

## Reviews

### EPONYMOUS WORDS

A review of *Batty, Bloomers and Boycott; a little etymology of eponymous words*, by Rosie Boycott. London: Hutchinson, 1982. 128 pp. R10,05.

'An eponymous word is one that has entered the English language because of a person or that person's deeds. The word derives from the [person's] name.' So writes Rosie Boycott in her introduction to this informative and entertaining collection of over 250 eponymous words and expressions. Her collection is not exhaustive, as she acknowledges; but while she has omitted many words that are too specialized to be of general interest, she has included some which, although not in common currency, have surprising or especially interesting sources. The origins of most of the entries are certain; others are admittedly speculative or apocryphal. Where alternative explanations for a single term exist, these are given. All make enjoyable reading. The entries are arranged in alphabetical sequence, and vary in length from three lines to two pages. Ms Boycott has not confined herself too rigidly to information that is strictly etymological, but has included details of people and events that are of general human interest. The result is kaleidoscopic: one makes acquaintance with a wide spectrum of personalities and happenings in diverse times, places and fields of endeavour — some momentous, others trivial, but all commemorated (if only incidentally) in words or expressions we often encounter without being aware of their peculiarly individual origins.

The collection embraces eponymous adjectives, verbs, idiomatic expressions, names of assorted objects, types of people and inventions, as well as a variety of terms associated with particular subjects such as physical science, botany, biology, music, medicine, weaponry, food, clothing and drink.

Examples of eponymous adjectives mentioned in the book are: batty, barmy, blimpish, draconian, gaga, gargantuan, machiavellian, maudlin, namby pamby, Rabelaisian, ritzy, roscian, stentorian, tawdry, titian and zany. The adjective 'blimpish' is found in the entry under 'blimp', which reads as follows:

#### BLIMP

This word, describing a type of observation balloon and, by association, a person who is dull, slow-witted or a 'windbag', has obscure origins.

Most sources say that the non-rigid airship first used in 1915 for observation purposes and later as a barrage device owes its name to Horace Short, who coined the word either from *bloody* plus *limp* or (type) *B* plus *limp*. The cartoonist David Low made metaphorical and hilarious use of the image in a character drawn for the London *Evening Standard* in 1940, and the name Colonel Blimp soon entered the language. By direct analogy with the airship, Blimp is 'full of hot air, lacking in backbone and deficient in motive power', and is depicted as an elderly, unprogressive and rather reactionary gentleman of somewhat limited intelligence.

*Blimpish* and *blimpishness* characterize the behaviour of a particular kind of English bureaucratic dullard.

Here the amusing figure with whom the word is linked is clearly fictitious. Several other entries in the collection are similarly associated with fictitious people, such as literary or mythological figures. On the other hand, the adjective 'tawdry' (like most of the terms in this volume) is found to derive from a person who once lived:

#### TAWDRY

Any object that is bright and garish, but worthless, may be described as *tawdry*. The word is a corruption of the name Audrey, from St Audrey or Ethelrida. Born in Suffolk, she was the daughter of King Anna of East Anglia and on the death of her first husband retired to the island of Ely, which had been given her as a wedding present. Five years later a marriage was arranged to a boy

prince, whom she deserted when he reached manhood. After living for a time in a convent, she set up a monastery on Ely in 672. She died on 23 June 679 of a breast tumour, which she blamed on wearing jewel necklaces as a child. As a result it became fashionable to wear silk necklaces thereafter, which, by comparison, were also much cheaper. At St Audrey's fair, held annually on 23 June, cheap necklaces were a speciality, whether in silk or just 'show' jewellery; hence the origin of the word *tawdry*.

Eponymous verbs represented in the book include terms such as: mosey, welch, birrell, bowdlerize, boycott, fudge, gerrymander, grangerize, ham, lynch, mesmerize, pander, pasteurize, diddle, tantalize and yapp. The entry for 'welch', for example, reads:

#### WELCH

There is dispute about the origin of this expression, which means to renege on a deal, to let someone down, or generally to betray someone. The word was originally only applied to racecourse book-makers who disappeared instead of paying out. The English like to think that the term *welch* (or *welsh*) derives from the rhyme 'Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief, Taffy came to my house and stole a leg of beef'. However, the Welsh take the view that the term originated with a Bob Welch of Epsom, an English bookie who made off with the bets.

Group loyalties, it seems, make the work of an etymologist so much more challenging! The origin of 'gerrymander' reflects partisanship of another kind. To gerrymander, we read, 'is to divide states or districts into voting areas which will result in unfair advantage being given to one party in an election. The word is also often used to describe mildly manipulative cunning or general fixing'. Its exact origin is owed to one Elbridge Gerry who, in 1810, became Governor of Massachusetts:

In his second term of office, in an attempt to keep power, he decided to redraw the voting districts to enable his party (the Republicans) to retain their majority in the imminent election. One day while in the offices of the Boston *Sentinel*, the painter Gilbert Stuart saw a map of the redrawn boundaries on the wall and onto its bizarre shape sketched feet and wings. 'That will do for a salamander,' he declared. 'Better say Gerrymander,' replied the paper's editor, Benjamin Russell. Though this practice was not new, the name stuck.

Gerry eventually became Vice-President of the USA in 1813 but died the following year.

Some examples of eponymous expressions in this volume are: Bob's your uncle, Hobson's choice, (sweet) Fanny Adams, (like) Billio, the real McCoy, nose parker, Oakes's oath, peeping Tom, smart alec(k), Buckley's chance, and Malley's cow. Many of these colourful expressions have origins that are equally colourful. The entry for 'McCoy', for example, reads as follows:

#### McCOY

The phrase *the real McCoy*, indicating indisputable authenticity, has a highly disputable origin. According to Eric Partridge in *From Sanskrit to Brazil* (1952) the expression, originally 'the real MacKay', dates from the 1880s, when it was applied in Scotland to men and whisky of the highest quality. Connected with this is the theory that the phrase derives from the fact that there are two main branches to the MacKay clan. Because of this, there is constant dispute over who is the true head of the clan, the *real* MacKay. The phrase was transported along with the men and the whisky, to the USA, and there it stuck.

Others, however, claim that the term originated with the boxer Norman Selby (1873-1940), whose fighting name was Kid McCoy. They tell of a drunk who quarrelled with the champion, who did all he could to avoid a fight. Onlookers warned the drunk who the man he was provoking was, but he persisted. Finally McCoy had had enough and knocked his challenger out with a punch. When he came round, the drunk shook his head and ruefully admitted. 'You're right, that was the real McCoy.'

Several of these quaint expressions have Australian derivations, such as Buckley's chance, Malley's cow and Oakes's oath. The entry for the latter reads:

#### OAKES'S OATH

*Oakes's oath* is an Australian expression to describe a testimony that, although sworn, should not be taken seriously. A man called Oakes was produced in court as a witness in a trial involving a large number of stolen cattle. Asked if he could identify a pair of horns that were said to have once belonged to one of the stolen beasts, Oakes scratched his head and said, 'I'll chance it; Yes.'

(Mr Oakes, one suspects, had heard of Buckley's chance.)

Eponymous words denoting types of people include the following: casanova, Don Juan, Darby and Joan, doubting Thomas, dunce, hooligan, jackanapes, Judas, lush, maverick, martinet, quisling,

Uncle Tom, harlot, bobby and yokel. Our schoolgoing readers, in particular, will be interested to learn that the dreaded word 'dunce' is derived from the name of someone who was himself no mean scholar:

#### DUNCE

The word *dunce* — used to describe anyone who is extremely stupid — derives from the great medieval Scottish philosopher and theologian John Duns Scotus (1256-1308), who was given his curious Christian name because of his birthplace in Scotland.

The young Duns Scotus entered a Scottish Franciscan friary at the age of fifteen and proved himself an apt pupil and became a priest in 1291. He later went to Oxford, and then lectured abroad, settling in Paris.

During his years at Oxford and Paris, Scotus took issue with the doctrines of Thomas Aquinas. His philosophy included an incorporation of the teaching of Aristotle into Christian theology — but with numerous additions of his own. He was nicknamed 'the Subtle Doctor' (as opposed to Aquinas, known as 'the Angelic Doctor').

Scotus had many followers, who called themselves Dunsmen, Dunses or Scotists. Like him, they involved themselves in hairsplitting over the finer points of divinity, and they were reluctant to accept change. According to Tyndal, 'The old barking curs raged in every pulpit' when new thoughts were introduced. Thus any opponent to progress or learning was called a *dunce* and eventually by implication stupid.

'Darby and Joan' is another appellation which many of us have used, without being aware of its origin, to describe a couple whose enduring connubial contentment is of note. Appropriately, this expression commemorates the homely virtues of a happy but otherwise ordinary couple who sought no public recognition:

#### DARBY AND JOAN

This affectionate term for a long- and happily married couple first appeared in a ballad by Henry Woodfall published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1735. As a boy, Woodfall was apprentice to a London printer called John Darby (d. 1730). Woodfall obviously was deeply fond of the old man and his wife — Joan — and gave them unlooked-for immortality when he wrote about them.

Assorted objects with eponymous names cited in this book include: blanket, Catherine wheel, guillotine, mausoleum, silhouette,

sideburn, teddy bear, bowie knife, tureen, saxophone, Albert, doily and Gladstone bag. While some individuals are deservedly commemorated in the creation of eponymous words, others are less so. For example, of the origin of 'guillotine' we read:

#### GUILLOTINE

An instrument of execution which consists of a weighted diagonal blade, suspended between two upright posts, that falls from a height and severs the victim's head at the neck.

Instruments similar to the guillotine had been employed for many centuries in Scotland, Germany, Italy and several eastern countries before it was introduced to France — not by Joseph Ignace Guillotin (1738-1814), who, unhappily for him, left his name to the device, but by Dr Antoine Louis (1723-92). In fact, for a time the guillotine was known as the *louisette*.

Guillotin was a French physician and an inventor of medical instruments. He was interested in the *louisette* because it offered a quick and relatively painless mode of death. When the machine was introduced in France — the first person to be guillotined was a highwayman on 25 April 1792 — it was generally kept for the aristocracy and those who, it was considered, deserved preferential treatment, beheading being reserved only for the upper classes. As a member of the Constituent Assembly, Guillotin proposed that the method should be used for all executions, on humanitarian and egalitarian grounds. At the height of the Reign of Terror, in June and July 1792, when 1376 heads fell, his suggestion was taken up.

Dr Guillotin died quietly in his bed. He had been appalled when the device was named after him and Victor Hugo was later to comment: 'There are unfortunate men; Columbus could not attach his name to discovery, and Guillotin could not detach his from his invention.'

The guillotine is still a legal, though rarely used method of execution in France.

In British parliamentary jargon, *to apply the guillotine* means to curtail a debate by dividing it up and fixing in advance the times at which votes on particular sections must be taken.

The word 'tureen' is another in which a Frenchman received unplanned immortality — happily without the sanguinary connotations of 'guillotine':

## TUREEN

A huge serving bowl with a lid, specifically for soup.

The Vicomte de Turenne (1611-75) was one of the greatest figures of seventeenth-century French military history and was created Marshal General of France in 1660. On one occasion there were no bowls available in which to serve the soup; he whipped off his helmet, upturned it, poured in the soup and thereby founded a dynasty of dinner dishes.

One of history's more famous tureens is a Meissen tureen which can be seen in Blenheim Palace. The handles are in the shape of lemon slices. It is part of a large service presented by the King of Poland to the Fourth Duke of Marlborough; the King's return gift was a pack of staghounds.

Another derivation of the word is from terrine, an earthenware dish (Latin *terra*, earth).

Examples of more deliberately contrived inventions with eponymous names are: daguerrotype, diesel, macadam, geiger counter, marconigram, pullman, Richter scale, wedgewood, zeppelin, ampere, bunsen burner, Celsius, Fahrenheit, joule, ohm, volt and watt. Other subjects that are quite well represented by terms included in this book are weaponry (for example: colt, derringer, gatling gun, mauser rifle, Big Bertha), botany (wisteria, fuchsia, zinnia, gardenia, greengage ...) and clothing (bloomers, cardigan, leotards, pantaloons, wellingtons, trilby, stetson, Tam o'shanter ...). In our own relatively permissive age it is interesting to read of the controversy that attended the creation of 'bloomers':

## BLOOMERS

Now a slightly wry generic term for loose trousers worn by women, *bloomers* originally referred to an entire costume consisting of a jacket, skirt and Turkish-style trousers. The trousers later became known as bloomers in their own right.

The original ensemble was first introduced into American society by Mrs Amelia Jenks Bloomer (1818-94) after an idea by Elizabeth Smith Miller. Mrs Bloomer was the founder and editor in 1849 of a New York ladies' journal called *The Lily* which supported the Temperance Movement. *The Lily* was the first magazine in America edited entirely by a woman; indeed, Mrs Bloomer personally wrote almost all the copy, typed the text and supervised the business and distribution.

For a woman to edit a magazine in those days was a courageous venture, so it was not surprising that Mrs Bloomer eagerly embraced the cause of the newly formed US Women's Rights Movement. She decided that her periodical should espouse the cause of women's dress reform and so she held a ball in July 1851 where she first sported the revolutionary new garment. All women attending, she insisted, could wear what they wished above the waist but below 'we would have a skirt reaching down to nearly halfway between the knee and the ankle, and not made quite so full as is the present fashion. Underneath the skirt, trousers moderately full, in fair mild weather, coming down to the ankle (not instep) and there gathered in by an elastic band .... For winter, or wet weather, the trousers also full, but coming down into a boot, which should rise some three or four inches at least above the ankle.'

The fashion found favour in some circles and was considered to be in keeping with current standards of decency. However, it was also greatly ridiculed and became a symbol of radicalism. One clergyman forbade Bloomer girls to enter his church; another, Dr DeWitte Talmage, cited Moses when speaking against Mrs Bloomer's outfits: 'A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man' (Deut. 22:5). Mrs Bloomer, with a spirited turn of wit, retorted that that rule was rubbish since there was no difference in the fig leaves worn by Adam and Eve.

(Readers who are quick to call Dr Talmage a male chauvinist will be happy to find the origin of 'chauvinism' explained elsewhere in the book.)

Types of food and drink are also quite well represented in this 'little etymology', such as: marmalade, marzipan, peach melba, sandwich, praline, bourbon, cocktail, Grand Marnier and grog. The entry for 'grog' illustrates the loosely associative process that sometimes lies behind the linking of a word to a concept:

#### GROG

Rough liquor. Groggram is a coarse fabric of silk, mohair and wool (from the French *gros grain*, coarse material) and Admiral Sir Edward Vernon (1684-1757) was nicknamed Old Grog because he habitually wore a cloak made from it. In 1740, in an attempt to limit the number of brawls that took place aboard his ships, Vernon issued an order stating that all rations of rum were to be watered down. The sailors dubbed the resulting drink *grog*, a word which later became associated with any cheap liquor.

The term *grog* also gave rise to the adjective *groggy*, probably used first to describe how someone recovering from an excess of alcohol is feeling!

Grog rations were stopped to all ratings on 1 July 1970.



There are many other entries in Rosie Boycott's book which space forbids me to quote, and which make equally fascinating reading — terms such as comstockery, gibberish, cant, malapropism, panic, masochism, Pindaric, sadism, spoonerism and chauvinism. The entries which I have mentioned should serve to illustrate the wide range of terms that are dealt with in this very readable book, and the amount and variety of etymological and incidental information it embraces.

Concerning the format of the volume, it is of compact paperback size, the hardback edition being light but sturdy, with a colourful cover illustration by Brian Grimwood depicting, one supposes, the Vicomte de Turenne. Inside, the layout is very clear, and reference to particular terms is easy. There are blemishes: a couple of spelling misprints caught my eye — but that is all.

By today's standards the price of the book is extremely reasonable, and within the means of most relatively impecunious scholars and teachers. *Batty, Bloomers and Boycott* is an edifying and entertaining book which will appeal not only to the academically-inclined, but to anyone who enjoys words and is curious about how they entered the language.

KEITH RICHMOND

Jean Aitchison *Language change: progress or decay?* London: Fontana, 1981. 266 pp. Paperback £2,95.

'O grammar rules', wrote Sidney some 400 years ago, 'to grammar who says nay?' Well, Bloomfield and the behaviourists, with their pet phonemes, said 'nay' very loudly in the 1930's to the prescriptive rules of grammar handed down from the Golden Age of Rome. They began the movement towards using the conversational exchanges in the playground rather than the formal statement on the printed page of grammar books as the language teaching method. Chomsky's counter-argument that the young acquire a knowledge of language as much from what they generate themselves as from the imitation of their elders produced the present chaos in schools and Education Departments. The only people who seem to be gaining any benefit from the contemporary Tower of Babel are the lawyers and the linguists. The present book comes from a lecturer in linguistics at the London School of Economics, that hotbed of Marxist iconoclasm.