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... BOOK EDITION

GAMES ABOUT WORDS AND  
THE STORY OF ENGLISH

Covey MacGregor

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**BETHUMP'D**  
**WITH WORDS**  
**... BOOK EDITION**

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藏书

Covey MacGregor

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***To Buck  
... who makes realities  
out of mere possibilities***

“Zounds! I was never so *bethump'd with words* since  
I first call'd my brother's father dad!” (Italics added)

William Shakespeare  
*King John*, act II, scene 1, line 466

## Introduction



# THE WORLD'S WORD LOVERS



**S**peakers of English rarely profess their love of the language with the emotion or terms used by speakers of other languages. Yet love is there and it's there 'in spades.' It's an affection, however, with a revealing and peculiar difference. While the French, for example, are moved to rapture by the mellifluous sounds and poetic rhythms of their language—and, predictably, react with disdain when the mood's disrupted by 'harsh' foreign entities—speakers of English love words: individual words, French words, German words, Japanese words, Yiddish words, Russian words, Melanesian words, Spanish words, indeed, *any and all* words. In sum, 'English' is less the name for a clearly defined language than for *an obsessive attitude* toward the fundamental tools of language.

This is reflected by such uniquely English phenomena as thesauri, countless publications featuring specialized compilations of words (e.g., synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, slang terms, et cetera), and a full blown industry wherein many oddly achieve success publishing nearly identical treatises: dictionaries. It is evident daily in syndicated columns, and in casual word play in every other segment of the media. There, it is salted into dialog and discussions far removed from the express topic of words. It's as though the performers and writers intuitively know their audience has a hunger that must be fed continuously, when- and wherever possible. The preoccupation is seen in the ubiquitous crossword puzzle, the unparalleled popularity of games such as Scrabble®, the never-end-

ing introduction of word games and books of every sort. Indeed, it explains why English is now far less Anglo-Saxon than a globe-spanning melting pot of languages, the world's reservoir of *words*.

It explains, too, why a lone author, the greatest word coiner, manipulator, and gamester in history, is idolized with near-religious fervor. William Shakespeare carved the mold, demonstrated models, and gave thrust and direction to an attitude toward words which has been imitated and nurtured for more than 400 years.

*Bethump'd with words* is an attempt to demonstrate why this is so, why Shakespeare's legacy has endured, why so many of us, his linguistic heirs, are similarly afflicted with logophilia. Instead of games that are played *with* words, it presents games that are *about* words. The focus is on the aspects of everyday words, in contrast to the obscure, that together convey the character and comprise the story of English. To a degree, it is an exposé of the factors that have contributed to English's hybrid vigor.

What U.S. coin has a name that means *goblin* in German? Ask why and you'll open a mini-capsule of history. You'll also tap into the pool of reasons that reveal why speakers of English find certain words captivating. What name for several breeds of dogs originated in the French word for *Spaniard*? In the 1990s, what professional golfer coined the portmanteau *Cablinasian* to use as an expedient way to express his racial heritage? Is the literal French meaning of *potpourri* pouring pot, little poor pot, or rotten pot? What origins are held in common by the words *shrapnel*, *boycott*, *money*, and *ammonia*? What slang term for a five-dollar bill came from the Yiddish word *finf*? What does a Melanesian mean when he says, in pidgin English, he's going to *swit mot* his mother? If you lived in the Middle Ages, why would you have taken great pains to *avoid* the joy of being *thrilled*?

When it comes to dealing with words, English—especially the American version—takes a rambunctious, fun-loving approach that says anything goes. Words are coined for any reason or purpose whatsoever. They are borrowed without hesitation from every conceivable source. They are taken apart, rearranged, expanded, combined, and in other ways massaged and squeezed until every scintilla of usefulness and, especially, comedic value is released. In the

process, English sometimes does things with borrowed words that the speakers of the loaning languages never imagined, or find unthinkable or even intolerable. Howls of outrage are common features of the froth in the language's wake. But, affected by neither protest nor praise, it moves on, sublimely confident in word-handling machinations that undergird a population of unequaled creativity. The linguistic chaos and goofiness suggested by its actions do not hide the fact that English is the most powerful language on Earth.

On a daily basis, though, we tend to take our language for granted, unconsciously accepting it as an almost biological attribute like breathing and eating. English *is* a living part of us. Its mark is on every aspect of our existence, from poetry to advertising to nuclear physics to the way we think. It's a language with an extraordinary ability to express thought with precision, foster the invention of words that convey meaning with ease and accuracy, and, ultimately, accommodate societal change. Despite its tenuous start and brief encounter with the threat of extinction, today it spreads around the world with growing strength and accelerating speed. This book is devoted to the heart and sinew of our mother tongue. Its backbone is a trail that leads from primitive obscurity to global prominence. I hope you enjoy it.

Covey MacGregor





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# ***SECTION I***





# HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH



## A FATEFUL INVITATION



**W**e have all heard that English embarked on its arduous climb to Global Language in the fifth century, after the ‘invasion’ of Britain by Germanic tribes of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. But, according to the Venerable Bede, Britain’s first historian, what became a true invasion was in fact triggered by an invitation. It was a fateful move by the Celts that proved to be an early rendition of *The Man Who Came to Dinner*.

Prior to the invitation, the Celts faced wave after wave of marauding bands of Scots and Picts. Celtic King Vortigern appealed to the Romans for help, but they had their hands full defending the Empire against similar attacks on the Continent. The world was in plunderous turmoil. In desperation, Vortigern sent an emissary across the North Sea to implore the Germanic tribes. At the time, the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes were the most powerful nations of Germany. They loved to fight, were good at it, and, he reasoned, would surely have empathy for a docile people in need.

In 449, three long ships filled with men from Jutland arrived on the shores of Britain. They and their leaders, brothers Hengist and Horsa, were welcomed with open arms by King Vortigern and his people. The foreigners immediately set to work on their assigned mission and, in short order, hammered and bloodied the barbarous

marauders into a screaming northward retreat.

But rather than returning home with sated energy and a sense of noble accomplishment, Hengist and Horsa decided to look around. What they saw was mighty appealing. It is not too difficult to envision King Vortigern nervously watching the brothers' widening eyes and wondering if he had opened the Celtic version of Pandora's box.

He had. When his back was turned, the foreigners slipped home a simple message: "The land's fertile; the people are weak; we're staying; y'all come!"

And come they did, in droves that would go down in history as an invasion. To King Vortigern's consternation, Hengist and Horsa were soon leading an invincible army that, even with the passage of time, showed no signs of homesickness.

After a troubled relationship that simmered for six years, the guests turned against their hosts with cruel ferocity. The Celts, stunned and long abandoned by their Roman protectors, fought with surprising tenacity, and the battles went on for decades. Eventually outnumbered, their exhausted and dwindling population was, with finality, driven westward to the far reaches of the island.

To add galling insult to an invitation gone awry, the immigrants took to calling their former hosts *wealas*, which means *foreigners* and is the root of today's *Welsh*. By the end of that century, they also established a footing for the emergence of the language that, in its youth, was known as *Englisc*.



## THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL AND DIGNITY



For centuries, Young Englisc—which, for some reason, is usually labeled with reversed chronology as *Old English*—remained a primitive, crudely developed form that is barely intelligible if at all to modern users of its descendant. It had a limited vocabulary, was

written in the runic alphabet, a system of mysterious origins dating from about the third century in northern Europe, and experts still get embroiled in garrulous debates about translations. Other than a few surviving inscriptions from the late fifth and early sixth centuries, the language appears to have languished in a literary slumber until Roman missionary Augustine arrived in Kent in 597. Still, Young Englisc got little real exercise. A poem here, an inscription there, another poem, and the like.

A wee bit of action came during the early years of the eighth century when the need to communicate more effectively with the pagan natives forced the Christianizing Romans to compile glossaries to ease the challenge of translating Englisc terms into their Latin. This is about as far as it went. Based on what historians have found to date, there seems to have been no interest in using Young Englisc for anything more literary. Even the Venerable Bede (c. 672-735) chose to write *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in mainstream Latin. It is possible, though, that more elaborate manuscripts were written but were destroyed by the Vikings, whose raids began in 778.

In any case, the historical record suggests that Young Englisc's life did not gain much in the way of dignity until sometime between the eighth and ninth centuries when an unknown poet took pen in hand and documented the story of Beowulf, a Scandinavian hero from the sixth century. The future looked more promising in the second half of the ninth century when King Alfred (849-899) came to the throne. Alfred was intelligent, literate, and determined that his people be taught how to read and write in their native language.

But just when Young Englisc's pulse began to quicken, an ominous horn-helmeted horde appeared on the horizon. Vikings. Already in control of most of central and eastern Britain, and threatening domination of the entire island, they sought to destroy the last vestige of resistance, the kingdom of Alfred. Young Englisc was terrified. The spectre of extinction hung in the balance. As Alfred faced the loathsome Danes, Young Englisc faced their language, Norse. Were the Danes to win, who knows what might happen? Would they, in vicious reprisal, destroy Young Englisc's few documented accomplishments and demand the use of

Norse by all of Britain? Could Young Englisc survive somehow, perhaps in the homes of the impoverished peasants ignored by the plunderers? The prospects of that were poor because few among the rural folk could read and write.

Alfred knew the terrible consequences of defeat as he hurriedly mustered his army and led it onto the field. The year was 878, and the place was Ethandun—today's Edington in Wiltshire. Alfred's forces formed a broad phalanx and, when the signal came, attacked the Vikings with a fury borne of terror. Swords clanged and arrows and spears whistled through the air creating a din punctuated by the grunting, shouting, and screaming of men. The bloodfest raged on until the Vikings, suddenly overwhelmed, dropped their weapons and took flight. Alfred, astonished, led his troops in pursuit. Many Vikings were caught and dispatched, while others reached the safety of a rear fortification. Alfred's men quickly surrounded it and lay in siege.

Toward the end of the second week, the weary Danes at last conceded defeat, sent out hostages, and gave their solemn oath that they would leave the kingdom. The relief was profound, and wise Alfred immediately initiated negotiations to establish a lasting peace.

Formal meetings and minor exchanges continued over the next few years, and Young Englisc, grown cocky, gleefully seized every opportunity to snatch useful and interesting words from Norse. The youth acquired what was to become the first of many handfuls. The Treaty of Wedmore, formalized in 886, reveals the language already comfortable with a repertoire of Norse that would prove durable—*fellow*, *landing*, *score*, *take*, and others.

In the calm that followed, King Alfred did all he could to improve the welfare of his people and to protect and enhance the acceptance and dignity of his beloved Young Englisc. Envisioning his kingdom as not only England's but Europe's center of wisdom and learning, he outlined an ambitious program of enlightenment that included translating the world's leading Latin texts into Englisc. He translated several himself, leaving unquestionable his sincerity of purpose. He implemented a momentous project when he commissioned the first issue of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

Written in Young Englisc, it was a massive undertaking designed to bring history up to date beginning with the year 1 and the birth of Christ. It grew into a tradition that was carried on by monks in monasteries for centuries thereafter.

The extant manuscripts of the *Chronicle* are among the most important of Alfred's legacies to modern linguists. They provide an extraordinary opportunity to monitor Young Englisc's early growth and development. They also reveal much indicting evidence: the brazen youth was a hopelessly addicted word thief. It appears the young language understood even then that linguistic strength is built on a foundation of vocabulary. In time, the booty bag contained a number of Latin terms and, because many of the Danes had traded their horned helmets and swords for straw hats and plows and were easier to approach, a complement of Norse that approached 1,000 words. These included unique and easy-to-pronounce terms such as many of our *sk-* words: *ski*, *skin*, *skill*, *sky*, *skirt*, and others.

Young Englisc's position in the world of languages seemed assured as the eleventh century approached. In hand were royal endorsements, expanded acceptance, enhanced dignity, and the freedom to grow in strength and sophistication as a means of communicating. Toward the middle of that century, however, storm clouds darkened the eastern sky.



## OPPORTUNITY SHATTERED?



William of Normandy sailed across the English Channel in 1066 and came ashore in Britain with an army of some 8,000 men. In a confrontation that was eerily similar to that of Ethandun 188 years earlier, Britain's King Harold faced France's William of Normandy while Young Englisc faced Norman French.

On the field at Hastings, the opponents were closely matched and the battle lasted for most of the day. But fate instantly favored



the invaders when Harold and his nobles were killed. In the ensuing chaos, Young Englisc was devastated. The victory was decisive for Norman French and all appeared lost, a prosperous future shattered in a single event.

In the years that followed, Young Englisc moved ever deeper into the shadows as swarms of Norman aristocrats, abbots, bishops, merchants, artisans, and their French-speaking retainers emigrated to Britain and strengthened the foothold of their language. A spark of hope glowed briefly when William the Conqueror attempted to learn the language of his British subjects. But it died when the task, complicated by the strange runic alphabet, proved too difficult and he gave up. Young Englisc had little choice but to remain in the background, watching as Norman French, haughty in triumph, seized the role of lone favorite in the nation's halls of power. Within twenty years, the foreigner established unchallengeable control of Parliament, the courts, churches, schools, and commerce. The ultimate blow came when Britain's former upper crust scrambled for status in the developing social structure by learning and endorsing the language of their conquerors. Englisc subsequently only saw action at the top of the hierarchy when the lofty were obliged to interact with British commoners.

Between the Battle of Hastings and the early thirteenth century, Young Englisc came to realize that, in reality, it was fortunate that the Normans considered it a language of little consequence, for no steps were taken to formally outlaw or otherwise restrict its use. The neglect, though painful, was benign. Furthermore, life off stage wasn't really as awful as it seemed on that bloody day in 1066. There was ample time now to search for useful words in Latin, and even supercilious French looked ripe for the pickings. Its sounds were appealing to the ear and, comparatively, its stockpile of words was huge. When the Parisian French later sailed over the Channel to join their fellow countrymen, they expanded the opportunities by making available words from their dialect.

In the twelfth century, several ego-satisfying phenomena became evident. The French were intermarrying with the British in growing numbers, and Young Englisc often found itself in accepted and, at times, even *approved* use in social settings. Curious and