Kel Richards and the Macquarie Dictionary, Word Map (ABC Books)


By publishing Word Map, the Macquarie Dictionary and the ABC’s Kel Richards are begging for controversy – literally. In his introduction, Richards says, ‘your feedback is absolutely vital. We need to hear from you on entries that are missing, misunderstood or mis-located.’

Word Map is a dictionary of regional Australian English expressions. It is compiled from a website where everyone can contribute their own version of the local argot, and although evidence was sought for each entry – that it ‘had some kind of general currency’ – before it was included, the overall effect of the book is inevitably not rigorous.

Australia is divided into 27 regions, marked on a map at the front. There are vast areas – several Victorias could fit into Central West Australia, for example – contrasting with tiny areas representing the larger state capitals. Hobart is not distinguished from the rest of Tasmania, and Canberra is lumped into ‘South Coast and Southern Tablelands’, although I’m not convinced that the distinct Canberrisms included are current all the way down to the south coast border with Victoria. Each word or phrase included in the dictionary is defined, and then assigned to a region or group of regions, with ‘see references’ to synonyms.

Every Australian reader of this book will find points of dispute. My copy acquired lots of pencil crosses in the margins as I went through it. My South Australian hackles rose slightly when Richards persisted in using ‘AFL’ to mean ‘Australian Rules
Football’, and someone has to let him know that we have just as many hoons and hard rubbish collections in Adelaide as they do in Melbourne and Sydney.

The strangest thing about this collection of words, though, is what is left out. One couldn’t complain about a lack of vulgarity or even offensiveness. There are no less than thirty-six synonyms for Speedos (the male version), all of them jocularly suggestive, and there are plenty of rude words for young men of socially disadvantaged backgrounds from outer suburbia. But if you took this to be a comprehensive catalogue of Australian slang, you would think that Australians had no offensive expressions for indigenous people, gays or women, and that, although there are several synonyms for testicles, the sexual organs themselves, male or female, or indeed sex itself, are never mentioned. Far more important, it seems, are names for marbles, casks of wine and Adelaide’s formidable range of cakes. This is no doubt partly a function of the method of gathering information used for the book, but it does present a rather anodyne picture of Australian society.

Many of the words included in the book are obviously recalled from the more or less distant youth of the contributors. Sometimes this is acknowledged, but a more methodical approach to the time dimension would have added depth. But it is an intriguing book and one that deserves to generate a lot of argument.