

THE ROMANCE OF WORDS

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The romance of words by Ernest Weekley

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ERNEST WEEKLEY

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OF WORDS**

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"Vous savez le latin, sans doute?"—

"Oui, mais faites comme si je ne le savais pas."

(MOLIÈRE, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, ii. 6.)

LONDON
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET, W.

1913

Annex
PE
1574
W41r
1913

PREFACE

A LONG and somewhat varied experience in language teaching has convinced me that there are still, in spite of the march of science, many people who are capable of getting intellectual pleasure from word-history. I hope that to such people this little book, the amusement of occasional leisure, will not be unwelcome. It differs, I believe, from any other popular book on language in that it deals essentially with the origins of words, and makes no attempt to enforce a moral. My aim has been to select especially the unexpected in etymology, "things not generally known," such as the fact that *Tammany* was an Indian chief, that *assegai* occurs in Chaucer, that *jilt* is identical with *Juliet*, that *brazil* wood is not named from *Brazil*, that to *curry favour* means to comb down a horse of a particular colour, and so forth. The treatment is made as simple as possible, a bowing acquaintance with Latin and French being all that is assumed, though words from many other languages are necessarily included. In the case of each word I have traced the history just so far back as it is likely to be of interest to the reader who is not a philological specialist.

I have endeavoured to state each proposition in its simplest terms, without enumerating all the reservations and indirect factors which belong to the history of almost every word.

The chapter headings only indicate in a general way the division of the subject matter, the arrangement of

which has been determined rather by the natural association which exists between words. The quotations are, with few exceptions, drawn from my own reading. They come from very varied sources, but archaic words are exemplified, when possible, from authors easily accessible, generally Shakespeare or Milton, or, for revived archaisms, Scott. In illustrating obsolete meanings I have made much use of the earliest dictionaries¹ available.

It seemed undesirable to load a small work of this kind with references. The writer on word-lore must of necessity build on what has already been done, happy if he can add a few bricks to the edifice. But philologists will recognise that this book is not, in the etymological sense, a mere compilation,² and that a considerable portion of the information it contains is here printed for the first time in a form accessible to the general reader. Chapter VII, on Semantics, is, so far as I know, the first attempt at a simple treatment of a science which is now admitted to an equality with phonetics, and which to most people is much more interesting.

Throughout I have used the *New English Dictionary*, in the etymological part of which I have for some years had a humble share, for purposes of verification. Without the materials furnished by the historical method of that great national work, which is now complete from A to R, this book would not have been attempted. For words in S to Z, I have referred chiefly to Professor Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary* (4th ed., Oxford, 1910).

¹ For a list of these see p. xli.

² *Compilatio*, "pillage, polling, robbing" (Cooper).

³ Among words on which the reader will find either entirely new information or a modification of generally accepted views are *akimbo*, *anlace*, *branks*, *caulk*, *cackney*, *felon* (a whitlow), *foil*, *kestrel*, *lugger*, *mulligrubs*, *mystery* (a craft), *oriel*, *patch*, *petronel*, *salet*, *sentry*, *sullen*, *tret*, etc.

It is not many years since what passed for etymology in this country was merely a congeries of wild guesses and manufactured anecdotes. The persistence with which these crop up in the daily paper and the class-room must be my excuse for "slaying the slain" in Chapter XIII. Some readers may regret the disappearance of these fables, but a little study will convince them that in the life of words, as in that of men, truth is stranger than fiction.

ERNEST WEEKLEY.

NOTTINGHAM, *January* 1912.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

ON its first publication this little book was very kindly treated by both reviewers and readers. The only criticism of any importance was directed against its conciseness. There seemed to be a consensus of expert opinion that, the book being intended for the non-specialist, the compression was a little too severe, and likely sometimes to lead to misunderstanding. I have tried to remedy this defect in the present edition, both by giving fuller explanations and by supplying further quotations in illustration of the less common words and uses. No absolutely new matter is introduced, but a number of fresh words have been added as examples of points already noticed. The general arrangement of the book remains unchanged, except that a few paragraphs have been shifted to what seemed more natural positions.

x PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Friendly correspondents in all parts of the world, to many of whom I must apologise for my failure to answer their letters, have sent me information of interest and value. In some cases I have been able to make use of such information for this edition. Many readers have called my attention to local and American survivals of words and meanings described as obsolete. This is a subject on which a great deal could be written, but it lies outside the plan of this book, which does not aspire to do more than furnish some instruction or entertainment to those who are interested in the curiosities of etymology.

ERNEST WEEKLEY.

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