the U2 — he stayed 36 years, 15 as the boss after Johnson retired.

[10] During that time he participated in the design and development of the F104 Starfighter, the U2 (still in service after 42 years), the highest flying and fastest aircraft yet built — the SR-71, and the F117A stealth fighter — the plane that, undetected by radar, delivered the “smart bomb” on the first night of Desert Storm which was replayed over and over on our TV screens.

* 12,000 Words: a Supplement to Webster’s Third New International Dictionary (1986) defines skunk works as a department or facility (as for research and development of a particular product) that is isolated from the rest of the company or corporation: pp 176-7.
[11] One can only speculate on the reaction of the Russian aerospace boffins inspecting the wreckage of Gary Powers’s downed U2 in May 1960. The U2’s engine sprayed hot volatile oil (20 quarts every mission) onto the cockpit windshield containing the pilot breathing pure oxygen. The problem was intractable until a veteran mechanic suggested, “Why don’t we just stuff Kotex around the oil filter and absorb the mess before it hits the windshield.” Rich ordered industrial-size cartons of sanitary napkins and the problem was solved. What the Russians made of this example of leading edge hi-tech Yankee know-how is not recorded.

[12] The Cold War produced much irony. The U2 overflights of Russia commenced in 1956 and ceased in 1960 after Powers was downed. During that time the Russians silently seethed over the illegal flights. They were unable to publicly complain without admitting their technical inability to stop such flights. Similarly, President Eisenhower was in possession of the perfect defence to allegations by his political opponents that his administration had permitted a Russian gain in firepower over the US. That there was no “missile gap” could not be disclosed without admitting to the illegal overflights that provided the evidence that the Russians were not ahead.

[13] Rich closes his book extolling the virtues of the “skunk works” approach: Ford produced the 1994 Mustang with a saving of one year and $300,000 over the projected expenditure of four years and $1 billion. Similarly, the only success IBM has had in the last twenty years was their PC developed in the early 1980s in a backwater Florida facility away from the mainstream corporate ethos of their head office.

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