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The Bottle Imp

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Scots Word of the Season

pinkie *n.* the little finger

Pinkie is one of the many Scots terms and expressions that Scotland has exported to North America along with its people. The word has been recorded in dictionaries of American English since the nineteenth century, and appears in diverse modern contexts. In April 2004, the *New York Times* reported that 'the President and Vice President have now agreed to take a "pinkie oath", looping little fingers with each other'.

Pinkie is generally thought to be derived from Dutch *pinkje*, also meaning 'the little finger', although it could also be a derivative of the now rare Scots word *pink* 'a small thing or creature; a speck, tiny hole, speck of light', which itself is probably a Dutch import. During the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, there was a great deal of trade between Scotland and the Low Countries, and many words have made their way into the Scottish lexicon as a result of this cultural contact. Pinkie is first found in written Scottish sources in the early nineteenth century. The earliest known usage appears in David Macbeth Moir's humorous tale *Mansie Wauch* (1828), describing how one unfortunate soul's 'pinkie was hacked off by a dragoon ... at [the Battle of] Prestonpans'.

Recent Scottish texts often make references to the pinkie, as for example Ian Rankin's 1999 novel *Dead Souls*, where one character is 'missing the pinkie on his left hand'. Pinkie also appears in a 2003 article in *Scotland on Sunday* about the prehistoric lizard known as *Chirotherium* (literally 'hand beast'). Peder Aspen, former curator of Edinburgh University's Museum of Geology, and discoverer of the animal's tracks, explains: 'The interesting thing about *Chirotherium* is the thumbs appeared to be on the outside. ... They used to think *Chirotherium* crossed its legs when it walked, no wonder it became extinct! But in fact it was a pinkie and it was an adaptation for walking on soft ground'.

As with a number of other Scottish cultural exports to North America (Halloween being perhaps the most obvious parallel), *pinkie* has since navigated its way back to other parts of the British Isles. Some of the reasons for this are commercial — the first known use of the term pinkie ring is recorded in an article in a local Ohio newspaper, the *Sandusky Register* in 1894: 'A pinky ring on her right hand set with a catseye'. Sales of pinkie rings have no doubt contributed to the internationalisation of this originally Scottish word, which can even be found in the 1996 edition of the quintessential English *Debrett's New Guide to Etiquette & Modern Manners*. Its protocol-guru author recalls 'a rather spherical woman daintily trying to dissect a kumquat with a tiny knife and fork: the effect was both impractical and comical, and suggested the nineties equivalent of the twenties housewife drinking her tea with her "pinkie" in the air'. Thankfully, however, he seems to find the word *pinkie* socially acceptable.

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