

A SECOND BOOK OF ENGLISH IDIOMS

WITH EXPLANATIONS

by

V. H. COLLINS



LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO

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A SECOND BOOK OF ENGLISH IDIOMS

The success of *A Book of English Idioms*, published last year and already in its second impression, has encouraged the author to compile this sequel on identical lines.

As in the previous book, the idioms are confined to those that are current today. Their meanings are carefully explained, and when possible the origins of the expressions are given.

Though intended primarily for the English speaker, reader, and student, the book should be of great value also to the advanced foreign user and student of the language.

There is always a danger in books on usage that they may seem to strike a pedantic note. Mr. Collins's work has won wide praise for not only the simplicity and ease of his style, often enlivened by humour, but, when concerned with new developments in usage, for his readiness, while deprecating what is undesirable, to welcome changes that enrich the language.

By the same author

ONE WORD AND ANOTHER

THE CHOICE OF WORDS

RIGHT WORD, WRONG WORD

A BOOK OF ENGLISH IDIOMS

PREFACE

THE main principles on which this book has been compiled are similar to those of its predecessor, *A Book of English Idioms*. For the title the word *English* has been kept, although a number of foreign, especially French and Latin, phrases, are included, because, with their adoption in ordinary English speaking and writing, they can be regarded as virtually an element of our language.

As before, the idioms selected have usually been those in most frequent use today. Occasionally, however, it has seemed interesting, for at all events the older generations of readers, to include some that only within living memory have become obsolescent or obsolete.

Those who know the previous book are asked to excuse the following restatement of some principles governing also the aims and methods of this sequel.

In studying idioms one is often confronted, apart from any question of the current meaning of an expression, by the problem of its origin or allusion. As Pearsall Smith pointed out, there are many phrases of which even specialists have not been able to find a certain explanation. A factor in the formation of an idiom must often have been a desire for euphony, alliteration, rhyme, or repetition. Moreover Pearsall Smith, referring to what he calls 'the expressiveness of irrelevant phrases', suggests that they often show a breaking loose, a love for the absurd, a reluctance to submit to reason, so that the human mind seems to prefer irrelevance as appealing to the imagination and adding to a phrase's vividness and charm.

The expressions included in this book include a few that

would be found in collections of proverbs, but that from their figurative use or for some other reason, can be regarded as idioms.

Many colloquialisms and slang phrases have been included. These, especially the latter, are sometimes described as being so. But there is often no clear line between the two, or between either of them and established literary English. Many words or phrases, originally used chiefly or entirely by the rough and the uneducated, that by others would have been regarded as slang, become colloquialisms used by the educated, and still later may become established literary idiom. Dean Alford, in *The Queen's English*, published in the second half of the last century, mentioned the expression *to come to grief* as 'almost a slang phrase or one that has but lately ceased to be one'. It is many years since then that the phrase has become established as a dignified literary idiom. H. W. Fowler said that 'the idiomatic speaker and writer differs chiefly from the slangy in using what was slang and is now idiom'.

Quotations are not usually included except when, besides being what may be classed as idioms, they are words that, divorced from their context, have come to possess an independent life of their own.

The usual practice has been to exclude idioms where the main or sole point at issue is one of grammar, which causes them to belong more properly, not to a book confined to idioms, but to one of a more general and comprehensive sort, such as those by Fowler, Vallins, and Mr. Eric Partridge.

In the spoken and written English of today idiom is an established, universal, and essential element that, used with care, ornaments and enriches the language. This was not always recognised. Pearsall Smith in *Words and Idioms* mentioned what was thought of idioms in the eighteenth century. They were then considered vulgarisms and offences against logic and reason. Addison used them in prose, but thought

they should not be used in poetry. Dr. Johnson wished to abolish them. He stated that in his dictionary he had tried to clear the language from 'colloquial barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular constructions'. Today such opinions as these would be regarded as absurd.

Some writers use idioms more than others. From this point of view one could often divide writers into two classes, those who use them much or little. Thus Dickens falls into the first class, Galsworthy into the second. There are dangers on both sides. Contemporary writing that is almost destitute of idioms can give an impression of flatness. On the other hand idioms can be overworked. Their use can reach a degree of frequency that deprives the writing of freshness. They often become clichés.

Naturally a constant source of reference has been the Oxford Dictionaries. References are generally to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* and the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, as these books have been at my elbow, though, when necessary, I have consulted and cited the big *Oxford English Dictionary*. The Delegates of the Clarendon Press have again given generous leave for the many references to and quotations from these books.

Much valuable information has been gathered from Mr. Burton Stevenson's *Book of Proverbs, Maxims and Familiar Phrases*.

For slang my constant resource, as it must be for everyone studying that element in the language, has been Mr. Eric Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*.

Among the many helpers whose interest and help I regard myself as having been extremely fortunate to gain are Mr. G. D. H. Pidcock, to whom especially in his untiring zeal I have been most constantly indebted, and who in a remarkable way combines destructive and constructive criticism; Mrs. Nancy Henry, for a large number of notes on various points; Professor W. S. Watt, on whose scholarship and erudition I have been privileged to draw in the articles on classical

idioms; Admiral Sir William James for help in nautical matters; Mrs. Rosemary Colman in biological allusions; and the Royal Mint. In addition I owe warm thanks to Mrs. L. Allen, Madame S. Altire, Mr. David Evans, Mr. I. R. Collins, Mrs. H. B. Thomas, Lt.-Col. W. M. C. Wall, Mr. Philip Wayne; and, once more, as in my previous books on language, from first to last, to a wonderfully patient and resourceful wife.

The following abbreviations have been used:

O.E.D. The Oxford English Dictionary

S.O.E.D. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, revised and edited by C. T. Onions, Fourth Edition, 1955

C.O.D. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, by H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, Fourth Edition, revised by E. McIntosh, with Addenda, 1954

O.D.E.P. The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs, by W. G. Smith, with an introduction by J. E. Heseltine, Second Edition, revised by Sir Paul Harvey, 1954

OO = Origin Obscure

R = Record of the Date of the Earliest Use of an
Idiom

Oe = Obsolete

Ot = Obsolescent

C = Colloquial

S = Slang

CONTENTS

	PAGE
Preface	vii
List of Idioms	1
Idioms	28
Index	245

LIST OF IDIOMS

- 1 to add insult to injury
- 2 an admirable Crichton
- 3 alive and kicking
- 4 all agog
- 5 all in all
- 6 to be all to the good
- 7 to all intents and purposes
- 8 That's all moonshine.
- 9 of all people
- 10 all the rage
- 11 to be all things to all men
- 12 and all that
- 13 *alma mater*
- 14 alpha and omega
- 15 another (*or* a different) pair of shoes
- 16 to applaud to the echo
- 17 an arm-chair critic
- 18 up in arms
- 19 *arrière-pensée*
- 20 the Ashes
- 21 to ask for bread and receive a stone
- 22 to ask for trouble
- 23 backdoor
- 24 backstairs
- 25 to bring home the bacon
- 26 to save one's bacon
- 27 bad blood
- 28 in bad odour
- 29 a baker's dozen
- 30 balderdash
- 31 not to bat an eyelid
- 32 at bay
- 33 the be-all and end-all

- 34 to be (a) off, (b) on, the beam
- 35 to bell the cat
- 36 the benefit of the doubt
- 37 at best (*or* at the best)
- 38 the best part
- 39 you bet
- 40 one's better half
- 41 between you and me and the post (*or* the bed-post)
- 42 to bid fair
- 43 a big noise
- 44 to be too big for his boots
- 45 (a) to give, (b) to get, the bird
- 46 a bit of fluff
- 47 a bitter pill
- 48 a black (*or* bad) mark
- 49 as black as thunder
- 50 blarney
- 51 to blaze a (*or* the) trail
- 52 to bless one's stars (*or* lucky stars)
- 53 a blessed nuisance
- 54 His blood was up.
- 55 to blow the gaff
- 56 to blow one's own trumpet
- 57 to bog-down
- 58 as bold as brass
- 59 I'll be bound
- 60 a brass farthing
- 61 to brazen out
- 62 (a) to bring, (b) to come, to light
- 63 brute force
- 64 in the buff
- 65 to build upon sand
- 66 a burning question
- 67 as busy as a bee
- 68 to butter up a person
- 69 to buttonhole a person
- 70 to call one's soul one's own
- 71 to call a spade a spade
- 72 to be called to the Bar

- 73 not to care a hoot (*or two hoots*)
- 74 to carry the can
- 75 to carry the day
- 76 to cash in on
- 77 a casting vote
- 78 the cat among the pigeons
- 79 to catch a person napping
- 80 a cave-man; a he-man
- 81 to chance one's arm
- 82 chapter and verse
- 83 as cheap as dirt
- 84 to bear a charmed life
- 85 cheap-Jack
- 86 Cheese it.
- 87 to get a thing off one's chest
- 88 to chop and change
- 89 off his chump
- 90 to claim one's pound of flesh
- 91 claptrap
- 92 a clean slate
- 93 close-fisted
- 94 to be in the clouds
- 95 under a cloud
- 96 to coin money
- 97 as cold as charity
- 98 off colour
- 99 come-day, (*or very come-day, go-day*)
- 100 to come down a peg
- 101 to come home to one
- 102 common or garden
- 103 a commonplace book
- 104 to cook a person's goose
- 105 What's cooking?
- 106 a corker
- 107 to count one's blessings
- 108 to count (something) to a person for righteousness
- 109 to have the courage of one's convictions
- 110 cracked
- 111 crazy, crazed

- 112 crestfallen
113 to have a crow to pluck (*or* pick)
114 to crow over
115 (a) crummy, (b) Crummy!
116 to cry down
117 to cry (weep) one's (a) eyes, (b) heart, out
118 to cry for the moon
119 (for a person's) cup to be full
120 to cut the ground (*or* the grass) under (*or* from under)
 a person's feet
121 to cut no ice
122 at daggers drawn
123 (a) to look, (b) to speak, daggers
124 to dance attendance on a person
125 days of grace
126 dead beat
127 as dead as Queen Anne
128 as deaf as an adder
129 a debt of honour
130 *Deo volente*
131 (a) in, (b) out of, one's depth
132 *deus ex machina*
133 the devil to pay
134 diamond cut diamond
135 dickey (*or* dicky)
136 to die in harness
137 die-hard
138 to do a person
139 to do the polite
140 to do a thing off one's own bat
141 to do away with
142 to do the trick
143 not to have a dog's chance
144 a Don Juan
145 a doubting Thomas
146 to draw a blank
147 to draw close
148 to draw in one's horns
149 to draw a (*or* the) line

- 150 to draw the wool over a person's eyes
151 to dree one's weird
152 a drop in the bucket (*or* ocean)
153 a lame duck
154 to look like a dying duck in a thunderstorm
155 to be all ears
156 in at one ear and out at the other
157 to gain (*or* win, *or* have) a person's ear
158 to give ear
159 to have a person's ear
160 to lend an ear
161 earth-bound
162 no earthly
163 Easier (*or* That is easier) said than done.
164 Easy (*or* Lightly, *or* Light) come and go, *or* Easy
 come, easy go
165 as easy as pot
166 to eat out of a person's hand
167 I'll eat my hat if . . .
168 to get in a word edgeways
169 an El Dorado
170 *embarras de richesse*
171 *en masse*
172 *en route*
173 enough to make a saint swear
174 enough to make the angels weep
175 *entre nous*
176 *Et tu, Brute?*
177 the eternal triangle
178 one's even tenor (*or* the even tenor of one's way)
179 to be even with
180 ever so much; ever so many
181 every now and then
182 every time
183 in an evil hour (*or* day, *or* moment)
184 a ewe lamb
185 to explore every avenue; to leave no avenue unexplored
186 an eye for an eye
187 with an eye to

- 188 to catch one's eye
189 to have an evil eye on a person
190 (a) to get, (b) to have, one's eye in (*or well in*)
191 to have (*or keep*) an eye on, *or* to give an eye to
192 the (*or a*) glad eye
193 to have an eye for
194 to have an eye to
195 to have an eye to the main chance
196 in the eye of the law
197 to mind one's eye
198 My eye! (*or My eyes!*)
199 the naked eye
200 with a jaundiced eye
201 with the mind's eye
202 in the wind's eye
203 in the public eye
204 a weather eye
205 to close (*or shut*) one's eyes
205A to cry one's eyes out
206 to make eyes at
207 to open one's eyes
208 to see with one's own eyes
209 a sight for sore eyes
210 eye
211 to face both ways
212 *facile princeps*
213 to fall flat
214 to fall for
215 to fall on (*or upon*)
216 a false step
217 to fall on stony ground
218 fancy-free
219 far and away
220 as far as in one lies
221 far from the madding crowd
222 to a fault
223 to feel like a giant refreshed
224 a fellow-traveller
225 to fight like Kilkenney cats

- 226 to fight a losing battle
227 in fine
228 to have at one's finger ends (*or* tips)
229 the finishing (*or* final) touch
230 between two fires
231 of the first water
232 to fish for compliments
233 a poor fish
234 a queer fish
235 as fit as a fiddle
236 by (*or* in) fits and starts
237 flesh-pots
238 to make one's flesh creep
239 to fling to the winds
240 to have one's fling
241 to floor
242 to flourish like the green bay-tree
243 flowing with milk and honey
244 to fly off the handle
245 to fly off at a tangent
246 a fly on the wheel
247 a fool's paradise
248 fool-proof
249 with one foot in the grave
250 (a) to give, (b) to have, a free hand
251 to fork out (*or* up)
252 a Frankenstein
253 a free fight
254 There is no future in it.
255 That is a game two can play at.
256 to gang a-gley
257 to get cracking
258 to get more than one bargained for
259 the gift of the gab
260 to gild the pill
261 gilt-edged
262 to gird up one's loins
263 to give one the creeps
264 (a) to give, (b) to take, the cue