

Art of Quotation: Where Did it Go?

BYRON DOBRELL, editor of American Heritage magazine, made a statement in the current issue that is worth quoting. He said:

"For hundreds of years most educated people could unloose a torrent of quotations from the wise or famous on any occasion. Many a stern admonition or well-meaning piece of advice was nailed down by an apt example from the Bible, Shakespeare or Emerson (himself).

No longer; the art of quotation died with the arts of listening, reading and memorization."

That is a sad commentary on our culture. American Heritage has launched a project to remedy this decline in what its editors view as a worthwhile practice.

They have invited readers to contribute their favorite quotations to a planned "ambitious volume" of American quotations.

The daily news and literature are sprinkled with quotations from many sources but they are not necessarily worth recording for refer-

ence. As a journalist I have listened to many speeches vainly looking for worthy quotations.

Some people just don't seem to make memorable comments. Others are quite good at it. For example, Plato, Mark Twain, Will Rogers, Winston Churchill, Harry S. Truman, and Dwight D. Eisenhower, to mention a few from the past.

Their remarks often have been mistakenly attributed to others. It is not uncommon to read an epigram from Benjamin Franklin or another credited to a present-day politician or actor. Not all of their jokes are original, either.

The business of selecting quotations for print or broadcast demands skill and judgment. A remark taken out of context may be misleading to readers or listeners.

This problem has plagued the president. Not long ago Ronald Reagan said: "They show me coming in to the hall, and they show me up there speaking, maybe one sentence aloud on sound, but then I see

myself speaking while some commentator goes on for 40 seconds telling the people what he says I said. They don't let the people hear what I said."

For a quotation to be memorable and useful it ought to be accurate and either strong enough to stand alone or be presented in context to reflect true meaning.

The value of declarations by qualified people on current topics can be considerable. Even if not quoted directly they may provide useful background.

My modest library contains a dozen or so volumes of quotations, including a 1941 edition of "Bartlett's Familiar Quotations" that contains items not found elsewhere. I also regularly read quotation columns in current publications.

It's surprising how frequently the gist of a long article, speech or sermon may be captured in a single sentence or paragraph. That's the part worth remembering — and quoting!