

## II. REVIEWS

DOI: 10.17951/et.2017.29.273

Przemysław Łozowski  
ORCID: 0000-0001-6685-9713IN SEARCH OF FORGOTTEN SYMBOLS AND VALUES  
IN THE FOREST, FIELD, AND MEADOW\*Donald Charles Watts, *Elsevier's Dictionary of Plant Lore*, Amsterdam:  
Elsevier, 2007, ix + 471 pp.

*Elsevier's Dictionary of Plant Lore* overwhelms us with its size, delights us with its erudition, and enthrals us with its wealth of data. It is compelling reading for anyone interested in the origins of plant names, their meanings and semantic evolution. The book is also of interest to all those interested in the practical and symbolic uses and functions of plants. In both cases, the focus is on plants viewed as symbols of human experience and the valuations that accompany this symbolism. The main part of the dictionary (the entries) is almost 450 pages long and contains about 30,000 English (but also other, mainly Latin) names of trees, bushes, flowers, vegetables, cereals, and many other of Nature's creations that deserve to be called plants. In addition to his own findings, the fruit of several decades of research, the author drew data from over a thousand sources – the list of references is just as impressive as the dictionary itself.

In point of fact, Donald Charles Watts did not finish his work. He had read the first printout, but died in 2004 at the age of 82, before he could give it a final revision. The dictionary appeared in print three years later, in May 2007. Nevertheless, Watts had taken into account most of the comments and criticisms raised by the readers of his earlier publication, which Elsevier had published in 2000 under a strikingly similar title *Elsevier's Dictionary of Plant Names and Their Origins*. In a sense, then, the 2007 dictionary is an extended and revised version of the 2000 book, which had been criticised for being too bulky (over 1,000 pages), too heavy (over 2 kg), and too expensive (over 200 USD). Content-wise, readers found fault with its repetitiveness (practically identical or very similar explications were given to different names of the same plant, even though each such name was, naturally, a separate headword in the dictionary), inclusion of archaic names (many of the

---

\* The review appeared in Polish as “W poszukiwaniu zapomnianych symboli i wartości w lesie, na polu i łące” in *Etnolingwistyka* 29. The present English translation has been financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, project titled “English edition of the journal *Etnolingwistyka. Problemy języka i kultury* in electronic form” (no. 3bH 15 0204 83).

plant names, mainly Latin ones, were outdated and out of use), mistakes in assigning the Latin names to their vernacular synonyms, and some incorrect dates. Nelson (2001), in his review for the prestigious Linnean Society of London, also points out the lack of bibliographical references to several key sources from the 1980s and 1990s. He states critically that Watts' dictionary "has been compiled as a labour of love", but it is difficult to see a reason for publishing this bulky work in print. At the same time, Nelson admits – and this is very important for ethnolinguists – that the dictionary is a contribution to ethnobotanical studies and that the knowledge contained in the names of plants can shed light on forgotten beliefs.

Watts took these comments to heart only selectively: his posthumously published dictionary is shorter, lighter, and cheaper, but it still does not cite the sources mentioned by Nelson, and the central idea behind it is not clear.

Perhaps, it is for the latter reason that the dictionary does not fully meet the rigour of its title: it is not a dictionary of "plant lore" but rather a dictionary of "English plant lore", if one takes into account the linguistic Anglocentrism of Watts' work, or "British plant lore", if we look at it from the point of view of the specifically British semantic exponents of the English plant names. Parts of some explications are indeed so general that they justify calling the work a lexicon. However, what the dictionary is meant to be, and a dictionary *of what* it is meant to be, is at best vague, if not simply haphazard.

**Content structure.** The entry *strawberry* is a typical example of how the dictionary glosses and explains plant names. If "plant lore" is to be understood as folk wisdom and myths and symbols associated with the world of plants that are passed from one generation to another, the reader who wants to find out how the word *strawberry* is grounded in that knowledge will be deeply disappointed. Watts' dictionary offers no insight into what cognitive path the human mind had travelled to arrive at the various names of what a systematic botanist sees as *Fragaria vesca*. The lexicon provides no answers to the question why Poles call the plant *truskawka*, Germans – *Erdbeere*, and Russians – *земляника* or *клубника*. In other words, the book does not explain how *Fragaria vesca* is entrenched in the primary, embodied experience of the human being, who, in perceiving the plant and categorising his/her perceptions, may pick out as central such distinct attributes as the auditory sensation of the quiet cracking of the fragile stalks (hence, probably, the Polish name *truskawka*), the location of the plant (as in Ger. *Erdbeere* and Rus. *земляника*), or the sensation of its bulb-like shape (Rus. *клубника*). What the dictionary attempts to provide is the etymology of the English name *strawberry*, an unsuccessful attempt in that there is no attested evidence for it to have originated from the practice of lining strawberry bushes with straw or from the delicate projections on strawberry fruits resembling strands of straw, even though this is what the *straw* and the *berry* in the name suggest.

Perhaps, then, this is a dictionary of "British plant lore"? In the entry for *strawberry* there are references to British beliefs and superstitions. The dictionary states that "Cornish girls believed that their complexion could be improved if they rubbed their skin with wild strawberry leaves" and, in another passage, that "East Anglian superstition tells that *strawberry* [*birth marks* called 'strawberry' marks] were caused by the mother's eating too much of the fruit during her pregnancy". The author of the dictionary quotes this information from sources (Deane and

Shaw 1975 and Porter 1974) that appeared in the series *The Folklore of the British Isles*, which gives the dictionary a “British” scope – broader than solely “English”.

Still further-reaching references are found in another passage, in which the lexicographer provides information regarding the symbolism of the *strawberry* in world culture, not to say human civilization. He gives examples from the works of the great masters of painting (quoting Haig 1913) and herbal prescriptions (quoting Lyeal 1937) in which the strawberry is used as “the emblem of ‘the righteous men whose fruits are good works’ or the symbol of ‘perfect righteousness’ and, apparently, of foresight”. Watts believes that the association of the strawberry with “righteousness” is the more important, because this symbolism appears “in early Italian paintings of the Adoration, where the infant Christ is laid upon the grass”. Since in these symbolic representations, the strawberry is usually accompanied by the violet, the author concludes that this is because “a truly fruitful soul is always humble”.

If, at this moment, the reader of this review feels that Watts’ argumentation lacks a logical foundation, they are right to think so. Watts indulges in this sort of encyclopaedism, which boils down to compiling data in a pre-theoretical manner and without a sense of direction. The dictionary shows no evidence of any methodological reflection either in the form of an introduction or an afterword, but also, more importantly, the entries have no internal architecture, something that a professional lexicographer would call a microstructure. If one tried to break up the information in the entries with subheadings as a test for their organisation, they would find the task unworkable in most cases (not only for *strawberry*). Watts does not arrange his data according to a pre-defined order, be it geographical, chronological, or by subject matter, to which he could consistently adhere (except for trying to begin with the etymology of the name). For example, references to Italian culture, mentioned above, are used again at the end of the entry for *strawberry*, this time to document beliefs about unwanted red marks on the skin. It is difficult, however, to deduce from the structure of this paragraph whether the fact that small children were not allowed to eat red fruit, such as strawberries, or wear red shoes, refers to Italian, English or any other children. Watts, loyally, cites the source from which he excerpted this information (Camp 1973), but the work cited has a title typical of a monograph (*Magic, Myth, and Medicine*), which offers the reader no clue as to the children concerned. It seems that a good organising principle would have been for the author to arrange the information (at least for the entry *strawberry*) by type of evidence, e.g., art (painting, sculpture, music), language (literature, spells, culinary recipes), behaviours (customs, rites), or by symbolic values (then, it is not the strawberry that is a symbol, but the colour red, with strawberry being only a vehicle of the symbol), or – and this, in the case of *strawberry*, would have been the simplest solution – by axiological loading: positive/desirable vs. negative/undesirable characteristics.

At the level of theoretical analysis, then, the way Watts organizes and presents data has no logical foundation. Watts is a story-teller. One reads his tales, like any good stories, with interest, almost with bated breath, unfeigned admiration for the compiler’s passion and devotion, and with an equally sincere and unconcealed irritation as to why all this is called a dictionary.

Seemingly better organised content can be found in longer entries, such as that for *potato* (three times as long as *strawberry*), which consists of ten separate

paragraphs. Let us quote the first paragraph in its entirety, firstly, to show the role and place of bibliographic sources in Watts' work, and secondly, to see for ourselves what part of "plant lore" it is devoted to:

(*Solanum tuberosum*) The fruit is poisonous, as are the vines, sprouts or peelings (Kingsbury, 1964), and so is the potato tuber itself, if left to turn green on the surface (Young). That poison is solanine, which can be fatal to children (Duncalf). Potato originally came from the Peruvian Andes, and was held in such regard as to be almost sacred. Dorman describes a ceremony in which a lamb was sacrificed and its blood poured over potatoes. At the high Andean levels, where the cold climate made preservation difficult, potatoes were converted into a flour called chuya, by an elaborate process of alternating freezing and warming which breaks down starch-containing cells. This "flour" could be preserved for long periods (Forde).

This part of the explication is based on five sources. If the referenced author is author of more than one source, a date is added to his/her name. This is understandable. However, the logic of argumentation is not: it does not follow from the poisonous properties of potatoes that they are sacred, and their sacredness does not imply that they can be used to produce flour. And then again, the Peruvian origin of potatoes has nothing to do with the belief in their poisonous properties, and the mention of solanine is just an expression of pompous encyclopaedism, especially in the context of Peruvian highlanders, their processing of the tubers into flour, and folk wisdom in general.

But is the text more consistently structured, if one looks at a whole group of related names, let us say the names of cereals? Here, there is one surprise after another: the dictionary has no entries for *rye* (*Secale*) or *wheat* (*Triticum*), either under the expected headwords or under related headwords such as *cereal*, *grain*, *corn*, or *crop*. The table below shows the structure of the entries for cereal names that the dictionary does list, and the thematic scope of the individual paragraphs:

Para.	<i>Maize</i> ( <i>Zeamays</i> )	<i>Barley</i> ( <i>Hordeum sativum</i> )	<i>Oats</i> ( <i>Avena sativa</i> )	<i>Buckwheat</i> ( <i>Fagopyrum esculentum</i> )
1	origin and distribution of names	medical properties and practices	superstitions and dreams	use as food (including Russian kasha) with one religious context (Hinduism)
2	relationship with the gift of agriculture in mythology	medical properties and practices	medical properties and practices	use as food, in connection with superstitions
3	medical properties and practices	ceremonial (religious) uses in Hinduism		folk beliefs (Turgenev, Pennsylvanian Germans)
4	well-dressing displays in Derbyshire			

It is easy to notice various types of asymmetries in the organisation of the content of the individual entries. In principle, none of the parameters is used consistently across all the explications. The medical properties and practices are covered most fully, being described in most entries except for *buckwheat*. Information on the possible origins of a plant name is only found in the entry for *maize*, references to Slavic languages only in the entry for *buckwheat*, and references to Hinduism only in the case of *barley* and *buckwheat*.

**Sources.** The lack of internal consistency in the organization of entry content is not the only manifestation of the randomness and selectivity of Watts' dictionary. Another one is the choice of sources. Naturally, one should not expect anyone to be able to say everything about everything, that is, in this case, to relate plant names to their meanings in all languages and cultures of the world. However, what strikes one about Watts' use of sources is that he cites very few works of Slavic-speaking authors, and hence makes few references to the linguistic and cultural world of the Slavs. His more exotic (here: non-British) interests include such places, languages, and peoples as Amazonia, Africa (more specifically: Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Morocco, Nigeria [Yoruba], and Tanzania), Ancient Greece, Rome and Egypt, North America (including Indians: Apaches, Navajos, Hopi, Comanches and many others), Central America (Mexico), South America (Peru, the Maya), Greek, Latin, Macedonian, Romanian, Hungarian, China and Hong Kong, Hawaii, India (Bombay, Calcutta), Jamaica, Japan, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Palestine, Polynesia, Portugal, Scandinavia, Tibet, Celts, Gypsies, French peasants, and Pennsylvania Germans. Among more than a thousand sources listed in the bibliography, only a few refer directly to the world of the Slavs: Bogatyrev (1998 [1929]) on the magical acts, rites, and beliefs of the Subcarpathian Ruthenians; Kennedy (1925) on the wedding and marriage customs of Polish peasants; Kourenhoff (1970) on Russian folk medicine; Warner (2000) on Russian peasant beliefs and practices concerning death and the supernatural in the Pskov region; and Wasson and Wasson (1957) on mushrooms, Russia and history. Other promising-sounding works include Gimbutas (1958) on symbolism in Lithuanian folk art, Rappoport (1937) on the folklore of the Jews, Trachtenberg (1939) on the superstitions and magic of the Jews, and Vukanovic (1989a,b) on witchcraft in central Balkans. With the Slavic library so scantily supplied, it is not surprising that dozens of entries are devoid of any exemplification from that cultural circle (for example, the only cereal that Watts finds worth glossing in his dictionary as occupying a sufficiently important place in the Slavic consciousness is buckwheat).

Let us now consider the names of trees, in particular those deciduous trees that experience has made a permanent element of our conceptual cognitive landscape (in alphabetical order): *birch* (*Betula*), *lime/linden* (*Tilia*), *oak* (*Quercus*), *rowan* (*Sorbus aucuparia*), *sycamore* (*Acer pseudo-platanus*), and *willow* (*Salix*). In Watts' dictionary, the explications for half of these headwords: *oak*, *rowan*, and *sycamore*, do not contain any Slavic references. This is particularly surprising in the case of *oak* and *rowan*, because they are among the longest entries in the whole dictionary. While one column in the lexicon usually features several headwords, the entries for these two names span six to seven columns, and this should be enough to record

the beliefs, rituals or medicinal practices of the Slavs. The remaining three entries make mention of the Slavic plant lore in the following contexts:

- under the entry for *birch*, we learn that “an aromatic oil is obtained from [birch], known as ‘Russian leather’, because bookbinders used it to rub on leather, to give it the characteristic perfume, and also to preserve it”; according to one of the Russian folk medical recommendations, birch tea has anti-rheumatic properties – it is made by “boiling birch leaves in water for half an hour, and putting that water into a hot bath. One bath daily before going to bed, for 30 days at least, is prescribed”;

- the entry for *lime* mentions shoes made of plaited lime bast, which “were still worn in very recent times in eastern Europe, particularly in the Volga district”;

- the entry for *willow* provides information that, according to Russian folklore, “willow branches put under the marriage bed would ensure a pregnancy”.

**Applications.** Finally, we come to the issue of how the dictionary can be used. The book does not have any indexes (by authors, languages, cultures, headwords, Latin names, or other), which makes it unsuitable for use in analytical studies. The user can only read it from beginning to end in the hope of finding what he/she is looking for on one of its nearly five hundred pages. In this sense, it is a work to be read, not to be studied, and it is difficult to imagine how the intention of the editors who address the dictionary to “plant scientists, linguists, botanists, historians, and plant enthusiasts” could be carried out. I have no reservations in recommending the book to the last group of users, and could add self-taught gardeners as another group of target readers, but am unable to fathom how a work devoid of any methodological rigour and not even one word said about the what, the how and the why, should be of interest to researchers in any of the fields mentioned.

Probably, the most fruitful way to use the dictionary would be to go through Watts’ research adventure backwards. What I mean is that relying on Watts’ conclusions, the user would commit the error of making further generalisations from already very broad generalisations. To avoid this, one would have to consult Watts’ sources each time, and credit the compiler with providing a clue as to where and what to look for. It is the only way one can go about answering the questions that Watts leaves us with (see the remarks on *strawberry*): what are the relationships between the violet and the strawberry, the strawberry and justice, justice *qua* strawberry and humbleness and humility, Jesus/Christ and the strawberry, etc.

The dictionary has one more application, an unintended one, I believe: it shows how much work Slavic ethnolinguistics, including ethnobotanics, still has to do, not so much to relate traditional symbolic content to the objects of experience of the Slavs, but to disseminate the knowledge that has already been acquired and explored, i.e. all that which can be called “Slavic plant lore”. Without such popularisation, Anglophone and Brit-centric publications such as Watts’ *Dictionary of Plant Lore*, will always be selective, one-sided, and unable to give the whole picture, even if they have self-aggrandising and global titles such as *Plant Lore*.

*Translated by Klaudia Wengorek-Dolecka*

## References

- Bogatyrev, Petr. 1998 [1929]. *Vampires in the Carpathians: Magical Acts, Rites, and Beliefs in Subcarpathian Rus'*. New York: Carpatho-Rusyn Research Center.
- Camp, John Michael Francis. 1973. *Magic, Myth, and Medicine*. Priority Press.
- Deane, Tony and Tony Shaw. 1975. *The Folklore of Cornwall*. [The Folklore of the British Isles.] Batsford.
- Duncalf, William G. 1976. *The Guinness Book of Plant Facts and Feats*. Enfield: Guinness Superlatives.
- Forde, C. Daryll. 1948. *Habitat, Economy, and Society*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Methuen.
- Gimbutas, Marija. 1958. *Ancient Symbolism in Lithuanian Folk Art*. Philadelphia: American Folklore Society.
- Haig, Elizabeth. 1913. *The Floral Symbolism of the Great Masters*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Trubner & Co.
- Kennedy, H. E. 1925. Polish peasant courtship and wedding customs and folk-song. *Folklore* 36: 48–68.
- Kingsbury, John M. 1964. *Poisonous Plants of the United States and Canada*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Kourennoff, Paul M. 1970. *Russian Folk Medicine*. W. H. Allen.
- Leyel, C. F. 1937. *Herbal Delights*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Nelson, E. Charles. 2001. Review of *Elsevier's Dictionary of Plant Names and their Origin*, by Donald C. Watts, Amsterdam 2000. *Botanical Journal of the Linnean Society* 137: 347–348.
- Porter, Enid. 1974. *Folklore of East Anglia*. [The Folklore of the British Isles.] Batsford.
- Rappoport, Angelo S. 1937. *The Folklore of the Jews*. Soncino Press.
- Trachtenberg, Joshua. 1939. *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion*. New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House.
- Vukanovic, T. P. 1989a. Witchcraft in the central Balkans. 1. Characteristics of witches. *Folklore* 100(1): 9–24.
- Vukanovic, T. P. 1989b. Witchcraft in the central Balkans. 2. Protection against witches. *Folklore* 100(2): 221–235.
- Warner, Elizabeth A. 2000. Russian peasant beliefs and practices concerning death and the supernatural collected in Novosokol'niki region Pskov province, Russia, 1995 part 1: the restless dead, wizards and spirit beings. *Folklore* 111: 67–90.
- Wasson, Valentina Pavlovna and R. Gordon Wasson. 1957. *Mushrooms, Russia and History*. 2 vols. New York: Pantheon.
- Watts, Donald Charles. 2000. *Elsevier's Dictionary of Plant Names and Their Origins*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.