

The Media Column - 3

The Oldie, May 2005

1. The editor *Richard Ingrams* said (page 3) that 'as usual a star-studded galaxy' had attended one of the paper's functions.

This has two faults of style, as the OED calls them:-

(1) It is tainted by pleonasm, or use of superfluous words. A galaxy consists of stars; that's what the word means. So it has to be star-studded or it wouldn't be a galaxy.

(2) It is magniloquent, described by the OED as 'talking big' or 'boastful'.

Comment An editor should set an example.

2. *William De'Ath* wrote (page 21) 'a club committee comprised of several golf-playing, white-moustached old colonels . . .'

This confuses 'comprise' and 'compose'. The committee was either composed of several colonels or comprised (that is included) several colonels.

Comment This is a common error, which no professional writer should commit.

3. Someone calling himself *Diarmaid Ó Muirithe*, who writes a column on English words, said (page 35) that he had never in his life heard the expression 'He wouldn't set the Thames on fire' (some expert!).

A glance at the familiar *Brewer* would have enlightened this man with the peculiar name.

Brewer tells us that the expression probably originated with a Latin saw (no surprise there).

Comment Why spend nearly half your column on far-fetched musings when, as usual, Mr Ebenezer Cobham Brewer (1810-1897) has the answer?

4. *Jonathan Cecil* wrote (page 54) 'As I think Max Beerbohm said, "If you like that kind of thing, then that's the kind of thing you like"'.

Actually it was Abraham Lincoln, and what he said was: 'People who like this sort of thing will find this is the sort of thing they like' (G. W. E. Russell, *Collections and Recollections* (1898) ch.30).

Comment If you're not sure, why not look it up – especially when you're being paid for your efforts?