

SUPPLEJACK

K. Smithyman
University of Auckland

Ripogonum scanaens is a liana of the New Zealand forest. Commonly called *supple jack* or *supplejack*, its familiarity persuades New Zealanders to believe that not only is the plant peculiar to New Zealand but also that the name is a New Zealand coining, a belief expressed by G.W. Turner.¹

Turner observes that the *supple* is 'very often pronounced with the first vowel /u:/'. A snap check among some students at Auckland shows that /u:/ is favoured roughly two-to-one over the short vowel. The two pronunciations do not seem to imply the recognition of more than one variety of plant, although in the last century J. S. Polack contended that there were several varieties or, in his own elegant words, that the name covered 'a number of liands of various genera'.² In such matters Polack is not always reliable.

The long /u:/ may preserve a provincialism, but another possibility must be mentioned. That is, that the /u:/ which remains current is evidence of a French influence, of 'la canne souple' a possibility which cannot be set aside altogether summarily. French sailors were on the coast, affecting the language of the beach early in the nineteenth century. Moreover, in view of the area in which *supple jack* appears to have originated, it would be imprudent to rule out French influence in advance. New Zealanders are inclined to fix their interest on the pronunciation, but the main feature of this adjective plus noun compounding which is of interest is the noun, *jack*.

The compounded name in connection with the New Zealand plant dates from 1773, when it was in the vocabulary of James Cook's men. An example is given under sense 1a of *supple-jack* (sb) in O.E.D. Shortly, another of Cook's company, William Anderson, recorded in his Journal, 25 February 1777, a reference to a New Zealand plant 'much like the supple jack', a comparison made with a plant known to him by that name but met in some other place.³ Menzies, the botanist of George Vancouver's expedition, in his Journal of 1791, which McNab transcribed and published in *Murihiku*, recorded the plant in flower, 'that which has obtained the name of Supple Jack'.⁴ It is mentioned by Augustus Earle in the late 1820s, and by Charles Heaphy in 1842. The early establishing of the name, the stability of the name (except for pronunciation), the currency of the name, are not in question. It is not a New Zealand coining.

The earliest American instance given in Mathews' *A Dictionary of Americanisms* surprisingly matches the New Zealand occurrence, dating from 1788, and appearing in a report made by a German of 'Supple Jack'. Since German, one suspects that there may be some influence from Cook's botanist Forster, another German, who in 1776 made the original botanical identification in New Zealand of *Ripogonum*.

Metropolitan urban English had the compound 'supple Jack' at 1784, used by Smollett, as *supple-jack* 'walking stick or cane', given by the O.E.D. sense 2a, which introduces the sense of

1 Turner 1966:166.

2 Polack 1838:1,286.

3 Beaglehole 1967:11,805.

4 McNab 1907:315.

jack as a to some extent pliable walking stick or of a walking stick or staff cut from a cane. The metropolitan instance is anticipated in the Caribbean, particularly in Jamaica from which comes Barham's notice of *supple jack* 'a cane-like vine', "full of round knobs at every five or six inches distance", published in 1794 but dated to 1725 by Cassidy.⁵ The *O.E.D.* gives another Jamaican attestation of 1725, from Sloane. The Caribbean area being brought into sight brings back consideration of possible French effect, which has to remain speculative in the absence of positive evidence. Jamaica apparently has priority as source of distribution of the compound. While a metropolitan usage is attested in the mid-eighteenth century, dialect or provincial sources within the British Isles do not appear indicated.

The problem now is to see how the name arrived. There are three or four aspects to that problem.

First, is there any significance to the capitals which occur, as in 'Supple Jack' or in 'supple Jack'? That is to ask, do the capitals point to the cane being likened in its springiness to a Jack-in-a-box or a Jumping Jack? The toy antedates English acquaintance with the cane, so the analogue is possible but a specific connection of 'Supple Jack' as an alternative to 'Jumping Jack' is lacking. Is the 'Jack' a folk or quasi-folk character? The only evidence which I have found which could support that conjecture is weak and also late, and refers particularly to the southern United States in a context which may equally suggest that the character is nicknamed after the cane.

Ripogonum or its like is 'the supple cane'. It may be only coincidental that both French and English namings chose *supple*. Something else is in play in the English choice of *jack* 'cane'. But, again coincidentally, the French *canne* is also 'walking stick', and in the eighteenth century English although the primary sense of *supple jack* is 'a cane-like vine', the secondary sense is 'walking-stick'. In the reference works which I checked, *jack* 'cane' does not figure, nor does *jack* 'walking-stick'.

A French source in a West Indian patois for *jack* is not impossible, but if there is such a source one has to conjecture altogether too much to account for passage from it into English, since the line of descent would need to be from a Carib or an African origin in a way which would seem to make transmission through French unnecessary. If not French, perhaps Spanish then? This appears a very slight chance indeed, and can be set aside.

It is unknown if the French 'la canne souple' is earlier or later than *supple jack*. Also, it is not firmly shown that the naming of the plant actually preceded the naming of the object made from it. A sequence of plant-name to object name is assumed, although the Jamaican attestations of 1725 precede the metropolitan usage of 1748 from which we infer, but do no more than infer, that *jack* or *supple jack* 'plant' precedes *supple jack* 'cane walking stick'. The effect of linguistic field has still to be taken into account.

The obvious analogy is with the maritime *jack* 'staff'. Talk of *supple jack* 'walking stick' is to some extent misleading. What we are concerned with is a 'staff', not the shaped object (shaped as New Zealand bushmen used to do by distorting a young growing plant and cutting it when matured with a shaft and crook *in situ*) but a pole of suitable length, diameter and weight which can be used as an aid in travelling in the bush. This is a staff, but also a lever and as such *jack* 'lever' has to be considered. A suitable *jack* 'lever' requires strength and some rigidity. It may connote masculinity, by obvious analogy, or, through field effect again, by *jack*

⁵ Cassidy 1961:371.

'male' of the cane (as, in New Zealand, people speak of male and female bamboo).

For *jack* 'staff, walking-stick' there is evidence. Cassidy gives an instance, seemingly obsolete or obsolescent perhaps, of *jack* as the third of possible terms for the ritual staff, a staff with crook significantly, used in the service of the Jamaican Pocomani religious cult.⁶ The other evidence is a New Zealandism, of an insect, one of the Orthoptera, of the Phasmatidae group. This insect is long, thin, segmented noticeably, and not exclusive to New Zealand. It is commonly called 'the Stick Insect'. It could also be, and was, called 'the Walking Stick Insect'; for example, by Alfred Domett in notes to his long poem *Ranolf and Amohia* (1872).⁷ A third name survives, derived from the frequent association of this insect with *Leptospermum* shrubs, the teatree which gave the insect its name as *teatree jack*. 'Stick Insect', informal inquiries suggest now predominates; 'Walking Stick Insect' is apparently obsolete; *teatree jack* is recollected mainly by older informants as a word from childhood or as a word acquired from people who were old in the informants' childhood. Otherwise *teatree jack* survives apparently as a current name only in pocket areas. While little is known about this, some small but positive evidence points to this being the case. In the *teatree jack*, *jack* 'walking-stick' is firmly manifested and gives authority to the view that the *jack* of *supple jack* or *supplejack* likewise signifies a walking-stick made from a cane or a liana, with its source in the West Indies.

Throughout these notes the speculative effect of the French compound has recurred. Now finally it may be set down as a small possibility, of no considerable force. Only one of the many works consulted gave *la canne souple*, one other gave *la canne flexible*. The upshot would seem to be that *la canne souple* while admissibly French is the result of appropriation from West Indian English, and the matter of influence is reversed. In which case, the matter of the two New Zealand pronunciations of *supple* is unresolved. English provincialism possibly contributed to the long /u:/, or French sailors' speech within the generous area of the formation of Pacific English. A visitor of 1934, Edward Markham, uncertain in his control of spelling and likely to be phonetic of sorts, provides an instance of "souple Jacks" which probably reflects the pronunciation of the day.⁸

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⁶ Cassidy 1961:240.

⁷ Domett 1872:509.

⁸ McCormick 1963:35, inscribed on illustration.