

The Devniad, Book 14

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Brewer's Feast

It's the Orville Redenbacher's of mind popcorn. Big. Delicious. Deeply satisfying. A little oddball. So addictive you can't have just one sample. And occasionally leaving something behind that sticks with you.

But *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* is more of a recondite taste than just any smartfood. And a new edition is a rare and special event. One that's occurred only 15 times since the first edition was published in England in the year 1870 by Dr. E. Cobham Brewer.

My first *Brewer's* was the thirteenth or Centenary Edition of 1970. Eleven years later, there was the fourteenth. And late last year, in Pandemonium off Harvard Square (proprietor Tyler Stewart is apparently another confirmed *Brewersboy*), I found the new 1995 fifteenth edition. O frabjous day.

What's all the fuss? you may ask. So this is, in the sainted Dr. Brewer's phrase, a collection of "words that have a tale to tell." One that treats words and phrases, philology, etymology, folklore, folk customs and beliefs, mythology (especially Greek & Roman, Celtic, and Norse), and curiosities.

So what? We've seen dictionaries and encyclopedias of mythology before. Plus separate collections of catchphrases. Of literary characters. Slang. Biography. Even books of lists.

Brewer's genius is that it's all these things, conjoined in one gloriously eccentric gallimaufry.

Which, as page 431 tells you, means a medley, confused jumble, or hotchpotch "made of all the scraps of the larder," from *galimafree*, French "ragout" or "hash," perhaps related to *galimatias*, a 16-century French nonce word for "gibberish."

Elsewhere on this particular page, you learn that the word "gallant" means brave or honourable when stressed on the first syllable, but chivalrous and attentive to women when stressed on the second.

Also that a "Gallio" is an official indifferent to matters outside his province (ever meet one of those?), after the Biblical functionary in Acts 18:17 who "cared for none of those things."

You discover that though "gallowglasses" technically are armed servitors or foot soldiers from ancient Ireland, Shakespeare places them from the Western Isles of Scotland.

And you get a fine little 121-word history of the Gallup Poll. Including the fact that it forecast 1945 British parliamentary election results within 1 percent by interviewing only 1809 of 25 million voters, but blew some later contests.

Finally, you find that the galoshes my mother forced me to wear in rainy weather as a boy had their linguistic roots in France (and earlier in Rome, from late Latin *gallicula*, "Gallic shoe").

And all this is only on one page. I could go on and on. In fact, here are a few more things I soaked up recently from my favorite *Brewer's*:

Francis Bacon died of a cold contracted when stuffing a fowl with snow as an experiment in refrigeration.

The two judges of the Isle of Man, called Deemsters, take an oath to execute the laws “as indifferently as the herring backbone doth lie in the midst of the fish.”

The Gazelle Boy, apparently a feral child of the Spanish Sahara, in 1961 was clocked at over 30 mph when galloping with the herd.

The phrase “golden handshake” was coined by an English editor. And the phrase “hat trick” isn’t originally from ice hockey, but from the slightly less combative sport of cricket. (If you took three wickets with three successive balls, the club bought you a new sissy little beanie. Sorry, cricket or beanie fans, when it comes to goofy sports fashion I call things as I see them.)

Among British regimental nicknames (one of my favorite categories in the book), the Inns of Court and Bloomsbury Volunteers were dubbed The Devil’s Own by George III “when he found that the regiment consisted mainly of lawyers.”

Or how about this derivation for a comic book metropolis that should have Batman spinning in his cave: “The village of Gotham in Nottinghamshire was proverbial for the stupidity of its inhabitants....One [tale] tells how they joined hands round a thorn bush to prevent a cuckoo from flying away.”

Certainly many of these examples demonstrate the book’s uniquely English cast. Take the following entry for “Catch someone with their trousers or pants down, To.” Note its stately definition and the beautifully euphemistic circumlocution of its example: “A metaphor of American origin meaning to

catch someone at a disadvantage. There is often a knock at the door when one is otherwise engaged in the smallest room.”

What can one say to that but “There’ll always be an England”?

Not that *Brewer’s* is perfect. The paper stock on the new edition is a tad too translucent, so you get some show-through. Also: for such a thoroughly British book, *Brewer’s* is usually quite sure-footed when it comes to U.S. idiom. But I do spot at least one lurch in the definition for “high school” in this latest edition: “In the USA a secondary school from grade 7 to grade 12...”

OK, technically you could say that a seventh grader attends “junior high school” and look at that as a subset of “high school,” but what native speaker of American ever would?

A few such quibbles aside, *Brewer’s* is probably my favorite reference book. So I feel called upon to do a Cato here. Not Kaelin — Marcus Porcius. As most of you will remember (well, noble Romanists Olson and Giguere anyway), every time he made a speech in the Roman Senate, on whatever subject, Cato threw in a little reminder from his personal geopolitical strategy agenda: “Carthage must be destroyed.”

OK, everyone, here’s my refrain from now on:

“Ya gotta get *Brewer’s*.”

[*Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase & Fable*, Fifteenth Edition; revised by Adrian Room; HarperCollins Publishers, 1995. Forty-five dollars; 1182 pages. Available wherever sublime reference works are sold.]

Backchat
on APA:NESFA #311, April 1996

To all:

Movies seen in the last month or so: *Antonia's Line*, *Mulholland Falls*, *Jane Eyre*, *Twister*, *Heaven's Prisoners*.

My favorite: *Antonia's Line*. This Dutch entry won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film of 1995. And won my heart (and Maureen's) with its depiction of a strong-willed, independent woman who returns with her daughter to a farming community deep in the Dutch countryside right after World War II. She's determined to live her life without dependence on anyone. Especially men.

We follow her for the next 40 or 50 years, witnessing along the way the usual incidents of rural life: rape, incest, insanity, suicide, mental retardation, sadism, agoraphobia, hard work, anticlericism, hetero and lesbian love, childbirth, aging, death by tractor, and big lunches at a long table outdoors. In other words, it's a big juicy feel-good movie. No, really.

Audio recording of the month: Mark Knopfler, *Golden Heart*. Besides what seems to be a minor hit, "Darling Pretty" (which you can hear over the stormchaser camp sound system early in the movie *Twister*), the eponymous song is lovely.

And for us those of us who like to mix some history with our folk/rock, there's the bitchin ballad "Done With Bonaparte," told from the POV of one of Napoleon's Grande Armée dogfaces who (though starving) is definitely fed up on the retreat from Moscow. In the opening, over a bouncy Celtic swing tune Knopfler sets the scene softly but with gravel: "We've paid in hell since Moscow burned/As Cossacks tear us

piece by piece/Our dead are strewn a hundred miles/Though death would be a sweet release..."

This may turn out to be my favorite modern song on a historical subject since Stan Rogers' magnificent "Northwest Passage," about Sir John's Franklin's doomed 1840s expedition to the Canadian Arctic. Or Rod MacDonald's incredible "The Way to Calvary," about two Roman galley slaves who slaughter their way to the lifeboats and escape to Palestine, where one witnesses a crucifixion many years later....OK, I never said my tastes in music were normal.

To Paul Giguere

Congratulations in advance on your move to Chelmsford, which I presume to be on the banks of the beautiful River Chelm. Certes with your fortitude of spirit you'll survive moving with only minor psychic scarring. Remember, the first twenty-five moves are the hardest.

Thanks for your cogent advice about scanning techniques. I personally don't envisage getting one anytime soon. Surely by now, all those lonely hours scanning and inputting for NESFA Press have convinced you of the truth of Cordwainer Smith's great dictum, "Scanners live in vain."

Agree with you in liking Caleb Carr's *The Alienist*. Although I keep hoping that a book about serial killers will equal Thomas Harris's work, and none are ever up to snuff. So to speak. (Where's that sequel to *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs*? Anybody heard anything about a publication schedule?)

Particularly impressed by Carr's descriptions of the horrifying living conditions among New York's immigrants before the turn of the century. The liberal and progressive reform movements that began then and

continued, say, into the 1960s — improving such basics as building and sanitation codes — made things much better for a vast number of people for a long while. It was one of the glories of American, indeed Western, civilization. That other factors have been rolling these reforms back in recent decades doesn't negate the magnitude of our high-water-mark achievement.

To Joe Ross

Loved all your corrections to mistakes made in the Trivial Pursuit game set. I remember a few myself. Sometimes led to a dustup, since some players believed if it were on the card it must be absolute truth.

Some of the correct answers are a bit dismaying compared to the simpler versions on the cards. You mean from now on, instead of Greenwich we have to call it Herstmonceux Mean Time? If so, could you provide a pronunciation guide next issue?

Wow, you worked in a ton of detail on those British Commonwealth flags, Joe. Didn't realize you were such a vexillologist.

OK, so "Hail the Hero Schweitzer" is from a Star Trek episode. Why is it on your masthead? What's, as Paul Harvey says, the rest of the story?

To Elizabeth Carey

Many thanks to you and to Craig McDonough for hosting the Other Meeting/party. Enjoyed talking to you both, and to your work friend Joe. And of course your feline cohosts, the lovely and talented Retsina and Kahlua. (And Midori and Absinthe.)

Enjoyed your books reviews. I've seen several good reviews and discussions on that Mary Lefkowitz book, *Not Out of Africa*, about how some Afrocentrist historians went astray. As

you suggest, let's not throw African studies out with the bathwater. General readers have everything to learn about African history, and even the historians have plenty of fascinating new discoveries and reinterpretations ahead. As an SF reader, naturally it took a genre work to bring this neglect home to me some years back. Specifically, Bruce Sterling's short story "Dinner in Audoghast." It's in the 1986 anthology by Gardner Dozois, *The Year's Best Science Fiction, Third Annual Collection*. Subtle, marvelous, and tremendously evocative of an African culture with all the trappings of civilization that flourished once and is almost completely forgotten.

Both Peter Heck at Boskone and Mark Olson in another review have discussed the Dava Sobel book *Longitude*. Like all three of you, I had high hopes when I opened this one. That subtitle — *The True Story of a Lone Genius Who Solved the Greatest Scientific Problem of His Time* — is a piece of genius itself. And I did find it fascinating to follow the long quest for a workable seagoing chronometer, the nutball gold rush that started when Parliament offered a big money prize in 1714, and John Harrison's lifetime of struggle to perfect the device. But am I the only one who was also sharply disappointed? I thought Sobel produced, not a book, but a sketch for a book. And a sometimes poorly written sketch at that.

To Michael Burstein

The only way you could top all these nominations and accolades you've been winning is by being assassinated on the Hugo Awards stage by *Babylon 5* creator J. Michael Straczynski in a fit of crazed envy when it turns out thousands of write-in votes gave the award for Best Dramatic Presentation to one of your public short-story readings. Your martyrdom would be the flashpoint of a shooting war between science fiction literary and media fan factions. After the rubble was cleared, there would be shrines built to your memory in the YA sections of a thousand public libraries.

Seriously, and again, heartiest congratulations, Michael. I'm so happy for you. Boy, if anything could encourage anybody to keep writing, this would be it.

On another topic: You say you "did see Halley in 1986"? Quite a trick, considering he died in 1742. Oh, you mean the **comet**...

To Nomi Burstein

Welcome to the APA!
Sucker.

So you want to eventually move into lexicography. I love that stuff, too. Probably have 50 dictionaries, including on the more extreme ends glossaries of homosexual slang, movie terms, and of course the beloved heart of both our professional lives, that ever-fascinating cornucopia of ridiculous alphanumeric and acronyms run wild — networking.

OK, what are some of your favorites? For everyday use I like Merriam-Webster's *Collegiate* and their *Unabridged*, although the *American Heritage*, with its in-between size and nice type weight, is growing on me.

Merriam-Webster's *Dictionary of English Usage*, issued in 1989, is quite a marvelous new model for style manuals.

It systematically shows multiple citations for how a word or phrase was actually used through time, then gives advice. Instead of skipping right to the advice like all the others. And it recognizes that a number of usage points are really toss-ups, presenting the cogent arguments for each side.

My favorite dictionary of any type would have to be *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*. In fact, it's so wonderful that I've just decided to review the new edition at length for this Devniad. Thanks, Nomi — I was getting desperate for a main topic this month.

To Tony Lewis

Thanks for alerting me to the recent death of Christopher Robin Milne; hadn't heard about it. Loved your quote/comment. Don't really believe this, of course. Why, I saw him climbing a tree just the other day...

Agree that Jane Austen wrote very funny books. Time has bleached all the enjoyment out of reading certain classics. Not hers.

To Ray Bowie

Concur with your assessment of the little-girl pilot who crashed and died, along with her father and flying instructor, on that cross-country record stunt. Saw all three interviewed on the *Today* show several days before the accident, and had the thought then that she'd been pushed into it by her stage door daddy.

Was particularly taken aback by the answer when the flying instructor was asked if the girl were a good pilot. He said in effect that she was coming along, but needed corrections now and then. Still needs corrections on a regular basis, so you put her in the pilot's seat for a cross-country marathon, and take off overloaded in bad weather because her

imminent birthday threatened the record? That little girl wasn't the only immature person on the plane.

To switch subjects: I deeply respect Robert Silverberg, even if you think he whines too much about literary SF's poor sales. Silverberg produced plenty of not-so-literary SF in his youth — was a real high-volume sausage grinder in the 50s and 60s. Then he burnt out, and decided to slow down and think a little about quality and originality. Which all kinds of SF could always use more of.

To Mark Olson

Congratulations! I hear you're now book reviewer for the resurrected *Aboriginal SF*. Hope this doesn't mean that invaluable (yet free) resource the Typo Machein will stutter to a stop....

The C. Northcote Parkinson book on the Nelsonian Age of Sail sounds like a must-read for me. Somehow hadn't heard of it elsewhere. Profuse thanks for pointing it out. The Canton library and its multilibrary network knows of 13 other CNP books, but not this one; I'll have to keep looking.

However, you think that of the Aircraft Carrier, Dreadnought, and Ship-of-the-Line eras, the last is "oddly, the least written about"? In historical fiction, at least, I don't know of any books about carrier or dreadnought warfare that come even close in popularity to C. S. Forester's Hornblower novels, which you mention, or to my current favorites, Patrick O'Brian's ongoing Aubrey-Maturin series. Perhaps you mean "written about" in straight history. But as far as familiarity with the era goes, I'd bet more readers even in America have some grasp of, say, who fought at Trafalgar than have any idea, for instance, where Dewey was engaged.

Very much enjoyed your trip report on England and Eastercon. Some fine,

colorful writing, in comments like those about the risks of bad weather upon the short runways at Logan Airport ("and blub, blub, blub, into Boston Harbor we go"), your review of the in-flight movie *Goldeneye* ("It wasn't too bad, but I'm glad I only paid \$348 to see it"), and your description of Stow-on-the-Wold ("an ancient village founded on the local sheep, but now relying more on fleecing rich tourists").

The cafeteria where you lunched in London sounds a lot like the Mövenpick Marché that Maureen and I hit in Toronto last year. Except our food was better than "decent." Truly a fannish anarchists' delight.

Your Eastercon section covered when, where, who, how, why, but left out the 6th W: hoW many people went?

I'm handing a copy on to my siblings for their trip over in early June. Thanks on their behalf for your excellent advance scouting.