FOSSIL

Robin Banks

I recognise the unceded land of lutruwita/
Tasmania on which I live, work, re-create and rest,
and of this great southern land we call Australia on
which I have enjoyed many of my fossil travels.

I pay respect to the traditional and continuing
custodians of lutruwita, the palawa people, and
of all of the lands within Australia, promising to
listen and learn and walk beside.

Lasting impressions

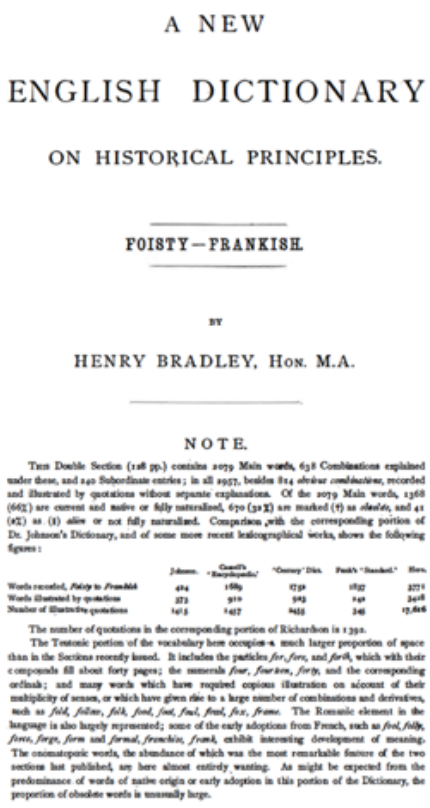
—

A Tasmanian life

Foreword

The auncient Philosophers affirme, that there haue bene founde fishes vnder the earth, who (for that cause) they called Focilles [Fr. focilles]

To me it is unsurprising that the word ‘fossil’ was included in volume IV: *F and G*, of the first edition of *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles—The Oxford English Dictionary*—published at the start of the new century in 1910. It had appeared in the earlier fascicle: *Foisty — Frankish*, in 1897.



A NEW

ENGLISH DICTIONARY

ON HISTORICAL PRINCIPLES.

FOISTY—FRANKISH.

BY

HENRY BRADLEY, Hon. M.A.

NOTE.

This Double Section (128 pp.) contains 2079 Main words, 638 Combinations explained under these, and 240 Subordinate entries; in all 2957, besides 814 *obvious combinations*, recorded and illustrated by quotations without separate explanations. Of the 2079 Main words, 1368 (66%) are current and native or fully naturalized, 670 (32%) are marked (†) as *obsolete*, and 41 (2%) as (‖) alive or not fully naturalized. Comparison with the corresponding portion of Dr. Johnson's Dictionary, and of some more recent lexicographical works, shows the following figures:

	Johnson.	Cassell's 'Encyclopædic.'	'Century' Dict.	Funk's 'Standard.'	Here.
Words recorded, *Foisty* to *Frankish*	424	1689	1732	1837	2371
Words illustrated by quotations	373	910	983	140	2008
Number of illustrative quotations	1413	1427	8452	248	17,626

The number of quotations in the corresponding portion of Richardson is 1 330.

The Teutonic portion of the vocabulary here occupies a much larger proportion of space than in the Sections recently issued. It includes the particles *for-*, *fore*, and *forth*, which with their compounds fill about forty pages; the numerals *four*, *fourteen*, *forty*, and the corresponding ordinals; and many words which have required copious illustration on account of their multiplicity of senses, or which have given rise to a large number of combinations and derivatives, such as *fold*, *follow*, *folk*, *food*, *foot*, *foul*, *fowl*, *frank*, *fox*, *frame*. The Romanic element in the language is also largely represented; some of the early adoptions from French, such as *fool*, *folly*, *force*, *forge*, *form* and *formal*, *franchise*, *frank*, exhibit interesting development of meaning. The onomatopoeic words, the abundance of which was the most remarkable feature of the two sections last published, are here almost entirely wanting. As might be expected from the predominance of words of native origin or early adoption in this portion of the Dictionary, the proportion of obsolete words is unusually large.

(*The Oxford* or *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* was published in ‘fascicles’ as work progressed on each letter.)

fascicle, n. A part,
number, ‘livraison’
(of a work published
by instalments);

Interestingly, the older word ‘fossilia’ did not appear in the 1st or 2nd edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*, but rather only made it into the 3rd edition published in 2010. The work of lexicographers only uncovering its previously lost story later in the dictionary endeavour.

It’s unsurprising to me that it appeared in that 1897 fascicle because I always think of the 19th century when I think about fossils: Charles Darwin collecting the specimens that helped him to develop his theories that led to *On the Origin of Species*; Mary Anning in the heavy dresses and capes of Victorian England clambering around the wintery Lyme Regis cliffs of the English coast, geological hammer in hand, introducing the world to the first full ichthyosaur skeleton; and her friends and palæontological companions Elizabeth Philpot, and Charlotte Murchison.

Anning, like me and my sisters and brothers, grew up in a fossil-focussed family. Anning was the fifth of ten of whom only she and her older brother Joseph survived. I am the fourth of five, all—thankfully—survivors. Her father, a carpenter, had supplemented the family's income with collecting. He took Joseph and Mary with him to collect fossils to sell to sea-side visitors. Mary Anning became a professional: a professional collector and amateur palæontologist. For me, the generations flip: I too was instilled with the rock collecting, examining and acquiring urge by my father, a professional palæontologist and amateur collector.

Our family home was (and is) a treasure trove of rocks and fossils, of bronze reconstructions of dinosaurs, and so many books and monographs filled with the stories of their history and formation.

Now, our garden—and indeed our house—is also littered with collected rocks. We have a beautiful stack of spheroidal grey rocks from Banks Peninsular in New Zealand, fossil-encrusted mudstones from various parts of Tasmania, sapphires from the Willows in central eastern Queensland, Yowah nuts (deep red brown matrix shot through with a filigree of opal seams) from Yowah in southern central Queensland, fossilised worm and root castings from coastal cliffs in

Victoria, delicate sheet gypsum from some forgotten collecting spot, a pinkish gypsum 'desert rose' from north western Victoria, perfect fine-grained 'tiles' of greenish, red and grey rock from the northern parts of South Australia, petrified fern from Lune River in Tasmania, agates from all over Australia, mossy green serpentinite from northern Tasmania, a precious 'hagstone', and various concretions … and so many more.

They sit on shelves—rock shelves in the garden, timber shelves in the house—and make me smile when they catch my eye, remembering what went into their collecting.

But most precious and fascinating of all are the fossils. They spark memories of so many holidays taken as a child, and as an adult. As a child, one of a huddle standing by as fossils were carefully struck free and photographed, or scrambling to find our own. As an adult, torn between looking up to spot this bird or that, my eyes guided by my ears and the bird's call or wing or foliage rustle; and looking down to search the earth for rocky treasures. That wrangle between skies and earth often began in the planning of an adventure: how about a trip to this place where the birdlife is rich and novel, or there, where the geology is fascinating? Sometimes no wrangle at all: those sweet spots where geology and bird life come together.

But this re-composition is about looking down, turning over, picking up and cracking open. This is about fossils and their enduring fascination: their lasting impression.

I don't know when I learnt about fossils. Perhaps it was knowledge passed down to me, the daughter of two palæontologists, in my genes: written in my DNA just as the ancient creatures' details are written in the texture pressed into the rock by their long-dead bodies. There was no moment of realisation in my childhood of knowledge acquired and polished.

IMAGINING

What fossil is that which is lost?

There are so very many options.

In my imagining, perhaps it is one my father found and, with others, described and named … perhaps one named for him by others.

And so, to this re-composition. What possibilities? Plant, animal, … other? Some with names that conjure fabulous creatures, masking a much more modest reality. Some with names that weave a story, marrying place, mythology, people. All of them having some familial connection.

And so, let's begin.