Words about Words.

Sir James Mackintosh has well said that, "In a language like ours, where so many words are derived from other languages, there are few modes of instruction more useful or more amusing than that of tracing out the etymology and primary meaning of the words we use. There are cases in which knowledge of more real value may be conveyed from the history of a word than from the history of a campaign."

An examination of almost every word employed in this quotation would confirm its truth and illustrate its meaning. Take the principal one—the word derive. It means primarily and in its etymology, to flow out from, as a river from its course; the last syllable of derive is indeed, identical with the word river. When we speak of a word being derived, therefore, we employ, though often unconsciously, a very poetical figure and suggest the idea that it branches out from its simple original meaning into various ramifications, and passes through many changes in its course; and when we speak of tracing the derivations of a word, we mean that we will follow the course of this river up to its fountain-head.

Let us begin with the term Pagan. The Latin word pagani meant villages; indeed, our word peasant seems to have been formed from it. But it was among the rural population that Christianity spread most slowly; so that, at a time when the inhabitants of the large cities—the centres of mental activity and intelligence—had, for the most part, received the gospel, the peasants, or pagani, still continued to worship their old deities. Hence this word began to suggest the idea of idolatry, and, at length, came to express it exclusively, so that idolater and pagan became synonymous.

The history of this single word is sufficient to disprove the allegation that the spread of Christianity in its early ages was due to the ignorance and superstition of its converts, since it shows that they were drawn from those who were the least open to this charge.

The word pagan is by no means the only name of reproach derived from the rustics. Villain, or villien, as it was formerly spelt, is just Villa-in, that is. a servant employed on a ville or farm. Churl (from which comes our name Charles) meant originally a strong man, and then a rural laborer. A boor was a farmer; and a neighbor was simply a nigh boor. A coward was one who cowered in the presence of an enemy; a caitiff, who had allowed himself to be taken captive.

Valor and value are the same word, and were spelt alike till the reign of Elizabeth, the valor of a man being regarded as his value. The same feeling is contained in the Latin word virtus, virtue. Its etymological signification is that which is becoming in a vir or man; this the Romans deemed to be military valor and fortitude pre-eminently. A virtuous man, in their esteem, was a brave soldier. Among their degenerate descendants, virtuoso is a collector of curiosities and articles of taste!

But our language is not without indications that the people retaliated upon their rulers in giving ill names. Our word cheat seems clearly derived from the escheats or legal forfeitures of property to the king or feudal lord, and which were often enforced under false pretences.

The word exact has two meanings —as when we say any thing is exactly correct, and when we speak of an extortionate exaction. It is derived from the Latin word ex-actum—forced out. The connection between these various and seemingly discordant meanings is seen when we remember that the claims of the feudal lords upon their serfs (or servants) were so exorbitant, if exactly exacted, the exaction had to be forced out from them.