

WOOSTER SAUCE



The Quarterly Journal of The P G Wodehouse Society (UK)

Number 1

March 1997

ARRANGEMENTS FOR SOCIETY'S RELAUNCH PROGRESSING SMOOTHLY

We can report with much pleasure that the relaunch of the *P G Wodehouse Society (UK)* is on schedule and can be confidently expected in the early summer.

It is extremely good news that Richard Briers OBE has agreed to become President of the Society. Richard has been making stage appearances, both in comedy and the classics, since 1959, and has the experience of a variety of direct Wodehouse roles to add to his appreciation of the Master's writing. As long ago as 1961 he appeared in the film *The Girl on the Boat*, as recently as 1995 he was Galahad Threepwood in the television film *Heavy Weather*. In between he has brought Bertie Wooster to life in radio series and on audiotapes.

Members may like to know that the members of the Society's Committee are Sir Edward Cazalet, QC (Grandson of P G Wodehouse), John Fletcher, Richard Morris, Helen Murphy, Norman Murphy, Tony Ring and Oliver Wise. Several individuals have been approached to be the Society's Patrons, and further news on these, together with very brief biographical notes about your Committee, will appear in the next issue.

In May, the Society's Constitution will be finalised. Its aim is to permit the Society to operate as informally as possible, yet to provide a set of rules to be followed if there is ever any cause for dispute. Wodehouse himself would have enjoyed writing scathingly of its insofars and hereinafters, but it does not contain any reference to *soccage in fief*. Should any member wish to have a personal copy to frame and hang on their wall, please apply to the Membership Secretary (address on the back page) with a cheque for £ 2.50 to cover copying, and a stamped addressed envelope (size A4 folded once).

Welcome to Wodehouse Share the Chairman's Enthusiasm

I imagine all of us, at one time or another, have met people who express surprise that we enjoy P G Wodehouse's writing. With a slight sense of disapproval they say things like: "Oh, but he's awfully lightweight, isn't he? I mean, he was only a humorist."

And when you reply that he was admired by Housman, Kipling and Galsworthy, that Evelyn Waugh called him 'The Master', and that Hilaire Belloc regarded Wodehouse as the finest writer in the language, they look disconcerted and change the subject.

My opinion is that these people feel that you cannot be a 'great' writer if you make your readers laugh.

The late Sir Robert Birley, headmaster of Eton, had no truck with this view. He told me once that I was right to regard Wodehouse so highly since, he said, the equal of his prose would never be seen again. It would simply not be possible, since Wodehouse was the end of a line of English writers that began with Shakespeare; writers brought up on the foundation of the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and the Classics.

Some enthusiasts enjoy Wodehouse for the intricacy of his plots, some admire his prose, some simply look for those masterly misplaced quotations. Wodehouse turned me into a social historian, digging away to find the events, people and places that put an idea into his mind, that gave him the germ of an idea for those intricate plots.

But that is just one aspect. There are dozens of others and one of the aims of this Society is to elicit them. Whatever your particular Wodehouse interest, we hope that membership of the Society will further it.

Norman Murphy

AS 'BY JEEVES' RUN ENDS, FOUR OF 250 performances in London and an award add up to a considerable triumph for the 'Almost New' musical

The news that *By Jeeves* was coming to the end of its run at the Lyric Theatre provided a timely opportunity to obtain some impressions about the show and related matters from four of the company: Steven Pacey (who played Bertie Wooster), Malcolm Sinclair (Jeeves), Lucy Tregear (Honorias Glossop) and Nicolas Colicos (Cyrus Budge III, jnr). Lucy had previously played Sue Brown in Harrogate Theatre's 1993 production of *Summer Lightning*, while Nicolas had been in *Wodehouse on Broadway* (Theatre Royal, Plymouth and BBC television, 1989).

For most of the cast, a run of 250 performances in London after some 30+ in Scarborough represented their longest single engagement, though Steven Pacey had played Tony in *West Side Story* for about a year in total, half in London and half on tour. Many of the company have been able to fit in additional work during the run; for instance Malcolm Sinclair filmed a series of *Pie in the Sky* (with Steven Pacey making an appearance in one episode), and Lucy Tregear took the title role in a three-part radio drama, *Patricia's Progress*. Since this was recorded in Birmingham, she faced a number of nerve-racking return journeys to ensure she was back at the theatre when the curtain went up. Nicolas Colicos happily attributed four engagements to his *By Jeeves* exposure, and was particularly pleased that none of the four casting directors (for three radio plays and his next live theatre role) requested auditions. But it is surely not surprising that after a lengthy run, none of the four is particularly anxious to join the projected national tour which is planned for the autumn.

Success in the theatre depends on a rapport between cast and audience, which in turn derives partly from the energy and enthusiasm displayed, performance by performance. When asked whether there were any particular tricks which were used to ensure performances remained fresh after six months, no one admitted to much of consequence. The impression

received was that very minor differences in a number of areas serve to keep the cast alert and at the peak of their form. Steven and Malcolm both made the point quite forcibly that in a show like *By Jeeves*, audience reaction differs enormously from day to day, and in Steven Pacey's words, "what might bring the house down one night gets zilch reaction the next". Many of the visual jokes, of which, as many members will recall, there are plenty, succeeded night in and night out (and even at the matinées, when as regular theatregoers will be aware, audience reaction is at its nadir) but one or two specific actions, and some of the verbal niceties, caused the actors to stay particularly alert and react according to their reception. At other times, mere changes in timing and inflection were sufficient to assist concentration. Malcolm Sinclair said that if anything he tended to simplify his part as he went on, to do less rather than more, and the four generally agreed that Steven Pacey's approach changed little from performance to performance. Overall, the productions had maintained very consistent running times, pointing to a supreme level of professionalism by the whole company.

During the run, two new songs and one new cast member were introduced. Whilst the show was still at Scarborough, the somewhat dated-sounding *Deadlier than the Male* had been replaced by the rousing *Love's Maze*, which involved the whole company (including understudies) in supporting chorus and dance. A new opening song *Wooster Will Entertain You* was introduced for the October opening of the sister production at the Norma Terris Theatre, Goodspeed-at-Chester, Connecticut, USA, and replaced *The Code of the Woosters* in the London production shortly afterwards. Both Steven Pacey and Malcolm Sinclair thought that the new opening song set up the different aspects of Bertie's character more clearly as far as the non-Wodehouse audience is concerned than its predecessor, which, Steven conceded, might have made him appear a little smug.

ITS STARS TALK TO WOOSTER SAUCE

The four were full of praise for the new company member, Claire Carrie, who replaced Cathy Sara as Stiffy Byng in the late autumn. A change in casting inevitably creates extra work, but the word is that Claire fitted in extremely well, and her rehearsals were limited to 'topping and tailing' the scenes in which she appeared. Malcolm Sinclair admitted to having been let off rather lightly, as Jeeves's direct involvement in Stiffy's scenes is minimal, whereupon Nicolas Colicos commented to the effect that he couldn't remember Jeeves appearing in *any* rehearsal. A greater tribute to an actor living his part is difficult to imagine!

The company was evidently very fit, having offered little opportunity to the three understudies who did, however, take the stage every night in one choral and dance number in each half. Indeed, Lucy Tregear did not miss a performance, while the others only missed two or three. The single exception was born out of the show's success: Malcolm Sinclair and his spouse had booked a holiday in Russia which was honoured when the show's run was extended. The opportunity which this gave to his understudy – a *planned* schedule of appearances for ten days – must be as manna compared to the more usual last-minute replacement of an unexpectedly sick star.

The whole of the cast were involved in a live recording of a modified script before an audience for BBC radio, the show being broadcast in December. The transmitted production cleverly mixed the new dialogue (some of which was

necessitated by the absence of visual humour) with recordings from the issued CD of the show, rather than the songs as performed for that audience. Presumably to get the broadcast to the correct length, the song *What Have You Got to Say, Jeeves?* was omitted completely, as was the finale. Steven Pacey and Malcolm Sinclair also recorded a conversation for a 'taster' cassette aimed at potential organisers of groups and parties.

Commercial success is one measure of a show's impact; another is the reception it receives at the hands of the critical world. Although there were a few professional critics who declined to take Sir Alan Ayckbourn's advice and 'leave their brains outside', the majority of reviews both at Scarborough and London were very positive. *By Jeeves* won the Best Musical award in the 1996 American Express Regional Theatre Awards, and was nominated for three categories in the Laurence Olivier awards:

Nicolas Colicos provided the information that *Time* Magazine had included the Goodspeed production in its list of ten theatrical pieces in the US not to be missed in 1996.

Lucy Tregear and Nicolas Colicos have both read Wodehouse, Nicolas having probably as comprehensive a knowledge as most members of the Society. We would love to see them using their undoubted skills in interpreting his work again in the future, while to all the company of *By Jeeves*, we thank them for what they have achieved, and wish them well in their next roles.

RECENT PRESS COMMENT

Two of the recent references to Wodehouse

From the obituary in the *Daily Telegraph*, 1 March, 1997, of Cyrille Toumanoff, a bailiff Grand Cross of Justice of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta and formerly Grand Prior of Bohemia:

During the Russian Revolution the young Cyrille heard the shots that killed his mother in the garden of his home. . . . Despite long years in America he retained his English accent. He constantly referred back to the books he enjoyed as a youth: . . . the works of P G Wodehouse. Toumanoff gave his friends Wodehousian

nicknames, such as Aunt Connie or even Empress of Blandings. In later years his conversation, packed with references to the world of Wodehouse, was hard to comprehend except to close friends, such as the Grand Master of the Order, Fra Andrew Bertie.

From a Sunday Times, 19 January, 1997, article entitled *New rich don't know how to boss a butler* saying that nouveau riche families need training:

Jeeves is feeling peeved: in the classless society, employers no longer know how to treat a butler.

THE WODEHOUSE SEASON AT

(British Wodehouse followers have just had the opportunity to enjoy a dozen examples of Wodehouse related films and TV programmes. **Tony Ring** reports)

The British National Film Theatre ('NFT') should be both thanked and congratulated for sponsoring a season of films and television with a P G Wodehouse link, a total of twelve evenings in the 35-day period between 26 November and 30 December. Remarkably, despite some near misses, the erratic British climate was kind enough to give us only low temperatures, wind, rain, fog and ice, but no chaos-causing snow to prevent our getting to the London location.

The NFT divided the programme clearly into 'film evenings' and 'television evenings', and each group was enjoyable for different reasons. The television series reminded me just how good had been the **Wodehouse Playhouse** series of Mulliner/Golf stories, starring John Alderton and Pauline Collins (**Unpleasantness at Bludleigh Court** and **A Voice From The Past** being my personal favourites).

We poor Angles have never had a chance to see these portrayals, in many people's view the peak of perfection of television Wodehouse, since video recorders for home use became commonplace, and have been living on our memories for some twenty years. Will some enterprising video producer not obtain the rights and produce a complete set for fans to enjoy?

A PLEA FOR HELP FROM THE BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE

"Sadly, many important Wodehouse items are missing from official television archives. There is only one surviving *The World of Wooster (The Delayed Exit of Claude and Eustace)* and nothing from *Blandings Castle* (BBC 1967) and *Ukridge* (BBC 1968). However there is a possibility that copies of these 'lost' programmes may be in the hands of private collectors and fans. The British Film Institute would be pleased to hear from anyone who has such copies or knows the whereabouts of any. If located we would borrow the material to make a copy for our own archive, and screen the item or items at the National Film Theatre at a later date."

Any member who can help is invited to contact the Editor of Wooster Source at the address on the back page.

It was also interesting to see again what is, alas, the only surviving episode of the Carmichael/Dennis Price *World of Wooster* series from 1966. Interesting, because it confirms the impression I had retained that Price was too old for Jeeves. Which he was, by a mile. And too supercilious. Which he was. Ian Carmichael was much the more accomplished of the two, though in my view he was also too old (Bertie didn't reach 30 in the sto-

ries) and he and his director will never be wholly forgiven for planting on an unsuspecting modern public the suggestion that Bertie Wooster wore a monocle! Nowhere is this suggested in the books, one tiny piece of circumstantial evidence notwithstanding. It is the magazine illustrations, and then Mr Carmichael, which have misled us. It was good to see that Hugh Laurie, who featured one evening in two episodes of the recent series with Stephen Fry, did not fall into the same trap.

There were two other television adaptations of stories which are worthy of note. The earliest surviving example of televised Wodehouse is a creditable 1956 **Lord Emsworth and the Girl Friend**, and we were privileged to see this, which was for its age really very good. The two most noticeable flaws, apart from the sets, were the evident immaturity of young

child actors (in this case, the one playing 'Ern), and the skills of the continuity function. In both these areas, I think, vast improvements have taken place in forty years! And we saw John Alderton performing **Jeeves and the Impending Doom** in 1982 what I can only describe as a play-reading format. That is to say, most of it was read or recited, but some scenes were acted

out. And of course, done brilliantly.

The remaining television evenings concentrated on interviews with PGW, between 1958 and 1971, which did not reveal a great deal, and two programmes put out around Christmas 1989, one a documentary called **Bookmark** (which included parts of these interviews) and the other **Wodehouse on Broadway**, a celebration of his theatrical career.

THE NATIONAL FILM THEATRE

Strangely, for this was a recording of a stage performance at Plymouth, I felt this made better viewing on the small screen.

The film season was something special for the connoisseur. The NFT has brand new prints of *Brother Alfred* (based on the short story *Rallying Round Old George*) and *Leave It To Me* (based on *Leave it To Psmith*). The treatment was competent rather than riveting, the film omitting an awful lot of plot and being created as a vehicle for the star rather than the story, and of course there was no Wodehouse screenplay, but it was good to have a chance to see them.

We also saw the two Jeeves films. *Thank You, Jeeves!* was supposedly based on the novel of the name, but it was difficult to see how! At least Bertie Wooster (played by David Niven) appeared in this, but the naivety of the American film industry was shown up very clearly by the English hotel register, which showed a guest registering on 8.13.19XX! The follow-up was an early example of that distasteful habit of selling commercial rights to a character or its name. *Step Lively, Jeeves!* had no Wodehouse involvement whatsoever, and did not even feature Bertie Wooster. It was the inter-war equivalent of a 1990s Bond film based on a story by a screen-writer who probably never met Ian Fleming.

Perhaps the most satisfactory were *A Damsel in Distress* and *A Girl on the Boat* each of which drew a good audience and were very entertaining. The former, featuring Fred Astaire, does appear on television occasionally, but the latter had seemed to have been lost. It features the diminutive Norman Wisdom, and a very youthful Richard Briers, and kept much more closely to the original plot than we had any right to expect. In all, it was very well received.

On each of the film evenings, we were additionally treated to a silent film, either a Reggie Pepper from 1919 or a golf story from 1924. These were accompanied by a live pianist, who musically improvised the mood changes with utmost skill. These films each lasted about 25 minutes and although they were of general interest, to the non aficionado they would have been somewhat slow! I feel it was a mistake to give us two of the golf silent pictures on the last evening; it caused at least one person to walk out, but meant that all the surviving five golf pictures (out of six) had been squeezed into the season.

A minor regret from the season was that we did not see *Those Three French Girls*, for which Wodehouse really did write the dialogue. But you can't have everything, and we had a lot!

The Most Unusual item in My Wodehouse Collection

The Editor is anxious to receive contributions from members on any aspect of P G Wodehouse's work, life, or perception by his contemporaries. If you have any knowledge, books, magazines or other documents which you think may be a little out of the ordinary and of interest to our members, please let me know.

And to collectors among you, a special plea.

Could you write a short article – say 250 to 500 words – describing the most unusual item in your collection: what it consists of, where and when you obtained it, its significance, and where appropriate, its provenance as far as its relevance to Wodehouse is concerned. Many of you must have hidden pieces of history which members would love to share!

DID YOU KNOW? Publishing Errors – 1

When Armada Books, part of May Fair Books, published *Mike at Wrykin* and *Mike and Psmith* in 1968, they spelt the name 'Wrykyn' wrong all over the cover, although they managed to get it right in the text.

I SAY! Favourite Exchanges – 1

"I think you're a pig," she said.
"A pig, maybe, but a shrewd, level-headed pig."

The Code of the Woosters

Go See The World of P G Wodehouse

Sven Sahlin, member of at least three Wodehouse Societies, reflects on the friends he has met on his travels amongst Wodehouseans.

Us Swedes are travellers since the Vikings and we thoroughly enjoy going places and meeting people. Many, many of us thoroughly enjoy our Wodehouses during our journeys. I, myself, started to read my Woosters and my Mulliners during the military service and have kept reading them ever since. Some five years ago during a flu period I thought I should tidy up the book shelves and found out I had perhaps fifteen or so P G Wodehouse hardbacks in English. Vaguely I thought I'd look for more and see how many I could find in the second-hand bookshops in Stockholm, in London, in Boston, well wherever I go. I did not really emphasize first editions, fine dust covers, etc, and I had never collected anything at all earlier.

And how fun it has been! Slowly finding out where to go, chatting to that wonderful, eccentric, knowledgeable species of mankind, the antiquarians themselves. They are not like anybody else you've ever met; once they understand you're a fellow book lover of sorts, all doors open up. You get advice, you get listings, you get friends. I particularly have Nigel Williams in mind, seek him out downstairs in his lair in Cecil Court – chat with him and enjoy his Wodehouse shelves on the other side of the alley. And do not miss the book fairs at Russell Hotel in London, what a wonderful crowd of personalities!

I had initially great problems in finding the Swedish Wodehouse Society. It was so quiet and so well hidden. Eventually, however, I found it and we have had some lovely gatherings. Later on I have also joined the English Society and I can put TWS after my name showing to the knowledgeable that I am also a US Society member. These international societies have given me another dimension of Wodehouse, the writer. Through my membership and through some little contact-making, I nowadays also think of Wodehouse, the magic door opener.

So listen to this, my dear fellow Wodehouse nuts. Business took me to Boston in November and through a little corresponding, I got hold of some wonderful New England Wodehouseans, the Newts! Lunch and afternoon with David Landman and the Swansons (Swedish ancestry!) The sheer pleasure to meet someone you know shares an interest. I mean, I'm not one of those who remembers names of aunts and fiancées. I read, I laugh, I enjoy and I forget. Still, Wodehouse fans are special people, I'll say no more... Business took me to London in December and again in January, with a nice, warm, funny dinner with Tony and Elaine Ring and Richard Morris. And believe it or not, in February, again during a business visit, a reunion dinner with the travelling Bostonians, David and Elizabeth Landman, and the Rings, with the Murphys thrown in for good measure !]

So give it a thought next time you travel! There are clubs in many places and the movement is on! You'll meet the nicest people and you'll find other vistas than the hotel lobbys and the usual traveller's sights.

Now, when you come to Stockholm we have this pleasure boat

Oh, Plum, you must feel happy up there! Not only did you create this animal shelter in the US, you've created a human shelter to take us away from the everyday ratrace.

Wodehouse, I like you! And I love you!

The Editor suggests:

If you would like to meet other Wodehouseans who visit the UK, please let me know, and I will give your name to members who indicate they are travelling to your geographical area.

What The Papers Said: The Daily Mail (1)

On 12 August, 1938, Charles Graves carried this report in his "I See Life" column:

I remember P G Wodehouse telling me that he went to have a golf lesson in London some time ago. The professional selected for him was named Jeeves.

P G Wodehouse, although he was the most modest man in the world, couldn't help saying "It is rather interesting to me that your name is Jeeves." At which the pro looked blank.

"You see my name is P G Wodehouse," said the latter lamely.

"Oh yes" was the uninterested reply, as the pro told him to keep his eye on the ball.

BOOK REVIEWS by John Fletcher

The Penguin Rhyming Dictionary

by Rosalind Ferguson (Penguin, 1985, 530pp, £ 7.99)

Quite useless. Every Jeevesian knows, from *Fixing it for Freddie*, that Wooster is pronounced like the product from which our magazine derives its name, but this book makes it rhyme with *booster*, *Wodehouse* with *roadhouse* and *Worcester* with *duster*! Rosalind F. must have read little and been nowhere. What would she have made of Psmith, Majoribanks, Mapledurham or Stanley Featherstonehaugh Utridge? True, with this book Bingo Little would not have said, when writing a love poem, "I wish the dickens ... she had been christened something except Cynthia. There isn't a dam' word in the language it rhymes with." If he had had a copy of this book he would have seen that actually there was one: *Carinthia*, an Austrian province. (Not that it would have been an easy word to work in.) If you want to compete in the Poetry competition at the TWS Chicago convention in October (see page 8), you'll have to find a better rhyming dictionary than this!

The Oxford Companion to English Literature

ed Margaret Drabble (OUP, 1985, 1171 pp, hardback £ 25)

What does the editor say about the man with over 1,600 citations in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the man whom Sean O'Casey called "English Literature's performing flea"? Not a lot; O'Casey himself gets more column-inches than Wodehouse. She calls PGW's father a judge, which is not only imprecise but irrelevant in so short an entry. Let us admit to the highest ranks of literature those whose plays or novels are made and re-made into films, TV series and videos. The makers know that their work cannot really catch the genius of the original, and that it is absurd to try. But love impels them to introduce the works to a wider audience, some of whom will go on to read the 'book of the film'. This might happen to any writer once; to the greatest it happens repeatedly. By this measure, especially after last December's torrent of Wodehouse films at the NFT (see page 2), he is up with Shakespeare, Dickens and Jane Austen. How many of O'Casey's plays have been made into films?

Those who love PGW have already found the best possible companion to English literature, but if they should want to know more about the writers he refers to, this handy volume will do nicely. Drabble gives good measure: not only Wodehouse's English literature is there but so is his French (Camus, for instance, immortalised in *Service with a Smile*) and Russian (you remember Tolstoy from *A Clicking of Cuthbert*). Even those foreign philosophers known only to Jeeves appear, like Spinoza (*Joy in the Morning*) and Nietzsche (*Jeeves Takes Charge*).

There are separate entries for Jeeves ("omniscient and resourceful") and Bertie ("amiable, vacuous young man-about-town). I can hear Jeeves say "Most apposite, madam". In the next edition, let us have similar entries for Lord Emsworth and Psmith, Uncle Fred and Pongo, Aunts Agatha and Dahlia, and Mr Mulliner and Utridge.

Songs on the Situation

In speaking of our cricketers

This maxim guideth me

If they win a match they're England

If they lose they're MCC.

This verse first appeared in *Books of Today and Books of Tomorrow* in February 1904.

POETS' CORNER

The Hesitating Lover

On my lady's white doorstep I linger
I have news which I'm eager to tell
Yet, somehow, my neatly-gloved finger
Shrinks coyly from pressing the bell.
I love her amazingly, dearly;
I have come here to tell her so now.
But, alas! I'm in doubt if I clearly
Know how!

Shall I whisper my passionate pleadings,
Or try a stage-villanous hiss?
At what point in the tender proceedings
Shall I venture to ask for a kiss?
When I call her a goddess or queen, or
An angel, I might strike my chest;
Or would a more placid demeanour
Be best.

Shall I mention my qualifications
To make her a suitable mate?
Shall I drag in my titled relations—
On my personal beauty dilate?
Shall I say I'm as rich as one need be?
Shall I slide my right arm round her waist?
Or would in her eyes such a deed be
Bad taste?

Shall I find it my best plan to flatter,
Or trust to a business-like speech?
I am simply a child in the matter—
A child, whom there's no one to teach.
For the rather remarkable fact is,
Though I've read of such scenes by the score,
I have never essayed one in practice
Before.

Shall I swear with astonishing fervour
That I love her better than life?
Or own that I do not deserve her,
Yet gladly would call her my wife?
Shall I make my voice tremble with feeling?
Or charm her with flashes of wit?
Shall I speak to her standing, or kneeling,
Or sit?

Ah, well! I had best get it over;
I can't haunt this doorstep all day.
When a man comes to call as a lover,
He chafes at the smallest delay.
Though I charm, or displease, or amaze her,
I shall end all this worry and doubt.
The Butler: "Miss Hester, I'm sorry to say, sir,
Is out!"

(This piece first appeared in *Pearson's Xmas Xtra*, November 1903)

NEWS OF FORTHCOMING PUBLICATIONS

Wooster Sauce has received news of the following publications in the pipeline:

- Hutchinson: *Wodehouse at the Wicket* Edited by Murray Hedgecock.
£10.99 Expected publication date: June 1997
- Galahad Books *The Luck Stone* by P G Wodehouse. (His only full-length story not previously appearing in book form.) 257 pages. £40. Available: April 1997.
- Porpoise Books *Tales of Wrykyn and Elsewhere* by P G Wodehouse. (A collection of 25 school stories not previously appearing in book form.) Available: Summer 1997.
- Isis Large Print Large print versions of the following books all at £14.95:
- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------|
| Carry On, Jeeves | October 1996 |
| The Code of the Woosters | January 1997 |
| Aunts Aren't Gentlemen | May 1997 |

HOW WODEHOUSE FEATURES IN OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY CITATIONS

The second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* was published in 1989 in 20 volumes. It is regarded as highly authoritative as regards the derivation and usage of words and phrases in the English language, and it encompasses some 2.4 million quotations, of which some 500,000 come from the twentieth century. Of these, over 1,600 are to be found in the works of P G Wodehouse. Only four of his books (*French Leave*, *Something Fishy*, *A Few Quick Ones* and *The Girl in Blue*) are not represented, which indicates that citations are included from some of his rarer and less considered publications such as *The Swoop*, *Not George Washington*, *Globe By The Way Book* and *The Prince and Betty*.

Perhaps what is even more remarkable is the analysis of the books which provide the highest number of quotations. Twelve books provide over 30 each:

The Inimitable Jeeves	103
Laughing Gas	97
A Damsel in Distress	61
Very Good, Jeeves	48
Hot Water	41
Right Ho, Jeeves	41
The Code of the Woosters	38
Bill the Conqueror	36
The Luck of the Bodkins	36
Jill the Reckless	34
Service with a Smile	34
Mr Mulliner Speaking	33

While no one will be surprised at the appearance of four books in the Jeeves/Wooster series, eyebrows may be raised at the prominence of such relatively unknown books as *Laughing Gas* and *A Damsel in Distress*. The explanation may well lie in the former case in the American setting, which offered the opportunity to introduce American slang and American slants on the meaning of words. We should remember that at the time it was written, 1936, there was still relatively little communication across the Atlantic and much of the conversation that was in everyday use on its western shores may have been fresh to the ears of those on its eastern.

Quotations are used by the OED to illustrate the forms and uses of a word showing the age of the word generally, and of its various senses in particular. It is always the earliest known instance of its occurrence that is cited. The quotations chosen also have to illustrate the origin of a sense, and its gradual separation from allied words or senses. The quotations are selected from those submitted by a large panel, who also receive suggestions from the general public.

Very few Wodehouse citations relate to instances of the first known use of a word, as opposed to its sense, although one such is the expression 'Cuppa', short for 'Cup of'. What is particularly amusing to us in England, where the term is ubiquitous in its penetration, is that Wodehouse's cited use, in *Sam the Sudden* was 'cuppa coffee', not tea, as you might have expected.

A longer article on this subject will form the subject of a *By The Way* Newsletter in due course.