LEAPIN' LIZARDS -- L.O. ANNIE

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Have you ever wondered about the credited quotes in Webster's Third New International Dictionary? Webster's assures us they are "contemporary quotations from well-known people and publications." Close examination of the dictionary itself, however, reveals they are a bewildering diversity, not necessarily either "contemporary" or "well-known".

People

In the people category we start chronologically with (I believe) Chaucer, go to Shakespeare, on to Milton and up to Adam Smith. After 1800 they come in larger numbers; after 1900, a veritable horde! Anyone who was anything in the literary field appears to be quoted.

In some instances, the year of birth is included with the name, e.g. A. M. Schlesinger b. 1917. This evidently is to distinguish the Pulitzer Prize winner from his Pulitzer Prize winner father, b. 1888. The need for year of birth is often doubtful; e.g. R. A. Hall b. 1911 has no namesake among well-known people, living or dead, in such standard references as the 1970 Information Please Almanac, Marquis' Who's Who, and Webster's Second - Biographical.

In other instances, the year of death is given, e.g. O. W. Holmes +1935. Thus he is not his famous father (1809-1894), and not the O. W. Holmes, historian and archivist of Washington, D. C., listed in Who's Who in America as still alive.

The problem is clearly related to the definition of "well-known". Webster's, to illustrate the language, of necessity must quote not only literary figures but others as well. And so the namesakes proliferate.

For instance, who is R. H. Brown? Robert Henry Brown, Washington college administrator; Robert Horatio Brown, Maryland orthopedic surgeon; Robert Howard Brown, Colorado mutual funds execu-

tive; or R. Harper **Brown**, Illinois packaging company executive?

Some examples which appear to be distinctive are F. D. Roosevelt, H. S. Truman, D. D. Eisenhower, Harry Lauder, Elizabeth Taylor, James Cagney, Ethel Merman, Milton Cross, Ted Williams, and J. K. Lasser -- for a sampling. But, who knows -- before Webster's Fourth is printed, a J. K. Lasser may write the Great American Novel.

Who is to say the C. D. Lewis quoted is not my good friend living in Wilmington, Delaware, instead of Cecil Day-Lewis, Poet Laureate of England? Cameron David Lewis doesn't mix up his middle initial with a hyphenated last name, and he is well-known, being listed in American Men of Science.

Some authors are treated a bit shabbily. We invariably see Sir Walter Scott, but sometimes Sir Winston Churchill and sometimes just plain Winston Churchill. The cruelest blow of all, however, is to poor William Shakespeare, who contributed so much, and yet is given the abrupt credit: - Shak.

Publications

Publications present a wider and more bewildering variety than people. There are, among many others, Have You Made A Will?, Sweet's Catalogue Service, Needlecraft For The Home, So. African Garden Manual, Brookmire Investment Reports, Beam v. Georgia, New Era In Concrete, Choice of Careers: Furniture Manufacturing, Bull. of Meharry Med. Coll., Dance Observer, Consumers' Use Of & Opinions About Citrus Products, and ETC.

In retrospect, who dares define what is strange? Who is to say these are not more well-known to many people than Time, New Yorker, Harper's, Saturday Rev., Encyc. Americana, Scribner's and Times Lit. Supp. ?

Do not believe that Webster's uses references only for their special knowledge. True, PROVIDE is illustrated by U. S. Constitution, and PROVIDED by Mutual of Omaha. But SKINTIGHT by Sydney (Australia) Bull. and PRIMA DONNA by Farm Chemicals!

Which gets us to the nitty-gritty. Is it any better that it was **Zane** Grey who said "a rough-and-ready, loud-spoken man" than for Webster's to have said "a rough-and-tumble among the boys in the playground? Or that John Milton said "there let the pealing organ blow", but Webster's invented "let it blow, we're snug and warm"? I submit that Webster's is fully capable of illustrating word use without

recourse to famous, infamous, known, questionable, trivial, trite, esoteric or exotic sources. Consider "flustered down the aisle to her seat", "the boy's sneakers suddenly took hold and stopped him from sliding off the roof", and "scenic fjords perforate the coastline." Could Shak. have done any better?

The Mostest

Does Webster's have some favorites or is there some pattern to the people and publications quoted? Under the verb SEEK, for example, are 38 quoted examples: 2 to Shak. but 4 to Amer. Guide Series -- a source I have never heard of. (In case other readers are not familiar with this series, I subsequently discovered that the WPA during the Depression of the 1930s sponsored the writing of guidebooks for the states and major cities of the U.S.)

For a homogeneous statistical sampling, I checked pages in Webster's ending in the numbers 19, 39, 58 and 78. This gave a sample of 107 pages -- and they contained 107 references to Amer. Guide Series. This means a statistical certainty of over 2500 references to this one source in Webster's Third.

Since there is, for example, by Amer. Guide Series "mistaking the light for a beacon, ships were lured to the treacherous reefs, there to be boarded and looted by the wily shoremen," there could well be over 50,000 words quoted from Amer. Guide Series.

For the mathematically-inclined among readers of Word Ways, the number-per-page/number-of-pages were 0/59, 1/17, 2/13, 3/10, 4/6, and 5/2. These statistics tell us there should be pages with 6 or 7 per page. And, indeed, page 1961 (the year of publication) has 7 references to Amer. Guide Series.

The distribution by states is equally intriguing. North Carolina, Minnesota and Michigan account for one-third of the total, with 14, 12 and 10 credits, respectively. In all, twenty-four states and N.Y. City were represented in my sample.

Future

I have no real quarrel with Amer. Guide Series. On the other hand, Webster's, why not tell it like it really is? Shouldn't you replace "heard the pow of a blowout - Ethyl News" with "Holy logology, Batman, that was some pow - Robin"?