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A Browser's Dictionary and Native's Guide to the Unknown American Language, by John Ciardi

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John Ciardi, *A Browser's Dictionary and Native's Guide to the Unknown American Language*. New York: Harper and Row, 1980. 429 pp. \$16.95.

Review by Ann Graham Attora

We browse in bookstores, libraries, art galleries, and boutiques to inspect the creativity and craftsmanship of others and to dream about what we might do or have one day. Browsing is a fine way to pass a bit of time. Thus, “browser” is an apt word in the title of John Ciardi’s latest book — not only because of the pleasant connotation of the word but because this book is meant to be sampled, put down, browsed again, put to rest, and then savored once more. Ciardi, known for his work with *The Saturday Review*, candidly states that he has been “flatly subjective” in his selection of words to include in this etymological dictionary. If he finds a word extremely interesting, he examines its origin and often its history. However, as befits a scholar, he does have an underlying purpose for writing this book, a purpose that transcends the obvious desire to entertain: he corrects and adds to current etymologies.

Throughout *A Browser's Dictionary* the reader finds entries where Ciardi disagrees with the traditional origin and history of certain idiomatic words and phrases. For example, the accepted etymology of “ghetto” is the Italian “borghetto,” little boro, the section of Italian towns to which Jews were restricted. However, Ciardi states:

Though I can find no English dictionary that has

not confused the case, the etymology of *ghetto* can be positively asserted: from L. *jactare* to throw, to cast (as metal in a foundry) to Venetian dial. *geto*, foundry. The curious XVI church Latin form *ghectum* is intermediate to *geto* and L. *jactum*, thing cast. It was on the island that contained *il geto*, the Venetian foundry, that the first ghetto was established. . . . Venetian *geto* was altered in XVI to It. *gheto* to bring the spelling into conformity with Italian practice; and altered again, almost at once, to *ghetto* under the influence of *-etto*, the common dim. suffix.

Another instance of Ciardi's dissatisfaction with etymological tradition concerns "nincompoop." How many students of Latin have been told that "nincompoop" and "nincompoopery" originated in the Latin "non compos mentis," not mentally competent? Samuel Johnson (*Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755) is probably the perpetrator of this error, but Ciardi sets the matter right with a solution that will delight any misogynists in his audience:

The OED (*Oxford English Dictionary*) rejects Johnson's suggestion, only to dismiss the form as "prob. only a fanciful formation," and that clerk's guess has been aped by all subsequent dictionaries, which dismiss the form as "origin unknown." Yet the OED provides all the necessary clues in its own citations of the earlier form: 1676 *nicompoop*, and 1694, *nickumpoop*; which, if taken to be of Du. origin, as the sound suggests, present no difficulty. Du. *nicht*, niece, female cousin; *om* (prep.), for, of, about; *poep* (pron. as if Eng. *poop*), fool, clown.

And if that does not work out to be at root "(female) relative of a fool," I will be a monkey's uncle.

Although dictionaries have delegated "nincompoop" to the

“origin unknown” category, at least Johnson and a few hoary Latin teachers attempted to discover the origin of the word. Ciardi challenges other origin unknowns given in standard dictionaries because he feels lexicographers have been “pointlessly safe” at times. When he finds substantial evidence for a derivation, he offers it, of course noting what part of the history is in doubt. He prefers not to drop the whole question of etymology if his research permits a strong guess. Such is the case with “hornswoggle”:

In one of the most curiously persistent errors of our etymology, our dictionaries have universally (or so to the best of my knowledge) glossed it “origin unknown.” Their bafflement, I submit, could only follow from a misdivision of the elements into *horn* and *swaggle*. It should be divided into *horns* (symbol of cuckoldry) and *waggle*. To place the hands on either side of one’s head, knuckles to the temples, and index fingers extended, and then to wave the head from side to side, is an ancient gesture of mocking a man as a cuckold. The exclam. *Well, I’ll be hornswoggled!* can only mean at root: “Well, I’ll be cuckolded!”

The third and final way in which Ciardi presents his disagreement with current representations of word origins occurs when he gently — not stridently — cites and refutes on evidence some of the most popular “wrong” etymologies. For example, folk etymology bases the origin of the word “cop,” a policeman, on copper buttons or on an acronym for constables on patrol. Ciardi states that both are “fanciful.” The correct origin derives from “to cop,” to snatch or steal, as in “I copped it in Macy’s basement.” Perhaps the thief copped the goods and eluded the cops in order to make his surroundings “posh”:

A direct borrowing of the form but not the sense of Romany *posh*, half. British gypsies commonly, if warily, worked with British rogues. . . . Brit.

rogues came to know *posh* in such compounds as *posh-houri*, half pence, and *posh-kooroona*, half crown, so associating it with money, and from XVII to mid XIX *posh* meant “money” in thieves’ cant, the sense then shifting to “swank, fashionable, expensive” (“the good things money can buy”).

The above dating refutes the folk etymology that “posh” is an acronym of port out starboard home, meaning the most expensive accommodations on the Peninsula and Eastern steamship’s packet service to India by way of the Suez Canal. The acronym supposedly refers to the shady, and hence more comfortable side of the ship. To clinch his refutation of the folk etymology, Ciardi says that when veterans of the Peninsula and Eastern were questioned about the word, they replied that they were unaware of the acronymic meaning.

Whether Ciardi is adding to or correcting an etymology or simply entertaining us with an accurate word origin, he feels that many terms do not make sense until they have been put into an historical context. The history of *roué* clarifies its origin and thus its meaning:

Variously, 1. A profligate scamp. 2. An unprincipled lecher who will stop at nothing. (Sense 1 is now primary in Am.) [Ult. from L. *rotare*, to turn a wheel, to Fr. *rouer*, to turn a wheel, but also, to turn on the wheel, with ref. to execution by being broken on the wheel, which in XVIII France was the punishment reserved for the most heinous of criminals, these being called *roués*, those executed in this way for their crimes.]

HISTORIC. Louis XV of France was five years old when he inherited the throne upon the death of his grandfather Louis XIV in 1715. The Duc d’Orleans (d. 1723) was appointed regent and surrounded himself with a palace guard of congenial (to him) rogues he called his *roués*, explaining that every one of them properly deserved to be broken on the wheel. The *roués* accepted the name but insisted

that it described their loyalty to their great patron, every man of them being prepared to endure anything — including the wheel, if need be — in service of the Duc.

Roué, posh, cop, hornswoggle, nincompoop, and ghetto are merely a sample of the treasures that await the reader for whom words and their origins are either a vocation or an avocation. After John Ciardi asks us for our “corrections and admonitions” in order that he may correct his errors in future editions of *A Browser's Dictionary*, he promises to bring out several more etymological works. Let us hope he does.