WORDS AND IDIOMS

Studies in the English Language

BY

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WORDS AND IDIOMS

By the same Author

ALL TRIVIA
Trivia—More Trivia—Afterthoughts
Last Words
ON READING SHAKESPEARE
A TREASURY OF ENGLISH PROSE
A TREASURY OF ENGLISH APHORISMS

PREFACE

"Words," the poet Donne writes in one of his letters, "are our subtillest and delicatest outward creatures, being composed of thoughts and breath"; and the creatures he thus describes—their echoes and overtones, and the effects which can be produced by the juxtapositions of these wonder-working sounds—have always possessed for me what is perhaps an undue fascination. The art of words, or Literature, as we call it, was, I believed in my youth, an art like the other arts, whose technique could be acquired by study and application; and no one ever told me—as the young are now authoritatively instructed—that if only our thoughts are sincere, and our feelings adequately excited, the right words will rush to our pens without care or trouble. It is my misfortune, I suppose, that having been born before the date of this great labour-saving discovery, I should have spent so much of my time in studying words and reading dictionaries. The human mind, moreover, is so constituted that pursuits which we take up as means to an end, become for us, not infrequently, ends in themselves; the hunter we mount for the chase, often turning, before we know it, into a kind of hobby-horse which gallops off with us

on unpremeditated expeditions. Nor is there anyone to whom this is more likely to happen than the student of words. A dictionary, as Anatole France has said, is the Universe in alphabetical order; and the Universe, whatever else may be said in its disparagement, is certainly full of curious facts and details of the most fascinating interest. These facts and these details, moreover, are often called by names which are so odd, and possess such romantic histories, that few can indulge in the joys of lexicography without being touched by the word-collecting mania—a mania which, like stamp-collecting, would be one of the most innocent pastimes or vices, were it not so often accompanied by the desire to make a display of one's specimens. There is a peculiar tedium, a special kind of boredom which seems inseparable from books on words, and I certainly never intended to add still another to the many publications of this kind. I have, however, at various dates in the last fifteen years written and printed a number of essays on words; and if I am now yielding to the temptation to put together in book-form some of these studies, I may perhaps attempt to justify this republication by the fact that my purpose, in the papers printed in this volume, has not been to make a miscellaneous display of curiosities, but rather to use the specimens I have collected as illustrations of certain general ideas, or as proofs of some practical conclusions which seem to me to possess a certain importance.

Being a lexicographer rather than a philologist—if indeed the name of lexicographer may be extended to include those who make compilations from the dictionaries of others—my interest has been more especially

aroused by two aspects of linguistic study which lie somewhat outside the scope of the strict philologist, into whose special field of enquiry I have not dared to venture. The most important of these aspects is the one which is described by the name of "Semantics," the study of the meanings, rather than of the forms of words; the history of the terms of our speech with reference to the history of the ideas they embody—the origins, the travels and transformations of these ideas in various epochs and countries. Our modern cosmopolitan civilization is a vast web or tissue of thoughts and inventions, each of which has its place of origin and its special story; and the names by which these phenomena are designated often turn out to be clues which enable us to unravel, and trace to their sources, the threads out of which this great fabric has been woven. In the first essay in this volume I have attempted such an unravelling in one department of our language which has for me a special interest, the names of the nautical discoveries and inventions which go to make up our vocabulary of English sea-terms.

But far more interesting than the record of man's practical inventions is the record of his thoughts and ideals and ways of feeling. No history is so fascinating, or so important, as the history of the human spirit; and in the study of words we find a method—a subsidiary method, it may be—but still a method of real value for the purposes of elucidating this history and placing it in a somewhat clearer perspective. This semantic method of study has not hitherto been applied with much profit, owing to the uncollected and often unreliable character of the necessary data—the

vast number of minute, but important facts which are needed for its adequate exploration. An investigation of this kind has only at last become possible, at least with regard to our own language, since the publication of that great monument of scholarship, the *Oxford Dictionary*, in which we find every English word traced to its source, and all its changes of meaning dated and registered in their chronological order. If I could look forward to another life-time—or to twenty or thirty years of uninterrupted leisure in this present existence—I should like to compile from this great work, and from the dictionaries of other languages, ancient and modern, a history of all the more important terms by which men have designated, not only their discoveries, but also their thoughts and feelings. Since such a study would be largely concerned with the loan-words in the languages of Europe, the terms which have been adopted by different countries to designate the ideas which they have borrowed from each other, I may perhaps claim that in my essay in this volume on *The English Element in Foreign Languages*, I have broken a little fresh ground in one corner of this wide field of study. In the essay which follows on *Four Romantic Words*, I give in more detail the history of certain terms of aesthetic criticism with which our language has enriched the vocabulary of Europe.

The other aspect of language which has engaged my attention is what I may perhaps call its teleological aspect—the study of different forms of speech, not from the point of view of the history embodied in them, but with regard to their value and efficiency as means of expression. As far at least as the borders of this large, and

as yet almost unexplored, region of speculation I have more than once ventured, and I have been impressed on these expeditions by certain views which I regret that I have not had time to corroborate and elaborate in more detail. If I could hope for still another thirty or forty years of leisure—still another life-time indeed would hardly be adequate for the undertaking—I should very much like to make a comparative study of all the languages of culture, discriminating in each its aesthetic and expressive merits, its harmonies and happy inventions, its fortunate contrivances of grammar and syntax and idiom.

But these are but the daydreams of an ageing lexicographer already much distracted in a world which is full of too many other interests. I shall never write either of these works of research : I have, however, embodied some of my views in a few criticisms of certain prevailing tastes and fashions and false ideals which, in my opinion, are tending at present to hamper and impede the efficiency and development of our own speech. Some of these views have been suggested to me by the writings of the famous Danish linguist, Dr. Jespersen ; others, and in especial the conception of "purity" in language, I owe to Remy de Gourmont's *Esthetique de la langue française*. My confidence in the validity of some at least of my conclusions has been greatly confirmed by finding them expressed in various tracts of the Society for Pure English. I must, however, be careful to point out that although two of the essays in this volume were first printed in the publications of that Society, I cannot of course claim its approval for all the suggestions

I have put forward; they are made on my own responsibility, and are without any other endorsement.

The essay on *Sea-Terms* was printed in the *English Review* in 1912; that on the *English Element in Foreign Languages* appeared in *English* in 1919. The paper on *Popular Speech and Standard English* was read to the Yorkshire Dialect Society in 1917; I have considerably enlarged it for publication in this volume. The chapters on *English Idioms* and on *Four Romantic Words* were originally published as tracts of the S.P.E. in 1922 and 1924. All these papers are reprinted here with the usual acknowledgments. The tract on English Idioms was edited by the late Dr. Bradley, to whom, and to Professor Graham Wallas, I am indebted for many suggestions. It is considerably longer in its present form, for it is in this paper that I have yielded most unreservedly to the temptation to make a collection of curiosities which should be as complete as possible. If I may be accused of encouraging or inventing a new vice—the mania, or "idiomania," I may perhaps call it—of collecting what Pater called the "gypsy phrases" of our language, I have at least been punished by becoming one of its most cureless and incorrigible victims.

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CHAPTER I

ENGLISH SEA-TERMS

I

If we take the words in common use among English sailors, the terms, special or general, connected with the sea and ships, we find a vigorous and expressive vocabulary, very characteristic of the hardy and practical people who habitually employ it. And yet if we examine these short and vivid words, which seem so essentially English in their form, and which are now being borrowed from our speech into most of the languages of the world, we shall find that the greater part of them are not of English origin at all. Indeed, anyone with a knowledge of the history of our language will notice, in passing from an agricultural district to the sea-coast, a remarkable change in the terms in common use. While for the barns and buildings inland, the fields, the meadows, the principal crops, agricultural processes, and animals, we should employ for the most part genuine old English words, our terms for the coast and its main features, for many of the birds above and the fish beneath, for the ships sailing the seas under the British ensign, would prove on examination to be a set of borrowed names of a curiously polyglot

mixture, derived ultimately from Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish and Dutch sources. These words seem like English words, because English sailors have given them an English shape and an English sound; they come nevertheless from remote countries, and are embedded in our English vocabulary like jetsam washed from afar, but so worn by the waves that it lies almost undistinguishable among the other objects that strew our coasts. But words are like sea-shells; they have their voices, and are full of old echoes; and if we take up these terms, and examine them, and sort them according to their ages and various sources, we find that they have much to tell us of the history of English seamanship. And, moreover, as we examine our sailors' speech, and the way they have fashioned and formed their admirable set of terms, we may come on a lesson or two which will not be without value to those who are concerned with the present state and future prospects of our language.

Our oldest sea-terms divide themselves into two main classes, and are derived from the two far-distant corners of Europe, where, in prehistoric times, men of European races first built themselves ships and ventured on the sea. These places were in the South among the islands and peninsulas of Greece, and in the North along the shores and shallows of the North Sea and the Baltic. From Greece the arts of navigation spread with their appropriate terms over the Mediterranean, while the sailors of the North carried their Teutonic speech along the coasts of the Atlantic. Gradually these two vocabularies met and mingled, and the sea-vocabularies of England and the other European

countries are largely made up of a mixture of these North Sea and these Mediterranean terms. The most English and anciently established ones in our language are, of course, of Northern origin, and consist of those words which the Angles and Saxons brought with them to England, and which safely survived the Norman Conquest. But among these old inherited terms are a few which, though they belong also to the South, have not been borrowed from thence, but descend to us from a time, thousands of years ago, when the Northern and Southern races dwelt together, and shared in a common language. Indeed, in sorting our words, we must put a few of them aside as belonging to the Aryan speech, from which not only most of the languages of Europe, but those of the Hindoos and Persians, descend. Two words, indeed, connected with some form of navigation have come down from that primitive Indo-European or Aryan language: a term for some simple form of boat (probably a dug-out or hollowed tree), and a name for the paddle with which it was propelled. The name for the canoe we have not inherited directly, but have borrowed it from Greek or Latin in the words *nautical*, *navy*, *navigation*, etc. The Aryan word for a paddle, however, descends to us in our verb to *row*, and also in our word *rudder*, for the primitive rudder was, of course, a paddle or oar; the fixed stern-rudder being a thirteenth-century invention. After these ancient words the next in antiquity are a few terms common, not to all the Aryan races, but to those of them who settled in Europe. These date from a period, after the separation from the Persian and Indian branches, when the ancestors of Greeks, Romans, Teutons, Celts and

Slavs all shared more or less in a common language. *Fish* and *salt* are among these "West-Aryan" words, as they are called, and also the old European word for sea (*mare* in Latin, *Meer* in German), which we preserve in our poetic word *mere*, in *marsh*, in the compound *mermaid*, and in names like *Windermere*.

These words, then, *row*, *mere*, *salt*, *fish*, are common to North and South; our next little heap is exclusively Northern, and is composed of those terms which belong to the Teutonic languages, and descend from that North Sea vocabulary which the English, German, Dutch and Scandinavian races share in common. Here at last we breathe a sea-atmosphere, and find our race embarked in boats with a vocabulary fit for sailors, and many terms for the objects and phenomena with which they are concerned—islands and landmarks, winds and weather, the points of the compass, and the birds and animals that haunt the sea. *Sea* and *ship*, *oar*, *mast*, *sail*, *steer*, *flood*, *cliff*, *strand*, *storm*, *North*, *South*, *East* and *West*, *mew* and *seal* and *whale*, are among the words which the Angles and Saxons brought with them in their pirate ships to England, and which they share with their Teutonic cousins; and we find among them, like a Mediterranean seashell, one word from the distant South. This is the word *anchor*, which the pirates from whom we descend had borrowed, before they came to England, from the Roman sailors who had taught them the use of this contrivance; their earliest boats being moored, like the Homeric ships, by cables fastened to the shore, or by a stone sunk overboard with a rope attached. For *anchor* is not a Homeric term, but appears in the Greek language at

a later date; it is, however, the first Mediterranean word which was added to our English sea-vocabulary, and like many of our words from Greek or Latin, the spelling has been tampered with by pedants, who inserted an *h*, owing to the notion that *anchora* and not *ancora* was the correct form in Latin.

These Mediterranean words are more numerous in the next little heap of our sea-terms, the next layer which we find as we dig down into our old vocabulary. This layer is composed of words which were not, as far as we know, brought by our ancestors to England, but were added to the language during the Anglo-Saxon period, before the Norman Conquest. In this layer we find the famous word *port*, which is borrowed from the Latin *portus*, and is a distant cousin of our Teutonic word *ford*. From the use of *port* as haven or harbour, is probably derived the use of the word for the left side of the ship, which has recently superseded *larboard*, owing to its similarity of sound with *starboard*. *Port* in this sense is found some centuries before its official adoption by the Admiralty in 1844; it is supposed to have arisen from the fact that when the steering apparatus was on the right side of the ship, it was convenient, in order to keep this free, to have the port or harbour on the left side when approaching it. Other Mediterranean words borrowed in this period are *lobster*, *limpet*, and *mussel*, and a name for oyster, *ostre*, which however perished later, and was replaced by the French form *oyster*. A taste for the delicacies of the sea is one of the results of civilisation, and our ancestors probably acquired this taste at the time that they were civilised by Christian missionaries—who, moreover, would

impose on them the necessity of a fish diet in times of fasting. The word *hulk* is also found in English late in this period; it is a Mediterranean word, widely-diffused in the languages of Western Europe, and is generally supposed to be derived from the Greek ὁλκας.

These are the Southern sea-words that drifted to our shores in the nglo-Saxon period. With them we find a few terms apparently of native English origin, *fleet*, and the adjective *afloat*, *neap*, and *starboard*. Starboard is really *steer board*, and means the board or side of the ship on which the *stéor* or paddle was used for steering. This in ancient times was the right side, the Anglo-Saxon name for the left side *bæc-bord*, the side to the back of the steersman, has become obsolete in English, although it still survives in the German *backbord* and the French *bâbord*. *Bæc-bord* was first replaced by *larboard* (which some would derive from the verb to *lade*) and then, as we have seen, by *port*. The important word *boat* we may perhaps claim as a word of English origin—it is first found in Anglo-Saxon, and seems to have been borrowed by the Dutch in the thirteenth century, whence, in the form of *Boot*, it has made its way into German.

These Anglo-Saxon words are known to have been a part of the English nautical vocabulary before the Norman Conquest. The Anglo-Saxons possessed, moreover, a large number of sea-terms which have since perished; for seamanship, unlike agriculture, has not always been an English occupation, and the English command of the sea is a comparatively late acquisition. The Angles and Saxons were, indeed, sailors and pirates and came to England across the sea, but when they were