Scot-Free

To 'get off scot-free' means 'to get away with something without being punished'. Since the familiar English word *Scot* refers to a native or inhabitant of Scotland, it is tempting to assume that this is a reference to that country. Indeed, that association seems to have existed since at least the 1500s, when the alternative spelling 'scotchfree' (based on the adjective *scotch*, meaning 'Scottish') was first attested. However, the *scot* in *scot-free* is an entirely different word.

Scot with reference to a Scottish person derives from post-classical Latin *Scottus*, but the *scot* of *scot-free* is related to the noun *shot* (associated with the verb *shoot*), influenced by cognate words in Scandinavian languages. The modern Scandinavian equivalents are Swedish and Norwegian *skatt*, Danish *skat,* and Icelandic *skattur,* meaning 'tax'. *Scot* is attested from Middle English with reference to various types of taxes, dues, and payments. In modern English, it is used primarily in historical contexts. Ralph Waldo Emerson is cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) for his use of the word in describing the 'personal independence' of the Saxons: 'No reliance for bread and games on the government, no clanship, no patriarchal style of living by the revenues of a chief, no marrying-on, no system of clientship suits them; but every man must pay his scot' (1860 'Wealth' in *The Conduct of Life*).

Scot-free arose in the 16th century as an alteration of the earlier term *shot-free*. It probably originated in the sense 'not required to pay a scot (tax or fee)' or 'free of charge', as in this example from 1792: 'Scot-free the Poets drank and ate; They paid no taxes to the State!' (John Wolcot, *Odes of Condolence*). This meaning is no longer common, but it seems to have been used as late as 1921, in hearings before the US Senate Committee on Finance: 'The common laborer does not know that that act [on taxation] was passed. He is scot free at 40 cents an hour'.

However, the earliest attested evidence for *scot-free* in the *OED* is in the sense that is more common today, in a more generalized meaning of 'without being punished', dating from as early as 1528. Thus, in his epistolary novel *Pamela* (1740), Samuel Richardson wrote 'She should not, for all the Trouble she has cost you, go away scot-free.'

Scot-free is the most common contemporary idiom involving the word *scot*, but it has historically been used in many other phrases as well. *Scot and lot* referred to local or municipal taxes; by extension, it came to be used as an adjective to designate a man who paid such taxes and hence was eligible to vote or (more generally) was respectable: 'May we not regret that potwallopers, and scot and lot men, and freemen then lost their privilege?' (1865 *Liverpool Mercury* 12 Oct.). In the context of British politics, *scot and lot* also referred to a system of voting which restricted the franchise to men who paid 'scot and lot.'

Scot came up in religious contexts as well. *Rome-scot* was an annual tax paid to the papal see at Rome in pre-Reformation England, and *soul-scot* was money paid on behalf of a deceased person to their former church.

The most intriguing *scot* compound is probably *scot-ale*. According to the *OED,* this referred to 'a festivity or "ale" held by the lord of a manor or a forester or other bailiff, for which a contribution was exacted and at which attendance was probably compulsory'; in other words, a party that one was compelled to attend, and for which was also compelled to pay a cover charge. As one 16th-century writer described it, 'a Scottall or Scot-ale is, where any officer of the Forest doth keepe an Alehouse…and by colour of his office doth cause men to come to his house, and there to spend their money, for feare of hauing his displeasure' (1598 John Manwood, *A brefe collection of the lawes of the forest*). Such fund-raising hootenannies were variously described as burdensome duties or pleasant occasions of boozy merriment. Either way, it was true in the most literal sense that no one got off scot-free.