About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

'It is reasonable to have perfection in our eye that we may always advance toward it, though we know it can never be reached.'
Samuel Johnson

Twenty-eight years ago I sat, rigid with fear, in Dictionary Corner for the first time, waiting for the cameras to turn to me. A newly fledged dictionary editor at Oxford University Press, I was a reluctant addition to the *Countdown* team, having resisted my boss's suggestion that I audition on at least three occasions. I am happiest when flying below the radar, and appearances on TV were clearly not on my wish list. But there I was, hiding behind Rula Lenska's glorious fox-red mane, trying desperately to look as though I knew what I was doing. I didn't, but somehow I got by that first afternoon, and that corner is now my second home. Most of all, the dictionary in front of me has become my greatest friend.

Perhaps it was always meant to be this way. I have been a linguistic magpie for as long as I can remember. These compelling birds, whose collective noun is the ominous 'tiding', have had a bad rap over the years. Whether lone harbingers of doom, or swooping thieves of chicks and jewellery, their dark reputation brings even the soberest amongst us to a shudder (or salute) in their presence. In the seventeenth century, 'magpie' was a metaphor for an idler or 'impertinent chatterer', and by the twentieth the epithet had attached itself to one who collects or hoards indiscriminately: as one dictionary put it, 'a petty pilferer'. That is surely an apt description of what I do, for I have collected odds and ends of language my whole life.

I was always the one who, during family dinnertime chats, would be entirely lost in the ingredients on the back of a ketchup bottle. It was the same story for shampoo, on whose magical labels the swirling characters of French, Greek, Arabic and Cyrillic beckoned like the exotic jewels a magpie might smuggle away. No

text was off limits – aeroplane safety instructions would be pored over, sometimes for an entire flight. It was there, squished between my parents, that I longed to know the difference between 'flammable' and 'inflammable', or to prove a possible link between 'monster' and 'demonstrate' (one of my many cul-de-sacs, as it happens, as there is no link, but even as I type this I am enjoying the fact that a cul-de-sac means 'bottom of the sack').

It was from earning pocket money posting pamphlets through letterboxes that I learned that the word 'pamphlet' was born not out of tedious bumf, but in a racy tale from the twelfth century, whose ardent hero was a relentless seducer named Pamphilus. His pursuits, devoured by the masses, were reprinted in little booklets or 'pamphilets', 'little Pamphiluses'. That bumf, by the way, before it became a byword for throwaway material, is short for the bumfodder that once wiped the bottoms of military personnel.

And so they went on, the petty pilferings from hundreds of mundane encounters that to me were anything but. I would file them away in my head – and eventually, in the only black book that interested me – marvelling in the simple shape of a word or musing over its origin. I would hoover up the new and unfamiliar, trying out a potential word from *Countdown*'s random letter selection and rejoicing when it was confirmed by the dictionary. These moments were the start of a linguistic adventure that has never come to an end.

Word Perfect might seem a strange choice of title. Like all lexicographers in the modern age, I sit very far from linguistic pedantry. I am, as John Humphrys once called me, one of those 'hippie chicks of English'. No modern dictionary-maker can afford to be prescriptive; rather we describe language as it is used, with its myriad meanings and contexts, and all its creases and crumples. A linguist's job is to map this evolving landscape, and to chart the journeys of words whose lifetimes will far exceed our own. We are, as Samuel Johnson beautifully described it, always 'chasing the sun'. For me, perfection is not a single moment in time when everything aligns and we are faultless, nor is it a finished state accomplished by rote. Instead I choose again Johnson's description – we keep it in our eye as we head towards it, knowing we will never quite catch up, but basking in that sun all the while.

I also like a definition from earlier times, when perfection conveyed maturity, ripeness, and full bloom. It is entirely fitting

that the metaphors of trees and flowers have wrapped themselves around our language, from the 'anthology' – once a posy of flowers – to the 'book', which comes from the Old English for 'beech'. Not for nothing do lexicographers explore the 'roots' of the words they define. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is said to have compared French to a country park, German to a dense forest, and English to a pretty garden. For all my love of German (and it's a deep love), English is so much more than that. If it is a garden, it is as full of thorns as roses, as gnarly as the bark of an old oak, and as mazy as a medieval labyrinth. It is also evergreen: locked away for weeks during the coronavirus, the dictionary was where I took my solace.

There was, for example, comfort in viewing our imposed quarantine through the filter of earlier times, when ships arriving in Venice at the peak of the Black Death were required to anchor for forty (*quaranta*) days of isolation. Ugsome lockdown days and nights were brightened by such rediscoveries as 'respair', an all-too-rare word for a recovery from despair, or the simple knowledge that 'chortle' was Lewis Carroll's blend of 'chuckle' and 'snort' (how we long to chortle again). Such were the things that sparkled in the darkness.

These were also the days when family sayings brought the warmth of home to those who were missing it so keenly. The pandemic bound us together with loved ones, either physically or Zoomed onto our screens, and threw us back upon the words of our childhood: verbal comforts that we pulled on like the cosiest of jumpers. They became the linguistic equivalent of 'huffle buffs', old Scots for the clothes in which we can breathe. *Word Perfect* includes many of the words and sayings that transport me straight home (a fit of sneezes, for example, will always be a 'snick-up').

In this book I have chosen a word for each day of the year. It is an anthology of words and phrases remembered through a moment in time. Some of these moments were decisive – the Battle of Copenhagen that had Nelson 'turn a blind eye'; the War of Independence that took the American language defiantly away from British English, thereby forever casting such authentically British words as 'fall' and 'sidewalk' into the list of Americanisms we love to hate. Other moments simply chimed with the time of year – the 'Yule-hole' at Christmas time, the 'crambazzlement' once the festivities are over, or the 'halcyon days' of summer heat.

Perhaps the greatest delight was choosing lost gems or obscurities from the corners of the dictionary. I made many fresh discoveries along the way. How could we ever have forgone the insults 'mumpsimus' and 'ultracrepidarian', when they so perfectly describe individuals that every one of us will recognise? And, to my greatest pleasure, I can confirm that we can all be 'gormful', 'gruntled', 'kempt', and 'couth' to our hearts' content. Now is surely the time to regain the lost positives of language.

Above all, the book has given me a chance to share the knowledge and love gained from a lifetime in the Corner, to prise open our language and revel in its secrets, surprises, surrealities, and occasional hiccups. Within its pages are 366 words and phrases that have made me smile, wonder, or simply 'suspire' (another word I'm determined to revive, meaning to 'breathe out with a sigh'). If *Word Perfect* gives you even a breath of the pleasure it has given me, this magpie's job will be done.

Susie Dent

JANUARY

1 January

CRAMBAZZLED

If there's one day of the year when much of the population will be feeling a little crapulous (a word defined in Samuel Johnson's great *Dictionary of the English Language* as 'sick with intemperance'), it's today. Though the English lexicon of drunkenness is vast, the term describing the aftermath is surprisingly patchy.

To be 'crambazzled', in old Yorkshire dialect, was to be prematurely aged through excess drinking. In other words, to achieve this status you will have partied hard for most of your life. The word has a deliciously decadent feel to it, conjuring images of being out for the count or looking entirely grisly and crumpled while you carry on your debauchery. You will also most likely be sporting a 'grogblossom': a nineteenth-century term for the telltale redness of face that results from too much booze.

If, on the other hand, you can see perfectly straight this morning and are devoid of what the Germans call a morning *Katzenjammer* (literally a 'cat's wailing' and a useful synonym for a severe hangover headache), literature will confirm that a tall, dark stranger arriving on your doorstep is a good thing. On the first day of the New Year, this is particularly so: dark-haired 'first-footers' have been prized above all others since Viking times.

In Scottish and northern English folklore, the first-footer is the person elected to cross the threshold of a house on New Year's Day morning. They are duly regarded as the bringer of fortune for the entire year. Technically anyone is eligible, though in Yorkshire traditionalists insist on male first-footers, while all candidates must have been absent from the house at the stroke of midnight.

First-footers are required to bear gifts, ranging from a handful of coal to a pinch of salt and a dram of whisky, each symbolising a different piece of good fortune, whether it be financial luck or health and good cheer. Such gifts are known as 'handsels', from

the Old English *handselen*, 'giving into a person's hand'. This word progressed to mean any good-luck charm or token, and by the eighteenth century traders were using 'handsel' for the first cash they earned in the morning – to them, an omen of good things to follow. Nowadays, it can also be used for the first use or experience of something that, if successful, will signal good days to come.

Unless that first experience is alcohol, in which case we are right back to crambazzlement.

2 January

JANUS WORDS

The month of January is named after the Roman deity Janus, god of beginnings, transitions, and doorways. He is traditionally depicted as having two faces, one that looks to the future, and one that looks back on the past. Janus was viewed as a protector of the state in times of war; the doors of his temple in the Roman forum, an enclosure with gates at each end, would be opened during times of battle, and closed in times of peace. He was also regarded as the doorkeeper of all entrances, including the one to heaven; our modern word 'janitor' comes from the same Latin root.

The god's two faces inspired several terms in English. Janus cloth, for example, is a reversible material, while a Janus lock can be fitted to either a left- or right-opening door. But the most enduring legacy of the two-faced deity is the 'Janus word': a term that has two diametrically opposed meanings. The list in English includes:

- fast: firmly fixed; very quick.
- sanction: approval; (economic) disapproval.
- cleave: to split; to adhere firmly.
- clip: to attach something; to cut off.
- custom: usual; specially made.
- overlook: to look over something; to fail to see.
- dust: to make free of dust; to sprinkle with dust.
- screen: to hide from view; to show.
- left: went away from; remaining.

Janus words (also known as 'contronyms') are emerging all the time. Slang loves them – you only have to think of the reversed sense of 'wicked', 'sick', or 'bad' – and, of course, 'literally', which now has a very non-literal sense – to see how we love turning the traditional lexicon on its head. Even today, Janus is a working metaphor for looking both ways.

3 January

JOURNAL

This is the time of year when we begin to fill in the calendars we were gifted at Christmas. But how many of us still write a diary? The desire to record details of our lives is as old as handwriting itself. Early diaries were mostly kept as public records, before the medium embraced more private reflections on life. Today, we vlog and blog both the intimate and the prosaic details of our days, virtual footprints that can never (unfortunately on occasion) be erased.

Many of the earliest travel journals were written on the pilgrimages of Christians to the Holy Land. Some of the greatest explorers and early adventurers meticulously recorded their itineraries and discoveries in logbooks and diaries – they include Captain Cook, and naturalists like Charles Darwin.

Diary as autobiography began in the mid-seventeenth century with Samuel Pepys, whose chronicles of London life include both dramatic scenes from history, such as the Great Fire of 1666, and more intimate scenes of drinking and entertainment with his friends (and of being caught short in the aftermath). Since then, the literary canon of journals has become immense. Tolstoy, Kafka, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath are among those most widely read, but there are thousands more, including surely the most famous diarist of all, Anne Frank.

The word 'journal' is from the French *journée*, 'day', a nod to the fact that the earliest examples were books containing the appointed time of daily prayers. The Romans similarly used *diurnus*, the ancestor of 'journal', both as an adjective meaning 'of the day', and as a noun meaning an account or daybook. 'Journal' is

of course the parent of 'journalist', once specifically a writer for a daily newspaper, and is an unexpected sibling of 'journey', originally used for travels that lasted no more than a single day. Ultimately, all go back to an ancient root *dheu* meaning 'to shine', which lies at the heart of 'July', 'circadian', 'deity', and – appropriately – 'diary'.

4 January

HUMDUDGEON

It's about now that the incipient dread of returning to work begins to creep in. After the blissful timelessness of the Merryneum (see 28 December), and the blurry exuberance of New Year, the foreknowledge of picking up the same routine, not least in the darkness of January, delivers to most of us a distinct bout of 'ergophobia', the fear of work.

This is the time, then, when a bout of 'humdudgeon' might come in handy. First recorded in the bawdily brilliant collection that is Francis Grose's *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785), the word is comprised of *hum*, the first part of 'humbug', and *dudgeon*, a state of begrudging indignation that we know primarily in the phrase 'in high dudgeon'. In other words, a humdudgeon is an imaginary illness, particularly one brought about by an episode of low spirits.

Francis Grose was a retired army officer and contemporary of Samuel Johnson, as large in life as he was in girth. While Johnson looked to the greats of literature for his evidence of English, Grose gathered the evidence for his lexicon at night, visiting the taverns and brothels and prisons and byways of eighteenth-century London. This was the language of the common people, including those whose underground vocabularies had never been captured before – among them cutpurses, gangsters, and lowlifes. It's hardly surprising that the humdudgeon is first recorded in his vibrant and unsqueamish collection.

5 January

LICK INTO SHAPE

This is the point at which we really begin to put our resolutions to the test. Most New Year pledges are about self-improvement, whether you're a little too 'ventripotent' (a positive way in the 1600s of saying 'big-bellied'), or prone to 'quiddling' (attending to the trivial tasks in life as a way of avoiding the important ones). The majority of us, in other words, need to lick our lives into shape.

This expression, which sounds straightforwardly modern and suggestive of a military boot camp, hides within it an ancient belief that persisted beyond the Middle Ages. In the animal lore of the period, it was held that bear cubs were born as formless blobs, and needed to be energetically licked into bear shape by their mothers. In one of his later sermons, as Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, the poet John Donne states that 'Lyons are littered perfit, but Beare-whelpes lick'd unto their shape'.

All trace of inspiration for the expression was eventually lost, and the idiom took on various other verbs including 'knocked' and 'whipped' into shape. Nevertheless, the belief in this ultimate manifestation of maternal love persisted for centuries – in Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part Three*, Gloucester compares his deformed body to 'an unlick'd bear-whelp, / That carries no impression like the dam [mother]'.

It is a beautiful image to keep us going when those tough resolutions come calling.

6 January

PANDICULATE

Dark mornings are, for most of us, the only catalyst we need for a good stretch and yawn, a combination that is technically known as 'pandiculating'.

The specialist terms for bodily functions are typically pretty dull. They tend to be borrowed from Latin and Greek, and remain within the confines of medical or anatomical dictionaries for good reason. The act of sneezing, for example, is more properly known as 'sternutation', while kissing is 'osculation'. The latter is alternatively, and slightly chillingly, defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'the mutual contact of blood vessels'; in the dictionary it sits close to 'oscitation', the medical term for yawning (from the Latin *os*, mouth).

None of these quiver with colour. Pandiculating, while still having a medical ring to it, is nonetheless a pithy description for something many of us do every day on waking: issue a large yawn while stretching our sleepy limbs. It too comes from Latin, this time from *pandere*, to stretch, which is also at the heart of 'expand'. It is recorded in a seventeenth-century dictionary with the definition 'a stretching in th' approach of an Ague' (a cold or fever). Most of us don't need that excuse. Incidentally, if you find yourself pandiculating after seeing someone else do the same thing, the contagion of bodily actions is known as 'echopraxis'.

Finally, in Joseph Wright's glorious nineteenth-century collection of dialect, we also find the word 'yawmagorp'. Wright defines it as either a yawn itself, or an affectionately mocking term from Yorkshire, Lancashire, and Leicestershire for a yawning, stretching person – in other words, a lounger. 'Yawm', from the same counties, means 'to move about awkwardly or slowly; to stand gaping or idling', while 'gorp' is a riff on the idea of gawping in a vacant, day-dreamy kind of way.

7 January

GYM

Gyms are never fuller than in January, when resolve remains firm and the Yule-hole (see 27 December) is a reminder of a blowout Christmas past. Gym is of course short for 'gymnasium', a highly important building in ancient Greece. There it was considered an essential community space, not only as a training arena for

athletic games, but also as a place for socialising and engaging the mind.

The three great public gymnasia in Athens were each associated with a celebrated school of philosophy. Antisthenes founded a school at Cynosarges (meaning 'White Dog'), from which the word 'cynic' derives; Plato, whose name lies behind the principles of platonic love, founded a school that gathered at the Academy, and Aristotle founded the Peripatetic school at the Lyceum (the fact that he liked to walk around a lot while teaching gave us the modern meaning of 'peripatetic': 'moving from place to place').

It seems a stretch to get from these famously intellectual institutions to the modern gym, where sweaty 'curlbros' gather. And yet in ancient Athens the body beautiful was equally important. Gymnastics was an integral part of education; contests would be held in honour of the gods, while the training of athletes was a matter of public pride and status. Physical prowess was the greatest indicator of good preparation, and bodies would be oiled to best exhibit the contours of a muscly physique. One consequence of such concentration on the aesthetic was that exercise was undertaken naked. Which is how the word 'gymnasium' began – in the Greek *gymnazein*, meaning literally 'to train naked'.

Incidentally, not all thoughts in these ancient gymnasia were quite so lofty. 'Muscle' is a shortening of the Latin *musculus*, 'little mouse' – so-called because the shape and movement of the biceps, when flexed, were thought to resemble tiny rodents scuttling beneath the skin.

8 January

DYSANIA

When the alarm goes off on a cold January morning, there is little incentive to throw off the duvet and embrace the day. 'Alarm', from the Italian *Alla arme!*, 'To arms!', began as a military call to soldiers to prepare for imminent attack – which is fairly representative of the body's reaction to the insistent buzzing from the bedside table.

The medical term 'dysania' may feel particularly relevant at this time of year. Dysania is a condition characterised by the physical impossibility of getting out of bed. While it may be a symptom of a serious disease, the term has been hauled into mainstream vernacular because it so clearly supplies a need.

Dysania is often paired with 'clinomania', an equally useful term for the near-irresistible desire to lie down.

9 January

DONG-DING

On this day in 2007, the Apple Inc. CEO and co-founder Steve Jobs announced the iPhone, fulfilling for many his own words from twenty years earlier: 'I want to put a ding in the universe.'

'Ding', imitating a ringing sound, has been around for some five hundred years. But its first appearances were far more violent – in the fourteenth century, it meant to deal heavy blows, or crush. To 'huff and ding' was, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, 'to throw oneself violently about; to bounce and swagger'. The ding that is the sound of a bell seems to have been a riff on 'ding-dong', which made one of its earliest appearances in an Italian–English dictionary as a definition of the verb *tintillare*: 'to jangle, to gingle, to ding-dong, or ring shrill and sharp, as some bells do'.

Today we might use ding-dong for a bell, an argument, a riotous party, or an exclamation of sexual frisson. It would of course never be dong-ding, just as we can never dally-dilly or shally-shilly on our way to a song-sing while wearing flop-flips. Nor walk in a zag-zig to a saw-see, have a chat-chit while eating a Kat-Kit, or (sadly) play a game of pong-ping. All of these follow an ancient protocol that we follow entirely unconsciously, and that goes by the technical name of 'ablaut reduplication'. Essentially it dictates that, in any duplicating word combination, we always put the *i* sound (as in 'pit'), or the *e* (as in 'see'), first, before an *a* or *o*. Even with three elements, the 'rule' stands: the order must be *i* (or *e*)/*a*/*o* – never bash-bosh-bish, or eeny-miney-meeny-moe.

The same 'law' is found in many languages. The Japanese have the beautiful *kasa koso* (the rustling sound of dry leaves), while the

Germans might speak of *Quitschquatsch* ('fiddlesticks'), a *Wirrwarr* (muddle), or of *Krimskrams* (their version of the French *bric-à-brac* – which is another).

We've all been doing this for centuries, yet the reason ablaut reduplication exists has never been fully nailed down. Sound is unquestionably key – when we produce an *i* or *e*, we position our tongue higher in our mouth, whereas the *a* or *o* pushes it lower. This high vowel/low vowel sequence produces a pleasing rhythm, even if it's one we reserve mostly for these playful combinations. Such unconscious knowledge of what to put where is just one example of native speaker's luck.

Another rule we don't know we know governs English adjectives, and would remain unknown to most of us had the writer Mark Forsyth not pointed out a hidden (and apparently arbitrary) blueprint when it comes to ordering our descriptions. The rule is 'opinion-size-age-shape-colour-origin-material-purpose'. Thus you will never have a green great dragon, or a young small girl admiring her red shiny new shoes in the marble long old mirror. Exceptions to this order are rare, though among them is the 'big bad wolf', which happens to observe ... the rule of ablaut reduplication.

10 January

CROSSING THE RUBICON

The crossing of a small stream in northern Italy, on this day in 49 BC, became one of the most pivotal events in ancient history, and the inspiration for a phrase that has come to signal the point of no return.

The significance of the Rubicon River (just north of modern-day Ravenna) lay not in its size, but in its location, marking the official boundary between Italy proper (directly controlled by Rome) and Cisalpine Gaul, a region on the southern side of the Alps governed by Julius Caesar. Such was Caesar's popularity with the people that he was seen as a threat to the power of the Roman Senate; the antipathy towards him from its senators meant that his days were effectively numbered. Caesar was ordered to disband his army, and

his nemesis Pompey the Great, a tenacious military commander, was entrusted with enforcing the edict.

Caesar knew full well that crossing the Rubicon would have dramatic consequences. According to the law of the Roman Republic, a general was forbidden to lead an army out of the province to which he was assigned. There was no coming back – the journey would be forever viewed as an act of war.

Writing around a century and a half later, the historian Suetonius reconstructed the moment that ensured Caesar's heroic status in the Roman imagination. As the governor of Gaul deliberated his next move, Suetonius imagines that a divine messenger of extraordinary height and beauty appeared, snatching a trumpet and rushing to the river to sound the note of war. Caesar is said to have cried out *Alea iacta est* – 'The die is cast.'

Caesar threw the die, and took the irrevocable step of crossing the river, thereby sealing not only his own future but also that of the Roman Empire. 'Crossing the Rubicon' was first recorded as a military aphorism in a chronicle of 1624 – fittingly, the idiom has itself never looked back.

11 January

LOTTERY

The first recorded lottery in England was drawn on this day in 1569, at the western gate of the old St Paul's Cathedral. The concept of the lottery had already been in existence for centuries: it is believed that the building of the Great Wall of China was partially funded by public money and the drawing of lots, and the sale of tickets to win various items was used in ancient Rome to fund repairs to the city or give aid to the people. Prizes varied widely – it is said that those offered by the hard-partying Emperor Elagabalus ranged from the 'gift' of six slaves to a cheap and cheerful vase.

For Queen Elizabeth I, on that day in 1569, the matter in hand was the Spanish presence in the Netherlands and its potential threat to her Protestant rule. The pressure was on to shore up her navy and coastal defences, and in 1566 she granted a royal charter

to raise money for the reparation of the 'havens and strength of the realm, and towards further public works'. Lottery tickets were issued, 400,000 of them, with a possible jackpot of £5,000. Smaller prizes included silver-plated items, and tapestries from the queen's own collection.

At ten shillings a ticket, the cost of entering such lotteries was well beyond the reach of most ordinary citizens. Syndicates were formed and money pooled to buy a single ticket. The attraction was more than the cash alone – the Crown also promised all ticket-buyers an amnesty of any crimes committed in their past, with the exception of murder and treason. For Elizabeth, such promises were worth it: with its boosted resources, her navy went on to defeat the Spanish Armada.

The word 'lottery' is based on a Germanic word for an object used in a chance selection. 'Lot' appears in a number of enduring expressions, such as to 'throw in one's lot', while reference to a 'lot' draws on the idea of a great number or multitude of things. Meanwhile, the method used for these early lotteries, whereby pairs of slips were drawn from two separate pots – one containing participants' names and the other with either prizes or nothing written upon them – led to the idiom 'drawing a blank'.

12 January

FEEFLE

The debate over the number of Inuit words for snow has been flurrying, if not raging, for decades, held up as proof that not only does our culture determine language, but that our language in turn shapes our view of the world. In the 1960s the anthropologist Frank Boas gently raised the possibility that the structure of languages such as Inuit allows for more variety in its way of describing things. Yet objections to his perceived headline accumulated, and what became known as 'The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax' became a fixture in linguistic textbooks. Even so, to this day most people will tell you that the Inuit have hundreds of words for the white stuff.

In fact, Inuit and other language groups are able to add suffixes to almost any word, thereby creating many more words – this goes for any category, including snow. Consequently there is indeed a large vocabulary for snow, but the argument largely comes down to what you consider to be a 'word'. If all that wasn't enough, in 2015 a new contender in the snow stakes arrived. According to the first historical thesaurus of Scots, that language has over four hundred words for snow, with more being discovered all the time.

The historical Scottish word-hoard includes the wonderful 'feefle', meaning to 'swirl'; 'smirr', a smattering of snow; 'unbrak', the very beginning of a thaw; 'flindrikin', a slight snow shower; and 'flother' and 'figgerin', both a single flake of snow that might be a harbinger of more.

13 January

GRAMMAR

During the Middle Ages, superstition and rationality competed for supremacy in many areas of learning. The study of magic, and the belief in alchemy – the transmutation of metals into gold in the search for the panacea or 'universal remedy' – became the chief objectives of early chemistry. A translation of Bartholomew de Glanville's influential *De Proprietatibus Rerum* ('On the Properties of Things') of 1398 states boldly that 'the asshes of a cokatrice [a serpent, identified with the basilisk, fabulously said to kill with a glance] be acountyd good and proffytable in werkyng of Alkamye: and namely in tornynge and chaungynge of metalle'.

On 13 January 1404, the English Parliament passed the Act of Multipliers, forbidding alchemists to engage in the creation of precious metals: 'that none from henceforth should use to multiply gold or silver, or use the craft of multiplication; and if any the same do, they incur the pain of felony'. Behind the prohibition was the fear of economic anarchy: that the alchemists would create such wealth as would easily surpass the royal coffers.

Nonetheless, education was popularly supposed to include the essential magic arts. These were folded into the notion of 'grammar', a synonym for learning in general. In fact 'grammar'

remained attached to this melting pot of language, literature, and occult sciences for 350 years, until the aspects of magical beauty and allure split off to become, in Scots, and largely thanks to the writings of Sir Walter Scott, 'glamour'. 'Grammar', meanwhile, narrowed to embrace the purely linguistic portion of the academic discipline, where it remains to this day.

For lexicographers, it is a strange but reassuring thought that grammar and glamour were once the closest of siblings.

14 January

COLOR

On this day in 1784, the United States was ratified as an independent and sovereign nation. The conclusion of the American War of Independence meant far more than the autonomy of government in the new United States of America – it also decided a battle for linguistic independence, in which rejecting the King's English was tantamount to rejecting the king.

Noah Webster was at the forefront of the movement to separate American English from its British counterpart. No longer would the United States look to the British for guidance on how to speak and write – instead, Webster argued, it must look to itself.

Webster wrote prolifically on the need for a new, independent language, one that replaced arcane and complicated rules with new, simplified, and vigorously American ones. This was linguistic patriotism to rival anything seen on British shores. It enshrined such spellings as 'color', 'honor', and 'rumor' in the American lexicon.

Not that these were new ideas – spelling, at the time the *Mayflower* set sail, was in a state of flux, if not chaos. This was a time when Shakespeare spelled his name differently, twice in his own will, and when the Bard himself (or his compositors at least) heartily embraced spellings that we now consider to be wholly 'American'. In the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays, 'honor' is found almost 500 times – 100 times more than 'honour'. In the same works, 'humor' outscores 'humour', and 'center' pips 'centre' with ease.

Webster embraced such spellings because they were easier, more phonetically correct. And it's hard to argue with him. For anyone tripping up over 'aluminum', 'sidewalk', or even the ubiquitous 'Wow!', it pays to remember that the British used every single one of them before they crossed the Atlantic.

15 January

HIBERNACLE

If you're looking to escape to a winter retreat, 'hibernacle' is for you. The word is the equivalent of the 'hibernaculum', the place a hibernating animal passes the winter months and a term that has been variously used in relation to a hedgehog's sanctuary, a greenhouse, a frog's muddy hideaway, and a caterpillar's cocoon clinging to a snowy twig. 'Hibernacle', 'hibernaculum', and 'hibernate' are all the offspring of a Latin verb, *hibernare*, to pass the winter.

What we choose to do in our hibernacle is of course entirely up to us. If we are 'dormitive' (inclined to sleep throughout the winter), the answer is obvious. Most of us, however, will probably opt for 'snudging', another perfect word for dark January days, this time from the seventeenth century, for the act of 'remaining snug and quiet'. In fact historical and dialect dictionaries hold a cosy lexicon of words for snuggling – including 'croozling', 'snerdling', 'snoodling', 'snuzzling', and 'neezling'.

16 January

SCREAMER

On this day in 1939, the *Superman* comic strip made its debut. At its height, it was syndicated in over three hundred publications, reaching an audience of around twenty million.

In the unlikely event that a superhero was ever asked for their favourite point of punctuation, the answer would surely be the '!'. From Captain Marvel's 'Shazam!' to Robin's 'Holy ... Batman!' and

Superman's own 'Up, up, and away!', the exclamation mark is as necessary to their stories as the hero's evil nemesis who threatens to destroy the world. The lead writer of *Superman* comics for many years explained that reproduction of comics on pulp paper was such a messy job that he began to use exclamation marks rather than full stops at the end of sentences, because they were clearer in print. His own name was duly changed to Elliot S! Maggin.

This is a punctuation mark with a fittingly lively history. The most plausible of the many theories attached to its origin is that it descends from the Latin word *io* ('joy') – represented by a capital 'I' over a lowercase 'o'. Since its early introduction in the sixteenth century, it has inspired a host of nicknames. In 1551, John Hart, making a list of the major English punctuation marks, included one that he called the 'wonderer'. Ben Jonson, arguably England's greatest punctuator (who even inserted a colon, or what he called a 'double prick', between his first and last name), called it the admiration mark; others of his time knew it as the 'shriek' and the 'screamer'. Since then, it has been variously called a 'boing', 'pling', 'bang', 'gasper', 'slammer', and 'Christer'.

Whatever you choose to call it, a pile-on of them is generally seen as a linguistic no-no. As the writer Terry Pratchett put it: 'All those exclamation marks. Five? A sure sign of someone who wears his underpants on his head.'

17 January

BAFFLING

On this day in 1773, Captain James Cook commanded the first expedition to the Antarctic Circle, with the aim of ending the ancient debate over the existence of *Terra Australis*. This 'South Land' had been postulated as early as the fifth century, and was regularly charted on maps even though no proof of it existed. Its presence was assumed because it seemed unthinkable that the land in the northern hemisphere was not balanced by a similar mass in the southern hemisphere. On 17 January, *Resolution* became the first ship to venture south of the Antarctic Circle. Cook's sweeps across the Pacific finally proved that there was no

Terra Australis further south of Australia itself, which was eventually to take the name of the mythical continent.

Cook's contribution to modern geography is undisputed, but his presence in the dictionary is less keenly felt. Nonetheless, his meticulous journals and accounts of his voyages have provided early evidence for a host of words, especially ones originating in languages indigenous to the lands he explored. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records his name alongside quotations for 'taboo', 'tattoo', 'albatross', 'cannibalise', 'chocolate', 'gum', 'mangrove', 'mocking bird', and 'kangaroo'.

An extract from Cook's writings also gives us the word 'coconut', written at the time as 'cocoanut'. Cook may well have known the word's eerie history: that *coco*, in Portuguese, described a terrifying mask used to frighten children into obedience. Look at any coconut and you'll see three holes at its base, reminiscent of a horrible grin.

Such exoticisms are unsurprising legacies from an adventurer like Cook. But he also recorded some home-grown expressions, among them the adjective 'baffling', which he used of winds that blew about and made straight sailing nigh impossible. Even by that time, the word 'baffle' had coursed a strange and fittingly unpredictable path. A Scottish word from the sixteenth century, to baffle was originally to expose someone, and in particular a perjured knight, to public ridicule. One of the (literally) baffling rituals included making an image of the said offender hanging from his heels, and subjecting it to shouting and the fierce blowing of horns. Later on, 'baffle' came to mean to hoodwink or gull, setting the path for the bewilderment and confusion now attached to it. The metaphor of billowing sails, buffeted this way and that aboard a ship such as *Resolution*, is still a vivid one today.

18 January

BERSERK

One of the first polar bears to be exhibited in the United States became part of an early menagerie in Boston on this day in 1773; the nine-month-old cub had been captured in Greenland. Forty

focused on its value in psychological and physiological terms. Experiments have shown, for example, that a person is able to immerse their hand in icy water for 120 per cent longer if they are shouting 'Bollocks!' (or similar) while doing so, as opposed to exclaiming something neutral but far less cathartic.

Swearing, clearly, can be good for the health, though if you're foreswunk as well as forswunk (tired before you even begin), it might take a lot of mouthing off to see you through.(*See* 'fuck', 27 May; 'the dog's bollocks', 14 August.)

21 January

DAPHNE

While in winter our gardens lie mostly dormant and quiet, they are lit by a few plants that begin to spring to life at the start of the year. One of the most beautiful of these is surely the daphne, a plant yielding lustrous clusters of flowers that fill the air with scent.

The name 'daphne' comes from the Greek for 'laurel' or 'bay'. In ancient mythology, Daphne was a nymph who became the unwilling object of obsession for Apollo, who persisted in hunting her down. In desperation, Daphne pleaded with her father – in most sources the river god Peneus – to help her; he did so by transforming her into a laurel tree (*see* 25 July).

Before her metamorphosis, Daphne was a naiad, a female spirit or nymph who in myth presided over fountains, wells, and other sources of fresh water. Those associated with rivers were known as the Potamides, believed to inspire those who drank from their waters. Among them was Lethe, the Greek spirit of forgetfulness and oblivion who inhabited the waters of the River Lethe in the Greek underworld. Those who drank from it forgot all memories of their earthly life. It is to the name of this river in Hades that we owe the word 'lethargic' today.

22 January

ARSLE

We all have days where progress seems impossible, and we are left with the distinct impression of going backwards. One word for this is 'arsleing'.

'Arsle' is a dialect word, found in Cumbria, Yorkshire, and Lancashire and documented from at least the 1800s. Its origin may lie in the Dutch *aarzelen*, which in turn comes from *aars*, 'backside'. Rather than simply arsing or 'futzing' about, however, it carries the definite sense of retreating – the English equivalent of the French *reculer* (which similarly has *cul*, arse, at its heart). For a while, 'arsleing' carried the various meanings of sitting restlessly, wandering aimlessly, and moving backwards. It is at its most useful in describing the latter – a single, pithy verb for conveying the fact that you are going nowhere, slowly.

23 January

JINGOISTIC

On this day in 1878, Disraeli ordered the British fleet into the Dardanelles to resist Russia – a move celebrated by a music-hall song that went on to become wildly popular. Its chorus included the two words 'by jingo', thus shunting the term 'jingoism' from its relatively unremarkable existence into the mainstream.

Jingoism is defined as extreme patriotism, especially in the form of an aggressive or bellicose foreign policy or a chauvinistic dismissal of foreigners. Its beginnings, unlikely as it seems, lie in a conjuror's patter.

'Jingo' is first recorded in the forms 'hey jingo!' or 'high jingo!' in the late seventeenth century. It was the classic refrain used by conjurors when an item was revealed as though by magic – an alternative to 'abracadabra'. In the same period, 'by jingo!', one of many euphemisms for 'by God' or 'by Jesus', became a general exclamation of surprise or exaggeration. It was in this form that we find it in the music-hall song of the 1870s, written by George Hunt for the actor and singer Gilbert Hastings 'The Great' Macdermott, a regular performer at the London Pavilion. Its

refrain consisted of these lines, which were quickly picked up as a mantra in support of Disraeli's actions:

> We don't want to fight but, by Jingo!, if we do,
> We've got the ships, we've got the men, we've got the money too.

On 11 March 1878, the *Daily News* was one of the first to call London's outspoken protestors 'jingoes' – 'the new type of music-hall patriots who sing the Jingo song'.

24 January

THE ACID TEST

On 24 January 1848, James Wilson Marshall, a foreman working for the pioneer John Sutter, was overseeing the construction of a water-powered sawmill in Coloma, on the American River, when he noticed a shiny metal gleaming on the bed of a channel below the mill. The discovery of what turned out to be nuggets of gold sparked one of the biggest migrations in US history. Despite Marshall's efforts to keep the discovery a secret, the news soon leaked and hopeful prospectors began to flock to Coloma; the Gold Rush had truly begun. It's said that by mid-June, three-quarters of the male population of San Francisco had departed for the newly discovered mines.

English owes several words and expressions to this frenzied time. Settlements were dug into the earth surrounding the mines to house the fast-increasing population and to provide saloons, shops, and brothels – these were the first 'diggings', a word later abbreviated to the 'digs' of modern slang.

One of those to arrive in California was the Bavarian immigrant Levi Strauss, who had the idea of making durable trousers for the miners from a heavy canvas that had previously been used for making tents. Those trousers were to become known as Levi's, one of the most popular brands of jeans in the world.

Using simple pans in which to rinse the gravel, those who isolated nuggets of the precious metal found that everything, quite literally, 'panned out'. In their bid to distinguish gold from base metal, gold prospectors performed a test that relied on the ability

26 January

HOOCH

On this day in 1838, Tennessee passed the first Prohibition law in the history of the United States, rendering it illegal to be caught selling, manufacturing, or transporting alcohol. This led, inevitably, to a highly profitable black market, and the popularisation of a shady practice known as 'bootlegging'.

Bootlegging today is a fairly blanket term for the sale of any illegally made product, or for unlicensed recording of a performance, but the name has an entirely literal beginning. During the early periods of Prohibition, black-market traders would hide their ill-gotten bottles of alcohol down their boots. These dealers might have referred to the smuggled booze as 'moonshine', liquor that was both distilled and transported under cover of darkness, or by the light of the moon. 'Hooch' was another name from the period for alcohol acquired illegally.

'Hooch' is a shortening of Hoochinoo, itself a corruption of Hutsnuwu, the name of an Alaskan indigenous people that is said to translate as 'Grizzly Bear Fort'. In his study of the region, the Presbyterian missionary Sheldon Jackson wrote about 'reaching Angoon, the chief town of the hootznahoos – but we did not remain long as the whole town was drunk'. The behaviour he found there, he noted, was not unusual, thanks to the strong liquor that the people drank in abundance. The process of manufacturing hooch was described by another visitor as 'weirdly horrible' – no explanation was offered, but ingredients were said to consist largely of yeast, molasses, berries, sugar and graham flour (quite an innocuous mix compared with some concoctions of the day, such as 'balderdash', a dubious mixture of beer and milk, with the occasional addition of pigeon dung and quicklime). Whatever its taste, the sheer strength of hooch and its effects made the term a byword for any strong liquor – especially the bootlegged kind.

27 January