

# Origins of Mystery Slang

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## Caught red-handed

The Red Hand has long been a heraldic and cultural symbol of the northern Irish province of Ulster. One of the many myths as to its origin is the tale of how, in a boat race in which the first to touch the shore of Ulster was to become the province's ruler, one contestant guaranteed his win by cutting off his hand and throwing it to the shore ahead of his rivals. The potency of the symbol remains and is used in the Ulster flag, and as recently as the 1970s a group of Ulster loyalist paramilitaries named themselves the Red Hand Commandos.

Red-handed doesn't have a mythical origin however - it is a straightforward allusion to having blood on one's hands after the execution of a murder or a poaching session. The term originates, not from Northern Ireland, but from a country not so far from there, socially and geographically, i.e. Scotland. An earlier form of 'red-handed', simply 'red hand', dates back to a usage in the Scottish Acts of Parliament of James I, 1432.

Red-hand appears in print many times in Scottish legal proceedings from the 15th century onward. For example, this piece from Sir George Mackenzie's "A discourse upon the laws and customs of Scotland in matters criminal," 1674: "If he be not taken red-hand the sheriff cannot proceed against him."

The earliest known printed version of 'red-handed' is from Sir Walter Scott's "Ivanhoe," 1819: "I did but tie one fellow, who was taken redhanded and in the fact, to the horns of a wild stag."

Scott was an avid student of Scottish history and folklore, which he relentlessly mined for inspiration in his novel writing. He is certain to have heard 'redhand' before writing Ivanhoe. The step from 'redhand' to 'redhanded' isn't large, so calling Scott the originator of the term is perhaps being over generous to him. Nevertheless, the enormous popularity of his books certainly brought 'red-handed' to a wide audience and, without him, the term might now be long forgotten.

The short answer:

The phrase "red-handed," meaning, as the Oxford English

Dictionary puts it, "in the very act of crime, having the evidences of guilt still upon the person," is quite a bit older than exploding bags of money or organized nut theft. It first appeared in that form in English in the mid-19th century, and as the adjective "redhand" was common in Scots (the language of Scotland) since the 15th century. A moment's consideration of the history of 15th century may clue you into what the "red" really was -- blood. A murderer caught "red-handed" still had the blood of his victim on his hands. We have, since the 18th century, also used "red-handed" to describe any criminal caught in the act or bearing irrefutable evidence of guilt.

## In Cahoots

The word cahoot is now only found in plural in the phrase in cahoots, meaning 'in partnership; in league', and almost always with a suggestion of some questionable or nefarious purpose.

Cahoots is of uncertain origin. The usual suggestion is that it is from French cahute 'a cabin; hut'; the shared-accommodation theme has a semantic parallel in the much more recent phrase in bed with, in the same sense.

The word is an Americanism, first recorded in the late 1820s in the singular cohort. Some other forms are a verb cahoot meaning 'to go into cahoots with' and an adjective meaning 'consisting of a partnership', e.g. "a cahoot business'.

## Gumshoe

It turns out that the original "gumshoes" of the late 1800's were shoes or boots made of gum rubber, the soft-soled precursors of our modern sneakers... At the turn of the century "to gumshoe" meant to sneak around quietly as if wearing gumshoes, either in order to rob or, conversely, to catch thieves. "Gumshoe man" was originally slang for a thief, but by about 1908 "gumshoe" usually meant a police detective, as it has ever since.

## Riddle Full of Holes

Oddly enough, the "puzzle" sense of riddle and the "full of holes" sense are completely unrelated. The puzzle kind of "riddle" comes from the Old English word "raedels," which meant "opinion, conjecture or riddle." "Raedels" it-

self was rooted in the Old English word "raedan," which also gave us the enormously useful word "read." This "puzzle" sense of riddle is both a noun and a verb, so we can also speak of "riddling" someone with a riddle.

The "full of holes" sense of "riddle," however, comes from the Old English root "hrid," which meant "to shake." The original meaning of this "riddle" was a coarse sieve used to separate corn from chaff or gravel from sand by shaking the material through the screen. Logically, the verb "to riddle" at first meant to sift something through a riddle. Ironically, a figurative sense of "riddle" appeared in the 17th century as writers spoke of "riddling out" clues or meaning from confusing evidence, which brought this "sieve" kind of "riddle" remarkably close to the unrelated "puzzle" sense.

But by the mid-1800's, "riddle" in the "sieve" sense was being used to mean making something look like a riddle by punching it full of holes. With the popularization of the machine gun in World War I, the unfortunate marriage of "riddled" and "bullets" was imprinted on popular speech, and the bucolic sense of "sifting grain" faded away.

## **Kangaroo Court**

One of the strangest aspects of "kangaroo court" is that the phrase is not originally from Australia, which is the only place you'll find actual kangaroos. The first "kangaroo courts" were informal tribunals set up to dispense instant justice in the American West in the 1850's, before conventional court systems existed on the frontier. Later on, "kangaroo court" was used to describe mock courts set up by penitentiary prisoners to intimidate and extort money from new inmates. Today we usually use the term to mean any court whose verdict is arranged in advance or otherwise clearly unfair.

So the question is why "kangaroo" was used to describe such mockeries of justice, and there are two basic possibilities. First, and most likely, is the theory you mention: that "kangaroo" is a sardonic analogy between the hopping gait of a kangaroo and the irrational and unpredictable conduct of the original frontier tribunals. Considering the leaps of logic and complete disregard for legal procedure likely to be found in such a proceeding, the comparison certainly seems apt.

Another possibility is that "kangaroo" in this case is simply a metaphor for something utterly alien and unnatural. Remember, there was no Discovery Channel or zoos in the Old West. Most people had never even heard of kan-

garoos, let alone seen one in person, and the critters were generally considered to violate the laws of nature. So labeling something "kangaroo" back then was roughly equivalent to calling it "Martian" today.

## **Red Herring**

Until over-fishing depleted their ranks, herring were so numerous and so important as a staple foodstuff to both America and Europe that many writers referred to the Atlantic Ocean as "the herring pond." The downside of the little critters, however, is that they spoil very rapidly and become inedible. The only practical way to preserve herring is to cure them with a combination of salting and smoking, and those herring most heavily cured turn a deep crimson color from the process. Voila, red herring.

Curing herring in this fashion not only preserves the fish and changes its color, but also gives it a distinctive smell, and thereby hangs the modern meaning of "red herring." In training hounds to hunt foxes, these red herrings, dragged on a string through the woods, were used to lay down a trail of scent for the dogs to follow. There is also some evidence that red herrings were, later in the training process, sometimes dragged across the scent trail of a real fox to test the ability of the hounds to ignore a false clue and stick to the scent of the fox. From this practice comes our use of "red herring" to mean a false clue or bogus issue designed to confuse one's opponent (or, in the case of our recent election, the voters). "Red herring" first appeared in the literal "smoked fish" sense around 1420, but the figurative "phony issue or false clue" sense didn't appear until around 1884.

## **Bought the Farm (Die)**

"To buy the farm" meaning "to die" or, more usually, "to be killed" began as American military slang among pilots during World War II. The most commonly heard explanation of the phrase traces it to the frequently expressed desire of soldiers of the period to survive the war and buy a farm on which to settle down in peace and quiet to raise a family. Thus a pilot who failed to return from a mission was said to have "bought the farm," i.e., gone to a peaceful rest, albeit not in a desirable way. It is also possible, according to another theory, that the phrase may refer to the pilot's death benefit enabling his widow to pay off a farm the couple already owned.

Yet another possible origin is a bit less romantic, but probably closer to the truth. It was understood among

pilots that when a plane crashed on a farm during training the farmer was likely to sue for damages to the farm, often for sums far in excess of the actual damage sustained. The more severe the crash, the higher the award for damages, often, it was said, enabling the farmer to pay off the farm's mortgage. So in a fatal crash, the pilot was said to have "bought the farm," paying with his life. This usage almost certainly also reflected an earlier sardonic slang use of "buy" to mean "to be at fault for damaging," as a driver who crashed his car into a telephone pole might be said to have "bought a telephone pole."

## **Stool Pigeon**

The story behind "stool pigeon" is, in the beginning, the story of the tragic extinction of the passenger pigeon in the U.S. Once the most numerous bird on Earth (think about that for a moment), this graceful relative of our common urban pigeon was hunted to the brink of extinction at the beginning of the 20th century. Sadly, efforts by conservationists to save the species ultimately failed, and the last passenger pigeon, named Martha, died at the age of 29 at the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914. None of us will ever see a living passenger pigeon again.

Instrumental in accomplishing this extinction was the pigeon-hunters' practice of capturing, blinding and then tying a pigeon to a stool. The frantic movements of the frightened bird would attract other pigeons, thus making them easy to shoot or capture. This tactic was the origin of the term "stool pigeon." But while the original stool pigeon lured its flock-mates to their doom through no fault of its own, human "stool pigeons" are a different breed. "Stool pigeon" as metaphorical slang made its debut in the early 19th century, meaning at first simply a police spy, dispatched among malefactors to gather evidence. It wasn't until the beginning of this century that the more modern meaning of "a criminal who informs on his ilk to save his own skin" emerged. Decades of gangster and prison movies populated with stool pigeons (usually called "stoolies," and played by diminutive character actors who always "got theirs" in the end) popularized the term. Though still used occasionally in newspaper headlines, "stool pigeon" today has a slightly musty, almost innocent tone to it, compared to the vast array of less refined epithets now current. Given the general decline in civility, even among criminals, "stool pigeon" may soon join its namesake in extinction.

## **Davy Jones' Locker**

Although no one knows exactly how "Davy Jones' Locker" came to be a metaphor for the deep sea, especially as the destination of drowned sailors, there have

been several theories proposed since the phrase first showed up around 1751.

One theory is that there may have been an actual person named "Davy Jones," a 16th century English barkeeper. Legend has it that the ill-tempered Jones kept his rum stores hidden in a locker in the back room of his tavern. Since sailors never got near Davy Jones' rum locker, goes the story, the phrase came to be adopted as a metaphor for the deep from which no sailor returned. There is, alas, no historical evidence supporting this theory.

Somewhat more likely is the theory that traces "Jones" to the Biblical Jonah, who was swallowed by a whale. Supporting this theory is the fact that "Jonah" has long been a sailors' term for someone or something that brings bad luck to a ship.

As to the "Davy" part, one theory traces it to the West Indian "duppy," a colloquial term for "ghost." But another possibility is that it is a reference to Saint David, the patron saint of Wales, often invoked by Welsh sailors of the day.

Putting Saint David together with Jonah in one phrase used to denote the worst fate that can befall a seafarer may seem illogical, but this is the lore and legends of sailors we're talking about here. As we say in New York, logic, schmogic.

## **Kick the Bucket**

There are actually two possible origins for "kick the bucket," both suitably grisly. It seems that one method of slaughtering a pig used to involve hanging it upside down from a beam by means of a piece of wood called a "bucket." The dying animal would, naturally, "kick the bucket."

The other possible origin refers to a method of hanging oneself, which involved standing on a bucket, tightening the noose, and then kicking away the bucket. Since the phrase "kick the bucket" dates back to at least the 16th century, neither of these can definitively be called the "genuine" origin.

## **Flatfoot**

A term that refers to the large amount of walking that a police officer would do, thus causing flat feet.

## **P.I.**

Private Investigator

**Dick**

Abbreviation of “Detective.”

**Unsub**

Abbreviation of “Unkown Subject.”

**Vic**

Abbreviation of “Victim.”

**Femme Fatale**

An extremely attractive woman who leds a man to his doom or into a dangerous situation on purpose.