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 ***Nineteenth-century English* By Richard W. Bailey (review)**

Joan Persily Levinson

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REVIEW

[View Citation](#)**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

398LANGUAGE, VOLUME 74, NUMBER 2 (1998) *Nineteenth-century English*. By Richard W. Bailey. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996. Pp. vii, 372. Reviewed by Joan Persily Levinson, State University of New York, Empire State College In previous works Bailey has demonstrated that he is an eminent authority on varieties of English and their cultural influences (Bailey 1991, Bailey & Gorlach 1982). Here his attention is focused on the linguistic changes that occurred in the nineteenth century and the critical responses they elicited. Underlying his work is the belief that these changes merit study as much as those of earlier and more dramatic periods. The volume presents a wealth of detailed information, analyzes innumerable instances, and provides a foundation in the specific and generalized innovations that accompanied the explosive growth of English over the century. The book seems to be designed for a range of audiences, for it is free of technical linguistic terms and footnotes or endnotes but has 24 pages of scholarly references. Its

contents are clearly of value to historians of the English language, researchers in nineteenth-century English literature and cultural studies, sociolinguists, social historians, and the assiduous general reader. I know of no other resource equal to it. B is particularly strong on tying shifts in English to the nonlinguistic forces that enmesh them. His preface states that 'English-speaking culture was transformed during the century by urbanization, by technology, by travel, and by rich new opportunities for communication', which 'cultural transformations had linguistic consequences' (vii). He points out that 'overseas varieties', barely distinguishable from British English at the beginning of the century, were by the end 'independent and distinct standards'. Nor did the effects move in one direction only; as usages diverged and gained currency, they in turn had noticeable effects: Democratically many more 'voices' could be heard, but they were also used to harden class stratification and maintain social distance. We know all this because more than ever before, observers commented on the state of English. No innovation is presented without marvelous examples of the response of the critics, and respond they did. Perhaps half the text is devoted to the century's 'ideas about English', since this is as much a part of the history as the 'bare facts of its forms'. B's copious quotations include the recognized academic authorities (e.g. Gould Brown, Parry Gwynne, W. H. Savage, W. W. Skeat, Henry Sweet, R. G. White, W. D. Whitney) and literary sources (e.g. Walter Scott, George Eliot) as well as many less familiar ordinary observers. They provide a distinct flavor of the prose of the time, illuminate the issues, and are skillfully integrated into B's own commentary. The impassioned debate over language usage, which continues undiminished today, blossomed in the nineteenth century. As innovations powered by massive social changes flowed in, they incurred the 'rage of the pedants', who sought to stem the tide both on narrow linguistic grounds and from an elitist perspective. The desire to either record or legislate usage resulted in dictionaries, glossaries, and teaching handbooks of 'bewildering rules' that found a large audience eager to avoid error. But by the end of the nineteenth century, varied and conflicting idioms were considered 'correct', and the hope that 'language could be regulated and restrained' (319) faded. Nevertheless, 'if there is one heritage of the nineteenth-century language culture that survives most vigorously, it is the institutionalization of hierarchy among linguistic variants [and] steadily increasing linguistic intolerance' (82). The 'Introduction' (1-22) sets the cultural stage for the linguistic changes. Identified are such factors as (1) the growth of the number of speakers of English (from 26 million to 126 million) and their dispersion in colonies all over the world; (2) the increase in bilingualism and its effect on Englishes; (3) the extension of literacy from a small minority to a considerable majority; (4) the emergence of English teaching and an 'English profession'; (5) the consequent development of a 'standard' and its social value; (6) the rise of historical linguistic study; (7) the growth of communications—by cheap travel, efficient mail distribution, and the products of journalism reaching a wide audience quickly; (8) the opening of channels for ordinary people to express...

*Nineteenth-century English*. By RICHARD W. BAILEY. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996. Pp. vii, 372.

Reviewed by JOAN PERSY LEVYMAN, *State University of New York,  
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In previous works Bailey has demonstrated that he is an eminent authority on varieties of English and their cultural influences (Bailey 1991, Bailey & Goetzsch 1982). Here his attention is focused on the linguistic changes that occurred in the nineteenth century and the cultural responses they elicited. Underlying his work is the belief that these changes occur slowly as much as those of earlier and more dramatic periods. The volume presents a wealth of detailed information, analyzes innumerable instances, and provides a foundation in the specific and gradual innovations that accompanied the explosive growth of English over the century.

The book seems to be designed for a range of audiences, for it is free of technical linguistic terms and footnotes or endnotes but has 24 pages of scholarly references. Its contents are clearly of value to historians of the English language, researchers in nineteenth-century English literature and cultural studies, sociolinguists, social historians, and the astute and general reader. I know of no other resource equal to it.

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