

## ARTS & LETTERS

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### *THE WARDEN OF ENGLISH: The Life of H. W. Fowler.*

By Jenny McMorris. Oxford Univ. Press. 320 pp. \$27.50

I think of the world as I wish it were, with its hedonism tempered, its courage roused, its greed eliminated, its love of truth multiplied. In that world, Henry Watson Fowler (1858–1933) would have been a hero—statues, tickertape parades, a knighthood, the whole bit. Fowler is, of course, the author of *Modern English Usage* (1926), a reference book that is revered even today, three-quarters of a century after it was first published, and revered even in America, which Fowler never visited and about whose idioms he freely admitted knowing little.

Fans of *MEU* will tell you that it's invaluable for more than the judgments it renders about the niceties of English. They treasure it as well for the character of Henry Fowler—for the way he brought that character to bear on his subject matter, teaching readers by example how to arrive at sound judgments of their own. For instance, he began a discussion of whether to set off slang words with such phrases as “so to speak” and “to use an expressive colloquialism”: “Surprise a person of the class that is supposed to keep servants cleaning his own boots, & either he will go on with the job while he talks to you, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, or else he will explain that the bootboy or scullery-maid is ill & give you to understand that he is, despite appearances, superior to boot-cleaning. If he takes the second course, you conclude that he is not superior to it; if the first, that perhaps he is. So it is with the various apologies . . . to which recourse is had by writers who wish to safeguard their dignity & yet be vivacious, to combine comfort with elegance, to touch pitch & not be defiled.”

To love *MEU* is to want to know more about its author, and now McMorris, the archivist for the Oxford English dictionaries, gratifies that desire. Fowler is full of surprises. A physical fitness buff, he for many years went for a daily run and a swim in the ocean. A shy and self-effacing scholar who was almost otherworldly about money, he did not marry until he was 50, but then entered into what was apparently a blissful marriage with a large, jolly chat-

terbox of a nurse. Half a dozen years later, the Great War broke out, and although Fowler was certainly overage and had plenty of other good reasons to stay home, he wangled his way into the army and then crusaded to be sent to the front lines.

McMorris lucidly recounts the facts of Fowler's life without grinding any particular ax about him. It's up to us to reconcile the man who ultimately composed passages such as the one quoted above with the man who, McMorris writes, mentioned his mother in print just once, telling “a rather foolish tale of his own snobbery as a schoolboy. He was embarrassed by her habit of trimming lamps and polishing glass in the house each morning, and felt that she did this because there were not enough servants to allow her to leave these things alone as, he believed, a lady should; she had explained to him that servants rarely did these small tasks satisfactorily. Only later did he understand the financial burden of educating eight children and that his mother needed to do some small jobs around the house.” Fowler extracted wisdom from his life—and we, too, have the chance to do so, with the help of McMorris's intelligent and winsome biography.

(Anyone tempted to dip into *Modern English Usage* itself should be warned that the stamp of Fowler's heart and mind is faint indeed in the heavily revised 1996 third edition, though it is clear in the 1965 second edition, which remains in print.)

—BARBARA WALLRAFF

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### *IT'S ONLY A MOVIE:*

#### *Films and Critics in American Culture.*

By Raymond J. Haberski, Jr. Univ. Press of Kentucky. 264 pp. \$27.50

Ain't the past quaint. One of the charms of *It's Only a Movie* is the opportunity to experience again this poignant if banal truism. Erik Barnouw's excellent three-volume history of broadcasting lives in my memory chiefly as the place where I first read General David Sarnoff's pious assurance that network broadcasting was too important an undertaking to be turned over to “hucksters.”