

OXFORD AUSTRALIA
**WORD
OF THE
MONTH**

February 2011

Sunbeam

– *noun*: an item of cutlery or crockery laid on the table but not used, and so not needing to be washed.

*Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary
5th Edition*

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The story behind the Word of the Month

In *What's Their Story? A History of Australian Words* (OUP 2010), I mentioned that **sunbeam** in the sense 'an item of cutlery or crockery laid on the table but not used, and so not needing to be washed' is an Australianism, and this was noted in a review of the book in the *Canberra Times*. This prompted a number of letters to the editor of the newspaper:

In his review ... Robert Willson observes that he has 'never heard the expression **sunbeam**'. ... Me neither. My mother has always referred to such an item as a 'shining jewel'. It's fascinating that while 'the rest of the world seems to think that there is no need for any word to describe such items', they apparently loom large enough in the Australian psyche to have attracted at least two different labels, both connotative of transcendent purity. I wonder whether there are any other variants? (11 January)

There may be regional differences in expressions such as those mentioned ... referring to implements left on the table after a meal. I don't use any such expressions myself, but my mother-in-law, who spent almost all her life in Victoria, often said, 'That's a **sunbeam**!' (13 January)

I suspect they might have had a wider origin. My mother-in-law, who migrated here in the 1920s, often used the term '**sunbeam**', which I (a fifth-generation Australian) had not heard before. She was of Scottish descent, but was born and raised in Liverpool until she moved here soon after her marriage. Does anyone have confirmation of a Lancashire or Scottish origin? (14 January)

It is possible the term has a British dialect origin, but it is not recorded in any of the dialect dictionaries.

And, surprisingly, the evidence for the term does not stretch back a long way. It was obviously unknown to the great Australian slang collector, Sidney Baker,

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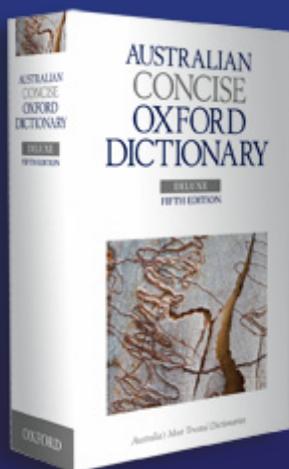
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for it does not appear in any of his books (the most recent being the 1966 second edition of *The Australian Language*). The earliest printed references to the term appear in the early 1980s, as in this passage from the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1982: 'In Australian households **sunbeams** still lighten the washing up.'

In 1997 the *Mercury* (Hobart) reported:

I myself, being a very desirable guest and a little treasure in the kitchen, have on occasion carefully collected **sunbeams** from amongst the after-dinner detritus and proudly flourished them before the busy hostess, only to have them snatched from my hands with an impatient, 'Don't bother with that—chuck em all in!'

Perhaps the arrival of the dishwashing machine has meant that people are no longer greatly concerned about retrieving items that do not need to go through the effort of washing-up in the sink and drying with a tea towel. Perhaps the word **sunbeam** has become a victim of modern technology?