

Oxford Australia Word of the Month

September 2009

Dux – noun: the top pupil in a class or school.

From the forthcoming new (5th) edition of the Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary

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Dux

The story behind the Word of the Month

The word **dux** is from Latin where it means 'leader', and it came into English with this meaning, although with a very specific use of the meaning. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines it as 'the head pupil in a class or division in a school'. For its evidence, *OED* gives:

1808 SCOTT *Autobiog.* in Lockhart *Life* i, Our class contained some very excellent scholars. The first Dux was James Buchan, who retained his honored place almost without a day's interval all the while we were at the high school. **1870** RAMSAY *Remin.* (ed. 18) p. xxix, 'I'm second dux'..means in Scottish academical language second from the top of the class. **1876** Grant *Burgh Sch. Scotl.* ll. v. 213 *note*, A gold medal [is given] to the dux of the [Aberdeen grammar] school.

The *OED* adds 'chiefly in Scotland'. Most Australians will immediately say—and also in Australia!

What is going on here? The entry for **dux** in the *OED* is unchanged since the first edition, and was prepared between 1893 and 1897. Is it possible that **dux** was first used in Scotland, and then spread out to other varieties of British English, and therefore to Australian English, and that this will become clear when the *OED* entry is revised? The American *Random House Dictionary* marks as 'British' the sense 'the pupil who is academically first in a class or school', but the most recent British Oxford Dictionary,

the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2nd edition, 2003) gives: '(chiefly Scottish) the top pupil in a school or class.' The *New Oxford American Dictionary* gives: 'a Saxon chief or leader.' The *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* does not include **dux** at all. Thus, the overseas evidence continues to suggest that **dux** in the star pupil sense is primarily Scottish, when we all know that it is also Australian.

The other place where we know the word is widely used for the top pupil in a school is New Zealand. The Australian evidence begins with the Melbourne newspaper the *Argus* in 1859, and thereafter is widely used:

The result of the National Grammar School examination. ... Dux of the school (gold medal)—Wm. Kernot. **1859** *Argus* 23 December

The distribution of prizes amongst the children of the High School took place yesterday—T.J. Connolly won the prize as dux of the school amongst the boys. **1873** *Argus* 24 December

We must assume that the word and its meaning were brought to Australia and New Zealand by Scottish migrants in the nineteenth century. Its presence here is interesting evidence of the way the Australian vocabulary has been affected by patterns of migration from Britain.

metrosexual
weapon
of mass destruction
burka
barbecue
senior moment
Sudoku
dishlicker
cyberstalking
Naltrexone
pear-shaped
Bioterrorism
karrack
glycaemic
index
stopper
hornbag
witlof
yakitori