

IRISH BULLS

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An Irish bull, or simply a bull, is a ludicrous language blunder: an illogical, absurd, and/or amusing mistake - especially one that is paradoxical or self-contradictory. Some dictionaries take a casual approach to Irish bulls, defining them but omitting actual examples. Included among such dictionaries are the following ones:

1. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged Edition (1966)
2. The New Century Dictionary of the English Language (1952)
3. Nuttall's Standard Dictionary of the English Language (1886; 1932; 1951)
4. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1980)
5. Funk & Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary (1973)
6. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English (1964)

One dictionary, The Random House College Dictionary (1980), goes even further, not including the term at all.

In the May 1970 Kickshaws, David L. Silverman reported the results of a library survey of dictionaries that he had undertaken, searching for examples of Irish bulls. He had been able to find only three:

1. Dumb speaker! (The Oxford English Dictionary, 1933)
2. It was hereditary in his family to have no children (Webster's Second Edition, 1934; Webster's Third Edition, 1961)
3. I make my own imported cigars (Funk & Wagnalls Unabridged, 1963)

Experience has taught me that no logical survey or research of any sort is ever complete - it is inherently impossible to exhaust an area lacking definable boundaries. I therefore looked forward confidently to **Word Ways** readers expanding Silverman's sparse findings in short order. I have now waited patiently for 15 years, but to no avail - not a peep has come forth from anyone. Since my patience is not unlimited, I have just conducted a hasty dictionary survey of my own, multiplying Silverman's discoveries by a factor of 6. I present my additional findings below. Because some of the dictionary examples of Irish bulls are in antiquated English, or in mutually inconsistent formats, or loaded with extraneous wording, I have edited the examples, streamlining and modernizing them, and reducing their formats to a bare minimum.

To begin with, the Oxford includes four examples of bulls, not

just one. Here are the three others:

4. His mother was sterile
5. The Papist boasts that he is a Roman Catholic.

I surmise that, since Papist is a disparaging term for a Roman Catholic, this statement is regarded as a bull because no one who thought of himself as a Papist would boast of being a Catholic; he would be ashamed to be one. Does any reader have a superior interpretation to offer?

6. So you were the bull in the play! I wish that I had seen you roar!

This is an example of a bull using the word bull in a different sense, that of a male bovine.

The Century Dictionary (1889-1891) provides another three specimens:

7. A universal particular [opposite terms in logic]
8. A beast that wintered one whole summer for a noble
9. The contrast between the humble professions of the Pope, as in his calling himself the "servant of servants," and the absolutely dictatorial nature of his edicts

The World Book Dictionary (1968), the Thorndike-Barnhart High School Dictionary (1965), Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language (1980), and Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary (1965) present one example each of Irish bulls:

10. If you don't receive this letter, write and let me know [WB,TB]
11. I'm glad I hate onions, for if I liked onions, I'd hate them, and I can't stand onions [WNW]
12. I was a fine child, but those who brought me up changed me [C]

Possibly, the assumption underlying this example is that no one regards himself or herself as being not fine, or bad, but I disagree strongly with that assumption. Does any reader have a superior interpretation to offer?

The "Dictionary of Rhetoric" in the Encyclopedia of English, edited by Arthur Zeiger (New York: Arco Publishing Company, Inc., 1959), quotes another three specimens of Irish bulls:

13. Caesar never perpetrated a wrong except with just cause
14. I saw no corn heaped in stacks - something I had never seen before, and something I would not believe had I not seen it
15. If an Englishman were born in Ireland, he would be guilty of just as many bulls as any Irishman is

This is an example of a bull using the word bull itself, in the sense of an Irish bull.

Eric Partridge's Usage and Abusage: A Guide to Good English (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, Inc., 1963), a dictionary in fact though not in name, presents two examples:

16. The entrance to the outside
17. If twelve cows were lying down in a field but one of them was standing up, that one would be a bull

This is a second example of a bull using the word bull in the sense of a male bovine.

The 11th Edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature and General Information* (1910-1911), in addition to citing some of the Irish bulls already mentioned here, adds this one:

18. A Catholic schismatic

Catholics favor a unified church, whereas schismatics seek to divide the church.

Many more examples of bulls are found in logological reference works. Thus, Evan Esar's *Humorous English* (New York: Horizon Press, 1961) presents an Irish proverb:

19. If you save something when you have something, you'll have something when you have nothing

Joseph T. Shipley's *Playing With Words* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1960) offers numerous examples, including these four:

20. Irish bulls are pregnant

This is a sensible example if bulls refers to language blunders, but an Irish bull if it refers to a male bovine.

21. Half the lies our opponents tell about us are not true

22. I marvel at the strength of human weakness

23. The best way to avoid danger is to meet it head-on

Charles C. Bombaugh's *Oddities and Curiosities of Words and Literature*, edited and annotated by Martin Gardner (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1961) also provides numerous examples of Irish bulls - such as these four:

24. A pure, limpid stream - one foul with stains

25. Latin, being a dead language, will always live

26. A horrid silence assailed my ears

27. The bank's profits shall be divided equally, with the balance left over going to the Governor

William S. Walsh's *Handy-Book of Literary Curiosities* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1893) lists scores of Irish bulls, among them the following ones:

28. It is fascinating to consider the various substitutes for paper in use before its invention

29. I hope that I live long enough to hear you preach my funeral sermon

30. Yes, I understand French - if it's spoken in Irish

31. Where can you find a modern building that has lasted as long as have the structures of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome?

Anyone who wishes to explore the subject of Irish bulls in greater depth than the works of Shipley, Bombaugh, and Walsh permit me, moreover, consult Maria and Richard Edgeworth's Essay on Irish Bulls (1802) and Walter Jerrold's Bulls, Blunders and Howlers (1928).

On the basis of my impromptu survey, I have concluded that the reference books in libraries teem with examples of Irish bulls; all that is needed is a genuine desire to locate them.

A DICTIONARY OF PICTURES

Pictorial dictionaries, based on the premise that a picture is worth a thousand words, have been around for a long time; Mann's Pictorial Dictionary and Cyclopedia first appeared in England about 1830, and the monumental five-volume I See All, containing over 100,000 photographs, was published there in 1929. The most recent addition to this genre is Jean-Claude Corbeil's The Facts on File Visual Dictionary, a 797-page work published in 1986 selling for \$29.95. This consists of over 3000 drawings arranged by topic, with various features identified by lines connected to words or phrases. For example, a drawing of the eye shows the location of the cornea, pupil, iris, eyebrow, upper and lower eyelids, eyelash, lacrimal duct, and sclera (but not the canthus); a harp contains a neck, peg, sound box, sound-board, pedal, string, pillar, pedastal, and feet. The book is thoroughly up-to-date, including such items as an electronic synthesizer, a nuclear reactor, a dot-matrix printer (but no Daisy wheel), a hang glider, a tape deck, a bathyscaphe, the space shuttle, and a water pik.

To get an idea of the book's scope, here is a listing of the major sections in the Table of Contents: astronomy, geography, vegetable kingdom, animal kingdom, human being, food, farm, architecture, horse, house furniture, gardening, do-it-yourself, clothing, personal adornment, personal articles, communication, transportation, office supplies and equipment, music, creative leisure activities, sports, measuring devices, optical instruments, health, energy, heavy machinery, weapons, and symbols.