



# Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths, and Profanity in English

By Geoffrey Hughes

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Tracing the history of swearing from ancient Anglo-Saxon traditions and those of the Middle Ages, through Shakespeare, the Enlightenment and the Victorians, to the Lady Chatterley trial and various current trends, Geoffrey Hughes explores a fascinating, little discussed yet irrespressible part of our linguistic heritage. This second edition contains a Postscript updating various contemporary developments, such as the growth of Political Correctness.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Excellent, non-prescriptive history." *Literary Review*

"Erudite and splendidly researched book ... quite fascinating." *Daily Telegraph*

"A provocative and stimulating book." *Glasgow Herald*

"Professor Hughes shows real skill in handling the social history aspect of the book, blending theme and chronology into a digestive mixture." *Punch*

#### From the Back Cover

From the earliest times swearing has existed in many variegated forms, from the deadliest curse to the most trivial expletives of annoyance. Hedged about with all manner of complex pressures, personal, societal, religious, sexual and other forms of taboo, it remains a phenomenon only imperfectly understood. Geoffrey Hughes traces these two contrasting strands through our linguistic history. His discussion starts with the use of language as magic in 'primitive' society, the binding oath of heroic commitment in Anglo-Saxon warrior society and the emergence of blasphemy in the medieval age of faith. With the Renaissance came a shift from a religious to a secular idiom of swearing, a period combining rich exuberance in language with severe restraint. This oscillation between institutional censorship and individual defiance continues to modern times. Professor Hughes includes in this broad-ranging survey such topics as xenophobia and the racist basis of abuse, graffiti, the sexual and sexist patterns of swearing, the multifarious forms of euphemism and the curious varieties of verbal duelling known as 'flyting' and 'sounding'. His book is a tireless exploration of a little discussed but irrepressible part of our linguistic heritage.

#### About the Author

Geoffrey Hughes is Professor of History of the English Language at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

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