Christmas

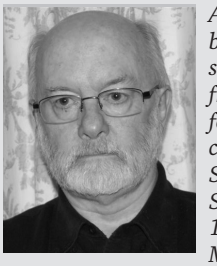
ALEXANDER TULLOCH

Some seasonal etymologies

THE ORIGINS of many of the words associated with Christmas are as fascinating as they are illuminating. But at this time of year those who celebrate Christmas throughout the world are usually too preoccupied with buying presents, preparing traditional fare, organising parties etc. to bother about the derivations of the words unwrapped along with the presents, only to be used for a couple of weeks before being put away again till next year.

For instance, there is the word 'carol'. Since the sixteenth century English has distinguished between the songs sung in church during the rest of the year and known as 'hymns' and those sung only at Christmas and called 'carols.' Their respective etymologies reflect something of how varying social and ecclesiastical seasonal customs leave their mark on everyday language. The word 'hymn' was derived from the Greek verb *humneō* 'I praise' 'I sing of', and was originally simply a festive song sung in praise of a hero returning from a distant war or a deity who was credited with bringing victory or a bumper harvest. But by the time Christianity had adopted the word it was used almost exclusively to denote songs sung in praise of the Christian god.

A 'carol' on the other hand was a song of enjoyment and would originally have been sung to the accompaniment of music and dancing and was thus not so much a composition intended for solemn religious devotions as an expression of joy, merriment and relaxation. We can safely assume this by looking at the word's structure and derivation. The word is composed of two parts: 'car' and 'ol'. The first element has come down to us from the Greek *khoros* meaning a dance, usually performed in a circle. The second element is a corruption of the Greek *aulos* 'flute' and if we combine these two we can easily see that the original meaning of the word was a dance performed to the accompaniment of music played on a flute. Now a flute, of course, is a long narrow tube which, when blown through, produces notes which can be arranged in such a way as to produce music and this gives us a clue to further etymologies. The Greek noun *aulos* was derived directly from the verb *aō* 'to blow' which is at the root of other words with perhaps unsuspected associations with Christmas carols: 'atmosphere', 'air' and even 'asthma'. In an even wider context the same Greek verb is at the root of the first syllable of the Russian word *ulitsa*, 'street'. This may seem to be



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stretching the etymological connections somewhat until we consider that a street originally is basically nothing more than a narrow passage between houses through which the wind can blow.

The tradition in England as in most European countries is to sing carols in church. But they can also be sung in houses, city squares and more recently even in supermarkets and shopping malls around a highly decorated tree. And although the custom of Christmas trees in England only began in the nineteenth century with Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria, the humble word 'tree' itself has a very long and noble lineage. In fact it can be traced back to the Ancient Greek word *drus* which meant specifically the oak tree (the generic word for tree used by the ancient Greeks was *dendron*, still recognisable in words accepted into modern English such as *rhododendron* i.e. 'rose tree'), a word with some surprising linguistic cousins.

The ancients must have been pretty impressed by the oak tree as a symbol of health and strength as it left a linguistic legacy in several European languages. The Latin name for this tree was *robur*, a word which survives in modern English 'robust' as well as in modern Spanish and Italian, both of which have *robusto* for 'sturdy'. And, continuing the theme of health and vigour, we also note that the Greek *drus* is detectable not only in the modern Russian for tree, *derevo,* but also in the word health, *zdorov'e*. So if a Russian greets another Russian with the traditional equivalent of 'hello', *zdravstvuite,* what he is really saying is 'Be like a tree.'

According to the New Testament, Jesus was born in a stable and was visited by a number of Wise Men from the East, alternatively known as the Magi (traditionally depicted as the three Wise Men, but in fact the Bible does not specify the number), and both 'wise' and 'magi' have linguistic tentacles which cross continents and time with surprising results. We now think of someone who is 'wise' as somebody who is intelligent and knowledgeable but we can safely deduce from the linguistic evidence that the original description would have been applied to somebody who 'knew' things because he had 'seen' them. In modern English the Indo-European root *wid* 'to see' is detectable in words associated with both knowledge and vision: wisdom (the possession of knowledge), wizard and witch (a man or woman who 'knows' things), idea (originally an image), the Latin verb *video* 'I see' (which has given us the ubiquitous pieces of modern technology, the 'video' and the 'television') all stem from the same Indo-European root. Any lingering doubt about the association in the minds of the ancients between things seen and things known should be dispelled by a brief consideration of the Ancient Greek verb *idein*. The present tense of this verb means 'to see', but the perfect tense, *oida,* was used as the present tense of the verb 'to know'. So when an ancient Greek claimed to know something or someone he was really stating that he had seen them.

The alternative term for the Wise Men, the Magi, is of a not entirely dissimilar derivation. In its present form the word has come down to English from the Latin *magus,* which in turn is derived from the Greek *magos* and both are borrowings from the Persian term for a learned man or priest. But these Persian savants possessed talents which we would now regard more as sorcery and even charlatanism. Especially renowned for their ability to interpret dreams, they dabbled in arts which astounded and baffled those less learned than themselves who no doubt thought their powers to be little short of 'magic' and would have thought of a priest as being more 'magician' than theologian. Nevertheless, they were exponents of what the Greeks termed *magikhē tekhnē*, the magic art, and their sudden and unexpected presence in the stable would have inspired awe and wonderment.

And what about the other indispensable elements of the Christmas story, the star that guided the Wise Men and the angel who appeared to the shepherds as they tended their flocks? The etymology of 'star' is fascinating as it reveals much of the interpretation the people of the ancient world attached to one of nature's most beautiful phenomena. Before the advent of science it was a commonly held belief in many parts of the world that the stars were gaps in the heavenly vault that allowed light to shine through from whatever lay beyond and sprinkle down onto the earth beneath. And this gives us the clue to the derivation of the word. 'Star' is derived from the Greek *astēr,* the noun from *stornumi* 'to sprinkle' 'to spread'. Other cognate words therefore include 'straw', 'strew' and the Latin for a layer, *stratum,* which gave English 'street', Dutch *straat* and German *Strasse.*

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When artists over the years have chosen to depict the shepherds in the fields being terrified out of their wits by an angel delivering the glad tidings it is not unreasonable to suggest that a certain amount of artistic licence has caused a degree of etymological distortion. The word 'angel' is a direct borrowing into English of the Greek *aggelos* (pronounced 'angelos') which originally meant nothing more than 'messenger' and the reference here is clear as the angel is supposed to be delivering an important message from God to mankind.

But there is a little bit more to the story as most authorities now agree that the Greek word was almost certainly itself borrowed from an Oriental language. Walter Skeat suggests that *aggelos* is derived from *aggaros* (pronounced 'angaros'), a borrowing into Greek from Old Persian meaning 'mounted courier'. More specifically these *aggaroi* or mounted message-bearers were stationed throughout the Persian Empire and had to be ready, at a moment's notice, to dash off at full speed and convey important news and royal proclamations to all parts of the Empire. In other words, the first angels were not blond-haired, winged creatures flying between heaven and earth, as they have often been depicted through the ages by various painters and artists, but skilled horsemen who performed duties not entirely dissimilar to those carried out by America's fabled 'pony express'.

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