OZWORDS

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## DEAD BIRDS, EMUS, MONKEYS, DRONGOS, GORILLAS...

# RACING SLANG IN AUSTRALIA

BRUCE MOORE

When Australians speak of **The Cup** they are not referring to the FA Cup or the World Cup in Soccer, or to the Davis Cup: in Australia, **The Cup** means one thing only — the Melbourne Cup, the first Tuesday in November, **Cup Day**. When the first Melbourne Cup was run in 1861 the *Argus* reported: 'His Excellency visited the saddling paddock during the half-hour preceding **'the Cup Race'**. By 1864 it was necessary only to mention 'the Cup': 'The slippery state of the ground made the results of the race for **the Cup** altogether unreliable' (*Australasian* 8 November). By 1865 the Cup was an event which fleetingly enabled Melburnians to put all cares aside: 'In Melbourne all was bustle and excitement — the crisis, the drought... seemed to have been entirely forgotten in the all-absorbing topic of **the Cup**' (*Illustrated Melbourne Post* November). Soon after Federation the national significance of the event was recognised by Parliament: 'The Federal Houses are frankly recognising **the Cup**. There is to be a parliamentary holiday' (*Huon Times* 2 November). By 1916 'T.O. Lingo' in the *Australian Comic Dictionary* was able to proclaim the Cup to be a national institution and to define **the Cup Race** as 'the Australian Race witnessed by the Australian race'. On 5 November 1996 **the Cup** will once again be the event that briefly stops the nation. It is the day when myriads of Australians who couldn't tell a **dead bird** from an **emu**, a **monkey** from a **gorilla**, a sprinter from a stayer, a **quinella** from a **trifecta**, a **monty** from a **skinner**, or an **asparagus** from a **pea**, will splurge millions of dollars on a 3200-metre horserace.

Much of the language of **the turf** is international. The phrase **home and hosed** was originally used of a horse which had completed a race, was back in its box, and had been hosed down; thus a horse which is described as being **home and hosed** during a race is a certain winner — it will be back in its box before the rest of the field has finished. A **flutter** is a small bet, and a **saver** is a hedging bet, a bet laid to insure against loss on another (more risky) bet. A horse which has been **nobbled** (as Big Philou was before the 1969 Cup) has been tampered with by drugging or laming to prevent its winning.

Many racing terms are, however, distinctly Australian. Here are some of the terms you might hear on Cup Day. Many of them you might have heard on Cup Day 100 years ago. Most interestingly, a number of them have developed extended meanings beyond their original racing contexts.

**asparagus** a punter who is a fountain of ideas about which horses are going to win, and who offers hot tips to all and sundry — in other words, a person who 'has more tips than a tin of asparagus'.

**boilover** The unexpected defeat of a hot favourite; a surprise result. Our earliest evidence for this use is from 1871. The term was later used in contexts outside horseracing – for an unexpected result in any context.

**bolter** This is an Australian horseracing term with a number of senses. A **bolter** is a horse with only a remote chance of winning; an outsider. The term can therefore also be applied to an outsider that unexpectedly wins. It is also used to describe an outsider that races well clear of the field, especially at an early stage in a race. The origin of the term and its meanings are not entirely clear. In general English **bolter** is used for a horse which escapes from control. In nineteenth century Australian English a **bolter** was a runaway convict or absconder. In the twentieth century the phrase **a bolter's chance** appears, meaning 'only a remote chance of succeeding; no chance at all' (and therefore synonymous with **Buckley's chance**), and if this phrase is a development from the convict/absconder meaning, it may give the clue to the origin of the racing term.

**daily double** A pair of horse races selected (usually from a programme by a racing club) for a starting-price double conducted by a totalisator betting agency. The term is used more widely in Australian English in a jocular way to describe any two major events. Nancy Keesing in *Lily on the Dustbin* (1982) writes: 'A Sydney woman said of a friend's daughter that she had won the **daily double** but missed out on the trifecta: the young woman in question was having her wedding at the fashionable St Marks, Darling Point, the reception at the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron, but had missed out on the honeymoon in Fiji'.

**dead bird** (often shortened to **bird**): an absolute certainty to win. This term was established in Australian horseracing circles by the 1880s, a transferred use from pigeon shooting where a pigeon about to be released and shot by a marksman was regarded as being as good as dead, or, as a writer of 1889 suggests: 'A "**dead bird**" signifies that a horse is considered certain to win, the analogy being

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## EDITORIAL

This number of *Ozwords* sees the arrival of a new editor, Frederick Ludowyk, a writer, researcher at the **Australian National Dictionary Centre**, and co-editor of the forthcoming new edition of the *Australian Oxford Paperback Dictionary*. The first five numbers of *Ozwords* were edited by Nicholas Hudson, and we are grateful to him for making *Ozwords* so popular among its readers, and for the experience and wit he brought to his editing and writing.

There are three new features in this number, and they will become regular items. First, there is a report on the activities of the **Australian National Dictionary Centre** from its Director (including a follow-up, as promised, on your responses to the article on regional Australian English). Secondly, there is a section on Australian words and their origins. Thirdly, there is a historical section which will reproduce comments from the past on the development of Australian English. The Mailbag section continues, so please continue to send in your comments, complaints, and questions.

Our two main features in this issue deal with Australian racing terms and with the folk etymology of some common idioms. Since this number of *Ozwords* will appear just before Melbourne Cup, I thought it would be appropriate to examine some of the Australian terms which have evolved as a result of the racing industry. The process of folk etymology ('a popular modifying of the form of a word or phrase to make it seem to be derived from a more familiar word') is quite fascinating to explore. I hope you will find the exploration fun.

A JOINT **AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY** AND **OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS** PROJECT

## DEAD BIRDS, EMUS, MONKEYS, DRONGOS, GORILLAS...

# RACING SLANG IN AUSTRALIA

BRUCE MOORE

CONTINUED FROM PG.1

taken from pigeon shooting, the scorer calling 'dead bird' when the bird is shot dead'.

**emu:** a racegoer who picks up discarded betting tickets in the hope of finding one which has not been cashed. The term appears to have its origin in the early twentieth century when it was used to describe people picking up pieces of timber after clearing or burning (and bobbing up and down in emu-fashion). It was also used of people picking up litter. It was then applied to people at racecourses who picked up discarded betting tickets in the hope of finding a winning ticket.

**hoop:** a jockey. Some commentators argue that this meaning derives from the way jockeys use a whip, wielding it in a circular motion, but it is more likely that it derives from the standard English racing meaning of hoop, 'a band in contrasting colour on a jockey's blouse, sleeve, or cap'. Only in Australia has this meaning been transferred to the jockey.

**money terms:** Some of these are international, and belong to the general world of gambling and the underworld. A **monkey** is $500 (formerly £500) and a **gorilla** $1000 (formerly £1000). A **pony** is $50 (formerly £25). If you haven't got an **Oxford** left, this means you haven't got a dollar. [**Oxford scholar** is general rhyming slang for 'dollar', but in typical Australian fashion this has been reduced to **Oxford** — just as **Noah's Ark** (= shark) has been reduced to **Noah**, and **septic tank** (= Yank) has been reduced to **septic**.] A **spot** is $100 (formerly £100).

**monty** (also **monte**): a certainty, a sure winner, especially a horse considered certain to win a race. Commentaries on Australian racing language usually suggest that this term derives from the British Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery (nicknamed 'Monty') who in 1942 commanded the 8th Army in the Western Desert, where his victory at El Alamein proved the first significant Allied success in the Second World War. However, our records show that the term was used much earlier than this. In the general sense of 'a certainty' it was used by Henry Lawson in 1894, and in 1930 Katharine Susannah Prichard used it in a racing context: 'The biggest bloomin' **monty** ever started on a racecourse'. Earlier, the term (sometimes in the form **monte man**) was used for a racehorse tipster: 'In the Leger the "Monties" are shouting" (1887, K. Mackay, *Stirrup Jingles*). All of these senses probably have their origin in the Spanish and Spanish-American game of chance, called **monte** (from Spanish *monte* 'a mountain; a heap or stack of cards left after each player has his share'), played with a pack of forty-five cards.

**mudlark:** a horse that runs well on wet tracks. The corresponding American term is **mudder**.

**no-hoper:** a racehorse with no chance of winning; a rank outsider. This sense emerged in Australian slang in the 1940s, and was soon transferred to describe 'an incompetent or ineffectual person; a failure'. The widened sense is used elsewhere, but is recorded earliest in Australia.

**not to run a drum** In the early twentieth century the term **drum** in Australian English came to mean 'a reliable piece of information', probably deriving from the signal given out by the percussion instrument. It often appears in the phrases **to get the drum** or **to give the drum**, and usually in racing contexts: 'It beats me how the punters get the drum (1915); 'I got the drum on the way out to the races' (1922). From this developed the phrase **to run a drum** meaning '(of a racehorse) to perform as tipped'. The phrase is now almost invariably used in the negative — **he didn't run a drum** meaning the horse didn't perform as tipped. Some commentators see the influence of rhyming slang here, and suggest that **drum** is also an abbreviation of **drum and mace** rhyming slang for 'place'. Thus a horse that **doesn't run a drum** fails to run a place.

**pea** A favourite; a likely winner, especially as chosen by a stable which has a number of runners in a race. This term derives from the pea in the game of thimble-rig, the sleight-of-hand trick played with three inverted thimbles and a pea, the thimbles being moved about and the bystanders encouraged to place bets as to which thimble the pea is under. The thimble-rigger knows where the pea is, and the betters are duped; by analogy, the stable knows which of its runners will win, and so the punters are again the dupes. In Australia it has developed an extended sense: someone in a favoured or favourable position; a person expected to win a job etc. over other applicants.

**roughie:** a horse that is a rank outsider, or an outsider with some chance of winning (*my roughie for the Melbourne Cup is Fred's Boy*).

**skinner:** a horse that wins at very long odds; any betting coup. This sense appears in Australian English in the 1890s, and probably derives from British slang *skinner* 'a person who strips another of money'. In British slang, **to skin the lamb** was also a term used to describe bookies when a horse at long odds won, i.e. the punters were fleeced.

**trifecta:** a form of betting in which the first three places in a race must be predicted in the correct order. The word is a blend of **tri** ('three') + **perfecta** (a chiefly American term, the equivalent of our **quinella**, and an abbreviation of American Spanish **quiniela perfecta** 'perfect quinella'). The term **trifecta** is also used in America, but it has a special place in Australian English because it is used in contexts outside horseracing as well, where it means 'a string of three major events'. Greg Norman's three wins in the South Australian Open were described in the newspapers as a **trifecta**. One writer attributes a trifecta to Bob Hawke: 'Bob Hawke was going for the big trifecta. He'd tipped Hawthorn in the Aussie Rules on the Saturday, Parramatta in the League on the Sunday, and had his money on Australia winning the America's Cup next week'. (*See also* **daily double**.)

The most famous Australian term to derive from racing parlance is **drongo**, meaning 'a fool, a stupid person, a simpleton'. The origin of this term has sometimes been wrongly traced to the bird called the drongo. The spangled drongo, *Dicrurus bracteatus*, a glossy black bird with iridescent blue-green spots on its head, neck, and breast, is found in northern and eastern Australia, as well as in the islands to the north of Australia, and further north to India and China. It is called a drongo after the name of a bird from the same family in northern Madagascar. Some of the drongos of eastern Queensland are migratory, and in winter travel either north to New Guinea or south to as far as Victoria. One ingenious theory has it that any bird which travels towards Victoria in winter must perforce be stupid, but there is no convincing evidence that the drongo acquired the reputation of the galah.

The origin of **drongo** belongs with a horse rather than a bird. There was an Australian racehorse called *Drongo* during the early 1920s. He was a bay horse by Lanius-Lys d'Or, and, according to the Australasian Turf Register, he had 5 starts in 1923, 15 starts in 1924, and 17 starts in 1925. He scored no wins. Yet he wasn't an absolute no-hoper of a racehorse: he ran second in a VRC Derby and St Leger, third in the AJC St Leger, and fifth in the 1924 Sydney Cup. He often came very close to winning major races, but in 37 starts he never won a race. In 1924 a writer in the Melbourne *Argus* comments: 'Drongo is sure to be a very hard horse to beat. He is improving with every run, and in the Herbert Power Stakes at Caulfield he was a close third to Easingwold and Wallace Mortlake at weight-for-age'. But he never did win.

Tradition has it that soon after Drongo's retirement racegoers started to apply his name to horses that were having similarly unlucky careers, and that it then became more negative, and was applied also to people who were not 'unlucky' so much as they were 'hopeless cases', 'no-hopers', and thereafter 'fools'. Even with this explanation there are some lexicographical problems — there is a big gap between the time of Drongo's racing career, and the first appearance of **drongo** in the transferred sense. We must jump 15 years to the Second World War. Many of our citations from the early 1940s are associated with the Royal Australian Air Force, where the term is applied in a derogatory way to a recruit. Yet even in military contexts, the association with the racehorse is made. We have anecdotal information that the horse Drongo appeared in cartoons by Sam Wells in the Melbourne *Sun-Herald* of the early 1930s, but we have been unable to confirm this as yet. If that is true, the cartoons would provide the missing link. At least in the popular imagination the origin of the Australian term **drongo** rests with the unfortunate horse of the 1920s.

# 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.**

## SPLIT INFINITIVES

When I was at school it was dinned in to me never to use (not 'to never use') split infinitives. When I complained about their use recently to a young teacher of English, she came back at me with a line she claimed was from *Star Trek* — 'To boldly go where no man has gone before' — as if sci-fi has become the arbiter of grammatical correctness.

**Vic Sutton**
**NSW**

*Why, I wonder, should nineteenth century grammarians be 'the arbiter of grammatical correctness' in this particular instance? They were the ones who flew in the face of centuries of excellent usage* ('To slowly trace the forest's shady scene' — Byron) *and quite arbitrarily laid down the almost divine law:* Thou shalt never split an infinitive.

*What is the infinitive of a verb? It is the form of a verb expressing the verbal notion without a particular subject, tense, etc. Thus 'I saw' and 'he sees' are* finite *forms of the verb 'see'. The* infinitive *(unmarked for subject, tense, etc.) appears most commonly in two kinds of constructions:* **1** We have come to see the Wizard; **2** We may see the Wizard tomorrow. *In the second example there are no problems since the infinitive ('see') is unsplittable. The problem arises with the first example ('We have come to see the Wizard') where the infinitive is understood to be not simply 'see' but 'to see'.*

*Our grammarians argued that in this construction one cannot put a word, especially an adverb, between the 'to' and the 'see'. To do so is to produce a 'split infinitive'. And when the pedant gives it that description it really does sound like a mortal sin. Thus instead of* He promised to never err *we should say* He promised never to err.

*As soon as we hear that example it becomes clear that with the split infinitive we are not talking about* linguistic *correctness. We are dealing with the subjective issue of style. Split infinitives often* sound *ugly or inelegant:* The soldiers were ordered to immediately shoot. *However, if the result is not clumsy, there is no reason to re-arrange a sentence merely to avoid the split infinitive:* Mr Howard would be advised to quietly drop his use of the phrase 'The Aboriginal industry'.

*What the pedant forgets is the fact that occasionally a split infinitive neatly avoids ambiguity. Listen to the difference between:* He failed to entirely understand the issue *and* He failed entirely to understand the issue.

*Indeed (*pace *grammarians and pedants), there are times when it is impossible* not *to split the infinitive. I defy anyone to unsplit the split infinitive in the following sentence:* I wanted to more than match my rival's bid.

*The moral: The pedant opposes the use of the split infinitive under any circumstances. The pedant, in this case, is immoderately pedantic. The infinitive may be split with gusto if the result is stylistically pleasing and if the split avoids stylistic awkwardness, places emphasis neatly where the emphasis ought to be, and dispenses with ambiguity.*

## KILLER-METRES *VS* KILL-OMITERS

I always enjoy *Ozwords*, and often want to comment on an article or letter, but hesitate lest I am not as well informed as the writer. This time, however, I dare to offer the following in response to **Of zoology and kilometres** (*Ozwords*, July 1996).

As one of the team employed by the Federal Government to introduce the metric system to the Australian public, I was comforted to see that there are still people and places where the KIL-ometre is not entirely forgotten.

When I worked for the Metric Conversion Board, I always held that for measuring instruments the OM-eter is correct: mile-OM-eter, speed-OM-eter, hydr-OM-eter, etc. In units of measurement, however, the unit prefix (in this case the one meaning 1000) has the emphasis: KILO-metre, KILO-litre, and KILO-gram.

The proof lies with the unit for 1000th of a metre, and with the instrument for measuring it; the first is a MICRO-metre and the second is a micr-OM-eter. QED.

**Sheila Mason**
**NSW**

*Your argument is watertight and your QED triumphant. Unfortunately the development of language is never logical. But then would we really want it to be so? It seems as if the pronunciation kuh-**lom**-uh-tuh is destined to be the winner: the majority of speakers have voted with their tongues and lexicographers will have no alternative but to record their vote.*

## A METAPHYSICAL MESS

A while ago it was necessary for me to send an e-mail message to several people, to check that the e-mail addresses we had recorded for them were still valid. The system itself would alert us if the message didn't get through to a particular address.

The message I sent was: 'Please ignore this test message.'

Only one person sent a reply, which was: 'I have ignored your message.'

What a predicament! Should I have thanked him or thanked the others?

**Ian Odgers**
**VIC**

*The convolutions of this will give me nightmares tonight. Readers, please answer Ian.*

## JARRING JARGON

Recently I went to a conference of the Australian Society for Legal Philosophy and came home with two new words, 'commodification' (the process of turning things into commodities which aren't really commodities, such as lawyers' skills) and 'majoritarian' (which has nothing to do with a preponderance of Rotarians but is a needlessly enlarged word for 'majority').

**Ian M. Johnstone**
**VIC**

*It is pleasing to think that the Australian Legal Philosophers will feel a warm inner glow when they say 'commodification' and 'majoritarian' to one another in mixed company: 'The majoritarian mentality, my dear Carruthers, is surely insusceptible to commodification.' — 'Yes, indeed, Smithers-Smythe. You've only to look at the non-Legal Philosophers here present to feel the force of your asseveration.' On such sillinesses, alas, is brotherhood built.*

## GENDER BLENDERS

I recently noticed that my thirteen- and fifteen-year-old daughters describe the male stars of shows such as *Home and Away* and *Neighbours* as 'babes'. Males as babes? I always thought 'babes' were babies or young children ('the babes in the wood') or women who appeared in American pop-songs ('I've got you, babe') or were addressed as such by gangsters ('Get lost, babe, or yous'll get the gat!').

**H. Anderson**
**SA**

*Women were **babes** in America, once upon a time, and many women found it demeaning to be so addressed. It now looks as if the latter-day American use of **babe** to refer to a* male *has come to stay in Aussie teenspeak. I've culled the following from recent editions of Australian teenagers' magazines: **BABE WATCH** (a regular column on hunky boys), **superbabes** (the likes of Keanu Reeves, Brad Pitt, etc.), 'If you've been wondering what Brad, Ethan, Keanu, Jonathan and heaps more mega-hunks are up to, check out our **babe update**', 'You're at the movies with your best friend and she points out a **to-die-for-babe** sussing you out', 'loads of **babelicious** hunks', etc. Interestingly, the reverse of the **babe**-process occurred with **guy**: it began its life by referring exclusively to males, but it is now used quite indiscriminately of both sexes.*

## LATEST PUBLICATIONS

1996 sees the publication of three new dictionaries: Bruce Moore's new edition of the *Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary*; Frederick Ludowyk and Bruce Moore's new edition of the *Australian Oxford Paperback Dictionary*, and the brand new *Australian Oxford Colour Dictionary*. Work is completed on three other projects: Jay Arthur's word and cultural study of Aboriginal English; Shirley Purchase's *Australian Writers' Guide*; and Maureen Brooks and Joan Ritchie's dictionary of Papua New Guinea English. These will be published early in 1997. Work is well under way on a new edition of the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*, and a new edition of *Australian Aboriginal Words in English*.

## ANDC ON THE INTERNET

We now have a Home Page on the Internet. Our Home Page can be accessed on http://www.anu.edu.au/ANDC

## SCHOOLS DICTIONARY PROJECT

One of the best ways for students to understand how dictionaries work is to make one themselves. This project is designed to get students to create a dictionary on a subject of their choice, collecting words that are unique to that subject, writing definitions for those words, providing each dictionary entry with examples of its use (i.e. illustrative quotations), etc. A teacher's guide to the project — *How To Make Your Own Dictionary* — is available free. It can be downloaded from our Home Page on the Internet. If you do not have Internet access, write to the Centre and we will send you a copy.

## REGIONAL AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH

The article on regional Australian English in the last number of *Ozwords* and a follow-up article in the *Sunday Age* produced some interesting and useful responses. It is now clear that **spider** ('a lemonade with a dash of icecream') is not exclusively Victorian. Respondents from Rockhampton to Perth attested to knowing this concoction, especially in its most popular flavour — a **lime spider**. Shirley Loney of Perth, David Hutchison of Fremantle, and C. Richardson of Bunbury inform us that **bathers** is not limited to Victoria and Tasmania, but is also the standard Western Australian term. Shirley and David tell us that **mudlark** is commonly used for the **magpie-lark** in Western Australia. They also point out that in Western Australia **lacky bands** is a common variant of **lacker bands**. Another respondent recalls **lackey bands** in the Pilbara; and another recalls it from Auckland in New Zealand. Our hypothesis that **yonnie** (also **yonny**) in the sense 'a small stone; a pebble' is Victorian was confirmed by responses.

Richard Evans of Victoria opened up the issue of marbles (or **alleys** to some):

> When I was a boy attending the State primary school in Drysdale, Victoria, in the mid-1970's, marbles were the big thing in playtime entertainment. There was a crime in marbles, similar in gravity to chucking in cricket and steroid use in athletics, called 'fnudging'. To fnudge (pronounced **fa**-nudge) was to flick your marble at an opponent's, not with an honest and unaided flick of the thumb, but with a dastardly and un-Australian forward jerk of the whole hand.... I have since used the word on occasion to describe any sneaky attempt to gain an unfair advantage in any enterprise, but no one except my brother, who went to the school at the same time, knows what I mean. I have also been unable to find any reference to anything like the word.

Well, Richard, here is another Victorian who knows exactly what you mean! I attended Ashby primary school in Geelong (admittedly only a yonny's throw from Drysdale!) and **fnudging** was certainly a heinous crime in our schoolyard. I tested the term during some talkback radio programmes, and found two Victorians (one now in Tasmania, the other in Canberra) who knew the term. Other callers insisted that the term was **fudge** and some suggested **nudge**. Perhaps our **fnudge** was a blend of **fudge** and **nudge**? (Any further information from readers will be much appreciated.)

W. Wetherell of NSW recalls some childhood terms:

> As a child in Broken Hill I played alleys and had toodlembucks and swam in a tank on a nearby property, maybe wagged school, pushed a raft across a pug-hole, tossed connies or gibbers at various targets, played bully on a string and made bottler shanghais and rubber guns, fired pepper berries through a pea blower and rode the grid miles through the scrub. Square Johnnick we had some bottler times: even jumped the rattler to Menindee a coupla times.

**Alley** belongs to general English and is a diminutive abbreviation of **alabaster**. A **grid** is a bicycle. It comes from British slang, but is included in the *Australian National Dictionary* because of its intensive use in Australia in the 1920s to 1960s (although it is perhaps now obsolete?). **Johnnick** (with the -o- spelling) is an Australian variant of British dialect **Jannock** meaning 'fair, straightforward, genuine'; thus **square Johnnick** is synonymous with **fair dinkum**. A **pug-hole** is an English term for a deep pit from which clay has been excavated, but it seems that in Australia a water-filled **pug-hole** was a popular venue for children's sports.

Other terms in this account *are* distinctively Australian. **Bottler** (meaning 'something which excites admiration') appears in Australian English from the late nineteenth century, but is of unknown origin. In general English a **tank** is 'a large receptacle or storage chamber usually for liquid or gas', and of course it is used in this sense in Australia. However, from the early 1800s **tank** is used in Australia to mean a 'reservoir' or 'dam' — and **dam** in this sense is also Australian: elsewhere it means 'a barrier constructed to hold back water and raise its level, forming a reservoir or preventing flooding'; in Australia the dam is the reservoir itself. It is likely that the terms **tank** and **dam** have some regional distribution in Australia, but we have yet to complete our research on this matter. **Shanghai** is an Australian term for a catapult (deriving from Scottish **shangan** 'a stick cleft at one end', and unrelated to **shanghai** in the sense 'to force a person to be sailor on a ship by using drugs or other trickery'). Again, it is likely that there is some regional distribution of this term. Another Australian term for a catapult was **ging**. Is it obsolete? A **connie** was a type of playing marble, the word deriving from **corn**(**elian**), a variety of chalcedony. Our last evidence for the use of **connie** comes from 1972. Perhaps it too is obsolete? But in the Broken Hill area was it more loosely used as a term for 'a stone' rather than 'a marble'?

Perhaps the most interesting terms are **toodlembuck** and **bully on a string**. **Toodlembuck** (probably from **tootle** 'to walk, wander' + (**th**)**em** + **buck** 'a gambling marker') was a gambling game played by children. K. Smith *A Word from Children* (Adelaide: 1960) describes it thus:

> Another gay, carefree kind of toy, designed to develop the gambling instinct of innocent children, was the Toodlembuck. It consisted of a disc of cardboard mounted on a cotton-reel and slipped over an old wooden meat-skewer. The top of the disc was divided into segments with a horse's name on each, such as 'Spearfelt', 'Carbine', or 'Heroic'. A pointer was fitted to the skewer and the disc was spun roulette-wise while the young bookie yelled, 'Who'll have a go on me old toodlembuck?'

It has been sometimes suggested that the game **toodlembuck** was limited to Victoria, but here we have evidence of it being played in Adelaide and Broken Hill. How widespread was it? Is it still played? The game **bully on a string** baffled us, since we had no evidence of the term. Radio talkback callers suggested that it was (is?) a form of 'conkers', with seeds strung on a piece of string. Can you provide more detail?

**BRUCE MOORE, DIRECTOR, ANDC**

# 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.**

# HOW TRUE BLUE IS TRUE BLUE?

The Australian National Dictionary Centre recently received a phone call asking if we had the phrase **true blue** in *The Australian National Dictionary*, and if not, why not — because, said the caller, it's a dinkie-di Aussie expression, as John Williamson's song 'True Blue' proves. Is **true blue** an Australian term?

The term itself is certainly not Australian, and its history goes back to the medieval period. At a time when all colours were given symbolic significance, **blue** was the symbol of loyalty, constancy, faithfulness, and truth. This symbolic meaning is common in Chaucer's poetry, and occurs in the late fourteenth century poem (often attributed to Chaucer) *Balade against Women Unconstant*: 'To newe thinges your lust is euer kene. In stede of blew [i.e. blue, the colour of constancy], thus may ye were al grene [i.e. green, the colour of inconstancy]'. Very soon thereafter the phrase **true blue** arose. It meant: 'faithful, staunch and unwavering in one's faith, principles, etc.; genuine, real' *(OED)*. Thus, in 1663, Butler writes in *Hudibras*: 'For his Religion it was fit To match his Learning and his Wit; 'Twas Presbyterian true Blew'.

The phrase subsequently became the distinctive term for the Conservative party and meant 'staunchly Tory'. Hence Trollope in *Framley Parsonage* (1860): 'There was no portion of the county more decidedly true blue'. And this is one of the two senses it still has in England — '**true blue** *adjective* extremely loyal or orthodox; Conservative; *noun* such a person, especially a Conservative' (*The Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, 1995).

Something entirely different happened in Australia. Thus in *The Worker* (Sydney, 1897) we find:

> Reports from the sheds are cheering, both [Union] reps and men being of the sort called 'true blue'. Of course we find a few of those queer individuals of the brainless, thick-hided, scab-barracker type amongst us.

The 'true blues' are the striking workers. Scabs (and, presumably, the wealthy and conservative grazing class) are their antithesis. The contrast drawn between 'true blues' and 'scabs' is clearly not a one-off: *The Worker* (1896): 'Jim Smith is "true blue" and Bill Muggins is not a scab though Jack Ruggles has called him so'. The working class associations of the term persist. In 1921 a letter to the Editor of *Ross's Monthly* (Melbourne) says: 'Ever since I arrived at an age capable of thinking I have been an ardent Laborite' (the letter is signed 'True Blue'); *Bulletin* (April 1975): 'J.B. on the other hand, is a true-blue Labor man'; A.B. Facey *A Fortunate Life* (1981): 'The unionists were real true blues — loyal and sticking together'. The Australian emphasis is still on loyalty etc., but whereas in England the political associations are with the Conservatives, in Australia they are firmly with the Left.

These working class associations of 'true blue' remain, but in a further development of meaning the term came to be applied to any loyal Australian; all 'true Aussies' or all that is 'truly Aussie' are 'true blue': *Bulletin* (January 1974): 'In the meantime, keep up your true-blue Aussie image'; P. Barton, *Bastards I have known* (1981): 'that bit of paper says he's not a dinky-di true-blue Aussie'; *The Kalgoorlie Miner* (1989): 'Eleven Boulder residents became true blue Aussies on Australia Day'. In other words, **true blue** has widened into a synonym for **dinkum** or **dinky-di.**

Other citations collected at the Centre indicate that further developments have taken place. *The Kalgoorlie Miner* (1989) reports: 'Beer belly and pie-eating contests, coupled with the background of the aquatic centre and hot conditions should make the evening a true-blue event to remember'. Here, **true-blue** is a synonym for the adjective **Australian** or **Aussie**. Again, in 1989, the *Observer* (Narrogin) reports: '[She] became a "true blue" during a naturalisation ceremony'. Here, **true blue** is a noun meaning an **Australian**.

The term **true blue** has developed distinctive Australian connotations which have separated it from the English sense of the word. It will certainly get a guernsey in the next edition of *The Australian National Dictionary*.

# NEENISH, NIENICH, OR NEIN?

It is a tradition at the Australian National University that computers have names as well as serial numbers. The computers at the Australian National Dictionary Centre are named after Australian food items: king prawn, icypole, pavlova, lamington, floater – and **neenish**. The last named computer gets its title from the **neenish tart**. But are neenish tarts Australian? Many people believe that they are.

First, for those who are not of the cake-shop conglutination (aficionados of glucogunk), what is a **neenish tart**? It is, it seems, a cake with a filling of mock cream, and iced in two colours – white and brown, or white and pink, or (occasionally) pink and brown. In May 1995, Column 8 in the *Sydney Morning Herald* included some discussion of the origin of the term:

> Wendy Kerr and Jenny Hawke, of the Forbes public library, found this in *Patisserie*, an encyclopedia of cakes, by Aaron Maree: 'Thought to have been invented by cooks in outback Australia.' And that may be right. Leo Schofield, writing in the *SMH* in 1988, said his mother made them from a Country Women's Association cookbook sold in Orange in World War II. When he asked for information, some readers suggested they had a Viennese or German origin. But a Mrs Evans said they were first made in her home town, Grong Grong. She and her sister, Venus, nominated Ruby Neenish, a friend of their mother's, as the originator. Mrs Evans said that in 1913, running short of cocoa and baking for an unexpected shower tea for her daughter, Ruby made do by icing her tarts with half-chocolate, half-white icing. From then on they were known as neenish tarts. That, said Leo, would account for the tarts' popularity in country districts and country cookbooks.

We have been unable to track down the eponymous Ruby Neenish, and some of the 'authenticating devices' in this account feel a little shaky – just how 'unexpected' can a shower tea be?

The earliest reference to **neenish** we have been able to find occurs in a 1929 recipe for **neenish cakes**. This is in *Miss Drake's Home Cookery* by Lucy Drake, published at Glenferrie in Victoria. The cases are made from: 8 ozs. almond meal; 6 ozs. icing sugar; 1 large tablespoon flour; essence almonds; 2 whites of eggs. The filling is made of: 1 gill cream; 1/2 gill milk; 1/4 oz. gelatine; 1 tablespoon sugar; essence vanilla. No mock cream here. The icing is half white and half pink.

The fifth edition of the *Country Women's Association Cookery Book and Household Hints*, published in Perth in 1941, has the following recipe, provided by E. Birch of Baandee: Cream 2 ozs. butter and add 1 tablespoon sugar, rub in 5 ozs. self-raising flour and a pinch of salt and mix to a stiff paste with an egg. Knead well. Roll on a well-floured board till very thin, line patty tins with paste and fill with a good thick custard. Glaze the tops with thin icing. Use chocolate and white alternately'. This time, the icing is half chocolate and half white. And, of course, no mock cream. More interesting is the fact that the cakes are called **nienich tarts**. This certainly has a Germanic ring to it, and the spelling continues to be used in the *CWA Cookery Book* as late as 1964.

So here is the challenge. Do any of our readers have a cookery book **printed** before 1929 which includes **neenish** or **nienich cakes** or **tarts**? Can anyone provide evidence for a European origin? Are there any supporters of the pseudo-eponymous Ruby Neenish?

# ALL MY EYE AND BETTY MARTIN!

## THE FOLK ETYMOLOGY OF SOME POPULAR IDIOMS

By Frederick Ludowyk

I was asked recently about the origin of the phrase **all my eye and Paddy Martin!** This surprised me, since I had always known a slightly different version — **all my eye and Betty Martin!** — and this is certainly the form most readers will recognise. The phrase means 'all nonsense, rubbish!'; more colourfully, 'a load of bull!'

The origin of the phrase is uncertain. Eric Partridge in *A Dictionary of Catch Phrases* (1977) inclines to the view that the term **all my eye!** (meaning 'that's nonsense') appeared first, that **Betty Martin** was a notorious (but otherwise unrecorded) eighteenth century character who gave rise to the phrase **it's all Betty Martin** (also meaning 'it's all nonsense': there is some early nineteenth century evidence for this phrase), and that the two independently occurring phrases were then conjoined. Two nineteenth century writers, however, argue that **all my eye and Betty Martin!** is a corruption of a Latin prayer *O mihi, beate Martine!* which may be Englished as 'O for me, blessed Martin!' or 'Come to my aid, blessed Martin!'. The corruption may have occurred deliberately as a result of Protestant Catholic-baiting, or, as Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* suggests, it may be a British soldiers' or sailors' rendering of the phrase. (It is possible that this explanation of the provenance of the phrase is itself 'all my eye and Betty Martin', especially since there is doubt that any such prayer ever existed.) In these explanations, the Catholic Latin (because it was meaningless to soldiers and sailors, or abhorrent to good anti-Whore-of-Babylon-Protestants) was corrupted: 'O' became 'all', 'mihi' became 'my eye', and 'beate Martine' became 'Betty Martin'. There was already (as we have seen) the phrase 'all my eye!' (or 'my eye!') with much the same meaning, and this served to enforce and support the corruption. Once the phrase had moved so far from the original Latin phrase, the significance of 'Betty Martin' was entirely lost, and so it, in turn, was open to further corruption — hence **all my eye and Paddy Martin!**

If we believe the soldiers-and-sailors story, the corruption of *O mihi, beate Martine!* to all my eye and Betty Martin! is an example of the linguistic phenomenon of folk etymology. This is the process by which a word whose origin has been 'lost', or which has been borrowed from a foreign language, is remodelled to conform to more familiar words in the language. Take **bridegroom**, for instance. In what sense is this person the 'groom' of the bride? The word in the Old English period (i.e. before 1066) was **bryd-guma** where 'guma' simply meant 'man'. By the fifteenth century the word 'guma' by itself had disappeared from the language. It survived only in the compound **bride-guma** or (now) **bride-gome**. This second element of the compound by this time made no sense at all. It was remodelled, through the process of folk etymology, by substituting a similar-sounding word, the French borrowing **groom** which then meant 'servant, man'.

Or take **crayfish**. Now a crayfish is not a fish, although it certainly lives in water. The word came into English in the Middle English period from French as **crevice**, and is in fact related to our word 'crab'. In southern English dialects the second syllable became confused with 'fish' (since **-vice** was sometimes pronounced 'vish'). The unfamiliar word, the desire to make some sense of it, led to a remodelling of the word through the process of folk etymology — thus a **crevice** became a **crayfish**.

**Folk Etymology: the process by which a word whose origin has been 'lost', or which has been borrowed from a foreign language, is remodelled to conform to more familiar words in the language**

Folk etymology affects idioms as well as words and compounds, and it is possibly the process of folk etymology which some centuries ago transformed *O mihi, beate Martine!* into **all my eye and Betty Martin!** The process is still alive and kicking. In the *Canberra Times* 31 August 1996, a reviewer said of the novel *Night Letters* by Robert Dessaix, 'Almost everything is sent up in this book; the absurd inherent in the serious. Dessaix is "cocking a snoot".' What Dessaix was purportedly cocking, of course, was a **snook**, not a 'snoot'. Unfortunately, the word 'snook' ('a gesture of contempt with the thumb to the nose and the fingers spread out') is as dead as a dodo except in that one phrase 'cocking a snook'. Quite unconsciously, I think, the reviewer replaced the senseless *snook* with the 'senseful' *snoot*, a colloquial word meaning 'nose' (*snoot* is related to *snout*, and produces the word *snooty* meaning 'supercilious, haughty, snobbish') .

Quite recently I heard a radio commentator assert that US Tomahawk cruise missiles, launched from warships in the Gulf, *'honed in on'* air defence installations in Southern Iraq. (This, by the bye, was not just a one-off: I wish I had a quid for every time I'd heard or read the phrase!) It puzzles me slightly why the perfectly sensible **home in on** ('make a beeline for') should be altered so frequently to '**hone** in on', an alteration which is becoming more and more frequent. What, I wonder, is the razor-connection in users' minds? (It's something to be thankful for that we have not yet seen the appearance of *honing* pigeons!)

Many Australians know the phrase **a wigwam for a goose's bridle** (or its variant **a wing-wang for a goose's bridle**), a snubbing or off-putting reply to an unwanted question, tantamount to 'none of your business': (SMALL BOY: Dad, what did you just hide under your pillow? — FATHER (*red-faced*): A wigwam for a goose's bridle. Now scram!). The original phrase was **a whim-wham for a goose's bridle**, 'whim-wham' meaning 'a bauble, a trifling ornament of dress, a trinket', and later 'a fanciful or fantastic object'. The original phrase was deliberately absurd (no goose ever wore a bridle; no goose's bridle ever needed to be decorated with a bauble), but it became obscure when the word **whim-wham** disappeared from common use in the language towards the end of the nineteenth century, except in this phrase **a whim-wham for a goose's bridle**. Once that happened, it was inevitable that the process of folk etymology, of 'Betty Martining', should begin. The variant **wing-wang** is a simple corruption of **whim-wham**: the true process of folk etymology occurs with the introduction of **wigwam**. This word was borrowed from the Native American Ojibwa language in the early seventeenth century, and at some stage it must have been felt that **whim-wham** is really a corruption of **wigwam**. This is all quite understandable — at least one knows what a wigwam is! Let that small boy wonder why a goose's bridle should have its own tepee, and serve him right if it bamboozles him to bits!

In *Macbeth* Banquo expresses stunned disbelief when told about the murder of his wife and children by Macbeth:

> What, all my pretty chickens and their dam
> At one fell swoop?

The phrase **at** (*or* **in**) **one fell swoop** has now been Betty Martined to 'at (or in) one **foul** swoop' because the meaning of **fell** has largely been lost. **Fell** originally meant 'fierce, savage; cruel, ruthless; dreadful, terrible' when applied to animals and men, or to their actions and their attributes. Thus in *c.*1400 in his *The buke of John Maundeuille being the*

*travels of Sir J. Mandeville knight 1322-56*, the good knight quite rightly gives that mass infanticide Herod the Great the following hefty serve: 'Herode was a full wikkid man and a fell'. And in 1688 Randle Holme in his *The academy of armory, or a storehouse of armory and blazon* tells us that 'The... Ban-dog' [i.e. a mastiff kept constantly chained up because of its ferocity] '...is fierce, is fell, is stout, is strong'. A **fell swoop**, therefore, is a savage and murderous swoop, a thoroughly beastly swoop, a deadly swoop of the sort one might expect from a felon. (**Fell** and **felon** would seem to be closely related words.)

So much for a **fell swoop**. What would a **foul swoop** be? It is unlikely, I think, that users would have in mind a swoop that 'causes disgust because it has an offensive smell or taste', or a swoop that is 'morally evil, filthy, or obscene' (some of the commoner senses of the word). Perhaps **foul** in the sense 'unfair, against the rules of a game' is uppermost in users' minds. A **foul swoop** would therefore be tantamount to **a foul stroke** and Banquo speaking today would probably complain that Macbeth's slaughter of his wife and kids was most unfair and just not cricket!

Less understandable is the transformation (no doubt by those who find the game of cricket too tedious to make sense) of the phrase **off one's own bat** into **off one's own back**. The original cricketing term refers to the number of runs made by a player, and by extension means 'something done by one's own efforts; unaided; unprompted'. 'Off one's own **back**' is opaque by comparison. The term **Parthian shot** ('a telling remark reserved for the moment of departure') is still used, but it is now almost invariably transformed into **parting shot**. The Parthians (*c.*250 BC to *c.*230 AD) were skilled horsemen who, if put to flight, would turn round and wreak havoc on their pursuers with 'parting' flights of arrows shot while they were in full gallop. But who would be expected to know that? **Parthian shot** is diminishing in the distance to a dot and **parting shot** has dug its heels in, determined to stay.

A parting shot: etymologically, a **forlorn hope** is not a hope but a 'troop' (as of soldiers) and it isn't in the least 'forlorn'. The phrase comes from Dutch **verloren hoop** — a 'lost heap' (i.e. 'troop') of soldiers, 'lost' in the sense 'doomed'. When the phrase first came into English, it referred to a body of specially picked men detached to the front to begin the attack. Thus in Leonard and Thomas Digges *An arithmeticall militarie treatise named Stratioticos* (1579): 'He [the commander] must also so order the Forlorn hope in ye [the] front of hys [his] Battayle with new supplies'. So too in John Dymmok *A treatise of Ireland* (1600): 'Before the vantguarde marched the forlorn hope'. (L. de) Gaya's *Art of War* (tr. 1678): 'Called the Forlorn Hope, because they... fall on first, and make a Passage for the rest'. As late as 1874 Leslie Stephen in *Hours in a Library* uses the phrase in this sense: 'Compelled to lead a forlorn hope up the scaling ladders'. In the plural, the phrase referred to the men who comprised this band of the doomed: Isaac Tullie *A narrative of the siege of Carlisle in 1644-45* (*c.*1645): 'Toppam had ye honour of ye forlorn hopes, and gave them a gallant charge'.

It is altogether understandable that the double Dutch of **verloren hoop** should have been Englished into **forlorn hope**, words which, in their pronunciation, are a spitting image of the Dutch. *OED's* earliest citation for this Betty Martined sense is 1641: Josias Shute *Sarah and Hagar: or Genesis the sixteenth chapter opened in xix. sermons*: 'If we sin, upon a presumption that we shall conceal either our actions or persons from God, it is a forlorn hope; our iniquities will finde us out'. And so, I suppose, they should.

I have given you only a small selection of the many Betty Martins there are. My favourite Betty Martiner would have to be the Roman grammarian Honoratus Maurus who did his grammaring at the end of the 4th century AD. He solemnly declared that the Latin word *lucus* ('a grove or wood', by definition a *shady* place) was derived from Latin *lucere* ('to shine, to be full of light') precisely because groves are *not* full of light. Now who could possibly out-Betty-Martin *that*?

# COLONIAL POETRY

**The two poems which follow were printed in the *Colonial Literary Journal* 1844, p.62.**

## A SONNET FROM THE GERMAN

**'Ich hab' ein kleines Hüttchen nur'**

**[FIRST TRANSLATION]**

I have a Cottage, in a nook,
'Tis on a verdant lea, —
A brook runs by, — a little brook
But clearer none can be.
Beside the Cottage stands a tree,
That hides it like a grove,
And shade and shelter yields to me,
To me and those I love.
And in that tree a nightingale
Sings still so sweet a song,
That all, who pass along the dale,
Listen and linger long.
My little one, so long my joy,
My fair-hair'd maiden, come,
And shield thee from the rising wind,
Within our Cottage-home!

**[SECOND TRANSLATION]**

I have a Bark Hut in the bush, —
A patch of maize to that, —
And after rain a creek will rush
Inundating the flat.
A wattle grows beside the hut,
And spotted gums conceal,
That frosts so cold and winds so hot
I scarcely ever feel.
And I have on the wattle there
A speaking Cocky-bird, —
And all who pass the Punt declare
The like they never heard.
My Jenny dear, that many a year
So well hast done for me,
Come in, here comes a brickfielder,
Let's have a pot of tea!

[We insert this at the request of an anonymous Correspondent, as we think the *Colonial* manner in which he has translated the Ode will amuse our country subscribers. — ED. *C.L.J.*]

Our 'anonymous correspondent' is no poet, but he has some feel for the developing Australian idiom. There are the obvious Australianisms: **bark hut**, **bush**, **wattle**, **spotted gums**, and **cocky-bird**. The term **brickfielder** derives from the name Brickfield Hill, a hill (in what is now central Sydney) where, until circa 1850, there was a large brickworks. In nineteenth century Sydney the term referred to a sudden squally wind from the south, bringing relief at the end of a hot day but sometimes characterised also by an accompanying storm of brickdust. Elsewhere in Australia the term was used by transference to describe a hot wind, usually from the north and accompanied by a dust-storm. It is this latter meaning which has survived into the twentieth century. **Creek**, too, is an Australianism as used here: in Britain it refers to a small bay or harbour on a sea-coast or a narrow inlet on a sea-coast or in a river-bank, whereas in Australia it came to mean any of various kinds of watercourse. The writer also picks up the Australian sense of **flat**. Elsewhere it means a piece of level ground, whereas in Australia it often refers to a stretch of level ground adjacent to a watercourse. **Maize**, of course, has now been superseded by 'corn' in Australia: in Britain 'corn' refers to the grain of any cereal crop such as wheat or oats.

# OZWORDS COMPETITIONS

## Ozwords Competition No. 5

Competitors were asked to write a small advertisement offering the Sydney Harbour Bridge (or some other desirable piece of the National Estate) to first home buyers or small investors.

The winner is punster Barry Knight of Queensland:

> BRIDGING FINANCE AVAILABLE
> Desperate Govt. Car(r)tel offers international landmark for sale. Cheap. Almost on rocks, close to liquidation. Coat-hanger design ideal for XXXXXOS fashions shop. Bottom-of-the-harbour schemes considered.


## Ozwords Competition No. 6: COLLECTIVE NOUNS

In her *Booke of St Albans*, Dame Juliana Berners (born *c.*1388), probably the Prioress of Sopwith Nunnery, wrote thus of collective nouns: *We say a congregacyon of people, a hoost of men, a felyshyppynge* [fellowship] *of yeomen, and a bevy of ladyes; we must speak of a herde of deer, swannys* [swans], *cranys* [cranes], *or wrenys* [wrens], *a sege* [siege] *of herons..., a muster of pecockes, a watche of nyghtyngales, a flyghte of doves, a clateryng* [clatter] *of choughs, a pryde of lyons, a slewth* [sloth] *of bears, a gagle of geys* [geese], *a skulke of foxes, a sculle of frerys* [a skull of friars], *a pontificalitye of prestys* [priests], *and a superfluyte of nonnes* [a superfluity of nuns]. A little more recently (1996), James Valentine asked listeners of his radio programme to invent a collective term for ferals: best offers were **a faction of ferals** and **a fornication of ferals**. One of the listeners to Matthew Abraham's radio show (1996) suggested **an amalgam of dentists**. What would be an apposite collective noun for collective nouns — a colligation? a confusion? a coleslaw? Competitors are asked to invent (and that's the operative word) a witty collective noun, preferably with a distinctively Aussie flavour or relevance (e.g. what might the collective noun be for Aussie Rulers, shiny bums, kangaroos?). There is no limit to the number of 'collectives' which may be included in an entry. The wittiest invention wins the prize:

($100 worth of books from
**Oxford University Press**).

*Entries close 31st January 1997.*

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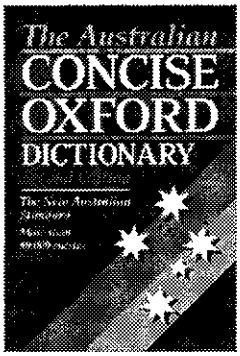


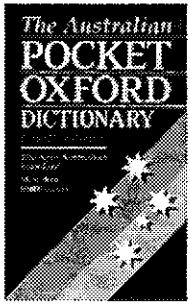


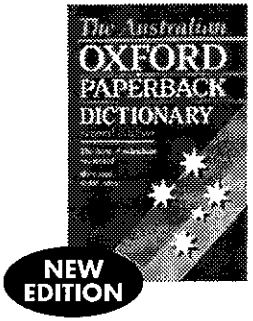



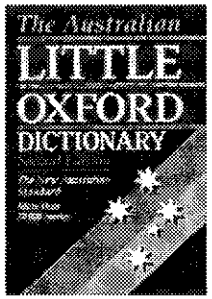


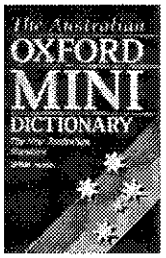


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