“The Spelling Bee,” 1 October 1875

(The keywords: pronunciation of the word daguerreotype, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

THE DAGUERREOTYPE: AN ARCHIVE OF SOURCE TEXTS, GRAPHICS, AND EPHEMERA
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THE SPELLING BEE [selected text]

The Spelling Bee and concert, in aid of the funds of the Dunedin Cricket Club, took place at the Temperance Hall last evening, and proved a thorough success in every way. The hall was crammed with people, and great interest was manifested in the proceedings. Mr. H. S. Chapman occupied the chair, and the examiners were the Rev. R. L. Stanford, Professors M’Gregor and Sale, and Mr James Anderson. . .

. . .“Daguerreotype” was a poser to one of our cricketers, and without attempting to spell it he shook his head mournfully and retired; the same word also sending the next speller to the right-about.

THE SPELLING BEE

To the Editor.

SIR,—I noticed at the spelling bee last evening that the Rev. Mr. Stanford in pronouncing the word daguerreotype gave it five distinct syllables, as follows:—Da-guer-re-o-type. Now, I think this is incorrect, and I am justified in my opinion by several orthoepists believing the correct pronunciation to be da-guerre-o-type, that is, a word of four syllables.

Perhaps you will kindly give us your opinion, and oblige.—I am, &c.,

B.

Dunedin, October 1.

[As the word is the name of an invention by one Daguerre, a word of two syllables, the addition of “otype” simply makes it a word of four syllables.—Ed. ‘E.S.’]

[End of text.]

EDITOR’S NOTES:

The mispronunciation of the word began with the introduction of the term. In January of 1840, even Edgar Allen Poe incorrectly gave it five syllables:
This word is properly spelt Daguerreotype, and pronounced as if written Daguirraioetep. The inventor’s name is Daguerre, but the French usage requires an accent on the second e, in the formation of the compound term.¹

Even in photographically-minded circles, the incorrect five-syllable pronunciation persisted. See Alfred T. Wise, "One Special Writer Retaliates," Photo-Era: the American Journal of Photography (Boston) 43:3 (September 1919): 160:

I attended a lecture on the history of photography, at the Polytechnic Institute, last winter, during which the speaker referred to the product of Daguerre’s invention (discovery, if you like) as the daguerreotype, which, each time, he took pains to pronounce very plainly, “dah-gherr-oh-type,” in four distinct syllables. The following day, I consulted all the English language dictionaries and other authorities in our Public Library, and found that the lecturer of the previous evening was absolutely correct. And yet I have not met a professional or amateur photographer who departs from that vile corruption—“deguerryotype,” and in five distinct syllables, at that!²

For a contemporary source of the correct four-syllable pronunciation of the word “daguerreotype,” see James H. Martin, The Orthoepist: Containing a Selection of All Those Words of the English Language Usually Pronounced Improperly, with a Reading Exercise Following Each Letter. . . (New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1851): 33, 37–39.³

A review of searchable texts in Google Books reflects that the word “daguerreotype” entered into the ranks of “difficult” words suitable for a spelling bee around the time of this text. See Nuttall’s Spelling Bee Guide: Including a Repertory of Five Thousand Difficult Words of the English Language (London: Frederick Warne and Co., nd [1876]): 42:

Daguerreotype, da-ger’-ro-type—a method of fixing images of objects on polished metal plates.⁴

To this day, this “difficult” word continues to be used in spelling bees.⁵

5. See “SCS Senior Spelling Bee 2011 Complete”; https://www.learnthat.org/word_lists/view/7987

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