

HISTORY OF SCIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The Origin and Derivation of Insect Names and Entomological Terms. B. ELWOOD MONTGOMERY, Department of Entomology, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana 47907. —Information of the origin and history of insect names furnishes us evidence of the knowledge of insects possessed by ancient peoples. The names of many common insects, as ant, bee, beetle, fly, *et al.*, are much older than the English language itself. At least some of these names may be traced back through ancestral languages—Anglo-Saxon and the primitive Germanic branch languages—even to the Indo-European. Of course, these names, as most other words, have undergone changes in both form and meaning. The changes in form of words are frequent enough to justify the observation, credited to Voltaine, that “etymology is a science in which vowels do not count at all and consonants very little.” The changes are, for the most part, not random but follow rather rigid linguistic “laws”. Perhaps, the best known of these “laws” is the sound shifts in the Germanic languages in which p, t, and k(c) become f, th and h, respectively, known as Grimm’s Law. Thus, *centipede* (borrowed or derived from Latin) and hundred-footed not only mean the same but are essentially the same word as modified from the ancient Indo-European during inheritance into Latin and English (*centum* - hundred + *pes*, *pedis* - foot). In addition to inheritance, names of insects may be brought into English by borrowing words from other languages or by formulation in modern English. The “Common Names of Insects and Related Organisms” of the Entomological Society of America have all been coined within very recent times. The “loan” names, acquired from other languages may undergo considerable change as they are molded into “accepted” English form by folk etymology. Thus, the Spanish *cucaracha* introduced into English as “cucarootch” by John Smith about 1600 has become cockroach.

Previous papers (1973, Great Lakes Ent., 6(4): 121-128 and 1973, Proc. Ind. Acad. Sci., 82: 235-241) on the form and types of insect names and the common names of dragonflies (Odonata) in English and Celtic contained information on the etymology of certain insect names. This paper is designed to extend these studies to include most of the names of the more common insects.