

THE ANGLO-AMERICAN HYPHEN

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When Queen Victoria was offered a choice of four names for one of her newer overseas possessions, she opted for Fiji as she liked its three dots. In contrast to this word-loving monarch (who is credited with having invented the double acrostic), a conspiracy of lexicographers, those responsible for the OED, spent a large part of her reign introducing a form of word vandalism, the unnecessary hyphen.

Fortunately, American writers ignored this aberration even if some took it to ludicrous extremes. For example, we Brits have RE-ENTER and CO-WORKER and are baffled by American Scrabble players scoring with REENTER (who or what reents?) and COWORKER (what on earth is a coworker?). But, our dreadful Chambers Dictionary continues the OED tradition even to the extent where it imposes its prejudices on such American unhyphenated words as APPLEJACK and SANDHOG. To see Chambers at its most idiotic, one has only to examine the entries which have TENPIN and TEN-PINS cheek by jowl. To discover its Jekyll and Hydebound nature, one should follow Chambers cross-references and, in this way, discover a hyphenless PIGNUT under ST. ANTHONY'S NUT--despite the hyphenated PIGNUT as a main entry headword.

To detail all of the Chambers absurdities would take more space than your editor would permit in an article in which they are merely peripheral items, so I will restrict comparison between Webster's Third and the OED as representatives of our common traditions of language--not that I consider either of these to be unimpeachable. How, for instance, can Webster's Third justify LONDON in lower case?

We recreational linguists and our more self-important colleagues, the logologists, follow Queen Victoria in our delight in words of a unique or unusual construction. One such rarity is the 'double U' word such as VACUUM, CONTINUUM and the British fernlike moss HYPNUUM. Now (and this is where I suffer anguish for writers of British English) what about the even more unlikely 'double W'?

With the singular exception of the excellent Collins series of dictionaries, we Brits have to rely upon American common sense to overlook the hyphens which destroy the charm of such words as BOWWOOD, BOWWOW, GLOWWORM, SLOWWORM and YELLOWWEED. If any **Word Ways** reader wishes to produce the definitive list of 'double W' words, then may I give him or her the OED's BOW-WISE (adverb, in the form or figure of a bow) as a possibility?