A long and somewhat varied experience in language teaching has convinced me that there are still, in spite of the march of science, many people who are capable of getting intellectual pleasure from word-history. I hope that to such people this little book, the amusement of occasional leisure, will not be unwelcome. It differs, I believe, from any other popular book on language in that it deals essentially with the origins of words, and makes no attempt to enforce a moral. My aim has been to select especially the unexpected in etymology, “things not generally known,” such as the fact that Tammany was an Indian chief, that assegai occurs in Chaucer, that jilt is identical with Juliet, that brasil wood is not named from Brasil, that to curry favour means to comb down a horse of a particular colour, and so forth. The treatment is made as simple as possible, a bowing acquaintance with Latin and French being all that is assumed, though words from many other languages are necessarily included. In the case of each word I have traced the history just so far back as it is likely to be of interest to the reader who is not a philological specialist.

I have endeavoured to state each proposition in its simplest terms, without enumerating all the reservations and indirect factors which belong to the history of almost every word.

The chapter headings only indicate in a general way the division of the subject matter, the arrangement of
which has been determined rather by the natural association which exists between words. The quotations are, with few exceptions, drawn from my own reading. They come from very varied sources, but archaic words are exemplified, when possible, from authors easily accessible, generally Shakespeare or Milton, or, for revived archaisms, Scott. In illustrating obsolete meanings I have made much use of the earliest dictionaries, available.

It seemed undesirable to load a small work of this kind with references. The writer on word-dore must of necessity build on what has already been done, happy if he can add a few bricks to the edifice. But philologists will recognise that this book is not, in the etymological sense, a mere compilation, and that a considerable portion of the information it contains is here printed for the first time in a form accessible to the general reader. Chapter VII., on Semantics, is, so far as I know, the first attempt at a simple treatment of a science which is now admitted to an equality with phonetics, and which to most people is much more interesting.

Throughout I have used the New English Dictionary, in the etymological part of which I have for some years had a humble share, for purposes of verification. Without the materials furnished by the historical method of that great national work, which is now complete from A to R, this book would not have been attempted. For words in S to Z, I have referred chiefly to Professor Skeat’s Etymological Dictionary (4th ed., Oxford, 1910).

1 For a list of these see p. xii.
2 Cumpilato, “pillage, pollage, robbing” (Cooper).
3 Among words on which the reader will find either entirely new information or a modification of generally accepted views are akimbo, anlace, branks, caulk, cockney, felon (a whitlow), foil, hostrel, lagger, mulligrubs, mystery (a craft), oriel, patch, petromel, salut, sentry, sulen, tret, etc.
It is not many years since what passed for etymology in this country was merely a congeries of wild guesses and manufactured anecdotes. The persistence with which these crop up in the daily paper and the classroom must be my excuse for "slaying the slain" in Chapter XIII. Some readers may regret the disappearance of these fables, but a little study will convince them that in the life of words, as in that of men, truth is stranger than fiction.

Ernest Weekley.

Nottingham, January 1912.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

On its first publication this little book was very kindly treated by both reviewers and readers. The only criticism of any importance was directed against its conciseness. There seemed to be a consensus of expert opinion that, the book being intended for the non-specialist, the compression was a little too severe, and likely sometimes to lead to misunderstanding. I have tried to remedy this defect in the present edition, both by giving fuller explanations and by supplying further quotations in illustration of the less common words and uses. No absolutely new matter is introduced, but a number of fresh words have been added as examples of points already noticed. The general arrangement of the book remains unchanged, except that a few paragraphs have been shifted to what seemed more natural positions.
Friendly correspondents in all parts of the world, to many of whom I must apologise for my failure to answer their letters, have sent me information of interest and value. In some cases I have been able to make use of such information for this edition. Many readers have called my attention to local and American survivals of words and meanings described as obsolete. This is a subject on which a great deal could be written, but it lies outside the plan of this book, which does not aspire to do more than furnish some instruction or entertainment to those who are interested in the curiosities of etymology.

Ernest Weekley.

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

It is just five years since this little book was first submitted to the toleration of word-lovers, a class much more numerous than the author had suspected. The second edition, revised and slightly enlarged, appeared in 1913. Since then the text has once more been subjected to a searching revision, and it is hoped that the book now contains no statement which is not in accord with common sense and the present state of philological knowledge. Only those who have experience of such work know how easy it is to stray unconsciously from the exact truth in publishing the results of etymological research. Moreover, new light is constantly being thrown on old problems, and theories long triumphant have occasionally to yield to fresh
evidence. To take an example from this volume, the traditional derivation of trousers from French trousse is now shown by the New English Dictionary to be chronologically improbable. That great and cautious work unhesitatingly describes hatchment as a corruption of achievement, but Professor Derocquigny, of Lille, has shown (Modern Language Review, January 1913) that this etymology is "preposterous," hachement being a good old French word which in 16th century English was ignorantly confused with achievement. Apart from these two etymologies, the only essential alterations have been made in the chapter on Surnames (p. 170), further research in medieval records having convinced the author that most of what has been written about "corrupted" surnames is nonsense, and that no nickname is too fantastic to be genuine. Two slight contemplated alterations have not been carried out. The adjective applied (p. 156) to a contemporary ruler seemed to need reconsideration, but the author was baffled by the embarras du choix. A word mentioned on p. 48 might gracefully have been omitted, but it is likely that the illustrious man alluded to would, if the page should ever accidentally meet his eye, only chuckle at the thought of time's revenges.

In the interval since the last edition of the Romance of Words the greatest Romance of Deeds, in our story has been written in the blood of our noblest and best.

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1 In spite of the fact that the New English Dictionary now finds shark applied to the fish some years before the first record of shark, a sharper, parasite, I adhere to my belief that the latter is the earlier sense. The new example quoted, from a Tudor "broadside," is more suggestive of a sailor’s apt nickname than of zoological nomenclature—"There is no proper name for it that I knowe, but that sertaine men of Captayne Hawkines doth call it a sharks" (1569).

2 See the author’s Surnames (John Murray, 1916), especially pp. 177-83.
Only a sense of proportion-withholds the author from dedicating this new edition to the glorious memory of his many old pupils dead on the field of honour. Nothing in the modest success of the book has given him so much pleasure as the fact, to which his correspondence bears witness, that his little contribution to word-lore has helped to amuse the convalescence of more than one stricken fighting-man.

Ernest Weekley.

Nottingham, March 1917.

Preface to the Fourth Edition

In preparing a new edition of this little book, ten years after its first appearance, I have corrected a few slight inaccuracies which had been overlooked in earlier revisions, and modified or expanded some statements which were not quite consonant with the present state of etymological knowledge. In word-lore, as in other sciences, it is seldom safe to lay down the law without a little conscientious "hedging." The only two considerable alterations have to do with the word snickersnee, the history of which is now clearly traced, and the name Bendigo. It is rather strange that no reader or reviewer has ever put me right on the subject of this Nottingham worthy, for the facts are plainly stated in the Dictionary of National Biography.

Ernest Weekley.

Nottingham, January 1922.