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978-1-108-06167-4 - The Sailor's Word-Book: An Alphabetical Digest of Nautical Terms

William Henry Smyth Revised by Edward Belcher

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION.

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WHAT'S in a word? is a question which it is held clever to quote and wise to think unanswerable: and yet there is a very good answer, and it is—a meaning, if you know it. But there is another question, and it is, What's a word in? There is never a poor fellow in this world but must ask it now and then with a blank face, when aground for want of a meaning. And the answer is—a dictionary, if you have it. Unfortunately, there may be a dictionary, and one may have it, and yet the word may not be there. It may be an old dictionary, and the word a new one; or a new dictionary, and the word an old one; a grave dictionary, and the word a slang one; a slang dictionary, and the word a grave one; and so on through a double line of battle of antitheses. Such is assuredly matter for serious cogitation: and voluntarily to encounter those anomalous perplexities requires no small amount of endurance, for the task is equally crabbed and onerous, without a ray of hope to the pioneer beyond that of making himself humbly useful. This brings me to my story.

Many years ago, I harboured thoughts of compiling a kind of detailed nautical vade mecum; but a lot of other irons already in the fire marred the project. Still the scheme was backing and filling, when the late

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Major Shadwell Clerke—opening the year 1836 in the *United Service Journal*—fired off the following, to me, unexpected announcement:—

“A Nautical Dictionary, or Cyclopædia of Naval Science and Nomenclature, is still a desideratum. That of Falconer is imperfect and out of date. We have heard that the design of such a work has been entertained, and materials for its execution collected, by Captain W. H. Smyth, whom we earnestly recommend to prosecute an undertaking of such promise to the service of which he is so experienced and distinguished a member—it could not be in more competent hands.”

This broad hint must have been signalled by the gallant Major in the way of a stimulating fillip, and accordingly it aroused considerable attention. Among those who were excited by the notification was my friend Captain Basil Hall, who wrote to me from Paris a few days afterwards—13th of January, 1836—in these words:

“I read a day or two ago, in the *United Service Journal*, that you had some thoughts of preparing a Nautical Dictionary for publication; and from your connection with that journal, or at least your acquaintance with our friend the editor, I am led to fear that the report may be true. You will understand the use of the word *fear* when I tell you that, for nearly three years, *my* own thoughts have turned in the same direction, and I have been busily preparing for a task to which I meant to buckle to with a will, and to which I meant to devote some four or five years of exclusive diligence. What I am anxious to know, as soon as may be, is the fact of your having undertaken a similar work, *or not*. For I assure you I am not so foolish, nor so insensible either to my own peace of mind or my own reputation; nor am I so careless of your good opinion and regard, as to enter the lists with you. I repeat, neither my feelings nor my judgment would permit me in any way to cross your hawse, if indeed, as I too much fear, you have got before me. There is one other man in the service besides yourself, and only one, with whom no consideration would induce me to enter into competition—and that is Beaufort—but his hands, I presume, are full enough, and I had somehow imagined yours were too. So much so, that you were one of the first men I meant to consult on my return to England, and to beg assistance from. I should not have minded the competition of any one else, but I am not so vain as to suppose that I could do the thing as well as either of you—and therefore, even if I were not restrained by motives of personal friendship, I should never dream of risking my reputation

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for professional, scientific, or literary attainments by a struggle in which I should certainly be worsted."

To this hearty and laudatory interpellation, an immediate reply was returned, stating that I had long held the subject in view, but that other weighty avocations occasioned its hanging fire, and had compelled me to suspend it *sine die*. Still I considered such a work necessary to the current wants, as well those of seafarers as of the landsmen who evince a taste for nautical matters; and that, from his profession and literary prowess, I knew of no one better fitted for the task than himself—adding that, under the emergency, my papers were at his service, and I would occasionally give him such personal aid as might lie in my power. This was acknowledged in a long explicatory letter, of which the following are extracts:—

"I trust I know the value of a compliment as well as any man, and I can say, with perfect truth, that in the whole of my career (such as it has been), professional, scientific, or literary, no compliment—I may say no circumstance—has occurred which has given me so much honest gratification as your letter of the 3d. I know you are a man not to say what you do not truly think, nor to express yourself strongly where you have not observed carefully. I shall therefore not disclaim your compliment, but rather seek, in a kindred spirit, to work up to the mark which you assign me—and which I know but too well how far I am short of.

"I do hope, indeed, that as you say, 'we may row in the same boat without catching crabs;' but of this I am quite resolved, not to cross your hawse, nor to interfere with your project, which you have alluded to as having already commenced. That is to say, I shall not interfere unless I can be of use to it and to you, and with your full concurrence, and, as I hope, your companionship. \* \* \* \*

"What I should propose would be, that you should furnish the professional technicalities in all the different branches, and that I should endeavour to popularize them. Here and there—as in the matter of Navigation—I also might intrude with some few technicalities. But generally speaking it would be you who should provide the real solid stuff, and I who should attempt to dress it up so as to be intelligible *beyond* the limits of the sea-service; and also to be intelligible to those young persons whom it is very important to instruct in general and even popular views, but for whom it would be needless to write a new elementary treatise. \* \* \* \*

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“This is a sketch of my plan. What think you of it? I must add one thing, however, that you must be the senior officer on the occasion. I shall act in all this matter, and in the most perfect good faith, as your subordinate.”

In responding to this full and frank overture, I entered into a few more particulars respecting my progress and purpose in the projected work; and invited him—on his return from France—to come at once to Bedford and ransack my papers.

Accordingly, in the autumn of 1836, Captain Basil Hall and his family—the whole of the Schloss Handfeldt party—arrived at my house, where he was located in a quiet library, with all my materials for the Naval Dictionary before him. Here he remained in close examination of them during two days, when he promised to send me his ultimatum in writing after due deliberation. He required time for this, seeing I had fairly warned him that my onerous undertakings would necessarily throw the heavier share of our performance upon his shoulders. On the 27th of November I received a letter from Edinburgh, in which he made this statement:—

“With respect to the Marine Dictionary I think we have come to a clear understanding—namely, that for the present it is standing fast. I certainly had a notion that I was an interloper, and as soon as I saw the vast deal you had done in the way of preparation, that it became me as a man of fair dealing, to back out. This does not, however, appear to have been your wish, but on the contrary that we may still make a joint work of it by-and-by, when we have leisure, both of us, to engage in it heartily—tooth and nail. I shall therefore keep it in my thoughts, and endeavour to shape my future plans so as to meet this view, and, should I see occasion, I can write to you about it. My present notion is, that if ever we do set about it, I must come to Bedford for a season, and give myself entirely up to the work, under your direction. The work, to be worth a straw, or at all what would be expected from you and me, would require no small labour on our parts, for a considerable length of time.”

We consequently lay upon our oars for some time, but occasionally pulling a stroke or two to keep to the station, and be ready for headway when required. While thus prepared, in 1842 my excellent and highly accomplished friend was most unexpectedly assailed by an afflicting malady, which at once reduced a brilliant mind to a distressing fatuity,

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which—after two lingering years—closed his valuable life, and clued up our arrangements.

Meantime our plan had oozed out, and too great an expectation was evoked in certain quarters, the inquiries from whence were frequent reminders. At length in 1865, most of my undertakings having been completed, and out of the way, I made an overhaul of the bulky ribs and trucks of the scheme in question. Both my judgment and feelings united in showing that it is now too late in the day for me to think of setting about such a work as was contemplated thirty years ago; yet finding myself still capable of application, and fully knowing all the bearings of the case, I feel assured that a comprehensive and useful “word-book” may be made from the shakings. On the whole, therefore, the foregoing particulars seem to be a necessary prelude to this introduction.

Doubtless a well-digested marine dictionary would be equally beneficial to the country and to the service, for the utility of such a work in assisting those who are engaged in carrying on practical sea duties is so generally admitted, that it is allowable here to dilate upon its importance, especially when it is considered how much information a youth has to acquire, on his first going afloat, in order to qualify him for a position so totally different from what he had hitherto been familiar with. In this case such a volume might justly be deemed one of the most useful of his companions, as it would at all times answer his questions, and aid that ardour of inquiry which some of his shipmates might not find it easy to satisfy. It would quicken the slow progress of experience, and aid those who take a pleasure in the knowledge and discharge of their duties. But a work of this description must necessarily require constant additions, and revised explanations, to enable it to keep pace with the wondrous alterations and innovations which are now taking place in every department of the naval service. The future of all this is utterly inscrutable!

Nor has this province been neglected, as the efforts of Captain John Smith (of mine own clan), Maynwarding, Boteler, Blanckley, Falconer, Young, and many others, testify; and however they may fall short of what naval science demands, they are full of initiative training. Indeed they may all be advantageously consulted, for honey is not the less sweet because it is gathered from many flowers; and I have freely availed myself of their various works, as far as they go, though I have adopted no

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term without holding myself responsible for its actuality. Such a vaunt may be considered to savour of the *parturiunt montes* apothegm, but the reader may confidently rest assured that whatever shortcomings he may detect they are not the result of negligence.

It has been pronounced that such lexicography may be too diffuse; that to describe the track of every particular rope through its different channels, however requisite for seamen, would be useless and unintelligible to a landsman. But surely nothing can be considered useless which tends directly to information, nor can that be unintelligible which is clearly defined. Moreover, such a work may be so carried out as not only to be instructive in professional minutiae, but also to be a vehicle for making us acquainted with the rules which guided the seamen of former times, thereby affording an insight into those which are likely to direct them in their own.

From the causes already stated, my project of a full sailor's dictionary fell to the ground; yet in course of time, and at the age of seventy-seven, finding leisure at last on hand, I thought it feasible to work my materials into a sort of maritime glossary. The objects of such a digest are to afford a ready reference to young or old, professional or non-professional, persons, who by consulting it may obtain an instant answer to a given question. Now although many of the explanations may be superfluous to some seamen, still they may lead others to a right understanding of various brackish expressions and phrases, without having to put crude queries, many of which those inquired of might be unable to solve. Nor is it only those afloat who are to be thus considered; all the empire is more or less connected with its navy and its commerce, and nautical phraseology is thereby daily becoming more habitual with all classes of the lieges than of erst. Even our parliamentary orators, with a proper national bias, talk of swamping a measure, danger ahead, taking the wind out of an antagonist's sails, drifting into war, steering a bill through the shoals of opposition or throwing it overboard, following in the wake of a leader, trimming to the breeze, tiding a question over the session, opinions above or below the gangway, and the like, so rife of late in St. Stephen's, even when a member "rats" on seeing that the pumps cannot keep his party from falling to leeward, he is but imitating the vermin that quit a sinking ship.

This predilection for sea idiom is assuredly proper in a maritime people, especially as many of the phrases are at once graphic, terse, and per-

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spicuous. How could the whereabouts of an aching tooth be better pointed out to an operative dentist than Jack's "'Tis the aftermost grinder aloft, on the starboard quarter." The ship expressions preserve many British and Anglo-Saxon words, with their quaint old preterites and telling colloquialisms; and such may require explanation, as well for the youthful aspirant as for the cocoa-nut-headed prelector in nautic lore. It is indeed remarkable how largely that foundation of the English language has been preserved by means of our sailors.

This phraseology has necessarily been added to from time to time, and consequently bears the stamp of our successive ages of sea-life. In the "ancient and fishlike" terms that brave Raleigh derived from his predecessors, many epithets must have resulted from ardent recollections of home and those at home, for in a ship we find—

Apeak,	Cat's-paw,	Driver,	Hound,	Rabbit,	Stays,
Apron,	Cot,	Earrings,	Jewel,	Riband,	Stirrup,
Astay,	Cradle,	Eyes,	Lacings,	Saddle,	Tiller,
Bonnet,	Crib,	Fox,	Martingale,	Sheaves,	Truck,
Braces,	Crowfoot,	Garnet,	Mouse,	Sheets,	Truss,
Bridle,	Crow's nest,	Goose-neck,	Nettle,	Sheep-shank,	Watch,
Cap,	Crown,	Goose-wing,	Pins,	Shoe,	Whip,
Catharpins,	Diamond,	Horse,	Puddings,	Sister,	Yard.
Catheads,	Dog,	Hose,			

Most of the real sea-terms are pregnant with meaning; but those who undertake to expound them ought to be tolerably versed in the topic. Thus perhaps there was no great harm in Dr. Johnson's being utterly ignorant of maritime language, but it was temerarily vain in that sturdy lexicographer to assert that *belay* is a sea-phrase for splicing a rope; *main sheet*, for the largest sail in a ship; and *bight*, for the circumference of a coil of rope; and we long had him on the hip respecting the *purser*, a personage whom he—misled by Bursar—at once pronounced to be the paymaster of a ship; as the then purser was, in fact, more familiar with slops, tobacco, pork, dips, biscuit, and the like, than with cash payments—for, excepting short-allowance dues, he had very little meddling with money matters. But the Admiralty have recently swamped the well-known and distinctive nautical title—despite of its time-honoured claims to repute—and introduced the army appellation, PAY-MASTER, in its stead.

The pithy conciseness of the brackish tongue renders it eminently useful on duty. In some of their sea-phrases the French, our great rivals, use a heap of words more than we are wont to do. An instance is given—supposing a ship of the former met with one of ours, and they should



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desire to salute each other, the English commander would sing out, "Man ship!" but the French captain would have to exclaim, "Rangez du monde sur les vergues pour donner des cris de salut!" By the way, there is a *ben trovato* respecting the difficulty of doing our naval tidings into French: a translator of note made quite a mull of a ship being *brought up* by her anchors, and of another which was stranded from *borrowing* too much; while "a man-of-war riding easily in the road at Spithead" was rendered "Un homme de guerre se promenait à cheval à son aise sur le chemin de Spithead." Some of the French terms, however, are recommended by their Parisian stamp, as in calling iron bilboes "bas de soie"—the waist-netting "Saint Aubinet"—the quarter-gallery a "jardin d'amour:" but similar elegance was not manifested in dubbing the open-hearted thorough-bred tar "un loup de mer."

In the work before us, the nautical import of the terms is duly considered, and the orthography, as far as feasible, is ruled by authority and custom, with an occasional slight glance at the probable etymology of the words—slight, because derivation is a seductive and frequently illusory pilot. Our language is said to have been arraigned by foreigners for its hissing enunciation; but, regardless of the rebuke, our pundits have, of late, unnecessarily increased the whistling by substituting the sibilant *s* for the vocal *z*, in all sorts of cases. Happily this same *s* not being yet acclimatized to the galley, Jack will continue to give tongue to an enterprising cruize after Portuguese merchandize, and there anent.

The plan of our work may be said to comprise the treating *de omnibus rebus nauticis*, for many branches of knowledge are demanded of the intelligent seaman. Thus in Naval Architecture, the terms used in the construction of ships, the plans and sections, and the mechanical means of the builders, are undoubted requirements of a sea word-book. So also in Astronomy, or that portion of nautical science constituting observations which are necessary to the determinations of the navigator. In Mathematics, especially the branch distinguished as practical, the doctrine which teaches whatever is capable of being numbered or measured, requires verbal elucidation, not so much for the educated youth, as for him who labours under difficulties—who is

"In canvass'd berth, profoundly deep in thought,  
His busy mind with sines and tangents fraught."

Many of the words in our columns are not *de facto* sea-terms, but as they are in rife and familiar use on ship-board, they obtained a lodgment;



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whence it becomes rather a difficult matter to mark a boundary for nautic language. Various expressions are also retained which, though now unused or all but obsolete, occur so frequently in professional treatises and antiquated journals, that their exposition may often be welcomed by a general reader: they are here introduced, not as worthy of revival, yet as necessary to be understood when fallen in with. And it should be remembered, that—especially during our last conflict with France—so many combined enterprises occurred, that the most general naval and military phrases pertained, in a manner, to both arms of the service.

What may be termed mere galley-slang also demands explanation, since even officers are sometimes ashore—I was going to say at sea—respecting its purport; and I recollect at a court-martial holden on a seaman for insolence to his superior, the lingo used by the shrewd culprit was liable to be thought respectful or otherwise according to the manner of utterance, and he was admitted to the benefit of the doubtful meaning. Still it must be admitted that all vulgarisms, as far as practicable, should be indignantly spurned from our noble English language—a language unequalled for excellence in fluency, capacity, and strength. A stern critic may also, and in truth, aver that terms are included on our roll the which are not altogether of maritime usage. This we have admitted, but the allegation will be greatly weakened on scrutiny, for they are here given in the sense entertained of them in nautic parlance. Such are generally illustrative of some of the lingual or local peculiarities of sea-life, or borne on its literature, and therefore are necessarily admitted as having a footing in maritime philology. Some of our misused words and archaic phrases are, by influence of the newspaper magnates, brought across the Atlantic, and re-appear among us under the style and title of Americanisms: after which fashion, in the lapse of time and the mutation of dialect, vocables once differing in origin and meaning may become identical in sense and sound.\*

Finally, Natural History, a taste for which is a substantial blessing to the sailor, is too vast a department for our professional pages. However, a few requisite definitions of the familiar products of the air, earth, and water are introduced. Numbers of marine birds and many fishes—so often misnamed—are entered upon the muster; and especially those

\* As for example the word *alarm*, *alarum*, a bell, from the German *lärm*; but the military *alarm* on a drum is the Italian *all'arme*.

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which the blue-jackets vote to be very good eating; yet, as a reverend author has well observed, we should, in such cases, recur to the probable state of their appetites at the time of experiment. The most general nautic dishes and refectations are likewise cited, to the making of which most of our sea-cooks are competent—there being no *purée*, *entremet*, or *fricandeau* to trouble them. But though they are at times libelled as being sent from the infernal regions, they are pretty fair in their way; and though no great shakes in domestic chemistry, they can enter the lists against any white-aproned *artiste* at pea-soup, beef-steak, lobscouse, pillau, curried shark, twice-laid, or savoury sea-pie. Still, a more luxurious tendency in this department is casting its shadow before; and there are Sybarites invading the ocean to whom the taste of junk is all but unknown.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "W. H. Smyth". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.