

# SETTING SAIL

By Peter Purcell

I have recently sorted through my near-complete set of *PESA News*, torn out the Words pages and gathered them into a small pile on my desk. I've enjoyed seeing old favourites again and being reminded of columns I'd forgotten.

I wrote the first Words column in January 1993, for the second issue of *PESA News*. I have missed only four issues since, including last month's, so this is my 125th column – and my last.

That first column began with Confucius' wonderful advice in *Analects* 13: *If language is not correct, then what is said is not in accordance with the truth of things* ... I can think of no other statement that encapsulates so clearly and so simply the essence of all advice I have offered in this column over the past two decades.

The idea of writing a column about words began in the 1970s, when I was a legal alien in Oklahoma with Conoco, reading Robert Bates' *Geological Column* in *Geotimes* magazine about the never-ending contest between geoscientists and the English language. Bates said it was fun keeping score. When *PESA News* emerged in December 1992, I saw my opportunity to help with the scorecard.

People who write about English tend to be classed as prescriptivists, who argue for a "correct" use of language, and descriptivists, who observe language as it is used, without judgement. I'm still inclined to the prescriptivist side but I have mellowed over the years; from about 70/30 when I started to about 68/32 today.

I know English changes constantly. That *nice* originally meant "ignorant" or "foolish", then "wanton" and "cowardly", then "shy" and "reserved", and now means "pleasant" and "likeable". But those particular changes took 700 years, and each started out as unacceptable. Time told.

For centuries, *wicked* meant "bad"; to the younger generations today, it means "good". Will that last? Or become a curiosity of teen-speak that fades into disuse? Time will tell. Until it does, use "wicked" in its time-honoured way.

I wrote in that first column that the Irish poet Samuel Madden described words as "men's daughters", always wanting to change and grow so fast. That's why fathers and editors were invented, I suggested: it helps in the growing if someone pushes back. If the change survives that resistance, then it becomes correct as has: the new use of *hopefully*, for instance.

I will miss *Words* for the stage it gave me to debunk, for example, the use of "out-migrate" when emigrate has been doing the job for almost 250 years. Or the use of "in-confidence" as an adjective, instead of an adverb: it might have been provided in-confidence, but the document is confidential.

Were I continuing, I would certainly pontificate at length on *seriatum*, its origins and its misuse as "list". *Seriatum* is a Latin word, meaning "series" but, for some reason, it is becoming popular with geoscientists to describe their inventory of prospects. If you review these prospects one after the other, you have done so *in seriatim*. But the list or inventory of prospects was not a *seriatum*.

Why am I bowing out then, I am asked. At the simplest level because those 125 columns on my desk took me, as a best guess, about 4-5 months to write, counting weekends. To a younger *PESA* person, that might not seem a lot over 20 years, but *tempus fugit* a lot faster as one gets older, and there isn't as plentiful a supply anymore.

I wrote my centennial column in December 2009, and I said then much of what I might otherwise say now. In particular, I drew an analogy between writing a regular column and running laps on an oval, large or small, depending on the journal. Each time a column is published, you run past the grandstand and hear the applause, sometimes loud, sometimes not, but always helped by the sound of your own cheering at having made it one more time.

I said then, that the gate by the grandstand had begun to loom as large in my sight as the grandstand itself, and seemed to be growing imperceptibly at each passing. So here we are, coming up to the gate again, and it's wide open and I've decided to run through. I might come back and run a lap from time to time but I won't do regular circuits again.

*PESA News* has changed course and it's time for me to do the same. Favourite projects in Ethiopia and Australia loom like ports of call on the horizon and they need more of my time and effort if they are to be safely reached.

I have long looked to Tennyson's *Ulysses* as my guide for these later years. Far more useful than retiring quietly to Proserpine's garden. I can hear him outside now, calling to make ready for sail. The wind is rising and it's time to go.