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AB(H)OMINABLE (H)AITCH

FREDERICK LUDOWYK

AITCH AND HAITCH: THE PROBLEM STATED

Australia, it seems, is divided between those who merrily sing *The **haitch** bone is connected to the thigh bone* and those who sternly retort that, on the contrary, *It is the **aitch** bone that is connected to the thigh bone, whatever the aitch bone may be*. Of all the grizzles we receive about grammar and pronunciation, complaints about the letter **H**, like Abou ben Adhem, lead all the rest. Forget the contention between Melbourne and Sydney, workers and management, cantaloupes and rock melons, Patrick's and wharfies: these are as nothing compared with the Great Australian Divide—between those who pronounce the letter H as **haitch**, and those who pronounce it as **aitch**.

The **Haitchers**, bless 'em, are not the ones who complain. The **Aitchers**, however, are a different kettle of cod. They see the spread of **haitching** throughout Australian society as a measure of its linguistic, even moral, disintegration. In short, they believe, it is barbarous and ab(h)ominable.

H AS AN AB(H)OMINABLE LETTER

Which brings me to Shakespeare. In *Love's Labour's Lost* the silly pedant Holofernes, a schoolmaster, rages against those who mispronounce English words ('rackers of orthography' he calls them). The 'racker' is one who would 'speak "dout" fine when he should say "doubt"; "det", when he should pronounce "debt"; d e b t, not det ... this is abhominable, which he would call "abominable" '.

It is clear from this that Holofernes wants the /b/ sounded in *doubt* and *debt*. As a pedant he knows that *doubt* comes from Latin *dubitare* where the **b** is indubitably pronounced. What he does not know is that the word came into English from the French and the French word is **b**-less to the eyebrows: hence, as the early fourteenth-century *Cursor Mundi* tells us of Doubting Thomas the Apostle, 'lange he dutid' ('long he doubted'). Likewise, the word *debt* was borrowed into English from French as *det*, the **b** being artificially forced into the word by sixteenth-century pedants like Holofernes himself because its Latin etymon was *debitum*. And, triumphantly, he wants an /h/ (or a /h/) intruded into and sounded in *abominable*. Again, this is on etymological grounds. As a Latinate pedant, he thinks that this word ultimately goes back to Latin *ab homine* ('away from man', hence 'beastly'), when in fact he is wrong—it comes via French from Latin *abominabilis*, 'deserving of imprecation or abhorrence', from *abominari*, 'to deprecate as an ill omen'. The passage demonstrates the precarious status of those linguistic pedants who appeal to the history of the language. Linguistic history is a double-edged sword. Or, as a famous mixer of metaphors once pointed out, by appealing to linguistic history, one can be 'hoist on' one's 'own petard'. (Apropos of nothing much, I wonder idly whether Shakespeare knew that *petard*, 'an explosive device or bomb', derives from the French verb *peter* 'to fart'.) Holofernes is Shakespeare's great warning about linguistic history—beware of linguistic pedants, even if they do know where *petard* comes from!

THE IMPOLITIC DROPPING OF ONE'S (H)AITCHES

'They liked, as they did not drop their own h's, to talk with people who did not drop theirs.'

John Ruskin

Holofernes' pedantic little outburst demonstrates how abominable a letter H has proved to be in English. Holofernes wants to *add* /h/; his descendants over the years have been complaining about the *dropping* of aitches. The Aitchers do not sound an /h/ when they say **aitch**, but they take good care to pronounce the /h/ in initial positions (e.g. in *harm* and *Holofernes*). The Haitchers put in an /h/ when they say **haitch**, but some of them drop the /h/ in initial positions ('There's no *'arm* in *'Olofernes*') and put in an /h/ when

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

EDITORIAL

We greatly appreciate readers' letters concerning Australian English, and although there is never space enough to print all information and queries in *Ozwords*, you can be assured that all material is followed up. Thus we are looking at the use of *yak* to describe Brahman cattle in Queensland; at the possibility that the term *durrie* for a cigarette may be connected with the signature *Douwe Egberts* on packets of *Drum* (rather than with the brand *Bull Durham*); at the use of *Boolooloola tongue* to describe meat containing much gristle; at one reader's claim that the word *cheerio* (regarded as a Queensland term for a 'cocktail frankfurt') was known in Bendigo; and at the origin of *mutt-eye* (or *mutti*) for 'corn' in the Kempsey-Taree area—and so on.

The Centre's home page on the Internet is attracting many 'visitors'. We are pleased that some teachers from the United States have taken up our school project 'How to Make Your Own Dictionary'. Other American teachers set class exercises asking students to find out the meanings of Australian words; and the students—these young denizens of cyberspace—manage to find our home page, and email us with requests for the answers! The Centre is keen to expand its links with Australian schools, especially via our home page, where there are school projects and information about Australian words. For those with access to the Internet, the address is: http://www.anu.edu.au/ANDC

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL DICTIONARY CENTRE
A JOINT AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY AND OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS PROJECT

AB(H)OMINABLE (H)AITCH

FREDERICK LUDOWYK

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

there 'hain't none' (*'H'ups-a-daisy, 'Arry h'old chum!*). Well, who is right—the Aitch Mafia or the Haitch Push?

Some facts. The dropping of initial /h/ has been and still is a social marker in Australia; that is, it is believed by some to mark a person disparagingly as being the product of a working-class background (hence poorly educated) or of a Catholic education. In 1892, in his novel *Nevermore*, the Australian novelist 'Rolf Boldrewood' commented on a Haitcher: 'A very fine young man, but evidently a nobody, inasmuch as he dropped his aitches.' Boldrewood's attitude of more than a century ago is obviously still alive and kicking today. The H-factor (the pronunciation of the letter and/or the dropping of it) is widely seen as a social solecism, the linguistic equivalent, one supposes, of tucking one's napkin into one's shirt collar at a formal dinner with the Queen. This is the context of the *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist's comment about Professor Niland (see inset): '*This column ... can't help wondering how any person who pronounces aitch as haitch can presume to comment on the education standards of this State, let alone be a professor.*'

WHERE DOES AITCH COME FROM?

'It is a kinde of history.'

The Taming of the Shrew

'Aitch', let us face it, is an oddity. It is one of the rare letters in the English alphabet (/w/ is another) which does not contain in its name the sound it represents. The **Haitchers**, therefore, have logic and common sense firmly on their side—**haitch** says huh for Harry, whereas **aitch** can only say uh for 'Arry! The **Aitchers**, on the other hand, may be illogical and devoid of common sense, but they do have history on their side. In Latin the letter H was originally aspirated (i.e. the ancient Romans said *hic* with the **h** sounded), but in the late Latin period the **h** became unaspirated (i.e. while still spelling the word *hic*, they pronounced it /ik/). Whereas the earlier Latin name for the letter was **ha**, reflecting the aspirated /h/, in late Latin this became ***accha**, reflecting the fact that in late Latin the aspirate had been dropped in pronunciation and often in writing as well (*heres* 'an heir' was pronounced without the initial **h** and often written as *eres*). So nebulous, in fact, was the status of **h** in Latin that even some of the ancients doubted whether it was a letter of the alphabet properly so called. Quintilian, for instance, whinged tetchily that *Si H littera est, non nota* ('It's not known whether H is a letter of the alphabet'). This dropping of the **h** was inherited by the Romance languages (which descended from Latin). The French didn't drop the /h/ in writing but they dropped it in speech—*l'hôtel*, they would say, and *haute cuisine* ('ote', not 'hote'). The Italians dropped the /h/ not only in speech but, logically, in writing as well—*ospedale* (hospital), they would say, and sigh that their sojourn in it was *orribile*. The Germanic languages clung to their /h/ with Teutonic thoroughness, as Adam clung to his flimsy fig leaf after the Fall. But English (a Germanic language) chopped and changed quite wantonly. The Anglo-Saxons sounded all their h's. After the Norman Conquest some dialects of English were influenced by French conventions. Words borrowed from French were not aspirated—*an hotel*, they would say, since the /h/ was silent. And they often dropped the **h** in spelling (since it wasn't there!). It must be at this point in the history of English that the letter **h** acquired the pronunciation 'aitch' in English, following the French convention. It appears in Middle English as **ache**. That, then, is the complex origin of **h**. Whether or not we should celebrate this French influence on English is another matter.

Sydney Morning Herald, 5 November 1997, p. 26

Look. This column does not want to seem snobbish, and, God knows, we have nothing against people who went through the Catholic school system. But yesterday we happened to hear an interview between the 2BL wireless talk-jock Philip Clark and the President-elect of the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee, Professor John Niland. They were discussing the need to overhaul the Higher School Certificate, commonly abbreviated to HSC. Clark referred to the exam as the 'aitch ess see' and Niland referred to it as the 'haitch ess see'. Neither would give ground. Every time Clark said 'aitch', Niland said 'haitch'. Clark politely did not suggest that Niland consult a dictionary on the pronunciation of the eighth letter of the alphabet. But this column ... can't help wondering how any person who pronounces aitch as haitch can presume to comment on the education standards of this State, let alone be a professor.

THE POLITIC DROPPING OF ONE'S (H)AITCHES

Whereas the dropping of one's aitches is generally frowned upon—I am reminded of Thackeray's delightful drawing-room where '*the* h *and other points of etiquette are rigorously maintained*'—there is a very strong tradition of the respectable dropping of one's aitches. This tradition derives from the same French influence on English I have outlined above. In cases where French-derived words were pronounced with silent **h**, when preceded by the indefinite article it was logical to use the **an** form (since it was followed by a vowel)—thus *an (h)otel, an (h)istoric occasion, an (h)eroic feat*. However, many of these words have changed in pronunciation, and the initial **h** is now

aspirated once again (we say *herbs*, although it is interesting to note that many Americans say *erbs*); we now say *a hotel, a historic occasion, a heroic feat.* (Follow this guideline and you would never need to eat a numble pie, not even a **h**umble pie or an umble one!)

THE POLITICS OF H

If the dropping of aitch is a social marker, the pronunciation of the letter **h** can also be a social, political, and sectarian marker. In the Irish Republic, the **haitch** pronunciation is common, but the situation is more complex in Northern Ireland where, it is claimed, Catholics say **haitch**, whereas the royalist Protestants follow the poms and say **aitch**. We are told in a Northern Irish newspaper that '*H is the most dangerous letter in the Northern Ireland alphabet. Catholics supposedly say* ***haitch****, when Protestants say* ***aitch****. There may not be any scientific evidence for this trait but bigots can't even spell scientific—so, depending on how you say it, H can get you a right kicking*'. This is tongue-in-cheek, of course, but a quick surf through the Internet provided ample evidence for this aitch/haitch divide in Northern Ireland—say **haitch** in a proddy area or **aitch** in a mick area and you could very well be in for 'a right kicking'.

H IN AUSTRALIA

Some would argue that **aitching** or **haitching** was once as much a sectarian issue in Australia as it is supposed to be so still in Northern Ireland. The received wisdom is that 'haitch' was introduced to Australia by Irish Sisters of Mercy and Irish Christian Brothers teaching in their Irish Australian schools. If this be true, there must have been (and still must be) many more Irished Catholic schools in Oz than I had ever imagined. Whatever the truth in the past about this sectarian argument, it has had little relevance now for more than a generation. Yet even in the absence of linguistically subversive Irish nuns, Australians continue to 'haitch'. We conducted a survey of the television programme *Wheel of Fortune* over a period of some weeks, just to see how many of the participants were **aitchers** and how many were **haitchers**. The results: 40% **aitched** and 60% **haitched**. Was this healthy majority of **haitch**-prone players unrepresentative? Were they all blue-collar blokes and their sisters and their cousins and their aunts? Or were they a mixed bunch? What the survey points to, I think, is the fact that whereas in the past **haitch** may have been a sectarian marker, and then a social one, the situation is rapidly changing. Australians from a wide variety of backgrounds are **haitchers** these days.

WILL THE SKY FALL IN ON 'ENNY PENNY?

What, then, may we conclude about all this **haitchery**? Will the sky fall in on us Henny Pennies as more and more Aussies **haitch**? Will **haitch** persist as a shibboleth in Australian society? I have no doubt that some people will continue to condemn those who say **haitch**. *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* notes that while the letter H is generally called 'aitch', it is 'sometimes' called 'haitch' in Irish English and Australian English. All the evidence to hand suggests that 'sometimes' is rapidly becoming 'commonly'. It is just possible that within a generation **haitch** will triumph in Australian English. Could it do for Australia what 'fush and chups' has done for New Zealand? The jury is still out, but the numbers are stacking up against the **Aitchers**. John Niland, methinks, will have the last laugh.

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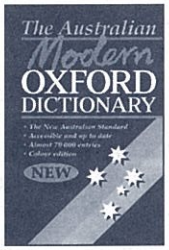

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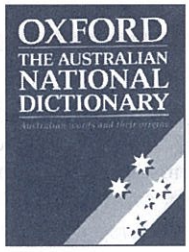

REISSUE

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MAILBAG

We welcome readers' comments on their recent observations of Australian usage, both positive and negative, and their queries, particularly those not easily answerable from the standard reference books.

HE DOVE INTO DEEP WATER

I'm an inveterate collector of clippings containing oddities. One of these clippings is from the *Canberra Times* (13 December 1997) in which the columnist Ross Peake writes of the Governor-General Sir William Deane, 'With impeccable timing, Sir William dove into the stolen children topic on Wednesday'. *Dove*? Surely the correct past tense is *dived*. Or did the change occur while I, like Rip van Winkle, slept the years away? Is it possible that Sir William may even have *diven* into that shameful topic?

P. Lawson

NSW

The past tense dove *is regular in Canada and some parts of America, but not (yet) in Australia (although two surveys done by the Australian National Dictionary Centre revealed that 30% of 18–21-year-old university students believe that the past tense of* dive *is* dove*). The history of this verb is complex, but by 1300 the past tense was established as* dived. Dove *is a nineteenth-century Johnny-come-lately modelled on verbs such as* drive—drove—driven. *Mercifully,* jive *didn't go the way of* dive, *not even in America; otherwise, no doubt we'd be told that after having* diven *into the shameful topic Sir William could have* jiven *all night.*

SWALLOWING CANINE HAIR

Taking a drink to combat the effects of overindulging in drink is called 'a hair of the dog'. Why? This has puzzled me (on and off, but mostly off) for years.

S. Breen

Queensland

One explanation is that the phrase has its origin in one of the principles of sympathetic magic: similia similibus curantur, *that is, 'like cures like' (which springs from another principle of sympathetic magic, 'like calls to like'). Thus if one wants to transmute lead into gold, one puts a smidgin of gold into the molten lead, says the appropriate magic words, and* voila! *one is a medieval millionaire. Similarly, if one is burning with a fever, one doesn't resort to ice-packs on the head: one resorts to hotwater bottles. If one is bitten by a rabid dog, one kills the beast and swallows one of its hairs (after which one dies of hydrophobia). And so, quite logically, if one has drunk too much grog and feels like death, one drinks more of the same. Makes perfect sense. Come to think of it, this sounds strangely similar to the principles of homoeopathy, the practice of treating disease not by giving drugs which counteract the symptoms but by giving the patient minute doses of drugs which produce symptoms exactly like those of the disease itself.*

DISAGREEABLE -GRY JUST WON'T GO AWAY!

In our last issue (November 1997) I published a solution by Ken Davis to the wearisome 'gry' conundrum put forward by the Society of Freelance Editors and Proofreaders (UK): 'There are only three words in the English language that end in **-gry**: 1. **Angry**. 2. **Hungry**. 3. **?** The word is something that everyone uses everyday and knows what it stands for. If you've listened very carefully I've already told you what it is. What is it?' *Ken pointed out that there aren't three everyday words in English ending in -gry and that we had all been bamboozled by the way the conundrum had been formulated. His solution made satisfying sense and I moved on to better things. Now reader Justus Angwin tells me that there* are *three words that end in 'gry'. Much to my annoyance, I find his argument fascinating. Here is his ingenious solution:*

Editors and proofreaders can be assumed to be sophisticated, intelligent and truthful. Thus it should be accepted that there *are* three such words, and it must be realised that in directing the search for the third word they will have provided all necessary clues—but in a necessarily devious way. Their 1, 2, 3 table is undoubtedly deliberately truncated. It can be expanded as follows:

1. ANGER (delete 'e') gives ANGRY = AN + GRY.
2. HUNGER (delete 'e') gives HUNGRY = HUN + GRY.
3. **?** (delete 'e') gives **?** = **??**

So **??** represents a basic word which, like AN and HUN, has its own existence and which, combined with GRY, must be *the* third word.

The separately existing word (which will include an 'e' which can be eliminated, leaving another basic word) is in everyday use and it will be an abbreviation (as we are told 'it stands for' something). It will also have a connection with sound(s)—'If you've listened very carefully'.

There are now some points to note about the penultimate sentence of the puzzle. First, the narrative switches to the personal—'you've' and 'I've'. Secondly, this sentence has been delayed till almost the end of the puzzle, but another place for it would be after the opening statement. Thirdly, and vitally, and for that reason deliberately delayed as mentioned, this sentence clearly envisages that 'you' should listen to what 'I' say—that is, the puzzle would originally be spoken. This point sums up the dead end(s) down which the editors and proofreaders have directed attention—by their taking advantage of the almost universal misbelief that the printed word can/does reproduce oral statements quite accurately. That this is a fallacy is apparent, for instance, when students find Shakespeare boring to read but exciting in performance.

So now the start of the puzzle can be stated in two alternative ways:

AS PRINTED: There are only three words in the English language that end in -GRY.

AS SPOKEN: There are only three words in the English language that end in GRY.

When carefully listened to, therefore, GRY is not required to be the *termination* and, of course, words have two ends. Reference to *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* gives only one GRY word—i.e., GRYPHON.

The expanded table, at 3, can now show:

3. PHONE (delete 'e') gives GRYPHON = GRY + PHON.

PHONE is in daily use, is an abbreviation, should be listened to, and without the 'e' it becomes PHON. *Phon* is a word having its own existence and (again per *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*) is 'a unit of the perceived loudness of sounds'.

These points enable another revision of the 1, 2, 3 table—putting it into the form in which the wordsmiths of the UK society would think of it, even speak of it, in a sort of verbal shorthand:

1. AN + GRY = ANGRY.
2. HUN + GRY = HUNGRY.
3. GRY + PHON = GRYPHON.

So their three basic words are 'AN', 'HUN', and 'PHON', and to each 'GRY' can be attached as an 'end'. I suggest that the puzzle, carefully read *and* spoken, is satisfied by 'gryphon'.

Justus Angwin

NSW

WAX

There was a good response from readers to our question concerning the term **wax** meaning 'to share (a football, cricket ball, etc.)', and readers provided evidence that the term is still in use. Here are some more questions about words, some raised by our research into Australian English at the Centre, and some raised by readers of *Ozwords*.

DONGA

The term is a borrowing from South African English, where it means 'a channel or gully formed by the action of water'. It first appears in Australian English in 1902 (a borrowing during the Boer War?), and it has come to mean 'a broad shallow often circular depression most commonly found in dry country'. A quotation from 1913 describes an Australian **donga**: 'Scattered over the plain for about twelve miles westward of Ooldea, are slight depressions having the appearance of shallow lake beds, where the soil is softer and the low monotonous blue bush gives place to thick rank grasses and clumps of stunted scrub. These ... "dongas" ... watered only in times of heavy rain, must seem a veritable haven of refuge to the animal life of the plains'. In recent years, however, especially in bushwalking contexts, **donga** appears to have become also a term for 'thick bush or scrub'. It is not entirely clear how this meaning arose.

More troublesome is a second Australian sense of **donga**: 'a makeshift or temporary dwelling'. The term is now widely used in Australia to describe a demountable building. Is this sense an Australian transfer from the South African word? Or from the Australian 'depression'? It has been assumed so, with the notion of a 'gully' or 'depression' being extended to 'any place of shelter'. We know that in Papua New Guinea **donga** means 'a house'. The second earliest piece of evidence for 'a makeshift dwelling' in Australian English occurs in *Through: The Official Journal of Signals 8th Australian Division* (Singapore, 1941): 'The great number of mosquito proof "Dongas" erected on the beach'. Is it possible that the origin of this sense lies in Papua New Guinea rather than in South Africa and the Boer War?

The stumbling block to this argument seems to be a 1900 quotation from *Truth* (Sydney): 'And dossed in dongas ev'ry night/Daown [sic] in the old Dermain [sic]!' It has been assumed that this is the first evidence for the 'makeshift dwelling' sense. But were these **dongas** in the Sydney Domain makeshift dwellings, or were they simply depressions in the ground where a tramp could take shelter? If so, we are perhaps back to WW2 for the origin of **donga** in the sense 'a makeshift shelter'.

We would welcome your comments on the troublesome **donga**.

FROM THE CENTRE

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL DICTIONARY CENTRE

The Australian National Dictionary Centre is jointly funded by **Oxford University Press Australia** and the **Australian National University** to research all aspects of Australian English and to publish Australian dictionaries and other works.

FISHING TERMS

Anglers must sometimes despair of lexicographers. We have only recently tracked down the term **lizard** as a very common colloquialism for a flathead—and perfectly understandable, given what this ground-dwelling fish looks like from above. But why is a flathead also called a **goat** or a **yank**? Similarly, we have recently learned that **yakka** is a common term in New South Wales and Queensland for the yellowtail when used as live bait. But why **yakka**? In some contexts anglers call unwanted fish **ooglies**. Where does this term come from? Saltwater fly fishers talk of **swoffing**. Is this really an acronym of *s*alt *w*ater *f*ly *f*ish*ing*? Or does it have some other origin? We look forward to some bites.

DRINKING TERMS

B. Simpson in *Packhorse Drover* (1996) uses three interesting drinking terms: **boozer's breakfast** ('Maloney was sitting up in his swag having a boozer's breakfast: a packet of Bex in one hand and a pannikin of rum in the other'), **dawn patrol** ('a gathering of drinkers served at the back door before the pub opens'), and **phlegm cutter** ('I met him one morning making a beeline from the cop shop to the bottom pub for the first phlegm cutter of the day'). We have no other evidence for the terms. Are they (or were they) real Australian terms?

READERS' QUERIES

A reader writes: 'There is a word which we believe may be peculiar to Tasmania's west coast mining communities: **SMICK = DUNNY**. My husband grew up in Zeehan, so has known it all his life'. I mentioned the word on Tasmanian ABC radio, without response. Perhaps all the miners were out mining! Can anyone help?

And, on the topic of dunnies, does the **flaming fury** ('an outdoor toilet, so called because the contents were periodically doused with a flammable liquid and ignited') still exist? One reader reports that in the Northern Territory it was essential 'to keep friendly with your neighbours as one will have to use *their* toilet—the flaming fury—one day each week'.

Another reader writes: 'I'd be grateful if you could tell me something of the history of the word **quailer**, which S.J. Baker's *Dictionary of Australian Slang* (1959) defines simply as "a stone" '. The problem here is that apart from Baker we do not have the evidence. Can readers help?

VOLUNTEER READERS

The heart of the Australian National Dictionary Centre is its database of Australian English, which is a massive collection of citations from Australian texts of many kinds. In the past six months a number of *Ozwords* readers have offered to become volunteer readers. This has been especially welcome. At the Centre we read the major newspapers, the latest novels, etc., searching for interesting words and uses of words, but we often do not have access to local newspapers, newsletters, etc. The process involves writing up an index card, with a headword (e.g. **bogan**), the quotation (e.g. *Bogans are people who are not in your group, who are uncool*) and the source (e.g. 1962 *Bullamakanka Times* 3 Jan. 6/2). The information on these citation cards is then entered into our electronic database. If you are interested in joining the team of volunteer readers, let us know, and we will send you detailed information about how we collect citations.

Write to ANDC, ANU, Canberra, ACT 0200. The fax number is (02) 6249 0475. The email address is ANDC@anu.edu.au

Bruce Moore, Director

FROM THE PAST:
THE AUSTRALIAN TWANG

In the *Bulletin* of 13 January 1894 the poem 'The Austrylian Songstress' concludes: 'Twere better if thou never sang/Than voiced it in Australian twang'. In their 1965 study, *The Speech of Australian Adolescents*, A.G. Mitchell and A. Delbridge found that 'in the whole group of pupils [studied] ... 86 per cent spoke with no obtrusive nasality', a surprising result given the often repeated claim that Australians speak with a nasal twang. In this look at the past, we examine some of the nineteenth-century comments on Australian speech in order to track the origins of the 'myth'.

The earliest commentator on the Australian accent makes no mention of nasality. James Dixon, in *Narrative of a Voyage to New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land* (1822), writes: 'The children born in those colonies, and now grown up, speak a better language, purer, more harmonious than is generally the case in most parts of England. The amalgamation of such various dialects assembled together, seems to improve the mode of articulating the words.' Peter Cunningham in *Two Years in New South Wales* (1827) discerns some Cockney elements ('even the better sort of them are apt to meet your observation of "A fine day," with their *improving* response of "*Wery* fine indeed!" '), but when he goes on to discuss the nasal twang of American speech, he makes no observations about nasality in Australian speech. Should we therefore assume that at least until the late 1820s there was no evidence of nasality?

Two decades later, nasality begins to become an issue. Mrs Charles Meredith, author of *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales during a Residence in the Colony from 1838 to 1844* (1844), writes: 'What puzzles me exceedingly to account for, a very large proportion of both male and female natives snuffle; dreadfully; just the same nasal twangs many Americans have. In some cases English parents have come out here with English-born children; these all speak clearly and well, and continue to do so, whilst those born after the parents arrive in the colony have the detestable snuffle. This is an enigma which passes my sagacity to solve.' In 1854–55 the NSW School Commission reported: 'Little care is apparently taken [in NSW schools] to correct vicious pronunciation ... This inattention has a tendency to foster an Australian dialect which bids fair to surpass the American in disagreeableness.' In 1859 R.H. Horne writes in *Australian Facts and Prospects*: 'A different explanation must be given of the vulgarity, illiterateness, public chattering, and colonial twang in the speech.' Should we therefore assume that Australian pronunciation became markedly nasal in the 1840s and 1850s?

The problem with the nineteenth-century commentators is that they provide conflicting evidence. Caroline Leakey in *The Broad Arrow* (1859) argues that as a result of the mixture of dialects Australian 'children ... have no opportunity to contract the nasal twang or gutturals of any particular province'. And J.A. Froude in *Oceania* (1873) comments: 'In thought and manners, as in speech and pronunciation, they are pure English and nothing else.'

The Englishman looks down his nose.
The Colonial merely speaks through his.

By the end of the century the charge of nasality has returned. G.L. James in *Shall I Try Australia?* (1892) writes: 'As to the English spoken in Australia, I believe it has already been remarked how correct, as a rule, it is, and I think it is free from any distinguishing accent or provincialism to a marvellous extent, while the tone of voice is pleasing and well modulated. In Sydney, however, more particularly the young girls, especially of the lower classes, are apt to affect a twang in pronouncing the letter *a* as if it were *i*, or rather *ai* diphthong.' While James agrees with Leakey and Froude that most Australians speak very well, he detects nasality among lower-class girls.

By 1894 the twang had become a matter of public debate, and was attributed to more than lower-class girls in Sydney. The *Bulletin* (Sydney) of 6 January 1894 reports:

Chief Justice Madden has dared to attend a girls' school Speech Day and tell the angels that their speech is disfigured by a 'colonial twang'. He besought them to pronounce the English vowels as they are intended and to keep their little noses out of the matter as much as possible.

These girls do not appear to be 'lower class'. As the report continues, the charge of nasality is levelled at all Australians:

Whereupon the Argus *[Melbourne] started a solemn enquiry into the why and wherefore of twang in this country and came to the conclusion that it is begotten of mental and physical laziness. Ghastly nonsense is lavished upon the subject of 'colonial twang'. Practically, there is no difference between the dialect of the London loafer, who leans against a wall and spits, and the pronunciation of the southern larrikin, who does ditto. But in this country the nasal loafer is more generally in evidence, his voice is more heard, and his accent infests the land instead of being localised. The early English convicts, mostly from London, brought it with them. Early Australian parents were too busy, and generally too uneducated, to notice that their offspring had caught the complaint, and said 'kike' for 'cake' and 'gripes' for 'grapes'. ... The twang is everywhere—in Victoria, at any rate—ringing in one's ears. If it remains on familiar terms with society for a few years longer, it will become the accepted pronunciation of the country and pass as 'good form'. But whether the 'colonial twang' dies out of Australian mouths or grows and strengthens and is improved, on the American system, the fact remains that it was never at the beginning anything better than the twang of Cockney vulgarity. We imported it, long before rabbits, sparrows, snails and other British nuisances were grafted upon our budding civilisation.*

Mitchell and Delbridge argue that of all the Australian vowels /æ/ (as in 'cat') is the one most likely to be nasalised. From a relatively minor feature of Australian pronunciation, nasality seems to have been demonised into typicality. Interestingly, the seeds of this demonisation lie in the nineteenth century, although, as we have seen, the commentators vary in their assessment of Australian pronunciation.

LARRIKIN

The Australian word **larrikin** was first recorded in 1868 in the sense 'A young urban rough, a young hooligan or thug, especially one who is a member of a gang' (the emphasis being on 'young': middle-aged larrikins were no longer larrikins, they were just simply 'thugs'). Thus, when the term first appeared in the nineteenth century, it was very negative. The *Age* (Melbourne) tells us in 1870: 'A gang of "larrikins" ... had been the terror of Little Bourke-street and its neighbourhood'; and in 1879 the *Australian Monthly Magazine* (Sydney) thunders: 'About six years ago, a gang of "larrikins" took a servant-girl to the North Shore in a boat. She was violated by the party.'

Larrikins, we are told further, were as much recognisable by their get-up as by their behaviour. (Nothing changes! This went for 'bodgies' and 'widgies' too, if you are old enough to remember!) Thus a writer in 1890:

The larrikins can be considered as the thugs of Australia. ... They are generally known by their peculiar style of dress—the broad-brimmed, low-crowned felt hat, the coat dotted with buttons in every conceivable spot, the tight-fitting bell-bottomed trousers, and the heels of the boots, which are disproportionately small.

There were also **larrikinesses**, the female associates of larrikins. In 1898 the *Bulletin* tells us: 'The larrikiness eats fried fish in bed, and when her **larrikin** wakes up in the morning he finds he has been sleeping on the bones and the stopper of the vinegar bottle'.

Well, where does this Ozword come from? E.E. Morris in 1898 (*Austral English: A Dictionary of Australian Words, Phrases, and Usages*) records a folk etymology which, he says, was believed by '99 persons out of 100' at the end of the nineteenth century:

It is a phonetic spelling of the broad Irish pronunciation, with a trilled r, of the word larking. *The story goes that a certain Sergeant Dalton, about the year 1869, charged a youthful prisoner at the Melbourne Police Court with being* 'a-larrr-akin' *about the streets'. The Police Magistrate, Mr Sturt, did not quite catch the word—'A what, Sergeant?'—'Larrikin', your Worchup'. The police court reporter used the word the next day in the paper, and it stuck.*

Morris adds: 'This story ... unfortunately ... lacks confirmation; for the record of the incident cannot be discovered, after long search in files by many people. Mr Skeat's warning must be remembered—"As a rule, derivations which require a story to be told turn out to be false".' By the bye, W.W. Skeat (1835–1912) was an English lexicographer and philologist.

Other derivations abound. It has been argued that **larrikin** comes from thieves' slang, a combination of **leery** (or **leary**) (meaning 'wide-awake', 'knowing') and **kinchin** (meaning 'youngster'); thus a 'kinchin cove' is a 'young boy' (or **larrikin**). So (the argument runs) **leary kinchin** could very easily have blurred into **leary kin** and thence blurred further into **larrikin**. Persuasive? Undoubtedly. The trouble with this theory, however, is that we have no record whatsoever of **leary** and **kinchin** being used together.

Another theory is that **larrikin** derives from French **larron** meaning 'a thief' + **kid**. This stretches credulity: to put it simplistically and avoid the sophisticated linguistic arguments, why should the perfectly understandable 'kid' be changed by speakers into the more opaque 'kin'? And so the theories proliferate. One of my favourite 'implausibles' is that **larrikin** is a blurring of the Irish **leprechaun**, 'a small, mischief-making elf or sprite'.

The most plausible provenance of the word lies in British dialect. **Larrikin** is in very good company in this regard, since an astonishing number of our Aussie slang terms derive from British dialects. There is evidence from the mid nineteenth century, in places such as Warwickshire and Worcestershire, for the word **larrikin** itself, not just a variant of it, the word meaning 'a mischievous or frolicsome youth' (*English Dialect Dictionary*, ed. J. Wright, 1898–1905). This meaning is somewhat at a remove from the early Australian meaning 'a nasty young thug' (but of this, see below). There is little doubt, I believe, that **larrikin** does come from British dialect. In Yorkshire, there is also a verb **to larack about** as a variant pronunciation of **to lark about**, 'be up to youthful mischief, etc.': *Goas laracking abart ower mich fur my fancy* ['(He) goes laracking about over much for my fancy'] (*English Dialect Dictionary*). It is likely, therefore, that the real origin of **larrikin** is as in the Irish policeman story (although our Irish policeman is undoubtedly a furphy), with this salient difference: the transition from 'larking' to 'larrikin' happened not in Oz but in England.

An interesting feature of the word **larrikin** is that in recent years it has entirely lost its early pejorative connotations. One of the UK editors of the soon to be published *New Oxford Dictionary of English* asked us last year about their definition of the Australian **larrikin**: they had tentatively defined the word as 'hooligan'. We replied that this was certainly one of its original meanings, but no longer. (By the bye, we have marked **larrikin** in the sense 'hooligan' as obsolete in *The Australian Concise Oxford English Dictionary* 3rd edition 1997). When a number of drunken louts invade the pitch of a one-day cricket match (as they did last year in a match against South Africa) we call them hooligans, but certainly not larrikins.

The term **larrikin** came to be used affectionately of a person who did not always adhere strictly to polite social conventions; a bit of a stirrer. It was used in political contexts as well—used positively as a term almost of endearment. The negative meanings gradually died out completely in Australia, and the larrikin came to be seen as someone who defied social or political conventions in an interesting and often likeable way. Thus as early as 1899, the *Truth* newspaper reports: 'Nowadays the Premier is the chief political larrikin of the House'. And in 1968 the *Nation* newspaper writes of

the peculiar character of political leadership in Australia, with its recurrent tendency to throw up two major personality types: the larrikin, represented on this occasion by Mr J.G. Gorton, and the prima donna, by Mr E.G. Whitlam.

Prime Minister Paul Keating was certainly a 'larrikin', I think, in spite of his penchant for antique French clocks. Interestingly, these positive connotations seems to have co-existed with the negative in the nineteenth century—as early as 1870 Marcus Clarke in *Goody Two Shoes* was able to write, '*He's a lively little Larrikin Lad, and his name is Little Boy Blue*'. Nothing pejorative about that!

MODERN AUSTRALIAN USAGE

Nicholas Hudson

[Second edition, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1997, pp. viii + 440. A$19.95]

REVIEW by Professor Ralph Elliott

Boldly described on its front cover as 'The ultimate guide to Australian English', *Modern Australian Usage* is a revised edition of the original hardback of 1993. Can there really be an 'ultimate guide' to any living language, especially one as susceptible as ours to pressures from other forms of English, notably that of the USA (see **Americanisms** in Hudson's book), and from changing modes of communication like email (or e-mail), not mentioned by Hudson? Stephen Murray-Smith, more prudently, prefaced his *Right Words: A Guide to English Usage in Australia* in 1989 with T.S. Eliot's 'For last year's words belong to last year's language, And next year's words await another voice'.

But for the present at least Nicholas Hudson's learned yet eminently readable new *Guide* is a welcome addition to Oxford's reference shelf. Good sense, absence of pedantry, ready admission of personal preference where there is ground for disagreement, and a wide sweep across current Australian English usage are the major attractions of the book.

Hudson fights where he considers it right to fight, as in retaining the useful distinction between *disinterested* and *uninterested*; but he admits that 'You can't win' when trying to sort out the differences between *a given name* and a *Christian name* or, for that matter, *a first name* or a *forename*. Think of people who are not Christians or have Chinese names.

Apostrophes, **plurals**, and **spelling** are all discussed at length. For example, should we write *programme* or *program*, the latter the preferred usage of the *Macquarie Dictionary*, the former that of the *Australian Concise Oxford* which would restrict *program* to computer usage, perhaps more sensible than writing *program* every time, as Hudson suggests?

Pronunciation is another aspect of current usage where practice differs. Some Australians stress *frontier* on the second syllable and *research* on the first. Hudson prefers to remain ambivalent, but strongly disapproves of such mispronunciations as /mis-CHEE-vee-uhs/ for *mischievous* as being unacceptable in any dialect of English.

Hudson's *Guide* is particularly helpful in enabling speakers, writers, and editors to sort out awkward pairs like *alternative* and *alternate*, *gourmand* and *gourmet*, *principal* and *principle*, *substantial* and *substantive*. And if you want to know what is wrong with a *wristlet watch*, read the entry on **diminutive**. While most of the entries are relatively short, there are some quite lengthy discussions of topics like **acronyms**, use of **capitals**, **case**, **punctuation**, **publishing**, and **sexist language**. And nobody who buys this book should ever be guilty again of confusing *may* and *might* or *lay* and *lie*.

The book is arranged alphabetically, is well laid out, easy to use, with appropriate cross-references in small capitals, and is excellent value at an affordable price. In short, it deserves to be highly recommended.

OZWORDS COMPETITIONS

Ozwords Competition No. 8: Results

We received several hundred entries. We whittled these down to 43 finalists, and these were voted on by six members of the Centre. We decided, this time round, to award three second prizes and one first prize. The remaining 39 should receive honourable mentions, but we haven't the room to print them all. Second prize ($50 worth of books from the OUP catalogue): M. Sarre: 'Can we make just one more search for the Holy Grail?' requested Arthur. H. Herrman: 'I suspect the little devil was not telling us the full story,' Tom imp-lied wickedly. M. McNeill: 'Pauline's right, migrants are all the same,' Tom typed racily. First prize ($100 worth of books from the OUP catalogue): R. King: 'Just a minor industrial accident,' Tom said off-handedly.

Ozwords Competition No. 9

I invite readers to send me a limerick on a current Aussie political theme. For those few who mayn't be quite sure what a limerick is or what its correct form ought to be, here's the good oil: it is a comic or satiric five-line poem in which the first, second, and fifth lines rhyme and have three main stresses each, whereas the third and fourth lines have a different rhyme scheme and have only two main stresses each.

EXAMPLE

While walking from Devon to Bicester
Your Ed met a man who said, 'Micester,
You Aussies are mean
To get rid of your Queen:
She Watches you like a Big Sicester!'

Note: Your Editor is given to understand that the quaintly charming village of Bicester (pop. 127, but 97-year-old Miss ffinch-ffinch (the younger) who runs Ye Olde Tea Shoppe in Cathedral Close is expected to succumb to bird flu within the next day or so) is pronounced 'Bister' by the Bicastrians (who, perversely for the poms, pronounce themselves 'Bicastrians' and not 'Booties' or something such, which logic would lead one to expect). The full name of Bicester (if it exists—your Editor never got there after his altercation with the royalist pom) is 'Bicester-cum-Castra-Castrorum-juxta-Nether-Wallop'. It has a river which flows down the middle of its main street. Thought you'd like to know.

Entries close 31 August 1998.

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