

Port Outward Starboard Home and Other Language Myths by Michael Quinion
(Penguin) R164.

27 July 2005

I still remember my desolation on first being told that there was no Father Christmas. I even remember that my parents seemed to take a certain pleasure in disillusioning me. They were not cruel people, but I imagine that they regarded this as a constructive rite of passage on my way to disabused maturity, like killing my first lion or getting my first pair of long pants. No doubt they were right, and I am pleased today that I am not the oldest person in the Santa line at Toys'R Us, but it was a loss for which I felt the poorer and still do.

Now along comes Michael Quinion to deprive us of some more cherished illusions, or *language myths* as he calls them with ill-concealed contempt. His title, of course, refers to the plausible explanation of the word *posh* as being derived from the abbreviation stamped on passenger tickets on P&O liners to India, for *Port Outward Starboard Home*, the most desirable and hence most expensive cabins. The explanation has everything we look for in etymology: a pleasing sense of words reflecting, indeed actively being shaped by social realities, containing within themselves traces of now defunct class and social structures.

Too bad, says Quinion; or rather, '*Folk etymology*' he mutters, with all the tolerance of a vegetarian finding veal on his plate. The implication is that folk are bad etymologists, ignorant, sentimental and gullible. Quinion himself is, amongst many other things, a researcher for the *Oxford English Dictionary* and is neither sentimental nor gullible. He ruthlessly stamps on the tales the pseudo-pedants amongst us have peddled around dinner tables for years. He is particularly harsh on derivations from supposed acronyms, such as "to insure promptness" for *tip*, or "For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge" for *fuck*. "Claims that words originate in acronyms are almost always spurious," says Quinion sternly. "There are almost no examples of words of acronymic origin before 1900." To be fair to the man, he recognises that it is only human to prefer language myths to language truths. "We're suckers for a really good story", he admits. "Stories that are boring, mundane or inconclusive will not survive. Unfortunately, real word histories are often all of these things."

So Quinion knows that his task is to deprive us, for our own good, of candy and feed us spinach. He does this with such verve that it is natural to suspect him of taking a sadistic delight in it. He first tantalises us with a really good story, such as, for instance, that the term "cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey" originated in the British Navy during the Napoleonic Wars: a stack of cannon balls was arranged next to each gun on a brass plate called a monkey. In cold weather the cannon balls would shrink and come tumbling down.

Having charmed us with this story, Quinion grabs it away from us like a piece of bright yellow candy: "It's rubbish," he snaps. "There's no evidence that such brass plates existed." Chastened, we read on, to find him, as he says, trampling on several beautiful stories with his "size nine clodhoppers of evidence".

Thus there is a seductive story about the origin of *chunder*, the Australian term for vomit. Like *posh*, it harks back to the days of shipping: “the word is an abbreviated form of ‘watch under’, supposedly shouted out by upper-deck passengers on emigrant ships just before being sick over the rails to the peril of those below.” The story has the incidental advantage of explaining present-day Australian egalitarianism, the so-called tall poppy syndrome, as the chundered-upon getting even with the chunderers; but Quinion will have none of it: “I have to tell Australians that it is a classic bit of folk etymological storytelling and they mustn’t believe a word of it.”

Repeating and rejecting a fascinating story about the origin of the word *sincere*, Quinion spells out his killjoy’s credo, what he calls his “informal etymological yardstick”: “the better they sound, the more circumstantial and detailed the background, the neater the conclusion, the less likely they are to be true. Conversely, if the story is mundane and boring, it is likely to be correct.”

This is a hard lesson, providing little comfort. We don’t stop getting presents when we discover that there is no Father Christmas, but Quinion offers us very little compensation for the myths he destroys. Here and there a true etymology is mildly interesting: brutally squashing the appealing story that *snob* was derived from the abbreviation in college registers at Oxford and Cambridge for undergraduates *sine nobilitate*, that is, without nobility (with *nobs* for their titled counterparts), he gives us instead the information that *snobs* was probably derived from the name for a cobbler, and by extension a townsperson.

It is instructive, also, to learn that the word *barbecue* is derived from the Arawakan Indians, who built wooden frames, called *barbacoas*, on which they cooked their food. The first recorded use of the word *barbicu* as a verb comes from Aphra Benn in 1690, which does make one feel a bit different about charred boerewors. .

There is, in fact, a good deal of solid and interesting information here. If you are the kind of person who actually enjoys stepping on snails or poisoning moles, you will love this book, and will take pleasure in squashing people who peddle folk etymologies at dinner parties. If, like most of us, you step and poison with a bad conscience, you will read it valiantly, believing that it will make you a better because better-informed person. And if you live with snails and moles and secretly still believe there is a Father Christmas, you will read it, smile, and persist in believing that posh people travelled port outward and starboard home.