

ACKNOWLEDGING THE CORN

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Ebenezer Cobham Brewer was born in England on May 2, 1810. He was graduated from Cambridge University with first class honours in 1836. Within five years, Dr. Brewer's first book, A Guide to Science, was published, and by 1905 it had gone through 47 editions and sold 319,000 copies in England alone. It is his 29th book, however, on which his fame principally rests and this, A Dictionary of Phrase & Fable, was first published in 1870. He was himself responsible for the new and enlarged edition of 1895 which rejoices in the title Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable. This edition, complete with new editors, revisions and corrections, has enjoyed a continuous history of publication up to the present day. All subsequent references to 'Dr. Brewer' are based upon the 1981 edition of this highly respected work.

'To acknowledge the corn' is an expression which both Dr. Brewer and the Oxford English Dictionary agree means to admit the truth of an issue. Both accept that it is American in origin and arose during the 19th century. To the OED, the word CORN means hardened skin and it assigns the American expression to a category of phrase which includes 'treading on one's corns' with the implication that one is acknowledging, albeit metaphorically, such a painful fact. By contrast, CORN to Dr. Brewer is the cereal and has a far more delightful derivation. The good doctor assures us that the expression arose during a Congressional debate of 1828 when, claiming to export corn, one of the states was forced to admit that the cereal in question was, in fact, used to feed hogs. However, that state's delegate defended his position by declaring that the aforementioned corn was still exported in the form of hogs!

Knowing how ingenious those who face customs officials can be, it occurred to me that perhaps others had exported CORN in a similarly concealed manner, and I glanced through the OED to see what might pertain. There were examples galore, at least in a logological sense, and so I jotted a few of these down. In all my examples, the constituent letters of CORN occur in an unbroken form and, in the spirit of complete concealment, have no individual letter of CORN occupying a terminal position. A typical example is aCORNs, but to note aCORNed I considered surplus to this discussion. Similarly, I noted aCRONarcotic (a more subtle concealment of CORN) ignoring aCRONycal, aCRONych, aCRONychall, aCRONychally, aCRONyctous, or wandering off into Chambers with its aCRONymic series of exports. Hyphenated words or expressions which expose a letter at an internal terminal position (such as maN-ORChis or iRON-Clay) struck me as being too readily discoverable by

the dreaded customs officials so these, too, failed to be recorded. (Other logological smugglers need not adhere to this hyphenated rule if they feel that it is over-cautious.) Thus, my casual discoveries illustrated below are merely illustrative of the ingenuity employed by various exporters of logological produce. If you wish to provide the definitive acknowledgment of the CORN, you have, as both Dr. Brewer and I assure you, a truly worthy challenge.

The collection below (amplified by the editor) illustrates the varieties of corn that can be smuggled in. Can readers add other varieties to the list?

CNOR:

CNRO:

CONR: deaCONRy, falCONRy

CORN: aCORNs, popCORNs, uniCORNs, sCORNful

CRNO:

CRON: aCRONym, aCRONarcotic, maCRONs, muCRONiform

NCOR: coNCORd, eNCORe, iNCORporate, iNCORrect, uNCORk

NCRO: caNCROid, eNCROach, uNCROss

NOCR: moNOCRat, pheNOCRyst, techNOCRat

NORC: MiNORCa

NRCO:

NROC: uNROCKed, uNROCoco

OCNR:

OCRN:

ONCR: cONCRete, nONCRedible

ONRC:

ORCN:

ORNC: cORNCob, cORNCrib

RCNO: peRCNOsome

RCON: ziRCONs, oveRCONfident, maRCONigram

RNCO: tuRNCOat

RNOC: KilmaRNOCK, poRNOCracy

ROCN: pROCNemial, macROCNemia

RONC: bRONCopneumonia, iRONClad

Glancing at the above selection, it is easy to see that CONCORD was originally smuggled by a citizen of Massachusetts (CORN fed to COD) and any reader who cares to pursue the 'acknowledgment' will find similar examples which prove the superior research of the Cambridge scientist over his great rival, the Oxford lexicographer. And science versus etymology is not as unusual as you may suppose. The spectacular failure seRiCONs exemplifies this. SERICON is defined in Chambers as 'conjectured to be a red (or black) tincture in alchemy'. But, SERICON is a word which was assigned to an ingredient which transmuted base metal into gold and it is only in that specific context in which the word has ever been used. Its actual origin and meaning are completely unknown. The 'red (or black) tincture' conjecture is but one of a number of suppositions based on the ludicrous notion that an alchemist would foolishly betray his greatest secret by describing it literally! (For further details, see SERICON in the OED.)