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TRADITIONAL SAYINGS AS REFLEXES OF HOUSEHOLD, BARN, AND BYRE

**Abstract:** on of which can in turn add to our knowledge and understanding of the sayings. This seems to be borne out by scrutiny of the saying *to stick one's spoon in the wall* for "to die", the literal meaning of which emerges from an examination of traditional eating habits and implements. Along with proverbialisms originating in the household, others that have grown out of the wider rural environment are discussed. Although we proceed from English sayings, many of them dialectal, not a few of these have Continental counterparts, the study of which can cast further light, but also raise questions as to origin, development, and transmission.

**Keywords:** proverbialisms, folk speech, folk life, historical background, literal meaning, sense development, transmission, comparative approach

Among the many fascinating expressions to be found in Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang* is *to stick one's spoon in the wall*, a now apparently obsolete colloquialism for 'to die'. Having cited the earliest occurrence known to him, from a source dated 1814, Partridge laconically asks: Why? Before trying to answer this very pertinent question as to the relationship between image and sense, we shall need to consider relevant examples, starting with Partridge's own, which is from the journal of a certain Matthew Todd, a gentleman's gentleman who accompanied his master on a tour of Europe from 1814 to 1820, and wrote down his impressions throughout the years in question (Partridge 1984, 1154).

On Sunday 11 December 1814, Todd arrived with his master in Valence on the Rhone. He comments: "This town is famed by Pope Pius the 6<sup>th</sup> having stuck his spoon in the wall", the reference being to the pontiff's death there in 1799. In his entry for Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> January 1815, Todd in fact varies the expression slightly, writing as follows of Monaco: "This place is a very

strong fort and famed (as report says) by the Duke of York having put his spoon in the wall on his way to Genoa" (Trease 1968, 71 and 83).

During the second half of the nineteenth century, a slight variation on this second version of the saying, namely *to put one's spoon into* [rather than *in*] *the wall*, was current in the dialects of south Worcestershire and Gloucestershire, while Norfolk (W. G. P. 1885, 49) and south-east Worcestershire had *to stick one's spoon in the wall*, likewise meaning "to die". A Lancashire variant was *to give up one's spoon*. Thus a text published in 1865 has, of a person who had shortly before left this world for the next: "Johnny gan ['gave'] up his spoon one day beawt ['without'] havin' any mooar warnin' nor other folk." Further dialect examples are not to hand, and according to Partridge the saying had passed out of colloquial usage by the early twentieth century (Wright 1970, 5:681 and 757, and 2:627; Partridge 1984, 1154).

In search of parallels on the Continent, we encounter first of all a set of apparently now obsolete colloquial French expressions for 'to die', namely *avalier* or *verser sa cuiller*, alias *rendre sa cuiller (au magasin)* (Robert 1992, 3:92), the gist being that dying is tantamount to swallowing or tipping out one's spoon, or handing it back (to the shop). Dutch for its part has *Hij heeft de lepel neergelegt* (ter Laan 1950, 178), 'He has put down his spoon', which matches such widespread German expressions as *Da hat einer den Löffel hingelegt* or *...weggeworfen* or *...fallen lassen*, in which a person who has paid his debt to nature is likewise said to have put down his spoon, or thrown it away or dropped it. "To drop one's spoon", which, like all the parallels cited, means "to die", has an early forerunner in a text of the second half of the sixteenth century by the German author Johann Fischart, who says of a deceased character: *Es entfiel ihm der Löffel*, "The spoon slipped out of his hand" (Röhrich 1991-1992, 2:973-74). Modern dialectal equivalents are along the lines of the Mecklenburg "He won't be licking his spoon again", the Silesian "She's left a spoon to spare", the Rhenish "He's licked his last spoon", and the Swabian "to wipe/put up one's spoon" (Röhrich 1991-92, 2:973-74). Modern slang and colloquial usage similarly

express the idea of dying with “to put down one’s spoon”, “to throw away one’s spoon” and so on (Küpper 1987, 502).

The synonymous Holstein expression *sin Lepel upstēken* (Wander 1977, 3:227), “to put up one’s spoon”, which matches one of the Swabian ones just quoted, might be seen as a word-for-word counterpart of the above-cited Lancastrian *to give up one’s spoon*. This, however, like the French *rendre sa cuiller*, means something like “to hand in one’s spoon”, whereas the Holstein saying has as its nearest equivalent the Mecklenburg *De het den Lāpel an de Wand stāken* (Röhrich 1991-92, 2:974). This means “He’s stuck his spoon in the wall”, thus exactly matching in imagery and sense the English sayings with which we began, and for which an explanation is still outstanding.

What we have to visualize in order to grasp the full import of sayings about putting up one’s spoon alias putting/sticking it in the wall is the old-fashioned farmhouse where the workers, both male and female, were as often as not served broth, potage or gruel, which were originally eaten with spoons of wood, or maybe horn, before these were replaced by metal. Any pieces of meat or fish were held in the hand and attacked with the teeth or cut with a knife. No forks were used. At the end of a meal, after each spoon had been wiped, it would be placed in the hole provided for it in a rack on the wall. So closely were such spoons identified with their owners that a Swiss saying from Solothurn meaning “from the humblest to the greatest member of a household” ran *vom Löffel im Rigel bis uehe zum vierspännigen Fuerwerch* (Wander 1977, 3:227), “from the spoon in the rack to the four-in-hand”. An alternative to the wooden rack was a leather strap fastened to the wall as a receptacle for small items. Dürer’s engraving “St Jerome in His Study” of 1514 shows such a strap supporting scissors, pen-case and the like (Strauss 1973, 162-63, plate 77). Old prints of interiors show such straps with spoons in them (R. R. 1885, 238).

What is not entirely clear is whether the English expression *to stick/put one’s spoon in(to) the wall* is a mere calque on its closest Continental counterparts, or whether it independently reflects similar circumstances, in which an individual actually placed his spoon in a wall-rack after a meal. Certainly spoon racks as such were known in England (Pinto 1969, 144 and plate 147).<sup>1</sup> In Wales spoons were in fact kept in wooden racks on the

wall, although there seems to be no record of an expression matching the English one in question (Tibbott 1991). In Ulster, cutlery, presumably along with spoons, was usually kept in drawers in the dresser or kitchen table, but larger items could be kept in open kitchen wall boxes. In the south-east of Ireland, dressers were often constructed in such a way as to have several spoon holes in the moulding or plate-guard rail on the upper shelf front (Carragher 1991).

The common denominator of the totality of sayings listed is of course the spoon rather than the spoon rack on the wall. The sense is that we are what we eat and, by implication, what we eat with. If we have licked our last spoon or handed it in, that is indeed the end. Essentially similar expressions for “to die” are *to hand in one’s dinner pail* or *to lay down one’s knife and fork* (Green 1988, 29). Compare also *He’s supt* (“supped”) *all his porridge*, said of one deceased (R. R. 1885, 238). Rather than end on such a lugubrious note, however, we should perhaps mention that spoons are also a symbol of burgeoning life, whence the custom, common in many parts of Europe, of presenting a newly born or newly christened child, in the hope that it will “do well”, with a spoon, often of silver (Hoffmann-Krayer and Bächtold-Stäubli 1927-42, 5:1317-18).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, of someone who was clearly favoured by fortune from the moment he came into the world, and for whom the gift of a christening spoon would thus have been superfluous, we say *He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth*. Of course not everyone starts out in such propitious circumstances. As Oliver Goldsmith put it: “One man is born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and another with a wooden ladle” (Wilson 1970, 76).

If there is any general conclusion to be drawn from all this, it is that, while the study of proverbial sayings is worth while for its own sake, it can also cast light on obscure aspects of folk life, the investigation of which can in turn add to what we know of the sayings. A popular saying never grows out of nothing. It always grows from what is perfectly familiar in a particular place at a particular time. Exotic and recondite though it may seem today, our example *to put one’s spoon in the wall* can only have come about in circumstances where, as part of a particular social and economic context, the keeping of spoons in wall racks was

taken for granted. The elucidation of those circumstances is as important for the student of folk life as it is for the paroemiologist.

While we are on the subject of food and its consumption, it will perhaps be appropriate to consider a set of apparently inter-related sayings, the first of which, applied to some endless task, is the Devonshire *lik aitin' whitpot wi' a stockin'-niddle*, in which *whitpot* stands for a once popular kind of custard, while a *stockin'-niddle* is a darning-needle. A Shropshire and Herefordshire equivalent of *whitpot* alias *whitepot* was *stir-pudding*, a dish similarly made from the basic ingredients of flour, milk and treacle. Here the expression, probably referring again to some endless task, was *to eat stir-pudding with an awl*. Now the northern term for an awl is *elsin*, and a version of our saying from Northumberland, Ayrshire, and northern parts of Ireland was *to sup sowens with an elsin*, glossed as “to attempt an impossibility”. From Lancashire northwards, north-eastwards, and westwards into northern Ireland, *sowens* was a word of Irish origin for a dish made from oatmeal husks and siftings steeped in water until the infusion became sour. After further procedures a light pudding resulted that was eaten with milk or other liquids, even beer or fish liquor in some localities.

Despite the range of dishes mentioned in this set of sayings, and of implements referred to, the underlying idea is much the same throughout: trying to perform a difficult, endless, or impossible task is like trying to eat semi-liquid food with a sharp implement. Here, then, we have presumably cognate variations on a theme. What has yet to be identified is the prototype from which these ecotypes arose (Smith 2009, 351-355).

We now move to a different set of sayings, starting with the Dutch *in duigen vallen*, literally “to fall into staves”, used for instance of plans that miscarry or come to nought (ter Laan 1950, 79). Rhenish German has the word-for-word equivalent *in de Daue falen*, meaning “to collapse”, of a person debilitated by hunger or illness (Müller 1928-71, 1:1278). Entirely analogous is the Scottish saying *to fall into staves*, used metaphorically of a person “going to pieces” and no longer in control of events (Wright 1970, 5:738). The image is clear enough for anyone still familiar with that traditional product of the cooper's craft, the barrel made of tongue-and-groove staves held in place by metal

hoops. Once past its best and falling to pieces, such a barrel made a sorry sight, inviting comparison with various other kinds of collapse or decrepitude. Likewise drawing its inspiration from a wooden barrel or cask, the saying *to go to staves* was similarly transferable to processes and conditions beyond the cooper's sphere of action. It meant "to break up", "to go to ruin".

What, though, of another Scottish saying, *to take a staff/stave out of one's cog*, meaning "to diminish a person's allowance of food", and hence "to reduce his/her expenditure" (Wright 1970, 1:693 and 5:738)? The word *stave* - an alternative form was *staff* - for one of the upright sections of a barrel has already been discussed. Principally in Scotland and Ireland, however, there was the art, possibly going back to prehistoric times, of making smaller vessels from staves, often with a longer one projecting upwards to form a lateral handle (Evans 1988, 74-75).<sup>3</sup> There can be no doubt that some such vessels are relatively ancient, since, when in the seventeenth century some of the type known as *quaichs* began to be worked in silver, they were often engraved with lines to represent staves and feathering (Grant 1995, 180-82; Pinto 1969, 54). Now superseded by items mass-produced from clay, metal, glass or plastic, stave-built vessels survive only as museum exhibits or collectors' pieces. They range from the above-mentioned small drinking bowls known as *quaichs* alias *quaighs*, through *bickers* ("beakers") of various sizes, suitable for whisky, ale or broth, to *cogs* or *coggies*, used as porridge bowls or even as ale reservoirs for refilling individual bickers (Pinto 1969, 53-55). There was also the *nog* or *noggin*, generally about the size of a mug, and used for porridge, milk or spirits. In this, too, one of the uprights protruded to form a handle, which helps us understand why, in Galloway, a house with only one chimney was jokingly referred to as a *nog*. Similar to the *noggin*, but sometimes larger, was the *piggin*, well known in parts of England as well as Scotland and Ireland. Thus a Shropshire version of the nursery rhyme "Hey diddle diddle" contained the lines: "The cow jumped o'er the moon, The little dog laughed to see such sport; And the piggin ran after the spoon." A writer reminiscing in 1841 about his schooldays in Hertford tells us: "We had no mugs to drink from, but wooden bowls in the

shape of small tubs, with wooden handles. These were called piggens” (Wright 1970, 4:288-89 and 497).

Since *to take a staff/stave out of one’s cog* would be to reduce the vessel’s size, it is now easy to see how the saying came to suggest diminishing a person’s food allowance and hence reducing the expenditure he or she incurred. Note also *stap*, a north British synonym for *stave*,<sup>4</sup> whence *to take a stap out of one’s cog*, which in Scotland meant “to put someone on a shorter allowance”. In northern England, *to take a stap out of one’s bicker* meant “to humble someone, to take him down a peg” (Wright 1970, 5:731). Such sayings seem not to have been known in Wales, where the idea of cutting down a person’s food allowance was rather *codi’r rhastal*, literally “to raise the rack”, the reference being to the one above a horse’s manger (Tibbott 1991).

At this point, then, we leave the household and enter stable, barn and byre, but also the open fields beyond. A couple of images provided by the second of these are easy enough to understand. The West Somerset *Mid* [“You might”] *zo well put a brass knocker on a barn’s door* is “a very common saying expressive of inconsistency” (Wright, 1970, 1 169),<sup>5</sup> while the Dorset *It’s blowing enough to wim* [“winnow”] *taters* which I recorded at Kingston near Corfe Castle about 1970, is a self-explanatory hyperbole matched, incidentally, by the Antrim *to blow the horns off the kye* [“cows”], “said of a cold and stormy day” (Wright 1970, 1:309).

Perhaps more in need of elucidation are some of the sayings associated with the northern word *boose*, which signifies a stall for a horse or cow, or the upper part of the stall, where fodder is placed. This gives us for instance the Craven *He braads o’ th’ dog i’ t’boose*, “He is like the dog in the manger”, and the Derbyshire *He has put Browney into Cherry’s boose*, used where a widower has wedded a second wife, “older than and perhaps not so handsome as the first”. *Browney* was of course a name for a brown cow, while *Cherry* was a favourite name for a red cow that was a good milker. In Cheshire, *to get into Cherry’s boose* was “to get into ‘a warm berth’ or good quarters”. In the northernmost counties of England it used to be jestingly said, when a child was born into a large family, that the next youngest must *now stand in Hawkie*<sup>6</sup> *boose*, *Hawkie* being a pet-name for a white-faced cow, one that was presumably, though much loved,

not the overall favourite. Returning to Cheshire, we find *Oo* ["she"] *likes the boose, but not the ring-stake* ["tethering-post"], said of a woman who, presumably, enjoyed the comforts of matrimony, but not its restrictions (Wright 1970, 1:342-43). What elsewhere would be a *ring-stake* or *redstake* was in north Yorkshire a *rudstake*, whence a saying of similar import: *If it hadn't been for t'standing, I wad nivver hae been tied to t'rudsteeak*, translated as "If it had not been for the property, I would never have married him" (Wright 1970, 5:176).

A related northern word for *boose* was *boost*. In west Yorkshire a father playing with his children and inviting one to come between his knees would say: "*Come into t'boost*" Less reassuring is a once common Lancashire proverb from Goosnargh in the Fylde: *A famine begins at the cow boost* (Wright 1970, 1:343). Compare Ray's version of 1678: *After a famine in the stall, comes a famine in the hall* and Camden's of 1636: *No dearth but breeds in the horse-manger* (Wilson 1970, 5 and 244). In the first of these, *famine in the stall* has been taken to mean a bad hay crop, and *famine in the hall* a bad corn crop (Apperson 1993, 203 and 183).

The well-being of cattle is touched on in the Cheshire proverb *Roast meat does cattle*, in which the verb may be presumed to rhyme with *goes* or *mows*. As for the noun *meat*, this is used in the older sense of "food in general". In the present context, *roast meat* refers to grass that in a hot, dry season has been exposed to much sun and little rain. Returning now to the verb, we identify it as belonging to the northern *to dow*, meaning "to be able, to thrive", and used in the latter sense of cattle doing well. In our proverb the verb is used transitively, so that it means "to cause to do well". Thus we arrive at the interpretation: "Parched grass causes cattle to do well", or, to quote a commentator: "In dry seasons cattle, if they can only get at plenty of water, often milk better than in cold wet seasons, when there is more grass." Compare another Cheshire saying on a related theme: *Hanged hay never does cattle*, which refers to bought hay that has been hung or weighed on the steel-yard (Wright 1970, 2:141; Apperson 1993, 533 and 282). The more common intransitive use of *to dow* is illustrated by our final proverb, provided by Wright's Cumbrian correspondent E. W. P[revost]: *A nanny pet lam' maks*



*a dwinin'* ["ailing"] *yowe, Not yen out o' ten ever dis dow* (Wright 1970, 2:141).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Plate 147 shows a Welsh and a Friesland spoon rack as well as an English one.

<sup>2</sup> Some time after my birth in 1933, my mother was presented with such a spoon on my behalf by her colleagues at the Kingsley Women's Institute, North Staffs. It would be interesting to know how common the custom was, and whether it survives.

<sup>3</sup> Since that handle was the *lug* (literally "ear") and the bottom of the vessel was the *laggin*, the saying *from lug to laggin* meant "from top to bottom". The hoop securing the *laggin* was the *laggin-gird*; *to cast a laggin-gird* was "to bear an illegitimate child" (Wright 1970, 3:503 and 687). And so one might continue.

<sup>4</sup> Compare the Scottish *to fa' a' staps* and the northern English *to go to staps*, both meaning "to become insolvent, to go to pieces as a spendthrift, drunkard etc." (Wright 1970, 5:731), with the above-discussed sayings that are similar, but contain *staves* rather than *staps*.

<sup>5</sup> I have adapted and simplified the spelling of the original. The *-s* suffix on *barn* in *barn's door* is entirely typical of south-western usage. See Wakelin 1977, 111-12.

<sup>6</sup> On the omission of the possessive inflection, see for instance Wakelin 1977, 111.

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