

## THE ORIGIN OF 'HARD-BOILED'

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TEN YEARS ago *American Speech* (II, 5, 258) offered the following explanation of the origin of *hard-boiled*:

The origin of the term 'hard boiled' is comparatively recent and it belongs to the New York school of slang. The term originated in Jack Doyle's billiard academy in the heart of Broadway. The term was invented by Jack Doyle, who described a certain class of pool and billiard players as hard boiled eggs, meaning tight in their play, close in their finances, and in everything else. The expression, however, carries no meaning of viciousness or dishonesty.

The expression captured the fancy of Damon Runyon, the writer, and he used it in his tales, while Tad Dorgan picked it up and used it in his comic pictures. Broadway accepted the term which spread quickly over the rest of the land. The war suddenly changed the accepted meaning of the term. The word egg was dropped and men became merely 'hard boiled'—and the term reverted to the old meaning as it was among the yeggs; hard, shrewd, keen men who neither asked nor expected sympathy nor gave any, who could not be imposed upon.

This explanation had been printed in an article in a 1926 issue of *Liberty*, and was brought to the attention of the editors of *American Speech* as an item that warranted the interest of its readers.

A careful reading of these paragraphs exposes a naïve contradiction. At the outset the writer ascribes the 'invention' of the phrase to Jack Doyle in the form of *hard-boiled eggs*, but in the second paragraph he says that *hard-boiled* 'reverted' to its old meaning among the yeggs. Mr. Jack Doyle, one of the country's better-known betting commissioners, would probably be the first to object to this connection if he had noticed it. While the operations of Mr. Doyle have probably entailed the cracking of many bankrolls and pocketbooks, without personal solicitation and urging to that end from him, of course, it need hardly be said that it is not of record that Mr. Doyle ever cracked a safe. Many other Broadwayites have probably done so, however, and it may be charitable to suppose that it is the activities of those that lead to the confusion of the writer.

Since 1927 *hard-boiled* has made as much progress in the language as it did between 1917 and 1927, and it is now established in good colloquial usage. As indicated in the excerpt quoted, the word developed from an original connotation of petty and mean to hard, shrewd, keen. Ten years after the World War it had shed much of its aura of violent, unfeeling severity. About 1933, General Hugh Johnson, in bringing army methods of organization and his energetic military phraseology to the crusade for

the National Industrial Recovery Act, helped to establish the word in the vocabulary of American business. Today, in its general aspects, *hard-boiled* mirrors the matter-of-fact attitude and impersonality of American business, and glosses that impartiality and disinterestedness that passes as an American trait. As a reflection of life and experience, the word has a rugged, native appeal. Like *rubberneck*, *sucker* and *rube*, for instance, it characterizes superbly a facet of American life.

The circumstances of the origin of *hard-boiled* are interesting, and to some extent differ from the version quoted from *Liberty*. The examples of usage to be quoted in exposing the genesis of this word give not only a clear idea of its origin and development, but are illustrative, in a sense, of the life-history of many words and phrases in American slang and colloquial speech. While this general subject may not be gone into here, a digression may be pardoned to say that it is curious to note that on the apparently simultaneous and nation-wide acceptance of a word in American slang, the word or phrase is generally labeled 'new,' and its origin ascribed to a contemporary, or present circumstances. The fuss newspapers made over the origin of *racket*, on its re-appearance some ten years ago, will be remembered. That words must be born, and vegetate, and perhaps die, does not seem to be fully appreciated. On the part of the public an oversight of this may be excused, but when there is published in the city of New York, A.D. 1936, a book on phrase origins in which the compiler notes a great number as 'unknown,' there is something wrong in the science of etymology. A better label for that sort of work is 'unsought.'

T. A. Dorgan, or TAD as he signed his work, was a cartoonist who occasionally wrote sports, fight stories and columns. Born in San Francisco and reared in the strong sporting atmosphere prevailing there in the eighteen-nineties, TAD went into newspaper work about the turn of the century. By 1910 he was a well-known cartoonist, and after that time, because of the syndication of his work in the Hearst papers, he was nationally known.

TAD's 'Indoor Sports' (occasionally varied to 'Outdoor') pictured the life of the average American male in most of his activities in a daily cartoon for twenty years. TAD had a keen sense of the picturesque in speech and action, and it may be said that his cartoons did more to spread the use of American slang and colloquialisms than anything else. The corpus of American slang of the first thirty years of the twentieth century may be found in TAD's work, and his work was published in such widely scattered papers as the *New York American* and *New York Evening Journal*, *Boston American*, *Chicago Examiner* and *Chicago American*, *Atlanta Georgian*, *Los Angeles Examiner*, and the *San Francisco Call and Post*.

In the following excerpts from TAD's work the origin and development of the word *hard-boiled* is pretty definitely developed:

- 1915 'Hard boiled egg who wouldn't bid go on 100 aces.' (Arrow indicates player in a game of pinochle.)—'Indoor Sports,' *San Francisco Call and Post*, Dec. 9, p. 14.
- 1915 'He's one of our best little promisers—the original hard boiled egg too.'—*Ibid.*, Dec. 25, p. 6.
- 1916 *Hard boiled egg* appeared often in TAD's work in the early part of 1916. If TAD got a response to a word or phrase used in his work he kept 'plugging' it.
- 1916 'Say!!! He's an awful thing—he can stand longer at a bar and buy less than anyone I ever saw—one hard boiled egg.' 'Indoor Sports,' 'Trying to shake a hard boiled egg who has stuck all evening without buying once' (title). *Ibid.*, Feb. 3, p. 10.
- 1916 'Talk about hard boiled eggs—he's a china egg.' (Bartender of drinker who got lots of service, but didn't buy.)—Comic strip, *ibid.*, March 11, p. 13.
- 1916 More Maxims of the Hard Boiled Eggs (heading). You can lead an Egg to the bar but you can not make him buy.—TAD's 'Tid-Bits,' *ibid.*, Dec. 13, p. 15.
- 1917 The Eggs of Forty-Nine (heading). J. S. No; the Hard Boiled Egg is no chick. As far back as 1885 the expression was used out West. Spider Kelly, Tim McGrath and Heinie Rafael brought it to San Francisco from a Reno faro bank palace. At that time a tightwad was called a Hard Boiler, and they'd hire guys to sit in so that the Hard Boiler couldn't get a deal.—*Ibid.*, Jan. 4, p. 11.
- 1917 'The theatrical promoters of New York are very particular about the titles of their plays. They must be appropriate. That's why we have such titles as "Have a Heart," "Very Good, Eddie,"....."For the Love of Mike," "Nobody Home."  
Why not have a couple more shows written and give them such titles as these? "Quick Watson, the Needle," "Yea Bo," "You Said It," "Hold 'em, Yale," "Solid Ivory," and "The Hard Boiled Egg."—Letter to 'Tid-Bits,' *ibid.*, Jan. 26, p. 15.
- 1917 'This Tad has formed a union cawld the "hard boyled eggs" an ya gotta be a tite wad to join.'—Letter to 'Tid-Bits,' *ibid.*, Feb. 13, p. 12.

It will be noticed that several of the quotations are from TAD's 'Tid-Bits.' This was a column of comment on the sporting scene, and in it TAD printed letters from readers, reminiscences of old-timers, answered queries, and so forth. The last quotation cited is interesting because it shows that TAD had, by 1917, so popularized the phrase that he was, as a humorous gesture, starting a union of the Hard-Boiled Eggs. Many letters were sent him, and these nominated various types of individuals for membership in that organization. That of January 4, 1917, is an answer to a question relative to the age of the phrase being discussed. In it TAD gives his knowledge of the circumstances that gave birth to the phrase, and indicates its age.

In his answer there is no evidence that TAD knew the origin of the phrase *hard-boiled egg*, or what the words alluded to. In spite of this there is no doubt that the slang use of *hard-boiled egg* is built on the caprice that a hard-boiled egg is *hard to beat*. That this allusion is the origin of the phrase is borne out by the following:

'What's the hardest thing to beat?'

'A hard boiled egg.'

—*The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide & Burnt Cork Encyclopedia*, Frank Dumont, New York and London, 1899, 'Conundrums,' p. 87.

This quotation strengthens TAD's statement that the phrase was thirty years old when he first used it. There is no telling how long this simple conundrum had been used in minstrelsy, for the conundrum as a classic form passed away only with the coming of the twentieth century. But this citation is testimony that the history of *hard-boiled* takes one from the harshness and practicality of every-day life to the black-face courtliness of 'Gentlemen, be seated!'

#### ELUSIVE WORD LISTS

Glossaries which supplement books are often difficult to find when needed. A bibliography of word lists would be well worth while. The following references may be of interest.

Baseball terms: Mrs. John A. Logan, *The Home Manual. Everybody's guide in social, domestic, and business life*. Philadelphia, c. 1889. pp. 102-103. Nearly all of the terms given in this list are still in use. A possible explanation of the verb *to muff* appears from the spelling of the noun form of the word as given in Mrs. Logan's *Manual*; *muffin*. Cf. *Drop it like a hot cake*.

Gipsy words: Gipsy Petulengro, *A Romany Life*, London, 1935. p. 273.  
Grafters' Slang (English): Philip Allingham, *Cheapjack . . .*, New York, 1934. pp. xiii-xvii.  
Gullah: Ambrose Elliott Gonzales, *The*

*Black Border: Gullah stories of the Carolina Coast*, Columbia, S.C., 1922. pp. 287-340.

Indian (Milicete): William J. Long, *Fowls of the Air*, Boston, 1902. pp. 309-310. Birds and animals.

—: William J. Long, *Northern Trails*, Boston, 1905. pp. 389-390. Names of birds and animals.

Kafir and Boer terms: William Charles Scully, *Kafir Stories*, New York, 1895. pp. vii-viii.

Sea terms: B. J. Totten, *Naval textbook . . .*, Boston, 1841. pp. 281-430.

—: Mrs. John A. Logan, *The Home Manual . . .*, Philadelphia, c. 1889. pp. 104-115.

Sporting (English, early 19th cent.): *The Field Book; or Sports and Pastimes of the British Islands*; by the author of 'Wild Sports of the West.' London (1833). 563 p. This is a veritable dictionary.

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