



Dictionary of Word Origins: Histories of More Than 8,000 English-Language Words

John Ayto

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With over 8000 entries, and written for the general market, this volume uncovers the often surprising connections between words. Written in a clear and informative style, the dictionary describes the Indo-European origins of English and includes many new words and coinages adopted each year.

Dictionary of Word Origins: Histories of More Than 8,000 English-Language Words Details

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Author : John Ayto

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Melanie says

One of my favorite books ever. EVER. I made my dad buy it for me for Christmas my eleventh grade year.

Thom Dunn says

Wonderfully readable--i.e. legible--etymologies. It could be better: it could be bigger.

Bmankiewicz says

Paperback in good shape. Pages are yellowed. 582 pages. No markings.

Warwick says

One of the better etymological dictionaries of English, not because it's especially comprehensive but on the contrary because it takes a smallish selection (around 8,000 words only) and treats each entry in detail. Unlike traditional dictionaries of this kind, which work backwards in time, Ayto begins at the beginning and works forwards, which has the effect of revealing the etymology to be a kind of narrative. Look up **ginger**, for instance, in a classic like Skeat 1884 and you'll get this:

Ginger, the root of a certain plant. (F.—L.—Gk.—Skt.) M. E. *ginger*, *gingeuere* (=gingever).—O. F. *gengibre* (F. *gingembre*).—L. *zingiber*.—Gk. ζιγγ?βερις.—Skt. *çriṅgavera*, ginger; lit. 'horn-shaped,' from the horns on it.—Skt. *çriṅga*, a horn; *vera*, a body.

This is a model that has been followed by most similar works. The story can be unpicked here (with reference to the table of abbreviations), but Ayto explains things naturally and with context.

ginger [OE] Few foodstuffs can have been as exhaustively etymologized as *ginger* – Professor Alan Ross, for instance, begetter of the U/non-U distinction, wrote an entire 74-page monograph on the history of the word in 1952. And deservedly so, for its ancestry is extraordinarily complex. Its ultimate source was Sanskrit *?rṅgav?ram*, a compound formed from *?rṅgam* 'horn' and *v?ra-* 'body'; the term was applied to 'ginger' because of the shape of its edible root. This passed via Prakrit *singab?ra* and Greek *ziggiberis* into Latin as *zinziberi*. In

post-classical times the Latin form developed to *gingiber* or *gingiver*, which Old English borrowed as *gingifer*. English reborrowed the word in the 13th century from Old French *gingivre*, which combined with the descendant of the Old English form to produce Middle English *gingivere* – whence modern English *ginger*.

This approach means that, while this can be hit-and-miss as a pure reference work, its value in terms of browsing pleasure is very high: it is written to be read, not deciphered. Instead of allowing the headline, as it were, to emerge from the history, Ayto gives it to you straight at the start: so, ‘*Sycophants* are etymologically “fig-showers”’, he tells us; or ‘*Whisky* denotes etymologically “water of life”’; or, ‘Etymologically, a *pencil* is a “little penis”.’

One of my favourite etymologies, which I'm sure I learnt from this book, is that of **porcelain**, which, as Ayto compellingly begins, ‘leads us back to a pig's vagina’:

It was originally applied to fine china in Italian, as *porcellana*. This meant literally ‘cowrie shell,’ and was used for the china in allusion to its shell-like sheen. *Porcellana* was a derivative of *porcella* ‘little sow,’ a diminutive form of *porca* ‘sow’ (to which English *pork* is related), and was applied to cowrie shells because they supposedly resembled the external genitalia of female pigs.

Once read, impossible to forget...

Admittedly I am slightly obsessed with etymologies; there are few conversations I don't walk away from thinking, ‘That's a funny word; I wonder where that comes from?’, and the first thing I buy when I'm learning a new language is a good etymological dictionary, since normal translating dictionaries can easily be substituted with online tools nowadays. Still, by focusing on eye-catching stories and clear readability, I reckon a book like this has wide appeal even if you don't normally care much about the subject. It's endlessly fascinating, and a good example of when less, in reference works, can sometimes be more.

Cami says

A fun reference for those who enjoy the history of words

Joshua says

Endlessly fascinating for anyone interested in language.

Beorn says

A surprisingly enjoyable read that, well, does exactly what it says on the label.

What I like most about this book is that it is written in an easily accessible, almost friendly manner with a good history of each word's origins whilst including all the necessary constituents and bits necessary to further research the paths and conduits of modern language that the word took.

Admittedly this probably has a fairly limited market to those with an interest in etymology but it's easily the best book I've found on etymology and is easy to dip in and out of whenever your curiosity gets tweaked and you want to look a certain word up.

I have no idea if this is even in print any more as I picked it up at a charity shop, but if you have an interest in historical languages or etymology and see this somewhere, I heartily recommend picking it up!
