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PEOPLE

**THE
DICTIONARY
OF
CLICHES**

Over 2,000 Entries!

If you wonder about the origins of all those old saws—from first blush to bite the dust—you’ll find this book the cat’s meow!

JAMES ROGERS

THE DICTIONARY OF CLICHES

James Rogers

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INTRODUCTION

The cliché has a bad name as an overworked and therefore banal expression. Spoken or written by someone who is not thinking much about what he is saying or writing, it usually upholds that reputation. Among people who do pay attention to their phrasing, however, clichés can serve as the lubricant of language: summing up a point or a situation, easing a transition in thought, adding a seasoning of humor to a discourse. Indeed, with a keen sense of where such a familiar saying comes from and what it means one can give his prose a piquant turn by embroidering a cliché, as the columnist George Will did when he exclaimed over the fact that the fans of the Chicago Cubs support their team “through thin and thin.” My aim in this dictionary has been to provide that sense of where the familiar expressions of English come from.

Doubtless as you look through this book you find sayings that strike you as proverbs. Many of them are. Since proverbs represent the distilled wisdom from decades or centuries of human experience, it is small wonder that many of them become fixtures of the language. If you were to leaf through *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, however, you would find more unfamiliar than familiar entries, since time passes many proverbs by or overwork causes them to lose favor. The distinction I have made between proverb and cliché is current use: if a proverb still gets heavy duty in the language, it ranks as a cliché.

I accumulated many of the entries in this book in, of all places, China, when a group from *Scientific American* went there to celebrate the launching of the translated edition of the magazine. My colleagues, wordsmiths all, knew of this project and obligingly fired clichés at me throughout the trip. I doubt that there is an easier way to assemble a list of familiar expressions than to draw on the experience of some 50 well-read people, and I am grateful to them for their help.

J. T. R.

Sugar Loaf, N.Y.
June 1985

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A-OK. The situation couldn't be better. It's a space-age term, first employed by John A. Powers, who was a spokesman for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. He first used it in connection with a manned space flight in 1961, to indicate that the mission was going well. The term caught on and has since served to describe many things that seem to be functioning perfectly.

A-1. Topnotch, the best. The term derives from Lloyd's Register of Shipping and was applied to ships in first-class condition. Lloyd's of London insured ships and gave the A-1's favorable rates. As defined in the "Key to the Register," the "character A denotes New ships, or Ships Renewed or Restored. The Stores of Vessels are designated by the figures 1 and 2; 1 signifies that the Vessel is well and sufficiently found."

Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here. You're going into a dismal, unpromising, no-win situation. The expression comes from Dante's *Inferno* (1300), where it appears as, "All hope abandon, ye who enter here." "Here" was the Inferno, or Hell.

Able to Make Head or Tail of It, Not. It's ambiguous, puzzling, unclear. An animal seen indistinctly could have given rise to the saying, and so could a coin that was worn on both sides or wasn't seen clearly. Thus, Margery Mason in *The Tickler Tickled* (1679): "Their Tale . . . had neither Head nor Taile." (Margery Mason, *spinster, pseud.*, is the singular way this author is listed in library catalogues. What her real name was is not recorded.)

According to Hoyle. Following the rules or the established procedures. Edmond Hoyle, an 18th-century Englishman, was an expert on games. A popular card game at that time was whist, a forerunner of bridge. In 1742 he published a handbook on it: *A Short Treatise on the Game of Whist*. Later he published

the rules of other card games, and eventually he was recognized as the leading authority on such games.

Ace Up His Sleeve. A surprise, a hidden weapon. The card-sharp, who depended for his living on winning at cards, was known to slip winning cards (of which the ace is the winningest) up his sleeve, to be pulled out and played when they would do the most good. This particular way of putting the thought probably dates from the 19th century, when cardsharps were rampant, but the thought of concealing something useful up one's sleeve is much older. A poem by William Dunbar in the early 16th century refers to "ane fals cairt in to his sleif."

Ace in the Hole. A good move, maneuver or argument kept in reserve for use at a strategic time. In stud poker it is an ace that is turned facedown on the table; only the player who holds it knows he has a secret source of unmatched power.

Achilles' Heel. The one weak spot in an otherwise strong character or position. In Greek mythology Thetis, the leader of the sea nymphs, wanted to make sure that her infant son Achilles would be invulnerable in battle as an adult. She held him by the heel and dipped him into the River Styx, whose water was believed to confer invulnerability, but his heel remained dry because her hand was cupped over it. Achilles died as a result of a wound from an arrow that struck him in that heel.

Aching Void. A yearning or longing. The expression appears, with its meaning unmistakable, in *Olney Hymns*, by the 18th century English poet William Cowper, who may have originated the thought. The verse reads:

What peaceful hours I once enjoy'd!
How sweet their mem'ry still!
But they have left an aching void,
The world can never fill.

Acid Test. A severe or crucial trial. In times when gold was in wide circulation, the question often arose as to whether an alleged gold coin or object was genuine. Nitric acid was applied; if the piece was false gold, the acid decomposed it, but if it was genuine, the gold remained intact.

Across the Board. Encompassing everything or everyone, as in "The workers received an across-the-board pay increase."

The term arose from the notice board displaying odds in a horse race. A bet across the board means that the fan laying down his money stands to collect something if his horse should win (come in first), place (come in second) or show (finish third). In 1958, *The Listener* showed how the meaning had expanded: "There is a common cliché among labour relations specialists in the United States that it is not the across-the-board wage increase . . . which is decisive."

Actions Speak Louder Than Words. What you do is more significant than what you say. The thought was put almost that way in 1692 by Gersham Bulkeley, in *Will and Doom*: "Actions are more significant than words."

Add Insult to Injury. To be notably harsh or unkind to someone (perhaps unwittingly); to (in effect) hit someone when he is down. A version of this notion appeared in Latin almost 2,000 years ago in the fables of Phaedrus. He cited a fable by Aesop in which a bald man swats at a fly that has bitten him, misses the fly and hits himself on the head. The fly remarks, "You wished to kill me for a touch. What will you do to yourself since you have added insult to injury?" In English the idea was picked up as early as 1748, when Edward Moore used it in his play, *The Foundling*: "This is adding Insult to Injuries."

Afraid of His Own Shadow. Excessively timid. It is an old way of characterizing the quickly worried or easily frightened, dating at least to 1513, when Sir Thomas More wrote in *Richard III*: "Who maye lette her to feare her owne shadowe?" In another work, in 1533, he came closer to modern usage: "The Ordinaries afeard of their own shadow."

Alarums and Excursions. Turmoil; threatening activity. The expression served as a stage direction in Elizabethan drama to indicate the need for some sort of feverish action, such as the movement of soldiers across the stage to the accompaniment of martial sounds from the wings or backstage. It turns up now in reference to areas or circumstances where the situation is unstable, as in "the alarums and excursions in the Middle East."

Alas and Alack. Sadly; too bad. Probably the terms were combined originally for reinforcement, since they are similar in meaning. "Alas," which was recorded in print as early as the 13th century, serves to express concern or unhappiness, "alack"

(15th century) to express sorrow or regret. They had been combined by the 19th century, as reflected in *The Cruise of the Midge*, by Michael Scott (1834): "Alas and alackaday both the pig and the wig were drowned."

Albatross Around the Neck, An. A burden, particularly one that is difficult to get rid of. The real albatross is a large seabird. The Ancient Mariner in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's long narrative poem of that name (1798) tells how as a young sailor he shot with his crossbow an albatross that had guided his storm-driven ship out of the Antarctic. Trouble then befell the ship; the crew, blaming him for it, hung the dead bird around his neck as a curse:

"Ah! well a-day! what evil looks
Had I from old and young!
Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung."

All Due Respect, With. You're wrong. The phrase comes under the heading of social lubricant. You are about to attack a position taken by someone, but you don't want to seem insulting or overbelligerent. An early example offered a somewhat different perspective; it is in M. R. Mitford's *Our Village* (1826): "[My greyhound] is sliding her snake-like head into my hand, at once to invite the caress which she likes so well, and to intimate with all due respect that it is time to go home."

All Greek to Me. Incomprehensible or unintelligible, as if spoken or written in a foreign language. The term was in use at least 300 years ago in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: the character Casca, who is among the group conspiring to kill Caesar, tells Brutus and Cassius how Caesar thrice refused the crown of emperor. Asked if Cicero said anything at the time (Cicero did, speaking in Greek to prevent passersby from understanding him), Casca replies: "Those that understood him smiled at one another and shook their heads; but for mine own part, it was Greek to me."

All His Worldly Goods. Everything he has (usually in the sense that he has lost them all at once, or is so reduced in circumstances that he can carry all of them at the same time). In Edward Lear's poem, "The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bongy-Bò" (1877) one finds:

On the coast of Coromandel
 Where the early pumpkins blow,
 In the middle of the woods
 Lived the Yonghy-Bongy-Bò.
 Two old chairs, and half a candle,
 One old jug without a handle—
 These were all his worldly goods.

The phrase was locked into the language long ago in the traditional wedding service. It appeared in the British *Book of Common Prayer* in 1548 as: "With al my worldly Goodes I thee endowe."

All Sorts and Conditions of Men. Everybody; no restrictions on inclusion. From "A Prayer for All Conditions of Men" in the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church and the Church of England: "O God, the Creator and Preserver of all mankind, we humbly beseech thee for all sorts and conditions of men; that thou wouldest be pleased to make thy ways known unto them, thy saving health unto all nations." The phrase was in the prayer book at least as early as 1662.

All Things to all Men, Be. Show different attitudes to different people in an effort to please everybody or avoid controversy. The Bible records St. Paul as saying in his First Epistle to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians, 9:22), "To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some."

All Thumbs. Clumsy, awkward at physical tasks. Examples of the expression appear in the 16th century, as in Sir Thomas More's *A Treatise on the Passion* (1534): "Euery fynger shalbe a thombe, and we shall fumble it vp in hast." In modern English it is: "Every finger shall be a thumb, and we shall fumble it up in haste." An example in the *West Somerset Word-Book*, published in 1886, is "Leave it alone, all thumbs! why thee art as clumsy as a cow handling a musket."

All Wet. Wrong; making an implausible argument. According to the *Dictionary of American Slang*, the expression originated in the United States around 1930. One can suppose that the anonymous author of the phrase had in mind a comparison with the notion that a person who lets himself get all wet and stays that way for any length of time is a little abnormal. An old English expression, "to cover oneself with a wet sack," meant

to make vain excuses, to adopt a position that could not be taken seriously; it dates from the 16th century.

All Wool and a Yard Wide. Genuine and of excellent quality. One hears this enough to assume it is an old saw or proverb; in fact it appears to have been mainly a verbal expression. In the 19th century, enough short measure and inferior merchandise reached the market for sellers of the products of textile mills in New England to adopt “all wool and a yard wide” as a claim for their “woolen” fabrics.

All and Sundry. Everybody or everything, “Sundry,” which is from the same root as “sunder,” refers to individuals, so “all and sundry” is a tautology meaning a group of people or things and every individual or item in it. Sir William Fraser wrote in *Wemyss of Wemyss* (1389) of “there [their] thyngys al and syn-dry.”

All at Sea. Lost; bewildered; confused. A person at sea who has lost his bearings is in such a predicament, and the expression probably derives from the time when taking bearings on celestial bodies was the only way to ascertain a ship’s position.

All in a Day’s Work. A routine matter; something that can be done without undue difficulty. The expression was common by the 18th century, and its origins are lost. Sir Walter Scott’s novel *The Monastery* (1820) has the following passage: “That will cost me a farther ride, . . . but it is all in the day’s work.”

All in the Same Boat. We’re in this together; we all share the same risks. The literal origin is in the perils faced by people at sea, particularly in small boats during ancient times. The figurative meaning, which dominates today, was in print by 1584 in Thomas Hudson’s poem *Judith*:

“Haue ye pain? So likewise pain haue we;
For in one boat we both imbarked be.”

All to the Good. Satisfactory; tending toward a desirable outcome. This “good” is, or was, an accounting term referring to a balance on the plus side, a net profit or an excess of assets over liabilities. *The Spectator* in 1889 described a man who was “boasting that he . . . had so much heavier a balance in the bank to the good, in consequence.”

All's Fair in Love and War. Anything goes in this situation. "All policy's allowed in war and love" turns up in a 17th-century play, *Love at a Venture*, by Susannah Centlivre. The modern expression appeared in 1850 in *Frank Fairleigh*, a novel by Francis Edward Smedley.

All-Out War. An engagement in which each side is fully extended, using all its resources. "All out" in the sense of total or entire is long-lived. In *The Romans of Partenay* (1475) one finds: "They approached Columbere toun all-out." The concept of all-out war dates from World War II and was recorded retrospectively by A. L. Rowse in his *The Expansion of Elizabethan England* (1955): "Not committing herself to an all-out war. . . ."

Almighty Dollar, The. A reference to the influence of money over people's minds, or to America's pivotal role in international finance. Washington Irving seems to have originated the term in *Wolfert's Roost, Creole Village* (1837): "The almighty dollar, that object of universal devotion throughout our land. . . ." Some 200 years earlier the Elizabethan dramatist Ben Jonson wrote of "almighty gold."

Alpha and Omega. The beginning and the end. Alpha (α) and omega (ω) are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. The term appears several times in the New Testament's Revelation to Saint John, including: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord. . . ."

Alphabet Soup. A jumble of agencies or concepts known mainly by their initials or acronyms. Alfred E. Smith, who had been the governor of New York and the Democratic nominee for President in 1928, was no great admirer of the New Deal instituted by Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Democrat who succeeded him as governor in 1928 and became President in 1933. When such New Deal agencies as the NRA, TVA, CCC and AAA (National Recovery Administration, Tennessee Valley Authority, Civilian Conservation Corps and Agricultural Adjustment Administration) proliferated in Roosevelt's first term, Smith said the Government was "submerged in a bowl of alphabet soup." There really is such a soup, in which pasta is formed in the shapes of the letters of the alphabet.

American Way, The. Conforming with traditions in the United States. The term was in use by 1885, when the *Century Mag-*

azine advised its readers that “Dynamiting is not the American way.”

Ancestral Acres. The place one’s family came from (and where one may still be living). The Latin poet Horace wrote in his *Epodes* (about 30 B.C.): “Happy the man who far from schemes of business, like the early generations of mankind, works his ancestral acres, with oxen of his own breeding, from all usury free.”

And How. That’s for sure. Bayard Taylor, a widely traveled American journalist who became the country’s minister to Germany in 1878, saw the origins of this expression in a similar German intensive, *und wie*. H. L. Mencken, in *The American Language*, noted that the phrase has also been traced to the Italian *e come* and the French *et comment*, but he was not persuaded “and how” derived from any of these. Incidentally, Taylor, writing about “and how” in a letter to the American poet Edmund Stedman in 1865, defined it in terms of another expression that is practically a cliché these days: “You’d better believe it.”

And I Don’t Mean Maybe. Do what I say; I’m not kidding. “Maybe” in the sense of perhaps is a contraction of “it may be” and was in use by the 15th century. Today’s cliché arose in the United States around 1920. Its originator is unknown, but by 1927 it was part of the language, as is shown in Clarence Buddington Kelland’s *Dance Magic*: “Leach is a bearcat and I don’t mean maybe.”

And So to Bed. The end of that activity (particularly of a day’s affairs). The daily entries in the diary of Samuel Pepys, which he kept from January 1, 1660, to May 31, 1669, often end with this phrase. Pepys wrote the diary in a shorthand code that was not deciphered until 1825.

Ants In His Pants. Excessively restless or eager. Hugh S. Johnson, the colorful former Army general who headed the National Recovery Administration in 1933–1934, may have originated this phrase but certainly made it popular. “Full of beans” and “full of red ants” convey the same idea.

Any Port In a Storm. Whatever refuge one can find or stratagem one can resort to in a time of physical or mental difficulty. It

is a sailor's expression that was familiar enough by 1780 to appear in a play by the English writer Elizabeth Inchbald: "Here is a door open, i' faith—any port in a storm, they say."

Apple of Discord. A cause of dispute or rancor. In Greek mythology Eris, the goddess of discord, uninvited to the wedding of Thetis and Peleus, sought revenge: she threw a golden apple on a table, saying it was for "the most beautiful." Hera, Pallas Athene and Aphrodite each laid claim to it. Paris, as judge, awarded it to Aphrodite; Hera and Pallas Athene were displeased and sought vengeance. The trouble they stirred up has been credited with bringing about the fall of Troy. In Roman mythology the contending goddesses were Juno, Minerva and Venus.

Apple of His Eye. A cherished person or object. In old English the eye's pupil was known as the apple because it was thought to be spherical and solid. Since the pupil is a crucial and indispensable portion of the eye, it serves as a symbol of something cherished. An example in the Coverdale Bible of 1535 (Zechariah II, 8) is: "Who so toucheth you, shal touche the aple of his owne eye." The expression also appears in Deuteronomy XXXII, 10 as part of a song spoken by Moses:

He found him in a desert land,
and in the howling waste of the wilderness;
he encircled him, he cared for him,
he kept him as the apple of his
eye.

Apple-Pie Order. Shipshape; everything just so, in perfect order. The expression is said to have derived from the French *nappes pliées* (folded tablecloths) and from "cap-a-pie [head-to-foot] order." I have also seen it ascribed to the neatly turreted border often fashioned at the edge of a pie crust. In the end one has to agree with the *Oxford English Dictionary* that the origin of the phrase has not been established.

Arm's Length. A distance deliberately maintained to forestall familiarity or domination. Virginia Woolf wrote of a person who was "pompous and ornate and keeps us at arm's length." In relation to, say, labor negotiations, one is likely to read that "arm's-length bargaining" is going on.

Armed to the Teeth. Fully or even excessively equipped with weapons for a contest. The English statesman Richard Cobden (1804–65) is recorded in his *Speeches on peace, financial reform, colonial reform and other subjects* (1849) as saying: “Is there any reason why we should be armed to the teeth?”

As Every Schoolboy Knows. Elementary; basic knowledge (often used condescendingly or as a put-down). In *On Lord Clive* (1840) Thomas Babington, Lord Macaulay, wrote: “Every schoolboy knows who imprisoned Montezuma, and who strangled Atahualpa.” Few schoolboys would know either of those facts today, and probably a great many did not know them in 1840 either. Viscount Melbourne once said of Macaulay: “I wish I was as cocksure of anything as Tom Macaulay is of everything.”

As Fate (Luck) Would Have It. That’s the way it happened, and it was a fortunate turn of events. *American Speech* recorded the expression in 1928: “As luck would have it, we took another road.”

As One Man. In unison; unanimously. In the Old Testament (Judges 20 : 8) it is said that “all the people [of Israel] arose as one man” and “gathered against the city [of Gibeah], united as one man.” The men of Gibeah had ravished and killed the concubine of a Levite who had spent the night there.

As the Crow Flies. In a direct line; by the shortest route (usually to distinguish travel by air from travel on the ground). Although the crow is not noted for flying long distances in a straight line, it does go directly to its target of opportunity (such as a cornfield), whereas the human traveler has to follow the twists and turns of the road. Robert Southey was close to the modern expression when in 1800 he wrote in a letter: “About fifteen miles, the crow’s road.”

At His Fingertips. Readily available. It seems to date from early in this century. An example in the *Strand Magazine* in 1905: “He has at his finger-tips every stroke in the game.” Then there is “to his fingertips,” meaning through and through, as in: “Alive with science to the finger tips.” That appeared in the *London Daily Chronicle* in 1907.

At Loggerheads. Unable to agree. A strange word, loggerheads, seldom encountered now without its "at," although it has several meanings, notably blockhead or stupid person. Among the other meanings are: (1) a metal tool with a long handle and a bulbous end; the bulb was heated in a fire and used to melt pitch or heat liquid; (2) a species of turtle with a large head; the name was also applied to other animals with large heads. One can speculate that people at loggerheads are confronting each other much like heated bulbs or heavy-headed animals, belligerently head to head. The phrase, with its meaning of confrontation, was known in 1680 when Francis Kirkman wrote, in *The English Rogue*: "They frequently quarrell'd about their Sicilian wenches, and indeed . . . they [the wenches] seem . . . to be worth the going to Logger-heads for."

At This (Particular) Point in Time. Now. An orotundity that gained wide currency in the early 1970s. It has now almost passed beyond the cliché stage and is quite likely to be employed sarcastically by someone poking fun at orotundity.

At the Tip of My Tongue. Something I know but can't quite recall. The implication is that the elusive fact will soon be retrieved and then can be spoken. Since the tongue is the output end of the speaking apparatus, the expression must have arisen when someone thought that a name or a fact was practically there if only he or she could dredge it up from memory.

Avoid Like the Plague. Shun rigorously; stay away from something at all costs. It has been three centuries since the plague last devastated the populations of Europe, but it has left its mark in this expression. Thomas Moore, assembling Byron's works in 1835, wrote: "Saint Augustine . . . avoided the school as the plague."

Ax to Grind, Have an. To seek a particular objective; to maneuver to achieve a personal goal. The term is often attributed to Benjamin Franklin, but, in fact, it seems to have originated with Charles Miner in the Wilkes-Barre (Pa.) *Gleaner* in 1811. In this tale a man with ax approached Miner (then a boy) and by flattery persuaded him to sharpen the ax on the grindstone in the family's yard. The boy gave it a good edge but got no thanks; indeed, the school bell rang and the man told the boy to get moving because he was late for school. The tale ends

with the adult Miner writing: "When I see a merchant over-polite to his customers, begging them to taste a little brandy and throwing half his goods on the counter—thinks I, that man has an ax to grind."