

Why We Use Ugly Words

A FEW weeks ago we published a letter from a correspondent (E.H.A., Te Aroha) asking why New Zealand has adopted what the writer called "certain ugly forms of English synonyms: 'paddock' for 'field,' 'bush' for 'woods'," and so on. A little later our correspondent put the same question to Professor Arnold Wall, whose reply we are now permitted to print.

YOUR letter raises some rather difficult questions, the answers to which must be largely guesswork. You ask whether our pioneers were "ashamed of euphony" or "considered beauty was not consistent with manliness," or whether they were just ruthless as shown by their treatment of the forests. There is I think a very slight shade of truth in these charges, but I should express indictment more temperately. The pioneers in both Australia and New Zealand were of course rigidly practical in their outlook and their main aims were strictly material, so that anything in the nature of poetry or sentiment was alien to their manner of thought and speech. This is very different from the deliberate choice of ugly and harsh terms.

You are right in supposing that the main differences between the idioms of the old land and that of Australasia are due in the first place to Australia. Australia, especially New South Wales and Tasmania, had fifty years start of us in New Zealand and when New Zealand became a British colony Australia had already made in its vocabulary most of the changes which were adopted here. During the previous fifty years nobody ever came to New Zealand but by way of Australia, the people who did come and settle here being only whalers and missionaries. It was therefore to be expected that the settlers from 1840 onwards should use the language already more or less fixed with its Australian flavour. Another consideration is that the Australian scene is so very different from anything the old country could show; the absence of greenery, the stark droughty appearance of the land, the scarcity of water, the ragged untidy forest of gum-trees, the harsh and yellowish grasses—all these were unfamiliar, and it is only natural that many of the words used in Britain seemed inappropriate to describe the Australian natural objects and landscapes.

Then, from very early days the colonists adopted almost as a national idiom the figure of speech called "meiosis" or "litotes," the "ironically moderate form of speech," the opposite of boasting; thus they called and still call their horse, however proud of it they may be, "a moke" and their dog "a mong." This gave their language a special colour and New Zealand took over a good deal of it. These are general considerations, and now I shall say something about the examples you have cited.

Change of Scene

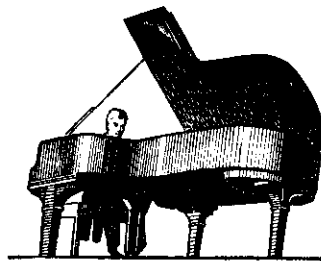
Paddock referred to field or meadow; here note the changed scene. Australia could show nothing like the small English field with its neat hedge and pretty wild flowers and emerald grass; "field" and "meadow" were not suggested at all. Why they "chose" paddock we can

guess; they never explained why they used such new idioms, why should they? I guess, then, that meiosis is involved as it is quite in the Australian character to call his thousand acre block a paddock and the New Zealander followed suit. The same applies to brook and stream, but it is not easy to explain why "creek" took their place. "Creek" for stream is an Americanism and the origin goes back to early explorations of the great American rivers: Mississippi, etc. Exploring parties saw the mouths of tributary streams and could not tell whether they were mere inlets or creeks, or whether they were true rivers and they used the term creeks for what were really tributary streams; this is the explanation given by Dr. Murray, editor of the *Oxford Dictionary*, when Morris applied to him for information for his Australasian Dictionary *Austral English*.

The question of course arises as to why or how this Americanism should have been used in Australia, and the only answer I can make is that relations between America and Australia in the early days were very close and contacts frequent, partly owing to the whaling industry in which American ships were interested, and partly by the commercial visits of American ships on their way to China. And if I know anything of human nature there must have been frequent desertions so that the early Australian society had a certain American element. "Bush" for "woods" is natural in view of the very different appearance and character of English woods and Australian forest or New Zealand forest. For the same reason such words as "copse" and "spinney" were quite useless in Australasia and inevitably discarded—unconsciously of course. As for billy-can or "billy" I can find no fault with this, for it is good English idiom and only more in use here than at home because the outdoor feeding was a more usual feature of Australian life than of English.

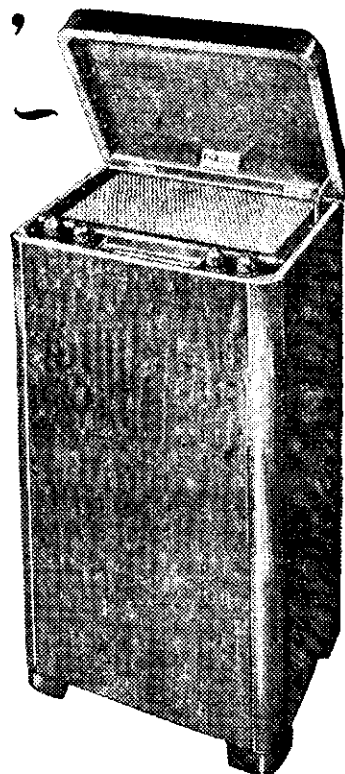
You complain of "scow," but no fault is to be found with it, for that is the only name for this type of ship and if it is not a beautiful word, well, neither is a scow a beautiful ship. The word scow is originally Dutch and an Americanism. Similarly "stack" and "rick," which you criticise, are good English terms and the only terms available either here or at home. I think you are mistaken about harvest, for I find this term in general use here. "Gleaning" is not used simply because the process itself is not in use. We are too well off to need to glean. Gully, you complain, replaces such words as "vale" and "valley." Actually a gully is a different thing from either of these, much deeper and rougher. The more frequent use of gully here is amply explained by the difference in the topography of Britain and Australia. Actually the first use of gully as an English word occurs in the writings of Captain Cook himself. He spells it in the early way "gullet."

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