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MY LIFE IN ETYMOLOGY

Abstract. "My life in etymology" is a story of a new etymological dictionary of English. The essay tells of how the project began and developed and how work on the dictionary engulfed its originator and became the culmination of his career in philology.

Few children decide that they want to write an etymological dictionary when they grow up, and this is a pity, because a project of such magnitude takes all the time one has on this earth. Several people realized quite early that life is short and began working on etymological dictionaries as students. Sigmund Feist and Manfred Mayrhofer are among them. But we also know that some luminaries managed to produce multiple editions of an exemplary etymological dictionary and do a lot of other things. Friedrich Kluge, Walter W. Skeat, and Jan de Vries immediately spring to mind in this connection. Ferdinand Holthausen cultivated a rather uninspiring style. Yet he brought out a series of etymological dictionaries, and one cannot but admire his accomplishment. De Vries had more leisure after the war than he needed, and that is why he succeeded in writing comprehensive etymological dictionaries of Old Norse and Modern Dutch (in addition to other books and articles). One is dwarfed by scholars of such stature, and, if I still dare say something about my modest achievements, it is only because I, very much in the spirit of a character in *The Children of Paradise*, "like my little life."

Born and educated in the former Soviet Union, as an undergraduate and later as an extramural graduate student, I had some exposure to etymology, for candidates specializing in Germanic were asked about such things during the Old English (Old High German, Old Icelandic) and especially the Gothic exam. I enjoyed the subject, but neither the requirements nor my understanding of etymology went beyond remembering a few cognates and explaining phonetic correspondences. Later, already in America, I regularly taught Gothic and learned something about word origins. Feist stopped scaring me and became an object of wonderment. Etymology became my principal occupation by chance. One day I was reading

a book on German dialects and ran into a word for 'goat' (I think it was *Hitte*) that sounded somewhat like Heiðrún, the name of the mythological goat in the *Edda*. The entry in De Vries made it clear that the origin of the Icelandic name had not been discovered (surprisingly, even the modern German name Heidrun has a disputable past). Then it occurred to me that Engl. *heifer*, though today pronounced with [hef-], may also have had *hei-* in the past. The plot thickened. I consulted Skeat and learned that *heifer* was, in principle, "a word of unknown etymology." Other easily available sources provided no information either. Since I wanted to find out whether *Heiðrún*, *heifer*, and perhaps *Hitte* were related, I tried to read everything written on the three words. Soon after I made that decision, I complained to my friend, a medievalist in the Department of English, that English dictionaries give no references to other works, Feist- or De Vries-like, and he asked me: "Have you looked up *heifer* in Wedgwood?" At that time, Wedgwood evoked in my memory only pictures of excellent china, but my friend, who was also a book collector, showed me an English etymological dictionary (second edition) by a man called Hensleigh Wedgwood. I figured out that the second edition must have been preceded by the first, but the greatest shock was the discovery of a totally new dictionary of English etymology. For years I had lived with Skeat and never bothered about his predecessors or competitors.

Large Midwestern universities have excellent libraries. This also holds for the University of Minnesota, where I have taught since my emigration to the United States in 1975. Thousands of old philological books and journals from all over the world can be found within walking distance of my office, but, much to my surprise, Wedgwood did not turn up among them. A look at various catalogs (I was not aware of a shorter route) told me that there had been four editions of Wedgwood's dictionary, and it is almost incomprehensible why my university managed to miss all of them. They soon came to me through the Interlibrary Loan. By that time I had, naturally, known the content of the entry in the second edition. It contained a tentative hypothesis quite different from Skeat's. I buried myself in bibliographies and discovered that finding publications on the origin of any word is hard. However, I managed to put together a semi-respectable reading list, accepted Wedgwood's conjecture on the origin of *hei-*, and half-heartedly agreed with what most people had said on *-fer*. *Hitte* and *Heiðrún* were easier to deal with thanks to *Deutscher Wortatlas* and De Vries's dictionary. It soon became clear that none of the three words – *heifer*, *Heiðrún*, and *Hitte* – was related to any of the others.

The work took me about half a year, and I realized that, if I ever embarked on another experiment of a similar type, a few dozen words later I would be dead, with little to show for my efforts. My adventure (in honor of Heiðrún I called it "Operation 'Getting One's Goat'") opened my eyes to the woeful inadequacy of English etymological dictionaries. Walde-Pokorny, Feist, Walde-Hofmann,

Vasmer, Feist, and their likes offer the user a broad panorama of earlier research with multiple references (Feist is especially, almost obsessively, exhaustive), so that one can pick up where the author or editor left off. By contrast, after reading Skeat, one comes away full of his ideas and very little else. He gave multiple references to dictionaries of foreign languages and Brugmann's *Grundriß*, occasionally registered his indebtedness to Curtius or his disagreement with Wedgwood, but almost never mentioned journal articles. For this reason, we do not know how much he read. Although his erudition was immense, it was not for nothing that the Germans complained of his partial neglect of their discoveries. Other dictionaries are much worse, because they lack Skeat's wisdom and brilliance and usually do not go beyond recycling the *OED*. Weekley is the only exception, but he too, even when he had an original opinion, did without the so-called history of the question. The time, I said to myself, was ripe for producing "an English Feist," and there appeared to be no one but me to undertake the writing of it. This is how, more or less accidentally, "my life in etymology" began.

I was over fifty when my chase for heifers partly took me away from historical phonology, Germanic accents, Scandinavian myths, Russian poetry, and many other things with which I had occupied myself for decades, and I entertained no illusions about the feasibility of my prospective undertaking. I suggested to my friend, the owner of Wedgwood's second edtion, that we write the dictionary together. He agreed, but a year later he moved to Texas and, although he remained my nominal co-author, he could help me only with the preparation of the manuscript for the press and advice on multifarious matters.

I devised the following plan. Hundreds of English words have easily recognizable cognates in other Indo-European languages (numerals and kin term are among them). English dictionaries do not enlighten the reader about the literature on *nine* or *father*, but many venues exist to find it. Some words are Common Germanic (for instance, *wife* and *bride*), without congeners elsewhere, even though it has been suggested more than once that they are not "purely" Germanic. By using the etymological dictionaries of German, Dutch, and the Scandinavian languages, a historical linguist can get access to the most basic works on the origin of those words. The rest, as chess players say, is a matter of technique: by following footnotes, one will be able to find most of the relevant literature. Then there are words with one or two cognates in Germanic (in Dutch, Frisian, or Norwegian, to mention just three languages). *Colt* seems to be such. This case is harder, but, in principle, it resembles the previous one. Finally, some words, like *heifer*, are really isolated. To be sure, numerous attempts have been made to find siblings for them from Sanskrit to Swedish, but none of them carries conviction. The lack of cognates need not surprise anyone: why not coin words from the requisite stock-in-trade? English slang, to give the best-known example, is based largely on internal resources. And of course, English is full of borrowed words. The line separating

those groups is well-defined only in theory. As already noted, *wife* and *bride* may have connections outside Germanic, and the same holds for *colt*. By contrast, a word, considered to be Common Indo-European, may, on closer inspection, lose its siblings and find itself in (partial) isolation. A supposedly native word may turn out to be borrowed, while a word classified with borrowings may emerge as a native formation. But a rough division into the groups outlined above need not be called into question.

Borrowings, especially from Greek, Latin, and French, interested me least of all. I lack the expertise to solve the riddle of *nectar*, *hostis*, or *bigot* and in my capacity as an outsider am happy to record persuasive ideas by experts (this is what happened in my wanderings around *bigot*: see below). Words taken over from non-Indo-European languages piqued Skeat's curiosity, and the editors of the *OED* also discussed them because they had to say something about every item they included. In the absence of Skeat's, Murray's and other great scholars' encyclopedic knowledge (to say nothing of the absence of consultants), I have to live up to my limitations and feel moderately comfortable only with the material that I know well (this is not an exercise in sham humility but a statement of fact). *Bride*, *wife*, and *colt* are of course my "turf;" however, students of their origin have reference works that will give them an initial push. The true orphans of English etymology, its real dregs, are the words without any established cognates. Their origin is obscure just because they are isolated, and in the literature (once it is discovered!) reasonable hypotheses on their derivation vie with fantasies by overbold specialists and innocent amateurs. Dictionaries usually dismiss them with the verdict "of unknown/uncertain/disputable origin." I decided that I would produce my dictionary in several installments and begin with the "dregs." This decision confronted me with two tasks. First, a list of the "dregs" had to be compiled. Second, the literature on them had to be found, for, to repeat, I aimed at producing "an English Feist." Every entry was supposed to open with a survey of everything said on the word. At that stage, I could not predict whether I would be able to offer a single original solution (when a word defies the efforts of many scholars for a long time, the chance of breaking the deadlock is slim) or whether my achievement would be confined to sifting and evaluating the existing opinions.

The first task was relatively easy to complete. I read *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (*ODEE*); other people read two more "thick" dictionaries, and we came up with about fifteen hundred words worthy of discussion. This list can be expanded or shortened. A good deal of slang, recent and old, is of unknown origin. The same can be said about the huge vocabulary gathered in Joseph Wright's *The English Dialect Dictionary*. Of necessity, I stayed away from volatile and dated slang and regional English (British, North American, Australian, etc.). Among the words of unknown origin, featured in the *ODEE*, I also found many words of little interest and excluded them. My list remains in a state of flux, but I think that

I will try to write approximately 800 entries. It is amazing how many common words ended up among those chosen. *Boy* and *girl*, *lad* and *lass*, *Cockney* and *cub*, *heather* and *oat*, *hemlock* and *horehound*, *adz(e)* and *key*, *awning* and *tarpaulin*, *yet* and *ever*, and so it goes.

The incredibly hard task consisted in amassing the literature on the origin of English words. To do that, we (I'll later define the pronoun) first looked through all the existing bibliographies and began copying the articles whose titles held out some promise. But titles are often non-informative or misleading. "Etymologisches," "Etymological Notes," "How Are Words Related," and others of the same type do not even say which language will be discussed in them (quite often words of many languages are included). Contributions to *Festschriften* and miscellanies tend to be "cute," rather than informative. And then, one never knows whether an article on German, Frisian, and Dutch or even Greek, Latin, and Hittite will mention something useful for an English etymologist. It is necessary to read or look them through. Any article on the laryngeals, any discussion of French slang, any review of a book on historical phonetics may contain a footnote that will illuminate an opaque English word. A treasure trove of guesses and hypotheses is buried in popular journals. *Notes and Queries*, including its numerous local offshoots, is the most important of them, but it would have been a serious mistake to ignore *The Gentleman's Magazine*, *The Saturday Review*, *The Essex Review*, *The Nation*, or *The Cheshire Sheaf*. Bibliographies have passed them by. Scholarly and sometimes popular journals in at least twenty languages had to be screened, because not too many English etymologists open a periodical in Russian, Polish, Czech, or Bulgarian. Even though my intention was to write a dictionary of English etymological waifs, I decided that the bibliography had to be all-inclusive. In hunting down articles, *father*, *three*, *bride*, *wife*, *colt*, *heifer*, and even *bigot* and *nectar* were declared to be of equal value. I passed by only such articles as dealt primarily with Greek and Latin, even if they ended up in English. Later I softened my approach and began to take notice of words like *armada* but only to the extent that the publications treated their development in English.

Even within the field of Germanic philology, publications in Dutch, Frisian, Icelandic, and Faroese seldom attract English scholars. A fully convincing etymology of an English word, as I discovered, may have been offered in a Swedish journal and fallen by the wayside (though among the modern Scandinavian languages Swedish is perhaps the best known). The most typical example is the origin of *cocktail*. It was explained in *Moderna språk*, and there it stayed, a buried treasure. Later the same etymology was rediscovered with great fanfare by two more scholars, neither of whom realized that he was doing useless work. Not too long ago, Cosijn's *Notes on Beowulf* were translated into English from Dutch. Evidently, few Anglo-Saxonists in the English speaking world could read them in the original. It would be sheer hypocrisy to pretend that the language

barrier does not exist for linguists. I know from bitter experience that publications on Germanic subjects written in the Slavic languages exist only for "inner consumption." A distinguished scholar would hate to admit that he is not fluent in Tocharian B, but a footnote to the effect that he is aware of several publications in Russian but, unfortunately, could not read them does not embarrass him or his readers. Welsh, Lithuanian, and Finnish are deader to those who do not specialize in them than Pictish. That is why it was so important to drag the relevant publications from their undeserved oblivion and make their content or at least their existence widely known.

Nor is the ignorance of "exotic" foreign languages the only barrier on the way to successful etymology. As noted above, information on the history of words is hidden so well that no one can retrieve it without the existence of a detailed bibliography. Convincing solutions may exist, but they are hidden at the bottom of an ocean. Several years ago, I made an attempt to solve the riddle of the word *slang* and discovered that its origin had been explained at the end of the nineteenth century in a small provincial British journal, where no one noticed it. Neither would I have found it without a footnote in a relatively recent work, whose author did not appreciate the worth of what he had read. A similar story can be told about *dwarf*. Kluge almost reconstructed its most likely protoform in the first edition of his dictionary but later gave up his idea and favored a seemingly more "prestigious" (and utterly fanciful) Indo-European derivation. As a result, it mixed with tons of etymological dust until I excavated it. A truly excellent etymology of *bigot* turned up in a review of the first edition of Wartburg-Bloch's French etymological dictionary. Even the two authors do not seem to have read it. In any case, the subsequent revisions repeat the verdict "origine inconnue."

Obviously, I could not work my way through such a mass of articles and needed assistants, which means that the project required funding. I had no unrealistic expectations about completing the work I had undertaken, but I had no idea how hard it would be to get money for what looked to me and everybody around me like a worthy project. My university supported me at once and gave me a small grant that enabled me to hire undergraduates whom I sent to the library to screen *Anglia*, *English Studies*, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, and other periodicals that did not contain too much dense material on Indo-European. Since I teach in the Department of German, Scandinavian and Dutch, some seniors were not tied to English. I read what they copied and marked the articles for words. The words were entered into the computer. The student sitting at the computer also had to be paid. Even a sweatshop requires some capital. The grants I received could be renewed only twice. Fortunately, the President and the Vice-president of the University of Minnesota gave me small sums from their discretionary funds, and this is how I stayed alive for five years, supporting

students, paying computer specialists (a costly program had to be installed), and copying hundreds of pages.

Advertising by the University brought me volunteers, and I found out something that came as a minor revelation to me. In all spheres of life, the nineteenth century tended to die hard, but with respect to Brugmann's or Meillet's type of scholarship by roughly the 1930's it had been over. Historical linguistics lost to structuralism (which, as a general rule, cared more about synchrony than about diachrony) and breathed its last in the storms of the Chomskyan revolution. To be sure, in numerous works allophones continued to be phonologized, the laryngeal hypothesis became the laryngeal theory, many active scholars went on publishing articles and books on Hittite, Tocharian, and Greek, and works on Nostratic and the homeland of the Indo-European kept appearing every year, but in Academia *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte*, if one may call the Neo-Grammarian and post-Neo-Grammarian epochs by the title of Hermann Paul's book, gave way to Theory with capital T. It disdained history and looked on the past as the Dark Ages. Today one can major in English or German (at least in the United States) and bypass even minimal exposure to *Beowulf*, Chaucer, or the *Nibelungenlied*. The situation is not much better at the graduate level, for there too the favorite catchwords are *modern*, *postmodern*, *film*, *deconstruction*, *immigrant culture*, *gender studies*, *globalization*, *sustainability*, and so forth. There are no jobs for the few newly-minted Ph.D.'s with dissertations on the older periods, and, when departments say *field open*, they hasten to add that applicants with specialization in the media will be given preference (and this is what invariably happens). Although enthusiasts still offer undergraduate courses in etymology, those are never required.

Fortunately (and here comes the revelation), the public knows little or nothing about the latest trends in Academia. Today, as two thousand and two hundred years ago, people want to know where words come from. Their interests are usually limited: most ask about the derivation of slang, idioms, and family names, but quite often they are curious about less obvious things. I learned all that much later, after I became a regular host at the Minnesota Public Radio and a weekly contributor to the blog "The Oxford Etymologist" on the website of Oxford University Press. In the early days of my project, I was surprised by the influx of volunteers. Men and women came from all walks of life. Former executives, retired librarians, nurses, janitors, parking lot attendants, editors, students, and many, many others expressed an interest in becoming part of the team, and, when I asked them why they had responded to my appeal, the answer was invariably the same: "I have always loved words." Some would remark that they hated their current jobs. There was of course no remuneration except that I promised to list their names in the dictionary in the section "Acknowledgments" (which I did when the bibliography appeared in print). Some volunteers stayed for a year, some a bit longer or a bit shorter, and one of the first never left. All of them were sent to the library to screen English language

popular journals (only one volunteer could read Dutch, and one was a native Swede), and it is to them that I owe thousands of entries from *Notes and Queries*, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, *The Academy*, *The Nation*, *The Literary Gazette*, multifarious "Reviews," and a long string of "Transactions."

All this time my friend from Texas and I kept bombarding the National Endowment for the Humanities with applications. They had to be submitted in spring or summer, and in due time they were rejected. It is surprising how little sympathy they evoked. Wherever I spoke about the prospective dictionary, I heard only words of encouragement, but the anonymous referees did not conceal their contempt of it. I learned that the world already had more than enough etymological dictionaries of English, that the *OED* made additional work in this direction unnecessary, that my choice of English words of undiscovered origin was wrong (because the purpose of etymology is to trace words to their most ancient roots, while most of the vocabulary I selected was too recent to interest the broad community of Indo-European scholars), that nothing in my education testified to my familiarity with Sanskrit and Greek (so how could I pretend that I was qualified for the task?), that I did not represent mainstream linguistics, that, if one divided the number of dollars I requested by the number of words I was going to discuss, the result would amount to robbing taxpayers of their hard-earned money, and that here was clearly a project that would culminate in a heap of Xeroxed paper and nothing more. Every year I asked for smaller and smaller sums (with the total exclusion of compensation for myself) and showed visible signs of progress. My ultimate achievement was the verdict: "Has merit; does not deserve funding." At that stage I called it a day. (A postscript for the uninitiated. Putting together an application requires an immense effort and is more time consuming than writing a dozen etymologies. The bureaucratic hurdles are many and useless, and the money must be spent in two years, instead of being stretched according to the investigator's needs.) "If I survive my well-contented day…" I do not know whether I will outlive my dictionary or whether it will be left in the middle. I only know that, if I had been given a small crew of assistants (one postdoc, one constantly working graduate student, and two undergraduates), the multivolume set would already have been produced. But I have no idea what taxpayers, that semi-mythical group of concerned citizens, might have said.

The project would have died in its infancy, but for a miracle that happened twice. A local philanthropist heard my plea and gave me a substantial sum of money. When years later I came to the end of it, an out-of-state benefactor of the humanities gave me even more, and it is on this second gift that I subsist, knowing that I will never get anything else as long as I live. Minor miracles should not be excluded. Last year the owners of a small foundation offered me enough to support a graduate student for one semester, half-time, but a major project cannot thrive on peanuts, so I hold on to what I have. Beggars can't be choosers.

The scramble for money described above, though it left a bitter aftertaste, was only an irritating background of "my life in etymology." After all, I never stayed without temporary support, and for myself I needed no payment, because I did everything in my "free time" (in "my copious free time," as the conversational formula goes). The real work progressed very well. Ernst A. Ebbinghaus, the then editor of the journal *General Linguistics* started a series "Etymological Studies" to which I sent regular contributions. The first two of them were devoted to *heifer* and *Heiðrún*. Since that time I have discovered what looks like the true origin of *-fer*, but I am still satisfied with my treatment of *Heiðrún*. My contacts with *General Linguistics* ended only with Ebbinghaus's death. I attended many conferences and congresses (with the subsequent publication of my talks in the proceedings) and made the prospect of bringing out a new etymological dictionary known. Additionally, I visited the seats of three major dictionaries then in preparation: *The Dictionary of American Regional English* (*DARE*) in Madison, Wisconsin (Fred Cassidy was still active, and *DARE*'s team remained my lifelong friends), *The Dictionary of Old English Dictionary* in Toronto, and *The Middle English Dictionary* in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Everywhere I was received most cordially and came away with heaps of useful information, but *DARE*, *DOE*, and *MED* were huge and financially successful enterprises, while I could not boast of even the proverbial shoestring budget.

The more articles I read (and I read them literally by the hundred), the clearer it was becoming to me that the familiar phrase *of unknown etymology* should be taken with a huge grain of salt. Dictionaries developed the evasive phrases *of uncertain etymology*, *of questionable etymology*, and *of disputable etymology*, which sound more scholarly and perhaps less offputting than *of unknown etymology*. But what do all of them (except of *disputable etymology*) mean? If we dig deep enough, almost every etymology will become questionable or even unknown. Engl. *table* is "unquestionably" from French, while French *table* is "unquestionably" from Latin, but the origin of Latin *tabula* remains a riddle. Everything depends on how far the researcher is ready to go. Very few words have fully ascertainable origins. Perhaps *moo* is such, but even sound imitative words can be borrowed. If the source of an idiom (for instance, *to sow one's wild oats*) is lost, there is nothing to say about it. But why is *oat* called a word of unknown etymology? The answer is clear: because no agreement on its origin has been reached, even though, in my opinion, the case is far from hopeless. While sifting through multiple conjectures on the history of *oat* and its likes, I realized that the compilers of "thick" dictionaries do not know enough to make informed opinions about the controversial part of the vocabulary and safeguard themselves by sending us away with nothing. They play safe, and, no doubt, it is better to be safe than sorry. Also, no etymology is preferable to a wrong one.

It would be unrealistic to expect that the editors of Webster's or of *The Random House Dictionary*, for whom etymology is at best one twentieth of their work, can read dozens of articles on each hard word or open multiple editions of old dictionaries to get a clear picture of the state of the art. At one time, solid dictionaries used to hire consultants and entrusted them with revising the etymologies. This was not a bad idea, except that even the best consultants did not have a database of the type I have compiled and also felt lost when it came to offering a new version of a traditional etymology. As a result, they either replaced a dubious hypothesis with "origin unknown" or inserted their own pet hypothesis, or made use of the latest suggestion by a noted specialist only because it was recent. Noah Webster had all kinds of ideas on the origin of words. He was a great man and an inspired scholar, but his etymologies were often absurd, and, as time went on, they became an embarrassment. In 1864 C.A.F. Mahn, a German student of Romance word history (!), revised Webster's etymologies. He was so successful that that edition is often referred to as Webster-Mahn. I wonder whether today anyone would dare to undertake such a task.

Gradually it became clear to me that I had to consult all the editions of all the relevant dictionaries, and a time consuming labor of obtaining and copying old editions began. A study of sources made me aware of the fact that Wedgwood's was by far not the only etymological dictionary of English I had never seen. I had to go to the beginning of the seventeenth century to trace the history of English etymological lexicography. At present I have Xeroxed copies of several hundred books, and the University of Minnesota bought and copied a few volumes for me. All those who have done bibliographical work will appreciate what it means to amass such a collection. A single example will suffice. Our library had neither of the two editions of Eduard Müller's and none of the four editions of Wedgwood's dictionary. It even managed to lose the first edition of Webster's *International*, though its holdings, as I have already said, are extremely rich (it is not for nothing that Friedrich Klaeber spent most of his professional life on our campus). Every time I set about writing an etymology I look up the citations in my database and open all the dictionaries and books in my carrel. As is well-known, only some dictionaries have word indexes. Soon after I started work on my project, I hired a student who indexed the main "thick" etymological dictionaries of the Scandinavian and some other languages for the English words mentioned in them, and I have indexed more than a hundred books myself.

It will be remembered that, according to one of my referees, the project was supposed to result in a heap of Xeroxed paper. He (she?) was partly right, but "the Xeroxed paper" was a means, not the end. The files in my office feature over 15,000 words culled from over 23,000 publications in approximately twenty languages. The writing of every entry begins with a critical survey of that literature. It happens more than once that among the many attempts to explain the origin of a

hard word, not a single conjecture sounds convincing but that I can piece together parts of different guesses and end up with a satisfactory hypothesis. As noted above, at the beginning of my work, I could not know whether it would be within my powers to make any discoveries. However, Feist's example had taught me that a close look at all the previous guesses is a reward in itself. At the very least, it either shows the way forward or makes it clear that we have reached a dead end. That is why my ability to say something new, however rarely, was a pleasant surprise. My personal contribution to etymology has been very modest, but perhaps it is not negligible. I dug up the forgotten suggestions on *bigot*, *dwarf*, and *slang* and developed them. I combined other people's little-known ideas on *skedaddle*, *ragamuffin*, *mooch ~ mug*, and *yet* and offered what looks like acceptable solutions. I hope to have shown where the adverb *ever* came from, and so forth. It is a widow's mite, but, again repeating myself, I can say that, if an intractable word has refused to reveal its secret to an army of researchers, it would be sheer arrogance to expect that I would come and write back to the Senate *veni*, *vidi*, *vici*.

I have often been criticized for using very old dictionaries and books and heard the same puzzled question: "Who needs that antiquated stuff?" Naturally, the referees also reminded me that etymology could be divided into two periods (prescientific, before the discovery of sound laws, and modern) and added that consulting antiquated sources was a waste of time. However, the truth is more complicated. By definition, sound laws are needed when a word has putative cognates (then incompatible forms can be weeded out because they violate the "laws") or a long written history, though in the second case dialect mixture and other factors may disrupt what is considered as regular development. Even while dealing with cognates, we often confront so-called *Restformen*, *Mischformen*, putative baby words, expressive and ludic forms, taboo, and so forth. But numerous other words are also seemingly rootless. This holds for probably 90% of slang and neologisms. The Neo-Grammarian algebra affords no help in such cases. *Awning* appeared suddenly in the seventeenth century, and no one knew who coined it. The situation has not improved since that time. Consequently, we have no advantage over Stephen Skinner, whose posthumous etymological dictionary of English appeared in 1671. He could even have known more about such a recent word than we do.

Two more considerations are important. In the past, etymologies were often proposed by educated people rather than professional linguists. In England, most of them were country squires and pastors, respectable antiquarians and the owners of excellent libraries. They knew Greek and Latin better than they knew the history of English, but they had read many old books and remembered what they had read. The pastors, intimately familiar with the dialect of their parish, occasionally offered quite reasonable derivations of local words. Skeat used to berate his contemporaries for their laziness and inability to understand that etymology needed knowledge rather than inspiration. He was of course right, but I have read

almost 8,000 letters to *Notes and Queries* and have sincere admiration for many contributors. Frank Chance was a medical doctor who did not demur at taking on Skeat and Murray, and both respected his opinion. Colonel Prideaux had almost no rivals in his command of Colonial (mainly Indian) English. I have a long list of such names. The second consideration is this. Researchers, independently of their level of sophistication, tend to reinvent old etymologies (see the story of *cocktail* and *slang*, above). A good knowledge of old works (dictionaries, books, articles, reviews, letters to the editor, and so forth), in addition to saving one from reinventing the wheel and repeating other people's mistakes, reveal the history of human thought in this single, admittedly limited, area of knowledge, and I believe that learning how humanity reaches the truth is as instructive as unearthing correct solutions. I may add that even in the most useless work one may sometimes find a lucky guess or a valuable reference to a recondite source. Once, while reading an unusually silly old book, I ran into a comparison of Engl. *thrush* (the name of a disease) and Gothic *þrutsfill* ~ Old Engl. *þrustfell* 'leprosy.' This comparison had not occurred to anyone, and even Feist was not aware of it. I found the comparison fruitful and wrote an article on the Germanic word in which I tried to prove that the vowel *u* in *þruts-* was short, that the word had nothing to do with "rotten," and that the Old English form was more authentic than its Gothic cognate. In the work I am doing, all is grist that comes to my mill and the policy of scorched earth pays off.

One's life in etymology is full of adventure. The history of words is, by definition, the history of ideas, institutions, and material things. The concept of *Wörter und Sachen* is much broader than even Rudolf Meringen thought. Thanks to my work, I learned a million things that would otherwise never have come to my attention. Unexpectedly, I delved into the history of leprosy. To explore the origin of *Lilliputian*, I had to study the catalogs of Swift's library, the translations of Catullus into English, and the first editions of his poetry in Italy. The history of *trot*, *mooch*, and *fag* brought me into contact with the coining of names by Dickens (Trotwood, Miss Mowcher, and Fagin). Time and again I had to study the literature on Shakespeare, because a certain obscure word might occur in his plays and a host of commentators had thought of its meaning and origin (this happened to *aroint* and *Cockney*, among others). In search of solutions I stumbled upon ancient Latin dictionaries and Greek lexicons, much used in the past but now known only to Classical scholars, leafed through the crumbling pages of *The Spectator* and seventeenth-century descriptions of New England, and studied the biography of Dutch philologists. Deep water fishes and poisonous plants suddenly required my attention. Myths and folktales, long vowels and voiced fricatives, unproductive suffixes, and iconicity – everything comes in useful while trying to penetrate the history of words. An etymologist walks with Jacob Grimm and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Brugmann, Meillet, and Benveniste. Plato waves him from afar. Who else can boast of such companionship?

Those interested in learning more about my work can consult my three books: *Word Origins… and How We Know Them: Etymology for Everyone*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005 (there also is a 2012 revised paperback edition), *An Analytic Dictionary of English Etymology: An Introduction* (2008) and *A Bibliography of English Etymology* (2010). The dictionary and the bibliography were published by the University of Minnesota Press (Minneapolis and London). Also, every Wednesday my blog (*The Oxford Etymologist*) appears on the website of Oxford University Press.

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