

AFTERBERNERS: AN ASSEMBLAGE OF NOUNS

PETER NEWBY

Chesterfield, Derbyshire, England

The English language owes a debt of gratitude to Dame Juliana Berners. She was born circa 1388 and is believed to have been the prioress of a nunnery near St. Albans, Hertfordshire, England. Her major contribution to literature is The Boke of St. Albans, a treatise on hawking, hunting and heraldry first published in 1486. The Boke has been in continuous print ever since and once enjoyed such a popularity that the distinguished editor of an edition of 1810 stated that, in the previous centuries, "its circulation vied with and perhaps exceeded every other contemporary production of the press of lesser eminence than Holy Writ". The Boke's latest edition, a facsimile of the original, was published in New York in 1969.

One of the delights of the Boke is its compilation of nouns of assemblage, and though other writers of the period also noted these collective nouns, it is to the Dame we are principally indebted. Some traditional terms are extremely ancient. A swarm of bees, for example, dates back to circa 725 AD. Other traditional terms are comparatively new. Whilst a grist of bees sounds both British and archaic, it is a 19th-century American term and also is featured in contemporary American wit as "a grist of rain". Some are found only in dialect. Hirsel, used by the Scots for virtually everything, is one such ancient term.

Alliteration, onomatopoeia or a characteristic inherent in the object being described is the basis of a collective noun, and has been true since compilations began in the 15th century. The many books on courtly behaviour written at that time stressed the importance of a knowledge of the correct term, as this was a sign of culture and good breeding. Even today, unless irony is intended, it is a mark of good grammar.

The following sample of collective nouns are all found in the Boke, many first recorded by Dame Juliana. Dates prior to 1486 note earlier publication. A question-mark indicates the meaning is unclear to me.

BERNERS

A shrewdness of apes (1452)

A pace of asses

A cete of badgers (the Boke called them graies "grays")

A congregation of birds (used of plovers in both the Boke and 1430)

A sounder of boars (1410, 1420; preceded by the Dame's injunction that 12 wild swine make a sounder and 20 a great sounder)

- A leash of bucks (c.1330, as a set of three creatures)
- A dule of doves
- A school of fish (c.1400, c.1440)
- A skulk of foxes (c.1450, **skulk** applied to **freris** (friars?), **foxys** and **thewys** "?")
- A bevy of girls (c.1430, c.1470; the Dame applied it to ladies, quails and roes)
- A herd of cattle (c.1000; the Dame used it for harlots)
- A brood of hens (c.1000, 1250, c.1385)
- A mute of hounds (c.1400)
- A kindle of kittens (c.1220; note that a clowder of cats is 1801)
- A leap of leopards
- A pride of lions
- A suit of mallards
- A watch of nightingales (c.1452)
- A covey of partridges (1440)
- A muster of peacocks (c.1470)
- A nye of pheasants (c.1470)
- An unkindness of ravens (c.1452)
- A building of rooks (c.1470)
- A flight of swallows (c.1250, applied to various birds and insects)
- A drift of swine (tame swine as opposed to wild boars)
- A spring of teal (c.1450, c.1470)
- A litter of whelps
- A rout of wolves (c.1275)
- A fall of woodcock (c.1430)

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Many collective nouns have arisen since the Boke was first published. An excellent list of those of serious intent is found, for example, in Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable. Comic variations have also occurred in large number. There is even a third type of which there is but one delightful example: a conglobulation of swallows. This is not an official collective noun, but as its only known application is that of a noun of assemblage, it cannot be denied.

Conglobulation is found, undefined, in Chambers English Dictionary. It also carries the word conglobulate. That same verb is also found in both the complete Oxford English Dictionary and Webster's International, though neither mentions the noun. Fortunately, The Encyclopedia of the Animal World provides the only sense that I can trace of a specific meaning of the noun conglobulation, which it applies to a remarkable and mythical assembly of swallows. But first the verb and its meaning as given in the OED. It defines the very as meaning "to collect into a rounded or compact mass", and quotes Dr. Johnson

A number of them [swallows] conglobulate together and then all of a heap throw themselves under water

and it is in precisely this sense that the Encyclopedia uses the noun conglobulation. In Dr. Johnson's day, there was a widely-held belief that swallows spent the winter asleep at the bottom of ponds.

A contemporary of his once tested this theory by tying dyed threads to the legs of swallows. When, the following spring, the dye had obviously failed to wash out, he began to doubt the veracity of that belief. A conglobulation of swallows, therefore, is a compacted flock throwing themselves under water for the purposes of hibernation!

In honor of Dame Juliana, I introduce the concept of **afterberners**. These are collective nouns, of both serious and comic intent, that share one common factor: each collective noun is an anagram of that to which it relates. For convenience, I have set them out in three groups:

- (a) the obvious
- (b) those requiring a definition of either the noun or the collective noun
- (c) the "gaggle" variety of collective nouns: those, like a gaggle of geese, where the collective noun was specifically coined for that purpose

a sounder of undoers	a clearness of cleansers
an atmosphere of metaphores	a sortment of torments
a triteness of interests	a flushing of lungfish
a tiredness of residents	a pertness of serpents
a shower of whores	a pressure of perusers
a niceness of incenses	a love-nest of novelets
an aridness of sardines	a dourness of sounders
an amassing of gas mains	a rudeness of end users
a cluster of cutlers	an underset of dentures
a soupçon of coupons	a piecrust of pictures
a crescendo of conceders	a spectrum of crumpets
a streaming of emigrants	a bluster of butlers
a measuring of geraniums	a unison of unions
a sensation of Estonians	a tissue of suites
an assertion of senoritas	a debris of brides
a greatness of sergeants	a sample of maples
a mischance of mechanics	

a pesaunt (weight) of peanuts
 an arshine (length) of hernias
 a madness of desmans (insectivores of the mole family, not desmen)
 a melange of gleemen (singers or minstrels)
 an ecstasy of cytases (digestive enzymes)
 a ripeness of crepsins (enzymes of the stomach)
 an arsenal of Lanares (falcons)
 a slough (dead skin) of ghouls
 a morsel of morels (cherries)
 a sqwere of qweers (a squire of choirs)
 a sestet of testes (applicable to a life form from another galaxy)
 a series of reises (journeys)
 a greest (grist) of egrets
 a ferkin of erfkin (cattle)
 a secretness of Centresses (female leaders of the Fenian movement)
 a deposit of podites (crab's legs)
 a pertusion (punching) of eruptions

an inertness of tennisers (players of real tennis)
 a cresset (container) of secrets
 a slaister (filthy mess) of realists
 a travoise (sledge) of votaries
 a leasting (atom) of genitals
 a pleasure of serpulæ (wormshells)
 a pastiche of hepatics (liverworts)
 a laciness of sanicles (a type of flower)
 a sixteen of extines (pollen grains)
 a frescadè (shaded pathway) of red faces
 a sprinkle of plinkers (random target shooters)
 a brisance (explosive effect) of carbines
 a trussel (bundle) of results
 a gorsedd (assembly) of dodgers
 a residence of deceniers (heads of households)
 a struggle of gurglets (tiny whirlpools)
 an ampleness of ensamples (practical warnings)
 an eclosion (hatching) of colonies
 an appetiser of piperates (salts of pepper)

Gaggle-type afterburners fall into two distinct categories, nonce nouns and assumption-of-noun-status by an adjective:

a pride's-nest of presidents	a dire-loss of soldiers
a fib-fails of bailiffs	an arch-mine of chairmen
a dust-nest of students	a sob-ship of bishops
a treasoning of Argentinos	a slawping of lapwings
a dishonest of hedonists	a mensural of numerals

Of the above, the easiest to create are the nonce nouns, and they possess the greatest potential for witty construction. The least satisfactory from the standpoint of the general reader are the obscure ones requiring an explanation. The best are the obvious, and, if you wish to add your own constructions to what I trust is "a relish of hirsel", then it will be interesting to see what the collective readership of **Word Ways** can produce.