Book review: **Etymythology**


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The author is a “word detective” chasing down the provenance of words and here tackles spurious word origins — “etymythology” as coined by a fellow practitioner Laurence Horn. These are the lexicographical equivalents of the urban legends that acquire credibility through repetition.

Australian readers may be interested in the entries for ‘chunder’, ‘dinkum’, ‘kangaroo’, and ‘pom’.

Of general interest are ‘Big Apple’ and ‘Windy City’ (for New York and Chicago) and ‘hamburger’ (from the German city of Hamburg and unrelated to ham as an ingredient) and its false derivatives such as the fish- and cheese- and vegie- varieties of burgers.

The author bemusedly relates how a listener’s erroneous etymology can place a speaker into politically incorrect hot water as the recent examples of public speakers using the idiom of “calling a spade a spade” and the word “niggardly”.

With my legal background I was pleased to see the author squelch the feminist legal scholars canard that English common law permitted a man to discipline his wife so long as he beat her with a stick no thicker than his
thumb (‘rule of thumb’). If only this book had been available to Regina Graycar and Jenny Morgan before they wrote *The Hidden Gender of Law*. Similarly for the male dominance of the legal system as reflected in the language of the law with the word for testimony being descended from testes (testicles). The author scotches this “weirder bit of folk etymology”.

While the author can speak with a definiteness to his conclusions there are entries where he marshals the evidence for us and leaves the final determination hanging — there are instances where the provenance has been lost in the mist of time and cannot be conclusively finalized with precision or confidence.

This book is informative and an interesting starting point in an area that requires more extensive research. The bibliography and “webliography” provide further directions.

The presentation of the book was marred by the designer’s choice of a beige dustjacket overprinted with pale blue text — with my eyesight I am unable to report on the veracity of the publisher’s blurb. Otherwise a delightful book to dip into.

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