

Register 9/2/91

"IS" OR "ARE?"

TO THE EDITOR.

Sir—In to-day's *Register* Professor Boulger writes:—"For the sake of 'sound learning in the province of South Australia' permit me to state that the English of the sentence—"The loud and liquid notes of this bird is heard from day to day"—although old fashioned, is not bad." He then proceeds—"No one with even an elementary knowlege of English *Formenlehre* would make such an assertion." The only assertion in the letter is his own, just given, and I fancy he will find a general agreement with his comment on his own assertion "that no one with the slightest, &c., &c., would make it." But of course that is not what he meant to convey. I imagine, however, an undergraduate submitting such a composition as Professor Boulger's would have a bad quarter of an hour with the Professor of Logic. The Professor would doubtless point out to him "the only assertion is your own, and you no sooner make it than you demolish it." For the rest there is no analogy between such a sentence as "The notes is heard" and "The wages of sin is death." In the latter you have "is" as a copula only, making an equation, the terms of which might be transposed without altering the equation, exp. "Death is the wages of sin." In the sentence "The notes is heard" you have "is" as an auxiliary to "heard" to make what is commonly called a passive. With regard to the quotation from Shakspeare, "Moneys is your suit," it stands on all fours with "The wages of sin is death." The use of "is" in both the sentences cited by Professor Boulger can be, and is, by grammarians defended on totally different grounds to those stated by the Professor, as of course he knows. But I should like him to say whether he is prepared to defend or not grammatical constructions because used by Shakspeare. If for the sixteenth century will he say that such authority is sufficient for the close of the nineteenth? Mr. Boulger is too good a Shakspearian scholar not to be acquainted with Dr. Abbott's Shakspearian grammar. Mr. Boulger is too good a classical scholar not to know the reputation of Dr. Abbott as a master of idiomatic construction. Let me ask him to refer once again to Dr. Abbott's exhaustive catalogue of Shakspearian idioms illustrative of the perplexing differences between Elizabethan syntax and our own idioms, which Dr. Abbott says would be called unpardonable mistakes in modern authors. In conclusion, what Mr. Hartley condemned was a sentence of execrable English in a work published in 1890, not sentences in the Authorized Version and Shakspeare of a different character.

I am, Sir, &c.,

E. G. BLACKMORE.

February 7.

TO THE EDITOR.

Sir—I believe it was Chaucer who remarked "the greatest clerkes be not the wisest men." The truth of this aphorism is well illustrated by Professor Boulger's unfortunate letter in your issue of Saturday. The Professor patronisingly pats the translators of the Authorized Version on the back, and says "the wages of sin is death" is not a grammatical slip. No one outside of Parkside ever thought it was. Without going in detail into those fundamental principles of English grammar which are supposed to be familiar to the small boys in our model schools, it is clear that "the wages of sin is death" is the equivalent of "death is the wages of sin," in the same way that Shakspeare's "moneys is your suit" is the equivalent of "your suit is moneys." Even in modern English we may say "trumps is your suit," or "your suit is trumps." But the position which the Professor seeks to defend in the quotation from the Aldine History is very different. There we have the verb "is" governed, and only governable by a distinctly singular substantive. If one should say "the wages of Professor Boulger is obviously £1,000 a year too much" he would be grammatically accurate, even though as a statement of fact there might be room for criticism. As for the writer of the Aldine History paragraph the English used suggests that the author had too closely directed his attention to testing the practical as well as the grammatical accuracy of "Mine's whisky."

I am, Sir, &c.,

St. Peters.

THOMAS HARRY.

Register 9/1/91

CENTENNIAL ONLY.

TO THE EDITOR.

Sir—Some two months ago, when writing to you on the subject of University exams., I had occasion to allude to the unsuitable papers set in English history by Mr. E. G. Blackmore, Clerk of Parliament, Examiner at the University, and formerly Parliamentary Librarian. Since then the learned gentleman has figured in the more uncomfortable position of an examinee on "Aldine History" in the Local Court. In your issue of the 6th he is reported to have thus delivered himself:—"After the adjournment the witness under cross-examination" (fortified by luncheon, I hope) "said the proper pronunciation of centennial was 'centēnial.' Mr. Symon—Have you heard any person with any pretension to literary knowledge pronounce it centēnial." "No. Because it is so unusual a word that it is not in common use." And, again, when explaining why "tenner" is not pronounced "tēner," he says to the learned counsel, "Oh, you're right this time; it does not come from the Latin." Truly a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Let me set you right before the March exams. There is a class of words in Latin of which "centēnarius" and "centēni," are examples, and if "centennial" came under this class you might have excuse for your dictum, but these words only signify containing a hundred. The word "centennial" is derived from "centum" and "annus," a year, whence the double "n," and never was pronounced "centēnial" by persons of literary pretensions for otherwise except the Clerk of Parliament, Examiner at the University, and ex-Parliamentary Librarian—no doubt a formidable array of authorities—no more than biennial or triennial can figure as biennial or triennial. I am committing some three or four candidates to the tender mercies of the Clerk of Parliament, Examiner at the University, and formerly Parliamentary Librarian, at the next exam., and would ask him when elaborating his "Encyclopædia Britannica" to remember that *humanum est errare*, which means that even a Clerk of Parliament, Examiner at the University, and formerly Parliamentary Librarian, can make mistakes, and to let the boys down a little more gently when he ponders on the literary errors of the "Aldine History" and of its subscribers.

I am, Sir, &c.,

F. A. D'ARENBERG.

Register 10/2/91.

"IS" OR "ARE."

TO THE EDITOR.

Sir—Some very shallow criticisms of Professor Boulger's letter on the use of "is" or "are" in this morning's *Register* induces me to say a word. We all, including the Professor, agree that, as Mr. E. G. Blackmore expresses it, the grammar of the sentence in question is execrable. Mr. Harry one can scarcely take seriously; he will have his joke, and writes his *jeux d'esprit* indifferently as to appropriateness, provided he has his fun. Such a chance of having a lark with a University Professor with an opportunity of airing one of his favourite aphorisms was too much for the Cornish cynic. But you, Mr. Clerk of Parliaments, Examiner at the University, and formerly Parliamentary Librarian, how could you be so weak? Why not have consulted the beloved "Encyclopædia Britannica" before committing yourself? Professor Boulger's position as a fellow-member of the University deserved a little more serious consideration. Or did you think, with the outside world, that he was talking nonsense? Let me quote to you what the highest authority in existence says on the subject:—"In the northern dialect, middle English, and modern 'es,' 'is,' and 'ys' is used for all persons of the singular, and also for the plural when not immediately joined to the nominative pronoun—*c.g.*, when the subject is a noun or relative. The latter usage is exceedingly frequent in the Shakspeare folio of 1623 (though much altered by editors ignorant of its history)." Mark you, Harry, Blackmore, & Co., ignorant of its history. Now let me give you a few quotations also:—1386, Chaucer—"Tis as ill a millere as are ye." Malory in 1817—"Here is I." Holinshed, 1570-87—"Giltless persons is condemned." Lyttleton's Tenures, still a law classic, has "Hys heires is in by descent." 1590, Shakspeare, com. ed.—"Ill deeds is doubled with an evil word." 2, Hen. VI.—"Is all things well?" And, lastly, in modern Northern English—"All my hopes is lost. Is your friends coming?" Kindly test these examples by the great equation discovery and auxiliary verbs assisting to make up what "are commonly called passives." "The witness referred to" does not call for any remarks except the law maxim, "*Qui haret in literâ haret in cortice.*"

I am, Sir, &c.,

F. A. D'ARENBERG.