

# OZ WORDS



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## EDITORIAL

The second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary* has finally arrived! This is a great cause for celebration at the ANDC as we have been working very hard, for a very long time, on this monumental work. I'd like to say we are taking a well-earned rest but we are already well into working on a new edition of the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

In this edition of *Ozwords*, Bruce Moore, Chief Editor of the second edition of the *AND*, writes our lead article. He provides an overview of the dictionary and the changing nature of lexicographical research and editing, and talks about some of the new words and phrases that have made their way into the dictionary.

Mark Gwynn takes a look at the *Australian Comic Dictionary*, the first Australian dictionary by a woman, published 100 years ago. We have used the dictionary as the inspiration for the next *Ozwords* competition and we hope Mark's article will inspire you to send us your best comic definitions.

Julia Robinson writes about some of the idioms and phrases that readers sent in response to my article and Julia Miller's in the last edition. We received a fascinating variety of responses; thanks to everyone who wrote in.

We hope you enjoy reading this edition of *Ozwords*. We also include an advertisement for the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*, with *Ozwords* subscribers offered a special discount.

**Amanda Laugesen**  
Director



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# A NEW AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL DICTIONARY

BRUCE MOORE

The new edition of the *Australian National Dictionary* (the dictionary that gives its name to the Australian National Dictionary Centre) has been published. This is a dictionary based on historical principles, modelled on the large *Oxford English Dictionary*: words and meanings are traced chronologically from their first occurrence in the language through to the present (or to the time when they ceased being used); the evidence for their history appears in the form of quotations from texts of various kinds, including printed books, journals, newspapers, manuscripts, and diaries. It includes only words and meanings that occur exclusively in Australia, that are used more intensively in Australia than elsewhere, or that have a special significance in Australia.

The first edition, published in 1988, was a one-volume work of 814 pages. The new second edition is a two-volume work of 1864 pages. The first edition included 10,000 Australian words and meanings illustrated by 60,000 quotations; the second edition includes 16,000 Australian words and meanings illustrated by 123,000 quotations.

The large increase in new entries cannot be attributed solely to an increase in the Australian lexicon between 1988 and 2016. We have also revisited and reanalysed the evidence from the period covered by the first edition. In doing this, we have been assisted by resources that were not available to the editors of the first edition. Those editors did not work with computers, and they had no access to what we now know as the Internet, which in one sense is a massive database of words ready for analysis by the lexicographer.

One of the major difficulties that confronted the editors of the first edition was the matter of judging whether a word was Australian or not. Of course, for many words the Australianness was self-evident, but at the colloquial level it was often particularly difficult to decide if a word was dinky-di Australian. The *Oxford English Dictionary* was not especially strong at that stage on colloquial terms, and a work such as Partridge's large *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (various editions 1937–84) was not comprehensive and was often indeterminate in its evidence and judgements. The Internet and various electronic databases have made the testing of the Australianness of words and meanings much easier, especially at the colloquial level, and research, at this level, has been greatly aided by Jonathon Green's historically based three-volume *Green's Dictionary of Slang* (2010).

The first edition was based on the evidence collected on index cards by readers who carefully searched through newspapers, diaries, novels, plays, non-fiction works—indeed, printed or written material of any kind. The editors of the first edition may have had only one or two pieces of evidence for a potential entry, and in most cases this was insufficient to justify an entry in the dictionary. For this new edition, our ability to search for additional evidence was greatly increased—we were able to search through electronic databases of many kinds, and towards the end of the project we had access to the National Library of Australia's extraordinary collection of digitised Australian newspapers (now more than 1000 of them).

All of these resources have made the business of editing the new edition of the *Australian National Dictionary* different in ways that would have been unimaginable to the editors of the first edition. In spite of all these developments, however, most aspects of the art of lexicography have remained fundamentally the same—choosing the words and meanings, researching the etymologies, crafting definitions, and (in the case of a

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THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL DICTIONARY CENTRE  
A JOINT VENTURE BETWEEN  
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dictionary based on historical principles) assembling the evidence for the history of a word by means of quotations.

Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of the art of lexicography is the skill involved in choosing the words and meanings that should go into the dictionary. This is especially important in the case of a regional dictionary—the *Australian National Dictionary* includes only Australian words and meanings. We all recognise that *Brexit*, *emoji*, *vape*, and *selfie* are relatively new international English words. We would also recognise that there are new coinages that are Australian, and so *budgie smugglers* and *schoolies' week* are in our new edition.

We have added many colloquial phrases from the pre-1988 period that are quintessentially Australian: *all prick and ribs like a drover's dog*, *couldn't train a choko vine over a country dunny*, *couldn't win a chook raffle*, *dry as a dead dingo's donger*, *land of the long weekend*.

Some terms are recognisable because they carry Australian names of various kinds: from the earlier period we have added *to cover more ground than Burke and Wills*, *Harold Holt* (rhyming slang for 'a bolt; a sudden departure'), *a heart as big as Phar Lap's*, *things are crook in Tallarook*; from the more recent period we have added *Barry Crocker* (rhyming slang for 'shocker'), *to do a Bradbury*, *Hawkespeak*, *Howard's battlers*, and *Marrickville Mercedes*.

Many of the colloquialisms that we have added, however, while usually known to most Australians, will not be so immediately recognised as Australian: *I don't know if I'm Arthur or Martha*; *your blood's worth bottling*; *to carry on like a pork chop*; *a cup of tea*, *a Bex*, and *a good lie down*; *full up to dolly's wax*; *happy as a bastard on father's day*; *it would kill a brown dog*; *stacks on the milk*; *he wouldn't know if a tram was up him unless the conductor rang the bell*; *he wouldn't work in an iron lung*.

The words and meanings added to this new edition come from numerous semantic areas. For example, new food terms include: *battered sav*, *bolar*, *boston bun*, *chiko roll*, *chocolate crackle*, *copha*, *dagwood dog*, *Devonshire tea*, *fairy bread*, *kransky*, *long black*, *neenish tart*, *nibblies*, *short soup*, *snag*, *snot block*, *white Christmas*, *yiros*. New terms for various kinds of people include: *bogan*, *bronzed Aussie*, *bush baptist*, *Callithumpian*, *chardonnay socialist*, *checkout chick*, *grey nomad*, *Mexican*, *Mrs Kafoops*, *mungo*, *pube*, *ranga*, *ruosexual*, *seachanger*, *seppo*, *skip*, *tradie*, *true blue*. The world of politics has provided many terms, including: *aspirational voter*, *branch stacking*, *captain's pick*, *economic rationalism*, *how-to-vote card*, *keep the bastards honest*, *micro party*, *mortgage belt*, *negative gearing*, *scrutineer*, *small-l liberal*, *true believer*, *two-party preferred*, *wombat trail*.

“  
The words and meanings added to this new edition come from numerous semantic areas.  
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THE NEW EDITION OF THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL DICTIONARY

Many of these are recognisably Australian, but some are not. It will surprise many that the following list, made up of items commonly found in and around Australian homes, is entirely Australian: *banana lounge*, *blood and bone*, *bouncinette*, *bunny rug*, *hills hoist*, *kitchen tidy*, *light globe*, *parents' retreat*, *pergola* (in the sense of 'an open-sided shelter attached to a house'), *pilchers*, *shopping jeep*, *splayd*, *teledex*, *texta*, *wettex*, *wheelie bin*.

Words from Aboriginal languages and culture are a significant source of expansion in this new edition. Whereas the first edition included about 250 words from 60 languages, the new edition includes more than 500 words from 100 Aboriginal languages. Conventional wisdom has it that borrowings of this kind usually occur in the initial 'contact' period, and while this is true of many of the significant borrowings (*kangaroo*, *waratah*, *cooe*, and the like) this new edition contains evidence of a continuing transfer of words from Aboriginal languages into Australian English. Many of these are names for animals and plants, sometimes the result of a deliberate policy to use indigenous names rather than imposed English descriptive names (*dayang* for 'heath mouse', *ijariti* for 'marsupial mole', *rakali* for 'water rat'), and sometimes from an increasing interest in bush tucker (*akudjura* for 'bush tomato', *gubinge* for a kind of plum). Outside the domain of flora and fauna, some of the terms reflect a renewed interest in aspects of Aboriginal culture: *bunji* 'mate', *kumanjayi* 'a substitute name for a person who has died', *migaloo* 'a white person', *tjukurpa* 'the dreaming'.

The words in the *Australian National Dictionary* are analysed historically: a word's family history is provided in the etymology section; senses are listed not in the order of the most common to the least common (as in a standard dictionary), but in the historical sequence in which they arose; words and their senses are illustrated by evidence of their actual usage in the numerous quotations that are provided from written sources—thus, the basic sense of the word *kangaroo* is illustrated by its first appearance in English when in 1770 Joseph Banks wrote in his journal 'Kill Kanguru', and then by a further 31 quotations up to the year 2014.

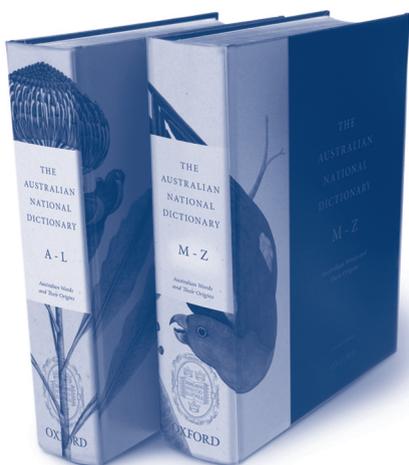
Semantic clusters of words tell the stories of various periods or aspects of Australian history—relations with Indigenous Australians, the convict era, the gold rushes, the processes of land settlement, the experience of war, and so on.

And perhaps most importantly, many of the words carry with them the history of distinctively Australian values and attitudes. If you asked an English person to give you ten or so words that encapsulate English values, they would probably just look back at you in puzzlement at the question. You would get the same response from an American. Any Australian, however, could easily supply you with such a list, which might include: *Anzac*, *battler*, *bludger*, *bogan*, *dinkum*, *dob*, *fair go*, *mate*, *no worries*, *rort*, *she'll be right*, *true blue*. We might all come up with slightly different lists, but the very fact that we could produce such lists is a measure of the extent to which the Australian language embodies Australian values and attitudes, and is a marker of national identity.

For such reasons, the *Australian National Dictionary* is a national treasure and treasury—the essential cultural and historical document that maps the words that define who we are, where we have come from, and what we value.

“  
... many of the words carry with them the history of distinctively Australian values and attitudes.  
”

Bruce Moore is Chief Editor of the new edition of the *Australian National Dictionary* and a former director of the Australian National Dictionary Centre.



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## GNARLY

*'Gnarly' is a slang word that my dad used to use when he was a teenager, and I was wondering what the etymology and origin of the word is. Has the meaning of the word changed over the past 20 years?*

O. Pollock, Victoria

One of our editors, a former surfer, remembers this word being used by surfers to refer to excellent waves, which may be how your dad used it too. Its origin is as follows. The word *gnarly* first appeared in the 1840s as an adjective meaning 'gnarled', a word used to describe a tree that is knobbly, rough, and twisted, especially with age. The word *gnarly* is a combination of *gnarl* (a rough knotty protuberance, especially on a tree) and the suffix *-y*. From the 1860s, a transferred use of *gnarly* appears. A person's hands, if they were knotted and twisted with age, could be described as *gnarly*; and a person with a difficult or prickly personality could also be called *gnarly*.

We encounter slang meanings of the word in the 1970s, all originating in the US. In this decade we find evidence, originally in surfing contexts, for *gnarly* meaning 'dangerous or challenging'. This may be a reference to the appearance of rough sea. In the same decade there is a sense of *gnarly* meaning 'awful, unpleasant, unattractive'. In the early 1980s, again originally in the US, *gnarly* is found in the sense 'excellent, cool, attractive'. As occurs quite frequently in slang, the meaning can flip from bad (awful, unpleasant, unattractive) to good (excellent, cool, attractive). The words *sick* and *wicked* are an example of this, as both have the meaning 'excellent' in recent slang use. Another sense of *gnarly* dates from the late 1980s, referring to 'harsh or grating' music or sound. All these 20th century senses of *gnarly* are still in current usage. As far as we know, no significant changes in meaning have occurred in the last 20 years.

## AT SPARROW FART

*Sparrow's fart* is a recent contribution from Paula to our Word Box. She explained the term in context: *We would typically say something like, 'We have to wake/meet at sparrow's fart' meaning very early in the morning.* She added the following note: *A friend came over on the weekend and he was telling his girlfriend about the saying 'sparrow's fart'. She was in disbelief that it was an Australian saying because the sparrow wasn't native to Australia. I subscribe to your Word of the Month and thought it might be interesting to know the origins of this phrase.*

The most common form of this term is *sparrow fart*, and it is usually found in the phrase *at sparrow fart*, meaning 'very early in the morning'. It is not an Australian expression, although it is commonly used here. It originated in British dialect. The earliest evidence is found in a glossary of words from the county of Chester, published

in 1886. Despite their immigrant status, sparrows do turn up in a couple of Australian English terms. In the late 19th century we find *sparrow ticket*, 'a means of gaining admission to, or viewing, an event such as a sporting match without paying for a ticket'. The term derives from the idea that the users of such tickets 'fly over the fence' like sparrows. In the early 20th century there is evidence of *sparrow starver*, 'a street cleaner', alluding to the street cleaner's removal of potential food for urban birds. Both these 'sparrow' terms fell out of use in the mid-20th century.

## METALLICIAN

*'Metallician' was a term used for bookmakers as far as I can tell from 1861 until 1920ish. It is very commonly used in old newspapers (see Trove). It comes up occasionally in dictionaries, but the definition is always the same—"they used metal notebooks and pencils"—but this doesn't make any sense, and I can't find what a metal notebook or pencil is.*

M. Collison, New South Wales

Can any Ozworder help with this query? As far as we know, the slang lexicographer J.C. Hotten is the first person to explain the derivation of the term 'metallician' in the 1874 edition of his *Slang Dictionary*. His entry says: 'Metallician. A racing bookmaker. Bookmakers use metallic books and pencils.' He gives no further explanation of these items, and our initial check of reference works and resources has been fruitless. If any readers are historians of the turf, and know what 'metallic books and pencils' are, please explain!

## ENOUGH TO DRIVE A BODY BERESK

*In northern Tasmania a lot of people, when they mean someone has totally lost their temper, say 'He went completely beresk' rather than 'He went completely berserk'. I've never heard it elsewhere in Australia. Can you tell me if this is only a variant used in Tasmania, and when was the first recorded use of it?*

H. Smith, Tasmania

Your letter prompted some lively discussion at the ANDC. A couple of us have occasionally heard the term *beresk*. It is not restricted to Tasmania, as we've found evidence in Trove of its use in mainland newspapers from the 1930s. The earliest example is in the report of a tennis match in the Broken Hill *Barrier Miner*, 19 June 1933: 'Satoh suddenly became beresk, hitting his peculiar shoulder drive with such viciousness that the shots would have left any player standing.' Some Ozworders will recall the 1970s television show *Number 96*. The character Dorrie Evans, given to malapropisms, used the catchphrase 'it's enough to drive a body beresk'. In the tennis context it is clear the player is 'angry' or 'mad', whereas Dorrie's catchphrase simply threatens it. Both examples confirm the notion that *beresk* is a mispronunciation of *berserk*, perhaps deliberately or with comic

intention. However, one of our staffers has anecdotal evidence that *beresk* is sometimes used as a variant of *bereft* rather than *berserk*. Can any readers shed further light on this?

## FANG IT, FANGIO

*I wanted to discover the etymology of the Aussie slang verb 'to fang' or 'fanging', but I found no reference to it on your website. We used the term a lot when I was a kid in the 60s and 70s, and I assume the origin of the word came from the name of the Argentinian racing driver, Juan Manuel Fangio. My father was a keen driver and mechanic, and we kids grew up hearing the names of Fangio, Nuvolari, Brabham, Campbell, etc. in daily conversation. But we used the word 'fanging' whenever we were talking about riding our bikes fast along a risky route. Not far from our place in Melbourne was the Valley Road Reserve with lots of hills and gullies, and the tracks around it were a magnet for us boys. We fanged around that park with no thought or regard for pedestrians. Peter Garrett prompted this thought from his memoir, Big Blue Sky, chapter one, where he writes, 'Fanging down the bumpy tracks on our bikes was the best feeling ...'.*

A. Rogers, Northern Territory

You are right in thinking the word *fang* comes from the name of Juan Fangio (1911–95), the Argentinian racing driver who won five world championships in the 1950s. We think it is the only Australian word to derive from the name of an Argentinian! The dates you give tally with our evidence. The earliest record we have of *fang* is in Alex Buzo's plays *Front Room Boys* and *Rooted*, first performed in 1969. Buzo uses *fang* as both verb and noun, and we have entries for both these senses, and the derivative *fanging*, in the new edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*. *To fang* is 'to drive a vehicle at high speed', and it can be used transitively and intransitively. Most of the evidence we found refers to motor vehicles, but your memories and Peter Garrett's are of *fanging* on bicycles. This is a transferred use of *fang*, and you can *fang* in or on almost anything at high speed. For instance, we have evidence of action on the ski slopes: 'There were skiers under those beanies, fanging down the slope as if there were no tomorrow.' (Melbourne Age, 23 March, 1996)



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## NEW EDITION OF THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL DICTIONARY

After many years in the making, the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary* has finally been published. The first edition appeared in 1988 and was edited by Bill Ramson. The second edition, discussed by Chief Editor Bruce Moore in the lead article of this edition of *Ozwords*, is twice the length of the first edition and includes many new terms, as well as updates and revisions of existing entries.

Many people made the second edition possible over the years and there is a lengthy list of acknowledgements in the dictionary. I would like to acknowledge here the huge amount of work Bruce put into the dictionary over many years, both as Director of the ANDC and following his retirement. The second edition is a tremendous contribution to Australian lexicography, and to the lexicography of varieties of English. As Managing Editor, I would also like to acknowledge the enormous effort put in by the final editing team, especially Mark Gwynn and Julia Robinson. The Oxford University Press team in Melbourne also contributed greatly to the production of a wonderful finished text, and I would especially like to note the contribution of Katrina Heydon. The proofreaders—Jamie Anderson, Greg Alford, and Craig MacKenzie—all deserve special mention for tackling such a challenging proofreading job.

The final product is a very handsome dictionary. OUP are offering a special price

to *Ozwords* subscribers, so please refer to the advertisement in this edition (see p. 3). It's a dictionary you will want to have on your bookshelf!

The launch of the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*, held at Parliament House, will be reported on in the next edition of *Ozwords*.

## RESOURCES

Joseph Wright's comprehensive *English Dialect Dictionary*, published in six volumes from 1898 to 1905, is a milestone in English lexicography. More than a century after publication it is still considered the most significant work on English dialect words. For some years a beta version of the *EDD* has been available on the Internet, but it has now been fully digitised by the University of Innsbruck, Austria, under the direction of Manfred Markus. The text is accessible as 'EDD Online' at: <http://eddonline-project.uibk.ac.at/edd/termsOfUse.jsp>

The editors of the *Australian National Dictionary* (both editions) consulted the hardcopy *EDD* as a matter of course, so we are pleased it is now available in a readily searchable form. It is cited in the etymologies of a number of Australian terms such as *cobber*, *youse*, *joey*, *maggie* (magpie), *pobblebonk* (the frog), and *Rafferty's rules* (no rules at all).

## NEW PUBLICATION ON LANGUAGE OF CRIME

Friend of the ANDC and slang lexicographer Jonathon Green has a new book out. It's called

*Crooked Talk: Five Hundred Years of the Language of Crime* (Arrow Books, 2016). The book provides a fascinating look at the 'language of crooks, conmen, and crime'. The focus is mostly on the UK and the USA, but there are a few mentions of bushrangers and larrikins. The book is highly recommended to those interested in slang and its history.

## DOG BAGGER

Do any *Ozworders* know the term *dog bagger* for makeshift bedding? We are familiar with the similar items *Murrumbidgee blanket* and *Wagga blanket* (or *rug*), but we have not come across *dog bagger*. Queensland word-nerd Professor Roly Sussex sent us an enquiry about it from listener G. McCulloch, who heard it from a friend's tales about his childhood:

*The family was quite poor. The father worked on a station out from Bordertown South Australia. The word DOG BAGGER came up. It was three jute wheat bags sown together sideways. The bags were then washed in a water trough a few times until they became quite soft. Apparently they were quite warm when used as a blanket.*

## CAN YOU HELP US FIND THE WORD OF THE YEAR?

We would love to know what word you think has left its mark on Australia in 2016. We are currently drawing up a shortlist of words that have become important in the national conversation, and in early December the editorial team will meet to choose our winning Word of the Year. It may be a newish word (like *bitcoin* in 2013), an old word that is newly significant (like *shirtfront* in 2014), or a compound term (like *sharing economy* in 2015). We invite suggestions from *Ozwords* readers via email, snail mail, Twitter, Facebook, or the Word Box on our website. Contact details below and on page 8.

## SCHOOL DICTIONARIES

New editions of two popular school dictionaries have just been published. The *Australian School Oxford Dictionary* (6th edition) and the *Australian Basic School Oxford Dictionary* (5th edition) are designed for students in the middle school years. Both were edited at the Centre by Mark Gwynn.



MEMBERS OF THE EDITING TEAM OF THE SECOND EDITION OF THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL DICTIONARY HOLDING THE FINISHED PRODUCT. FROM LEFT: MARK GWYNN (EDITOR), BRUCE MOORE (CHIEF EDITOR), AMANDA LAUGESEN (MANAGING EDITOR), JULIA ROBINSON (EDITOR).

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are welcome.

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# THE AUSTRALIAN COMIC DICTIONARY

Mark Gwynn

In 1916 a lexicon entitled *The Australian Comic Dictionary of Words and Phrases* was published in Melbourne by E.W. Cole. The author was one 'Turner O. Lingo', a nom de plume for writer Mary Eliza Fullerton. The volume runs to 64 pages and includes over 600 entries with their definitions arranged (roughly) alphabetically from Z to A to reflect the 'Antipodean' nature of the work. This dictionary is a milestone in lexicography; it is the first Australian dictionary written by a woman, and the first comic dictionary of Australianisms.

Mary Eliza Fullerton was born on 14 May 1868 at Glenmaggie, Victoria. In the 1890s she became an active supporter of the women's suffrage movement. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries a number of her short stories and poems were published in Australian journals and newspapers, including *The Bulletin*. During the First World War she wrote against conscription, and it was in this period that her comic dictionary was published.

A comic dictionary uses the format of a standard dictionary for humorous purposes. As Julie Coleman points out in *A History of Cant and Slang Dictionaries*, '[a]lthough sharing the iconoclastic stance of some slang glossaries and commonly catalogued as such, comic dictionaries tend to concentrate on non-standard definitions for standard English terms'. (Volume 3, 2009). There are a number of early precedents for the comic dictionary, including some humorous definitions in Samuel Johnson's otherwise serious tome, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755). His definition of *oats* is well known: 'a grain which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people'.

Perhaps the best-known comic dictionary is Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary*, which was published in full in 1911. Material for this dictionary had already been published in various forms, including US newspapers, from the 1870s. The definitions for *lawyer* ('one skilled in circumvention of the law') and *conservative* ('a statesman who is enamoured of existing evils, as distinguished from the Liberal, who wishes to replace them with others') provide good examples of the satirical nature of this dictionary.

*The Australian Comic Dictionary* follows the same format as *The Devil's Dictionary* but, rather than providing definitions for standard English terms, many of the headwords are derived from Australian English. As stated in the introduction: 'The endeavour has been to make this dictionary especially Australian in character.' Here are several examples of entries as they appear in the dictionary:

- **Billy Tea**, a milkless beverage flavoured with eucalyptus and ants; takes some ability to make and some agility to drink.
- **Cup Race**, the Australian Race witnessed by the Australian race.
- **Drover's Wife**, a bush Joan of Arc without a pedestal.
- **Governor-General's Speech**, nothing, drest in flourishes.
- **'It Isn't Cricket'**, what you have to keep telling your old lady relative when you take her to a football match.
- **Kerosene Tin**, the bush conjuror's 'property' which he transforms into four hundred and six different articles for domestic use.
- **Nulla Nulla**, nothing at all; a phantom waddy.
- **Ropable**, what the man is when the animal isn't.
- **Shickered**, liquored.
- **Tinned Dog**, bushman's pate de fois gras. Cave canam.
- **Wallaby (on the)**, refers to the custom that prevails in Australia of travelling on a wallaby; a favourite pastime with persons who cannot afford a horse.
- **Yarra Banker**, usually a man who stands on a soap box telling the great unwashed how 'dirty' the rich man is.

This article was first posted as a blog (at [ozwords.org](http://ozwords.org)) earlier this year. For more detail about Mary Eliza Fullerton you can read her entry online in the Australian Dictionary of Biography, and her profile on the AustLit website.

If you fancy trying your hand at a comic definition, turn to our competition on page 8, where we challenge you to define an Australian word or phrase in the manner of Mary Eliza Fullerton.

“  
Billy Tea,  
a milkless  
beverage  
flavoured with  
eucalyptus and  
ants ...

”

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Mark Gwynn is an editor and researcher at the Australian National Dictionary Centre.

# SPANNER CRABS, PLATFORM 27, AND A ONE-DUCK DUCK FARM

Julia Robinson

We had some interesting and entertaining correspondence from readers in response to our articles on Australian idioms in the last issue. In her article, Julia Miller was puzzled about the logic of the idiom *mad as a box of spanners*, asking ‘how can an inanimate spanner be angry or crazy?’ One reader, C. Roe (Qld), has an ingenious theory: perhaps *spanners* is an abbreviation of *spanner crabs*, the edible crustacean *Ranina ranina*. We haven’t seen a box of spanner crabs, but it’s possible they would be more than a little annoyed about being thus detained. T. Bowden (NSW) is also concerned about crustaceans: ‘*Off like a bucket of prawns* makes no real sense. I always knew it as *off like a bucket of prawns in the sun*.’

Some of the expressions sent to us were variants on established Australian English idioms. C. Papps tweeted: ‘My dad used to say he was so unlucky he *couldn’t win a kick in a street fight*.’ This is one of a number of similar Australian expressions on the theme of bad luck or incompetence, such as *couldn’t win a chook raffle*, *couldn’t train a choko vine over a country dunny*, and, used chiefly in AFL contexts, *couldn’t get a kick in a stampede*. T. Brook left a message on Facebook along the same lines: ‘It was an excellent article in the most recent Ozwords. My favourite [idiom] was missing, but it came and went so quickly in the 1990s it was easy to miss: *He’s so stupid he couldn’t run a one-duck duck farm*. I can’t explain the appeal.’

*Blind Freddy* is familiar to many of us as an allusion to something extremely obvious, as in ‘*Blind Freddy* could see that the deal was shonky’ and ‘*Blind Freddy* himself could have picked the winner’. One reader, J. Smith (NSW) had a twist on this: *Blind Freddy without his guide dog could see that*. The inclusion of the guide dog, perhaps a logical extension of the idiom, was new to us. In Amanda Laugesen’s lead article on idioms, she mentioned the special place the bandicoot has in Australia as an emblem of deprivation or desolation. J. Smith added to our stock of bandicoot expressions: *the country was so poor that even the bandicoots had to take cut lunches*.

One reader sent us some early anecdotal evidence of the Australian term *more arse than class* (‘to be very cheeky; to be very lucky’). Our own evidence in the new *Australian National Dictionary* dates from the title of the 1974 album ‘More Arse Than Class’ by Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs. However D. Aitkin (ACT) remembers the expression being ‘common in (male) squash-playing circles in Canberra in the early 1960s’, in reference to ‘a brilliant shot that was not intended at all’.

There are a number of idioms based on the formula *an X short of a Y* that mean ‘very foolish’ or ‘mad’. Some of the better-known are *a stubby short of a six-pack*, *a sandwich short of a picnic*, and *a sausage short of a barbie*. T. Hackett (SA) sent us *two dogs short of a dingo*, and *two bob short of a quid*, the latter known to him from pub talk in the 1950s. Of course *two bob* (two shillings), the predecimal equivalent of twenty cents, has form in Australian idioms. *Not the full two bob* means ‘not in full possession of one’s faculties’ or ‘not the genuine article’. *Two-bob* is also used to refer to something cheap, inferior, or of little consequence, as in ‘it’s a *two-bob* hamburger joint masquerading as fine dining’.

D. Burke (NSW) sent us an expression with a very local application. Some years ago at Central Station, Sydney, a query to a railway worker as to someone’s whereabouts might have elicited the response ‘he’s gone to platform 27’. There was no platform 27. Our reader tells us that the last platform was number 26, and that the answer was code for ‘he’s gone to the pub’ (there was a hotel nearby). A current map of Central Station now shows only 25 railway platforms. Has the pub been extended?

Another response to a question was sent in by A. Horsfield (Qld). ‘In the 1940s whenever we asked what’s for tea (now called dinner) Dad would say *bread and duck under the table*. Took me ages to work that one out.’ Presumably Dad was exploiting two meanings of *duck* for comic effect. There is some evidence for this saying, the earliest in a letter published in March 1917 in the *Don Dorrigo Gazette & Guy Fawkes Advocate*. Nancy Keesing also notes it in her book on Australian domestic slang, *Lily on the Dustbin*, published in 1982. She writes: ‘“What’s for lunch/dinner/tea?” “Stewed roodleums”, “Bread and duck under the table—or duck under the table and bread and pullet”.’ Other Ozwords will have their own family expressions for this. *W & S* (for *wait and see*) was my own mother’s invariable reply.

Finally, we enjoyed this story, also from A. Horsfield, about the origin of his family’s catchphrase *good thinking Mary*, used when ‘someone said something simply obvious or far out. Many years ago a teaching friend was working hard to put on a Nativity play for a school concert . . . . The actors with limited recall tended to improvise a lot. On the night of the solemn production Mary and Joseph looked for a place for the birth of baby Jesus and found there was no room at the inn. Joseph: “What shall we do?” Mary: “We could use the stable.” To which Joseph replied very thoughtfully: “Good thinking Mary.” We have used this ad nauseam as a point of mild ridicule.’

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”

Julia Robinson is an editor and researcher at the Australian National Dictionary Centre.

# OZWORDS COMPETITION

## OZWORDS COMPETITION NO. 46 RESULTS

Australia has no national motto. For Competition 46 we asked you to rectify this omission by creating one that expresses our national hopes, dreams, or character. Readers responded with entries that ranged from aspirational to idiosyncratic (we're looking at you, *Grouso Marks*). We promised extra marks for a nod to Australian English, and we were rewarded with several *She'll Be Right, Mate* entries and a fair smattering that included the words *downunder, mateship, and dinkum*.

An avalanche of alliteration arrived: *Fair Dinkum, Fearless And Free, Dreamtime, Diversity, Dynamism, Destiny; Bush Tucker, Blowies, The Barrier Reef, Free Land Forever, A Continent Of Content*. The wordplay continued with an acrostic by S. Robson, which revealed the word 'Australia'. We assume the words were chosen to illustrate important aspects of the country. If so, we are interested to see that 'irritis' appears in the list, defined as it is in the new edition of the *Australian National Dictionary* as 'feelings of extreme annoyance and vexation'. Are the irritis prompted by the lamington before it, or the Aussies that follow?

Akubra  
Uluru  
Surf  
True Blue  
Roo  
Antiquity  
Lamington  
Irritis  
Aussies!

Our history was acknowledged in several entries, including *Remember Eureka, And Live Its Values Of Democracy, Justice And Liberty* (R. Byard). We liked the one-eyed devotion of *Absolutely Fabulous* (B. Edwards), and the playful *Downunder, Democratic, Delightful* (G. Hurlle). The heart-swell of national pride in *Thumbs Up For Downunder!* (J. Wingfield) was balanced by the ultimate backhanded compliment: *Australia Is The Brisbane Of The World* (attributed to Barry Humphries). Apologies to Brisbaneites.

As ever, politics featured, both present and past: *We Of The Never Never Budget*

*Surplus* (C. Conlan), and *Nothing Will Save The Governor-General* (B. Wright). Multiculturalism surfaced in entries such as *A Land Of Many Nations* (J. Wicks), and *Of Many Cultures And Colours—Under The Akubra's Broad Brim* (S. Robson). Despite our many differences, V. Adamek says there is one thing that brings us together as a nation: *By Smartphones We Are United*.

Musical references were prominent. The national anthem inspired K. Allison's *Girt By Sea, She's A Bottler* and D. Tribe's *Being Sage In History's Page*. J. McGahey, with *Great Southern Land*, is clearly a fan of the 1980s band Icehouse (or a history buff). *Ain't Pissing In Your Pocket, But We're Not Too Bad* (I. Foletta) sounds like something AC/DC might belt out, but our favourite musical motto for the land of the long weekend was inspired by classic 1960s pop: *Friday On My Mind* (B. Wright). We can all relate to that.

**1st prize** (books to the value of \$150 from the OUP catalogue):  
*Dinky-Di And Aiming High* (G. Hurlle)

**2nd prize** (books to the value of \$100 from the OUP catalogue):  
*Big Dreams For A Big Country* (C. Howard)

**Honourable mention:**  
*Out Of Felons Came Forth A Beauty* (K. Allison)

## OZWORDS COMPETITION NO. 47

On page 7 of this issue Mark Gwynn has written about Mary Fullerton's *Australian Comic Dictionary of Words and Phrases*, published 100 years ago. To mark its centenary we are asking you to write a comic definition of an Australian word or phrase in current use. For example, you might define *kangaroos in the top paddock* as 'the Australian Senate', or *battered sav* as 'an abuse of the culinary arts'. For further examples of the comic lexicographer's art, see Mark's article, which includes a selection of Mary Fullerton's definitions. As ever, the most amusing entries will receive a prize.

### Entries close 31 January 2017

Send entries to the ANDC at one of the addresses in the next column, and please include a postal address, so we know where to send the prizes.

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