

SCHOTT'S ORIGINAL MISCELLANY

A gallimaufry of dexterous knowledge, compiled sinisterly for Weekend by Ben Schott

LEFT

Left-field ideas are those that tend to be unusual, creative unexpected and iconoclastic. The term seems to derive from the area on a baseball pitch to the left of the batter – but no one is quite certain as to why. ☞ To *see with the left eye*, and to *work with the left hand* are terms for inept or lazy performances. ☞ The term *left-footer* is a derogatory nickname for Catholics, which may derive from the left-footed spade employed by some Irish turf-cutters. In the 1960s the phrase was used equally vituperatively to describe *homosexuals*. ☞ The *loony left* was the unreconstructed Socialist side of the Labour Party in the 1980s. ☞ The *Left Bank* in Paris is the area on the south bank of the River Seine. It is home to a number of educational establishments, and is the haunt of various writers, intellectuals, aspiring writers and pseudo-intellectuals. ☞ *Stage left* is that half of the stage on the actor's left when facing the audience. ☞ The *Left Book Club* was a publishing venture founded in 1936 by Victor Gollancz, John Strachey and Harold Laski as a reaction to the rise of far-right (q.v.) politics. The aim of the club was provide its members with books advocating socialism – the most famous of which was George Orwell's *The Road To Wigan Pier* (1937). For obvious reasons, the club suffered something of a decline when the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed. ☞ In *Chinese* tradition, the left hand is used for giving. ☞ The *left-right effect* describes the phenomenon whereby children of pre-school age find it easier to grasp the distinction between up and down than left and right. ☞

To *marry with the left hand* is to enter into a morganatic marriage – ie, one between a man of high rank and a woman of a lower class. The custom was for the man to pledge his troth with his left hand rather than his right. The result of such a union was that the wife did not acquire her husband's rank, nor were she or any offspring of the marriage able to inherit the title or any possessions. ☞ *The Devil* was said to mark children consecrated to him on the *left eyelid*. ☞ *Left-hand rope* (or “water-laid rope”) is that laid up and twisted over from right to left, or against the sun. ☞ The left is the biblical direction of *Hell*, which is in part why the sign of the cross is made with the left hand during *Black Masses*. ☞ A *left-handed oath* is one made in bad faith by someone who has no intention of keeping it. ☞ The *Dogon* – an African people who live along the Niger River in the West African republic of Mali – traditionally buried the corpses of men on their right side, and women on their left. ☞ Words spoken *over the left shoulder* should be interpreted as meaning their exact opposite. ☞ *Fleming's Left Hand Rule* (for motors) states that if you hold the thumb, first finger, and middle finger of the left hand at right angles to each other and point the first finger in the direction of the field, the middle finger in the direction of the current – the thumb points in the direction in which the force acts on the conductor. ☞ The philosopher *Lao-tzu* wrote “left is the place of honour in good times and the right in bad. In battle the subordinate stands on the left and the commander on the right, in doing so equating war with burial rights.” ☞



RIGHT

The notion of a *political left* and *right wing* originated in the French National Assembly of 1789 where the nobility sat on the right of the President, and the Third Estate were ranged on his left. ☞ Extreme right-wingers are inevitably described as being “somewhere to the right of *Genghis Khan*” – a name which translates as “universal ruler”. ☞ In *Chinese* tradition, the right hand was used for taking. ☞ *Fleming's Right Hand Rule* (for dynamos) states that if you hold the thumb, first finger, and middle finger of the right hand at right angles to one another, and then point the thumb in the direction of motion, the first finger along the lines of the field; the middle finger will then point in the direction of the induced current. ☞ In the Amish card game Euchre, the *right bower* is the knave of trumps. ☞ By custom, taxis and other cars *drive on the right* along the short stretch of road outside the Savoy Hotel in London. ☞ On the occasion of an inauguration, with *his right hand raised* aloft, and his left hand placed on an open Bible, the new American President proclaims: “*I do solemnly swear [or affirm] that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.*” ☞ So superstitious were the ancient Romans about the danger of left and right that a young boy would be stationed at the threshold of affluent residences to warn visitors that they must enter with their *right foot foremost*. ☞ The right is the biblical direction of *Heaven*. ☞ In *Japanese* tradition the right side is linked to females, water and the moon. ☞

Right sailing is running a course on one of the four cardinal points of the compass. ☞ Both *Mr* and *Miss Right* are euphemisms for the ideal potential partner. ☞ Ideas that are considered to be at least vaguely tenable are *in the right ballpark* – another baseball term of uncertain provenance. ☞ A *right-angled triangle* is one with an interior angle equal to a right angle. ☞ If the *right eye* itches it traditionally signifies laughter at hand and, conversely, if the *left eye* itches, it betokenes grief. ☞ About 90 per cent of the population are *right-handed* or *dexterous* – a term also implying skill, agility and adroitness. In contrast, being *left-handed* is *sinister* – with suspicious, base, evil and dark motives. ☞ In the language of traditional Communism *right deviationism* was the move away from orthodox ideology towards more conservative principles. ☞ In the slang of the criminal underworld, a *right croaker* was a doctor prepared to treat criminals without squealing to the police. ☞ If one is on tip-top form one might be described as being *right as rain*; *ninepence*; *a trivet*; or indeed as *right as my gloves* or *as right as a shining shoe*. ☞ *Stage right*, is that half of the stage on the actor's right when facing the audience. ☞ *Starboard* is the right-hand side of a ship as one faces forward. ☞ In astronomical terms, the *right ascension* is the co-ordinate on the celestial sphere that is consistent to longitude on the surface of the Earth. ☞ In the curious and idiosyncratic world of surfing, one who rides a surfboard with the right foot forward instead of the left is called a *goofy foote*

