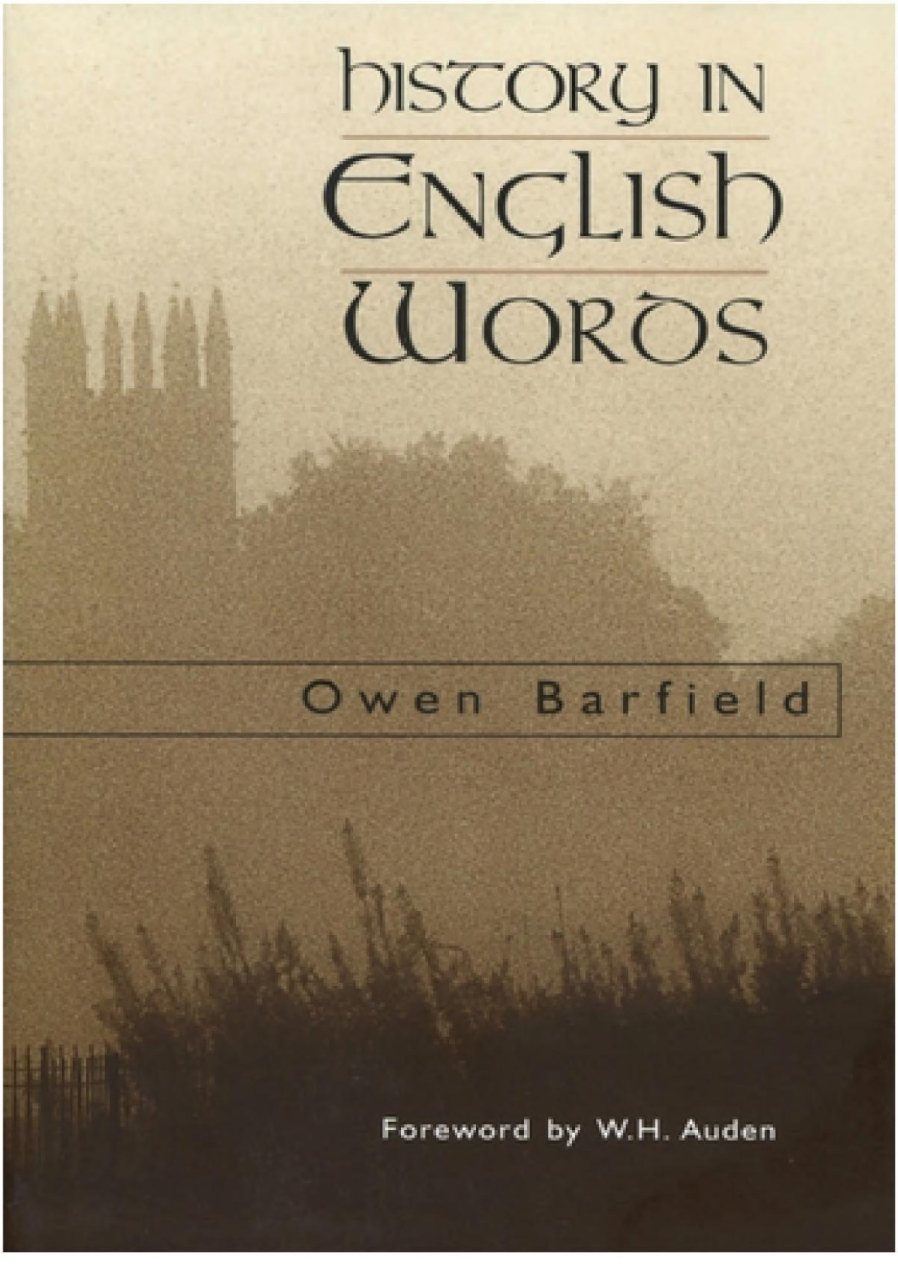

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Owen Barfield

History in English Words

Foreword by W.H. Auden

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FOREWORD

I have drawn from the well of language many a thought which I do not have and which I could not put into words.

C. G. Lichtenberg

Many who write about 'linguistics' go astray because they overlook the fundamental fact that we use words for two quite different purposes; as a code of communication whereby, as individual members of the human race, we can request and supply information necessary to life, and as Speech in the true sense, the medium in which, as unique persons who think in the first and second person singular, we gratuitously disclose ourselves to each other and share our experiences. Though no human utterance is either a pure code statement or a pure personal act, the difference is obvious if we compare a phrase-book for tourists travelling abroad with a poem. The former is concerned with needs common to all human beings; hence, for the phrases given, there exist more or less exact equivalents in all languages. No poem, on the other hand, can be even approximately translated into any other language. A poet, one might say, is someone who tries to give an experience its Proper Name, and it is a characteristic of Proper Names that they cannot be translated, only transliterated. Furthermore, precisely because writing poetry is a gratuitous act, in it, as Valéry observed, "everything which *must* be said, is almost

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impossible to say well."

Whereas most code statements are verifiable or disprovable, most personal utterances are neither; they can only be believed, doubted or denied. When we speak as persons, capable of good and evil, the important question is not 'Is what we say the case or not?', but 'Are we speaking the truth, or deceiving ourselves, or deliberately lying?'

Many animals possess a code for communicating vital information about food, sex, the presence of enemies, etc., and in social animals like the bee this code may be extremely complex. It is even possible that, in the case of animals, geese, for example, which are capable of forming personal bonds between individuals, their sound-and-gesture code may have an element of personal expression but, even if this be so, it is secondary, whereas, in the case of human language, personal speech is its primary function, to which its use as a code is subordinate.

If this were not so, then, like all other species, we should only have one language, used and understood by all human beings, with at most slight regional dialect differences, like the song of the chaffinch, and this language would undergo no historical change, but remain the same from generation to generation. But from the beginning, not only have men spoken many different languages, all subject to historical change, but also no two persons with the same mother-tongue speak it in exactly the same way. Understanding what another human being says to us is always a matter of translation. In this book, Mr Barfield is trying to help us to translate correctly, instead of

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making, as we all too often do, the most elementary errors.

True understanding is unattainable without both love and detachment, and we can only learn to view anything with detachment by comparing it with other things which are both like and unlike it. We cannot understand the present without a knowledge of the past, our native land without having spent some time in a foreign country, our mother-tongue without a working knowledge of at least two other languages. Without such knowledge, our love of ourselves at the present moment, of our country, of our language, remains an ignorant idolatry, exemplified by the Frenchman who said: "The great advantage of the French language is that in it the words occur in the order in which one thinks them."

In weaning us from this idolatry, the historical approach employed by Mr Barfield seems to me much more likely to be effective than the approach of the linguistic analysts. The latter seem to believe that, by a process of 'demythologising' and disinfecting, it should be possible to create a language in which, as in algebra, meanings would be unequivocal and misunderstanding impossible. But human language is mythological and metaphorical by nature. As Thoreau said: "All perception of truth is a perception of an analogy; we reason from our hands to our heads." Mr Barfield gives many fascinating illustrations of this process. The English words *delirious* and *prevaricate*, for example, are derived from the Latin verbs, *delirare* and *praevaricari*, which originally meant, he tells us, 'to go out of the furrow' and 'to plough in crooked lines'. A secular and, therefore, fool-proof language is an

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unphilosophical day-dream. We can only cope with the dangers of language if we recognize that language is by nature magical and therefore highly dangerous. It will always be possible to use language, as a demagogue uses it, as Black Magic which neither. like a communication code, supplies people with information they need to know, nor, like Speech, asks for a personal and therefore unpredictable response, but seeks to extort from others mindless tautological echoes of itself.

"We must not forget," Mr Barfield reminds us, "that nine-tenths of the words comprising the vocabulary of a civilised nation are never used by more than at most one tenth of the population; while of the remaining tithe, nine-tenths of those who use them are commonly aware of about one-tenth of their meanings."

Until quite recently, this did not matter very much. Before the spread of semi-literacy and the development of the mass media, the language used by the nine-tenths was the language they had learned at first-hand from their parents and their next-door neighbors. Their vocabulary might be limited, they might be aware of many of its possible meanings, but with it they were able to say what they meant to say and to understand what was said to them. Their ignorance of historical changes in the meanings of words was not a serious handicap because they could not or had no desire to read the literature of the past. The age of innocence, however, has come to an end and can never return. To-day, when all school children and college students are expected to read some English Literature, the consequence of such ignorance is that a nineteen-year-old, confronted with

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the lines,

> *The agèd bloodhound rose and shook his hide,*
> *But his sagacious eye an inmate owns.*

can interpret them as follows: "The poor dog was blind. Some lunatic had punched his eye out and kept it."

To-day we must modify Mr Barfield's warning and say that nine-tenths of the population use twice as many words as they understand. It is no longer a matter of their knowing some of the possible meanings of the words they use; they attach meanings to them which are simply false. Thus one can hear a person, when he is feeling sick, say *I am nauseous;* a reviewer of a spy-thriller can describe it as *enervating;* a famous television star can call a firm of investment brokers, for which he is making a plug, *integrity-ridden*. So befuddled, how can the man-in-the-street be expected to resist the black magic of the propagandists, commercial and political? Formerly, philology could remain a study for specialists: to-day, *History in English Words*, and other books like it, must he made required reading in all schools.

I have deliberately refrained from saying much about the contents of Mr Barfield's book. After reading it, one first impulse is to tell others about the many facts in it which have surprised and delighted one. I never knew before, for instance, that the first recorded use of the word *self-respect* in a favorable sense—hitherto it had always been a pejorative, akin to *selfishness—occurs* in Wordsworth's poem *The Excursion*. One's second impulse is to cite further examples of significant

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meaning-changes. I am fascinated, for example, by euphemisms and would very much like to know exactly when it was first thought tactful to call the poor *under-privileged* and the old *senior citizens*. But, on reflection, one realises that asking such questions is a form of showing off, and that to quote extensively from a book of this kind is as bad as telling readers in advance the solution to a murder mystery.

It is a privilege to be allowed to recommend a book which is not only a joy to read but also of great moral value as a weapon in the unending battle between civilisation and barbarism. As Dag Hammarskjöld wrote in *Markings:*

> *Respect for the word is the first commandment in the discipline by which a man can be educated to maturity—intellectual, emotional and moral.*
>
> *Respect for the word—to employ it with scrupulous care and an incorruptible heartfelt love of truth—is essential if there is to be any growth in a society or in the human race.*
>
> *To misuse the word is to show contempt for man. It undermines the bridges and poisons the wells. It causes Man to regress down the long path of his evolution.*

— W. H. AUDEN

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PART I

THE ENGLISH NATION

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I

PHILOLOGY AND THE ARYANS

ELECTRIC • QUALITY • GARDEN • MEAD • TIMBER

If somebody showed us a document which he said was an unpublished letter of Dr. Johnson's, and on reading it through we came across the word 'telephone', we should be fairly justified in sending him about his business. The fact that there was no such thing as a telephone until many years after Johnson's death would leave no doubt whatever in our minds that the letter was not written by him. If we cared to go farther, we could say with equal certainty that the letter was written since the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the telephone was invented.

Now suppose that there had been nothing about telephones in the letter, but that it had contained an account of a thunderstorm. If in describing the stillness just before the storm broke the writer had said that 'the atmosphere was electric', we could still be fairly positive that he was not Dr. Johnson. But this time it would not be because the *thing* of which the letter spoke had no existence in Johnson's day. No doubt the heavens during a storm a hundred and fifty years ago were as highly charged with electricity as they are today; but if we look up the word *electric* in the *Oxford Dictionary*, we find that in Johnson's time it

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simply was not used in that way. Thus, in his own dictionary it is defined as:

'A property in some bodies, whereby when rubbed so as to grow warm, they draw little bits of paper, or such-like substances, to them.'

The world was only just beginning to connect this mysterious property of amber with the thunder and lightning, and however still and heavy the air might have been, it would have been impossible for the lexicographer to describe it by that word. Or again, supposing the letter had said nothing about a storm, but that it had described a conversation between Garrick and Goldsmith which was carried on 'at high tension', we should still have little hesitation in pronouncing it to be a forgery. The phrase 'high tension', used of the relation between human beings, is a metaphor taken from the condition of the space between two electrically charged bodies. At present many people who use such a phrase are still half-aware of its full meaning, but many years hence everybody may be using it to describe their quarrels and their nerves without dreaming that it conceals an electrical metaphor—just as we ourselves speak of a man's 'disposition' without at all knowing that the reference is to astrology.[1] Nevertheless by consulting an historical dictionary it will still be possible to 'date' any passage of literature in which the phrase occurs. We shall still know for certain that the passage could not have been written in a time before certain phenomena of static electricity had become common knowledge.

Thus, the scientists who discovered the forces of electricity

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actually made it possible for the human beings who came after them to have a slightly different idea, a slightly fuller consciousness of their relationship with one another. They made it possible for them to speak of the 'high tension' between them. So that the discovery of electricity, besides introducing several new words (e.g. *electricity* itself) into our everyday vocabulary, has altered or added to the meaning of many older words, such as *battery, broadcast, button, conductor, current, force, magnet, potential, tension, terminal, wire*, and many others.

But apart from the way in which it is used, there is a little mine of history buried in the word *electric* itself. If we look it up in a dictionary we find that it is derived from a Greek word 'ēlektron', which meant 'amber'. And in this etymology alone anyone who was completely ignorant of our civilization could perceive three facts—that at one time English scholars were acquainted with the language spoken by the ancient Greeks, that the Greeks did not know of electricity (for if they had there would have been nothing to prevent our borrowing their word for it), and that the idea of electricity has been connected in men's minds with amber. Lastly, if we were completely ignorant of the quality of amber itself, the fact that 'ēlektron' is connected with 'ēlektōr', which means 'gleaming' or 'the beaming sun', might give us a faint hint of its nature. These are some of the many ways in which words may be made to disgorge the past that is bottled up inside them, as coal and wine, when we kindle or drink them, yield up their bottled sunshine.

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Now the deduction of information from the presence or absence of certain words is a common practice which has been known to critics and historians of literature, under some such name as 'internal evidence', for many years. It is from such evidence, for instance, that we deduce Shakespeare's ignorance of the details of Roman civilization. But until a few years ago—within the memory of men still living—very little use had been made of language itself, that is to say, of the historical forms and meanings of words as interpreters both of the past and of the workings of men's minds. It has only just begun to dawn on us that in our own language alone, not to speak of its many companions, the past history of humanity is spread out in an imperishable map, just as the history of the mineral earth lies embedded in the layers of its outer crust. But there is this difference between the record of the rocks and the secrets which are hidden in language: whereas the former can only give us a knowledge of outward, dead things—such as forgotten seas and the bodily shapes of prehistoric animals and primitive men—language has preserved for us the inner, living history of man's soul. It reveals the evolution of consciousness.

In the common words we use every day the souls of past races, the thoughts and feelings of individual men stand around us, not dead, but frozen into their attitudes like the courtiers in the garden of the Sleeping Beauty. The more common a word is and the simpler its meaning, the bolder very likely is the original thought which it contains and the more intense the intellectual or poetic effort which went to its making. Thus, the word *quality* is used by most educated people every day of

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their lives, yet in order that we should have this simple word Plato had to make the tremendous effort (it is one of the most exhausting which man is called on to exert) of turning a vague feeling into a clear thought. He invented the new word 'poiotēs', 'what-ness' as we might say, or 'of-what-kind-ness', and Cicero translated it by the Latin 'qualitas', from 'qualis'. Language becomes a different thing for us altogether if we can make ourselves realize, can even make ourselves feel how every time the word *quality* is used, say upon a label in a shop window, that creative effort made by Plato comes into play again. Nor is the acquisition of such a feeling a waste of time; for once we have made it our own, it circulates like blood through the whole of the literature and life about us. It is the kiss which brings the sleeping courtiers to life.

But in order to excavate the information which is buried in a word we must have the means to ascertain its history. Until quite recently (about a hundred years ago) philology, as an exact science, was still in its infancy, and words were derived by ingenious guesswork from all kinds of impossible sources. All languages were referred to a Hebrew origin, since Hebrew was the language of the Bible. This was taken for granted. Since then, however, two new developments have revolutionized the whole study, made it accurate, and enormously extended its scope. During the eighteenth century Sanskrit, the ancient speech of the Hindoos, began for the first time to attract the attention of European scholars. In 1767 a French Jesuit named Coeurdoux pointed out certain resemblances between the European and Sanskrit languages. In

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1786 Sir William Jones described that language as being

'of wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could have been produced by accident—so strong that no philologer could examine all three without believing them to have sprung from some common source which, perhaps, no longer exists.'

At the time it was no more than a brilliant conjecture, but with it the comparative philology of the Aryan languages may be said to have begun.

Secondly, with the advent of phonology certain apparent laws were discovered governing the sounds made by the human throat and the way in which these sounds change with the passing of time and react upon each other when they are knit together in a spoken word. Henceforward it was possible to say for certain that, for example, the English word *wit* (from the old verb 'witan', to know) was not *derived* from the Latin 'videre', but cognate, or related, with it. Many words derived from 'videre', such as *advice, envy, review*, seem at first sight much farther off from the stem 'vid-' than *wit*, but it was now possible for scholars to say definitely that a Latin stem 'vid' adopted into English could not possibly have changed into *wit*. They could be equally certain that, if the Romans had *borrowed* the Greek word 'idein' (to see) into their language, it could never have changed its form to '*videre*', so that,

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innumerable as are the words which Rome borrowed from Greece, 'videre' is not one of them. Thus, it was clear that such groups of three words as *idein, videre*, and *wit*, or *astēr, stella*, and *star*, were not father, son, and grandson (as is the case, for instance, with *poeinē, poena*, and *penal*), but three brothers or cousins all descended from a common ancestor with a stem something like 'weid' belonging to some other language. This, put very briefly and with many omissions, was the contribution made by phonology to the science of comparative philology.

Perhaps it is not altogether insignificant that the study of that seemingly dull subject—phonology—should be associated in our minds with one of the most charming collections of fairy-tales in Europe. It is thanks to the labours of Jacob Grimm during the first half of the last century that we are now able to reconstruct the remote pasts of words, not, it is true, with absolute certainty, but with a degree of it which makes a chapter such as the present one worth writing. And while Grimm was burrowing into the rich, loamy soil of German speech and German folk-lore, another German scholar, Franz Bopp, was laying the foundations, with the help of this knowledge and of the results of the study of Sanskrit, of a genuinely scientific comparative philology. Nor was it long before less scholarly but more imaginative minds, such as Max Müller's, were interpreting the meaning of their researches to a wider public.

We can imagine the suppressed excitement of the philologists of that time as they began to discover in that remote Eastern

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language, the sacred language of the Vedic hymns, words such as 'vid' (to see), 'tara' (a star), 'sad' (to sit), 'bhratar' (a brother). For it was not only the evident relation of Sanskrit to the languages of Europe that was exciting. Sanskrit, which had preserved the forms of its words more unchanged than any other Aryan tongue, threw a brilliant light on the close relations existing between those other languages themselves. For instance, although the sisterhood of words such as the Greek 'onoma', Latin 'nomen', and *name*, had long been suspected, yet there had been no way of distinguishing such a sisterhood from purely accidental resemblances like Hebrew 'gol', Greek 'kaleo', and *call*, and the connection between 'brother' and 'frater' was by no means obvious. But when the older Sanskrit form 'bhratar' was brought to light, the gap between these words was at once bridged. It could be seen at a glance how the three of them, *brother, bhratar*, and *frater*, had started from the same original form and diverged through the years. Gradually all doubt was blown away, and Sanskrit, the language of a race with whom Europeans had thought, and for the most part still think, that they had almost nothing in common, stood revealed as an obvious relative of Latin, Greek, Modern English, and practically all the other languages of Europe. It seemed, therefore, to follow that our ancestors and those of the Hindoos were at one time living together, that our ancestors and theirs were, in fact, the same.

At first it was thought that Sanskrit itself was the parent-language from which all the others had derived, and that the nations of Europe were descended from a body of Hindoos,

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some of whom had migrated westwards. We called ourselves 'Aryans' because the people who had once spoken Sanskrit were known as 'Aryas', or worshippers of the God of the Brahmins. But soon the accurate methods of analysis which philology had now acquired made it plain that this could not be so. Therefore a still older language was postulated and called indifferently the Aryan, the Indo-Germanic, or the Indo-European parent-language. If there was a language, there must have been a people who spoke it, and attention was soon focused on the character, civilization, and whereabouts in space and time of the people who spoke the lost Indo-European, or 'Aryan' parent-language.

The fascination of this particular branch of philological research is apparent when we recollect that in this case, in the case of these remote Eastern ancestors—or predecessors—of ours, philology is almost the only window through which we can look out on them. In most subsequent periods of history we have many other ways, besides the study of language, of discovering the outward circumstances of men's lives. Historical records, archaeology, ethnology, folk-lore, art, literature, all come to our help in considering, say, the ancient Egyptian civilization; but it is not so with the Aryans. Here ethnology and archaeology tell us practically nothing, anthropology a little, and the rest nothing at all. If we wish to cross the darkness which separates us from this period we must lay down a little plank of words and step delicately over it. And in such romantic circumstances it is hardly surprising that we should find a veritable army of scholars and philosophers, both professional

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and amateur, jostling each other upon that plank with such vigour that the bridge and its burden have often seemed in danger of vanishing quietly together into the abyss.

The central principle upon which philologists have worked is this, that if a word occurs today in a fair sprinkling of the Aryan languages, then that word existed in the Aryan parent-language, and therefore the thing of which it is the label existed in some form or other in the primitive Aryan civilization. Conversely, if an object or an idea is found to have a different name in most of the Aryan languages, it was sometimes assumed that that object was not known to the Aryans before their dispersion. But this negative deduction soon came to be regarded as unsafe, and there are indeed many reasons why the whole method is limited and uncertain. For instance, even in one language it is constantly happening that, when a new thing or a new idea comes into the consciousness of the community, it is described, not by a new word, but by the name of the pre-existing object which most closely resembles it. This is inevitable. We have to proceed from the known to the unknown in language as in life; but language lags behind life and words change more slowly than things or ideas. When railways first came in, their rolling-stock consisted of a string of vehicles resembling the old horse coach so exactly that it was said later that 'the ghost of a horse stalked in front of the engine'. Although this is no longer the case, we still call these vehicles *carriages* or *coaches*, and look like continuing to do so. To take an even more patent example, when a modern Englishman or American uses the very old Celtic word *car*, we all know what he means: yet it would be

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an error to deduce from this that the principle of internal combustion was known in pre-Christian times in Wales, Ireland, Cornwall, Brittany, and probably Rome (Latin 'carrus', a cognate word). Moreover, we can see at once that the fraction of error is very much greater when we are dealing, not with the development of a word in one language, but with its history as it descended from one language to another; for example, from the hypothetical parent-tongue into the languages with which we are familiar today. Indeed, this kind of reasoning, if no other evidence were available, would lead us to conclude that the Greeks were acquainted with electricity.

Fortunately, however, it is not the object of this little book to put forward theories and discuss the extent to which they can be proved or disproved by words. And though it has been interesting to observe that in some cases—and notably when we are endeavouring to reconstruct the life and thought of our Aryan ancestors—our knowledge, such as it is, is derived very largely from the evidence of words, yet in these pages, even when that particular period is being dealt with, the words chosen for description will by no means necessarily be those which provide the most conclusive evidence for what is said. A great deal has been done in quite recent years by way of collating the results of comparative philology with those of anthropology, ethnology, comparative mythology, etc., and reconstructing from the combined data something of the past history of our own and other races or cultures. We are concerned here, not with the way in which those results were arrived at, but with the results themselves. The reconstruction

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itself has been and is being done by scholars; here the endeavour is rather to make use of their labours; not to think about the past, as it were, but to look at it. Consequently the words chosen are not the most useful ones, but those which are the best telescopes; for while the nineteenth century spent itself prodigally in multitudinous endeavours to know what the past was, it is now possible for us, by penetrating language with the knowledge thus accumulated, to feel how the past is.

Who are the Aryans? Where did they come from? Looking back down the corridor of time from the particular perspective to which we have attained in the twentieth century, far away in the past—it may be in the Stone Age—we seem to be able to perceive a remarkable phenomenon. At some particular spot in the vast plains stretching from Eastern Europe to Central Asia it was as though a fresh spring bubbled up into the pool of humanity. Whether it represented the advent of a new 'race-type', what a race-type exactly is, and how it begins are questions which we must leave to others to settle. That spring was the Aryan culture.

Throughout much of Europe and Asia there were already in existence different civilizations in different stages of development; such were the Egyptian, the Chaldean, and farther west the great Minoan civilization, which in its Bronze Age was to ray out an influence from Crete all over the Aegean world. It may be that there was something static[1] in the very nature of these pre-Aryan cultures, or it may be that they were ageing and passing in the natural course of events; what is certain is that there was something dynamic, some organic, out-

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pushing quality in the waters of this Aryan spring. For these waters spread. They have been spreading over the world ever since that time, now quickly, now slowly, down into India and Persia, north to the Baltic, west over all Europe and the New World, until in the persons of the three Aryan explorers, Peary, Amundsen, and Scott, their waves have licked the poles. It appears to have been the tendency of the Aryan settler, whether he came as a conquering invader or as a peaceful immigrant, to obliterate more than he absorbed of the aboriginal culture on which he imposed himself. In this the Celts and Teutons who ages ago overran most of Europe appear to have resembled the English-speaking settlers who long afterwards almost annihilated the North American Indian with his gods and traditions. It is true that we English owe to this latter pre-Aryan race the ability to express just that shade of contempt which is conveyed by the word *skunk*, also the charming blend of whimsicality and reprobation crystallized in *mugwump*. But such survivals really only emphasize the extent to which, as the Aryan waters spread, the pre-Aryan past has been covered over. The past does indeed live in the language we speak and in those with which we are familiar, but it is the past of the Aryans. If we dig down far enough into the English language, we reach an old civilization flourishing somewhere round the banks of the Dnieper; of what was going on in these islands at that time we hear scarcely the faintest reverberation.

There is little doubt that the ancient inhabitants of Western Europe as a whole differed from their Aryan successors in two important customs. They buried their dead, whereas the Aryans

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invariably used cremation; and they were organized in systems of matriarchies. Aryan culture is patriarchal to its foundations. We may patronize our less fortunate neighbours, but we do not 'matronize' them. Yet faint memories of such strange ways seem to have lingered on among the Aryans in the widespread legend of a race of Amazons who once dwelt in the lost continent of Atlantis, the western land, and in the rumour of mighty female warriors in pre-Celtic[1] Gaul, while the name of the River Marne (Matrona) has been said to be another relic of the existence in pre-Aryan Europe of a race of men who deified their trees and streams, and hoped, when they died, to be gathered to their mothers.

With this brief glance at our forgotten forerunners, we may turn our gaze upon that region near the banks of the Dnieper whence our own ancestors first began to expand into the world. And we get a glimpse of the kind of settlements in which these pastoral people must have lived in the fact that the English word *garden* has grown from the same stem as the termination *-grad* in *Petrograd*, where it means 'town', while on the other hand the Dutch for *garden* is 'tuin'. We see their villages, family settlements springing up in an enclosure round the home of a patriarch. Households are large and cumbersome, the sons, as they grow up, bring home wives from different villages, and all live together under the roof and absolute dominion of the mother and father-in-law. Both sexes wear *zones* or loincloths, and probably in addition one simple garment of fur or of some woven material, which does not altogether hide their tattooed bodies, adorned with armlets and necklaces of animals' teeth,

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or it may be of shells or amber beads. It is the business of the women in these communities, not only to remain faithful to their husbands on pain of the most appalling penalties, not only to bring up the children, to keep house, and to *weave* and spin, but also to till the fields and look after the *bees, geese, oxen, sows*, and such other animals as may have been domesticated. A hard enough life, but they have their consolations as they grow older and become respected as dames. Moreover, they have a religious cult of their own. In some cases their imaginations are rich in myth, and they are looked up to as knowing the secrets of Nature and possibly of the future itself. It is the men's business to make war, hold councils, and hunt—possibly with horses[1] and *hounds*, both of which animals are at any rate known to them. The family lives on a kind of unleavened bread, *milk*, cheese,[2] cooked meats, vegetables, and some fruits.

There is much brutality. Widows may be expected to join their husbands in the grave, and old men are sometimes killed off to make room; nevertheless, life is not without its friendlier aspect. There is little doubt, for instance, that our Aryan ancestors knew how to get drunk. The liquor, made principally of honey, with which they sent themselves to bed, appears to have been fraught with such sweet associations that no branch of the Aryan family, however far they went upon their travels, could forget it. The Angles and Saxons brought this *mead* into our country, and the word occurs in Dutch, Icelandic, Danish, Swedish, German, Irish, Lithuanian, Russian, Greek (‘methu’), Sanskrit, Zend, and modern Persian. As it threads its way

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through this babel of tongues, ringing the changes on the meanings of 'honey', 'drunkenness', and 'enjoyment', the little monosyllable seems to give us a peculiarly intimate peep into the interior of an Aryan home. Yet the connection of the word *bed* with the Latin stem 'fod-' (fodio), 'to dig', should prevent us from forming an unduly voluptuous image of the final stages of this prehistoric pastime. If we call up before us a roof and walls of wood or wattles, bounding a dark interior crowded with human beings and possibly some cattle, lit only by a draughty hole in the roof—an arrangement which the Teutons were evidently trying to express when they afterwards dubbed it a 'wind's eye' or *window*—we have a picture which will serve. It is a picture of our ancestors just before they began to spread out over the world, and the time is before 2000 B.C.

But the question of the houses in which they lived takes us farther back still. At some time, probably before they became acquainted with agricultural modes of livelihood, the Aryans were living a nomadic existence. *Axle, nave, wheel, yoke*, and a common word for 'waggon' have convinced people that they once moved from place to place in a kind of primitive caravan, running probably on solid wheels (for there is no common word for 'spoke'). Now the English word *cove*, which in its Icelandic form means 'hut' and in its Greek form (' gupē') a subterranean dwelling such as that which was inhabited by the Cyclops, takes us back to a still older form of residence. Again, *wand* in English means a 'slender rod', but in German and Dutch it means a 'wall', while the weightier and more solid word *timber* is connected with the Greek root 'dem-' (demein), 'to build',

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Latin ‘domus’, ‘a house’. In these words we can perhaps see the most ancient house rising as time goes on out of a natural cave in the ground to the dignity of a sort of dug-out with wattled sides and roof—eventually to the estate of a firm, wooden hut. And so, behind the picture of our ancestors as they lived together on the spot from which they finally began to spread, we can discern another less certain picture of the very beginnings; of a race, a family perhaps, or some voluntary collection of men not tied by blood, who were together in the Stone Age somewhere in Central Asia. They increase in numbers and power, and, trekking westwards, live—for how many years or centuries we cannot tell—as a race of pastoral nomads, until somewhere in the region of the Dnieper they pass from the wandering nomad existence to some more settled life such as that which has been described.

In addition to the somewhat prosaic words from which we have attempted to derive information, it is pleasant to us to think of these ancestors of ours already uttering to one another in that remote past great and simple words like *fire, night, star, thunder*, and *wind*, which our children still learn to use as they grow up. And we must think also how during all this time the new thing, the force, the spirit which the Aryans were to bring into the world, must have been simmering within them. Strengthening their physique through the generations by stricter notions of matrimony, working by exogamy upon their blood, and through that perhaps upon some quality of brightness and sharpness in their thought, the Aryans became—Aryans.[1] And then they began to move. And the result was the *Bhagavad*

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Gita, the Parthenon frieze, the Roman Empire, and the Holy Roman Empire—it was Buddha, Michelangelo, the plays of Shakespeare, Bach, Goethe—it was Aristotle and Bacon, and the vast modern industrial civilizations of Europe, Britain and America reaching out to the Antipodes.

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[1] See p. 142.

[1] The linear writing of Cretan inscriptions has been pointed to by one writer as a sign of this passivity. Philologists have also pointed out the important position occupied by the verb in Aryan speech.

[1] Gaul was inhabited by Celts at least as early as the third century B.C. The *Galli*, against whom Caesar fought, were Celtic tribes.

[1] Greek 'hippos'; Lithuanian 'asva', etc.

[2] Greek 'turos', from which was formed 'bouturon' (butter).

[1] Terms such as 'nation', 'race', 'ancestors', 'descendants' are used in these chapters loosely, and without intending political or ethnological implications. The people referred to as 'Aryans' are the people who spoke the Aryan language. They are clearly our cultural 'ancestors', and that is really the only concern of this book, which was written several years before the word 'Aryan' had been adopted as a racial shibboleth by the Nazi Party in Germany.

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II

THE SETTLEMENT OF EUROPE

BEECH • BARD • ATTIC • TRAGEDY • AUTHORITY
DELIRIOUS • WINE • CHURCH

It would be a great mistake to picture the Aryans setting out in some vast, organized expedition such as that of the Israelites under Moses. The study of comparative grammar suggests rather that they spread outwards from their centre in a series of little rills, each one, as it flowed, either pushing the rill in front of it a stage farther on, or flowing through it and passing beyond. During the first thousand years of this process we have very little idea of the extent to which the individual groups of these ever-widening circles—the different 'races' as they were perhaps now beginning to be—were in communication with one another. After a time, however, we can discern them pretty sharply divided into two streams, a north-western and a south-eastern stream. It was the main stream which flowed north-west, and it carried along with it the ancestors of the powerful races which were afterwards to be called Greeks, Italians, Slavs, Teutons, and Celts. The settlement of the Celts in Britain and the subsequent arrival first of the Teutonic Angles and Saxons and then of the Normans, the movement of the Celts westward to Wales and Ireland, and the final streaming of their

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Teutonic successors right through them and across the Atlantic —all these are excellent examples of the way in which the separate rills of the north-western stream have continued ever since the first central commotion to crawl and mingle and overlap like the waves of an incoming tide.

Meanwhile the south-eastern stream flowed past the Himalayas down into India and westward to Persia, where their descendants became the Brahmanic Hindoos and the Zoroastrian Persians of a later date.

That all connection was lost at a very early date between these two main streams is suggested by another interesting little group of words. These are common to all the members of the north-western group, but quite unknown to the south-eastern, and perhaps the most interesting is *mere*, the Old English for 'sea', which is still used poetically of inland waters, and in the word *mer*maid, while its Latin form 'mare' is equally familiar to most educated Englishmen. From the distribution of this word among the Aryan nations, together with similar equations such as *fish* and *piscis*, we can deduce that these two groups of travellers had already separated before either of them reached the seaboard.

There is evidence, too, that this north-western group, comprising as it did the ancestors of the Greeks and Romans, as well as of the Celts, Teutons, and Slavs, had reached, before it dispersed, a new country of forests, such as must have covered most of Northern and Western Europe at that time. At any rate we find words for trees—such as *beech, elm*, and *hazel—and* for birds—*finch*, *starling*, *swallow, throstle*—

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common to most of the languages spoken by their descendants, yet absent from Persian and Sanskrit. It was at this time, and amid these surroundings, that agriculture seems to have appeared among the north-western Aryans. The old Aryan word from which we have *acre* lost its former meaning of 'any enclosed piece of land' and acquired the new and special significance of *tilled* land, as in the Latin 'ager', etc. *Corn, furrow, bean, meal, ear* of corn, and the verb to *mow* also date back to this period of our history.

And then the north-western stream again sub-divided; and we will follow first of all that branch of it which dropped away southward into the Balkan peninsula and the islands of the Aegean. This time it is not a word, but a poet's imagination which has fixed for us in a passage of considerable beauty the historic moment when this wave first lapped the farther shore, the prophetic shock of contact between Aryan settler and aborigine:

Then fly our greetings, fly our speech and smiles!
As some grave Tyrian trader, from the sea,
Descried at sunrise an emerging prow
Lifting the cool-haired creepers stealthily,
The fringes of a southward-facing brow
Among the Aegean isles;
And saw the merry Grecian coaster come,
Freighted with amber grapes, and Chian wine,
Green bursting figs, and tunnies steep'd in brine;
And knew the intruders on his ancient home,

The young light-hearted Masters of the waves….

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These young, light-hearted masters were called Greeks, or Hellenes; they migrated southwards in a series of waves, the first of which contained two tribes known as the Achaians and Danaans. We still make use of some of the experiences undergone by these and other Greek tribes, and of the characteristics which they developed, in order to express more exactly our own inner experiences. Through the channel of words and myths which have come down to us from that time, the great poet who sang to the Achaians and Danaans of the exploits of their ancestors has given us many metaphors and images—special little reservoirs of feeling which we could not have created for ourselves. Most people, for instance, like to be called *Trojans; stentorian, pander*, and *hector* are from the names of characters in his poems, and *nectar* and *ambrosial* from the food and drink consumed by his gods. Speech was a more miraculous and rhythmical thing to the Achaians than it is to us today, and whether or no the Gaelic *bard* is cognate with the Greek ‘phrazein’, to ‘speak’, there is no doubt that ‘epos’, the ‘word’, had its other meaning of ‘poem’. Long afterwards the adjective ‘epikos’ came to be applied especially to lofty compositions such as those of the great poet himself. Accordingly, in the European war the special correspondent could often find no more vivid expression for his sense of the vastness and grandeur of the catastrophe he was recording than to call up by the word *epic* vague memories of Homer's gods and heroes.

A single timid reference to ‘awful signs’,[1] together with the absence of any ordinary word for ‘writing’, suggests that

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Homer's Achaians did not know how to write, and that his two long poems of twenty-four books each had to be memorized from beginning to end by that class of professional reciters from which our word *rhapsody* is derived. The actual text of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* gives us a vivid and majestic picture of early, but not the earliest, Aryan culture. Of their author, in so far as there was one particular author, we know very little except that he was probably blind. It was the common thing for the bards who were to be found among all the Aryan races, and survived as 'Minstrels' into the Middle Ages, to be blind; and Homer's own blindness, apart from a reference to it, has been deduced by some from a preponderance in his poems of 'audile' epithets, such as the *clanging* arrow and the *loud-sounding* sea. It may be mentioned that the Slavs once called their bards 'sliepac', a word which also meant 'blind'.

The Dorians settled in Laconia in the southern part of the Peloponnese or, as it is now called, the Motean peninsula. The notorious taciturnity of the inhabitants of Laconia has given us *laconic*, and we are referring to their rigid ideas on infant welfare when we speak of a *'spartan* mother', for Sparta was the capital of Laconia.

Attica, for a time the home of the Ionians (who eventually crossed the Aegean to Asia Minor), has a more complex history; and it was in Attica, in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., that the Hellenic culture reached its finest flower. We use the word *Attic*[1] to describe a peculiarly finished work of art or an exquisite literary style. No wonder. In the city state of Athens, for the first time among the Aryans, there began to grow up

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something which an educated man of today would be willing to recognize as a civilization. In that clear air of a marvellous political freedom—a social atmosphere which could hardly have condensed from any but Aryan moral ideas—the matured, age-old wisdom of Egypt and the East was absorbed by these youngsters and transformed in a few hundred years into a science, an art, and a philosophy of their own which have never been wholly surpassed. Consequently, the names of many things which we regard as the very hall-marks of a cultured society can be traced back to the Attic dialect of this period. *Academy, school, history, logic, grammar, poetry, rhythm, harmony, melody, music*, are all from Greek works which were in common use in Athens, and the lasting influence of her sublime dramatic tradition is indicated by the great words, *chorus, comedy, drama, theatre*, and *tragedy*, and the lesser *catastrophe, episode, prologue*, and *protagonist*, all of which draw their meanings from the inspiration of the great Athenian dramatists.

Meanwhile another branch of the Aryan family had found its way into Italy, and there, in the eighth century before our era, had founded the city of Rome. It is noticeable that the pitch darkness in which the early doings of all the Aryans are lost often seems to flash into a spark of myth or legend at those moments when they come into contact with other races. It is just such a spark which, in the story of the rape of the Sabine women, perhaps lights up for us one of the early shocks of encounter between Italiot Aryans and the older inhabitants of Italy.

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Most people know a little about the subsequent history of these Italiots. The republic which they eventually established at Rome transformed itself into an empire that extended its bounds until they were coterminous with the civilized world—an empire of Europe and part of Asia which retained its real authority oven men's persons until the fifth century A.D., and its authority, as an idea, over their minds and actions down to that day at the beginning of the last century when Bonaparte first styled himself 'Emperor of the French'. There is, in fact, scarcely a word in our language expressing even remotely the notion of 'authority', which does not come to us from the Latin: *authority, chief, command, control, dictator, dominion, empire, government, master, officer, rule, subordinate*, are some of them; and it is significant that the two Greek words which we use to express the same idea are *despot* and *tyrant*. Both these terms have a definite stigma attaching to them, and are employed very much more often by the foes of authority than by her friends. The Greeks were not the nation to establish a world-empire. They would have combined to bury Caesar, not to praise him; and from another point of view the odious *sybarite* is good proof that they were not the stuff of which colonists are made. The English *lord* and *king*, on the other hand, retain about them a hint of the possibility of affection. It is a mark of affection when sailors drop the Latin *captain* and adopt the Dutch *skipper*, and the substitution by landsmen of Old High German *boss* for Latin *manager* seems to have begun in the same way.[1] And lastly, when we wish to suggest a peculiar blend of dignity and chill self-consciousness, we use the

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name of the most remarkable of all the Roman emperors.

Rome not only extended her jurisdiction over all Europe; she was responsible for the birth of a new idea in men's minds—the idea that 'authority', as such, based on an abstraction called 'law' and irrespective of real ties of blood or affection, of sympathy or antipathy, of religion or ownership, can exist as a relation between human beings.

But we have hurried on to the Empire and left out the Republic. What were the beginnings and early occupations of this astonishing race, of whose national hero we are reminded when we use the word *brute?* In the previous chapter reference was made to certain words and phrases which are now used for the purposes of everyday life, but which were originally technical metaphors drawn from the phenomena of electricity. If we examine such words as *calamity, delirious, emolument, pecuniary, prevaricate, tribulation*, we shall find that they possess a similar history. Although the Romans of classical times used the Latin words from which they are derived in much the same way as the English words are used now, yet if we trace them a little farther back, we learn that 'delirare' had at one time no other meaning than to 'go out of the furrow', when ploughing; 'praevaricari' was to plough in crooked lines'; 'tribulare' to thrash with a 'tribulum', and so forth. In *interval*, on the other hand (from 'intervallum', the space between two palisades), *excel, premium, salary*, and many other words we have examples of metaphors taken from the military life. The English-sounding word, *spoil*, comes to us from a Latin term which once had no other meaning than to

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'strip a conquered foe of his arms'. By entering with our imaginations into the biography of such a word, we catch glimpses of civilization in primitive Rome. Agriculture and war, we feel, were the primary businesses of life, and it was to these that the Roman mind instinctively flew when it was casting about for some means of expressing a new abstract idea—of realizing the unknown in terms of the known. Not often could the warlike city afford to beat her swords into ploughshares, but she was constantly melting both implements into ideas.

Wherever we turn in our language, we have only to scratch the surface in order to come upon fresh traces of Rome and of her solid achievements in the world. With Greece, however, it is different. It was not the outer fabric of a future European civilization which the Greeks were building up while their own civilization flourished, but the shadowy, inner world of human consciousness. They were helping to create our 'outlook'. We shall see a little later how the language which is used by the theologians, philosophers, and scientists of Europe was the gradual and painful creation of the thinkers of ancient Greece; and we shall see that, without that language, the thoughts and feelings and impulses which it expresses could have no being. Rome's task was to erect across Europe a rigid and durable framework on which the complicated texture of thought, feeling, and will, woven in the looms of Athens and Alexandria, could be permanently outspread. Yet the performance of this task, concrete as it was, was inseparably connected with an event of tremendous import for that growing, inner world to which we have already referred—the most significant event, as many

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believe, in the history of mankind.

The first casual contact between Greek coaster and Semitic trader, imaginatively portrayed in the stanza quoted above from Matthew Arnold, was indeed prophetic. It proved afterwards to have been not merely a memorable event, but a sort of fertilization of the whole history of humanity. For to one Semitic tribe the passionate inner world of its thoughts and feelings had remained almost more real than the outward one of matter and energy. The language of the Old Testament is alone enough to tell us that, while the Greek Aryans had been pouring their vigour into the creation of intellectual wisdom and liberty, the Hebrews had been building up within themselves an extraordinary moral and emotional life, as narrow as it was intense. The two streams of evolution, stronger for having been kept apart, were destined to meet and intermingle. In 332 B.C., when Alexander the Great sacked Sidon and Tyre, Greeks and Hebrews began for the first time to live side by side. They did not intermarry, but subtle influences must have passed from one to the other, for in Alexandria, shortly afterwards, contact between the two grew so intimate that by the second century B.C. Greek had become the official language of the Hebrew Scriptures. In the same century a Roman Protectorate was established over Syria, which in course of time became a province of the Roman Empire. In that province was born the individual who is known to history as Jesus of Nazareth.

His teaching, as far as it has come down to us, was Semitic both in its form and in its outlook on the past. Nevertheless, it was His teaching, and the feelings and impulses (though in a

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language just after the Conquest. The French, being so much nearer to Rome, both in blood and in space, were a century or two ahead of the Teutons in their civilization, and the Normans, after their long sojourn on the Continent, brought with them to England quite a complicated system of legislature and executive. Besides the Latin words to which we have referred, there are a large number of legal terms which are not so easily recognizable as Latin, having passed through Late Latin, Low Latin, and Early French colloquial speech before they reached our shores. In some cases they only developed a specifically legal sense in Late Latin or even Early French. Yet because the whole spirit of Roman civilization had been so impregnated with legalism, the capacity for expressing exact legal ideas seems to have remained latent, through all their curious vicissitudes, in such words as *assize* (literally 'a sitting down'), *court, judge, jury, county, district, manor, rent,...* Lawyers have gone on employing a queer kind of Anglo-French, in some cases, right down to the present day. The official use of 'Law French' in legal documents was only recently abandoned, and such technical terms as *champerty, feme sole, tort, chose-in-action, cestui-que-trust, ...* survive to remind us of the days when an English-speaking lawyer would naturally write such a sentence as:

Arsons de measons felonisement faits est felony per le comen ley. (Arson of houses committed with felonious intent is felony by the common law.) The profession still sometimes refers affectionately to an old law-report, which mentions that the prisoner at the bar *jecta un brickbat a le dit Justice, que*

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