

MUCH ADO ABOUT "NOTHING"

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It is axiomatic that if you have nothing you have "no thing." Delving into this realm of nothingness has revealed numerous creative ways by which speakers of English express this idea of nonentity. As with this previous word, most "nothings" seem to begin with an N: none, nil, null, nary, naught, nix, and the north of England's nowt. Of late, one even finds numerous instances of the Spanish "nada" creeping in.

Readers may remember that when Richard Nixon was running for president, some cars sported bumper stickers that proclaimed "Nix on Nixon." An interesting case, too, is how aught and ought have lost their initial N through confusion of the indefinite article's "a" and "n"; a naught and a nought ended up as an aught and an ought. (Other examples of this incorrect separation: apron, auger, orange, etc.) Also from naught we get naughty--someone who is a "nothing" in esteem or in approved behavior. In this N category we can even include "nuts" as a way of saying "nothing doing." This was popularized in 1944 during the World War II Battle of the Bulge when General Anthony McAuliffe gave this response to the German commander's request for surrender.

As well as an N group, there is a Z group of nothings--zero, zilch and zip ("the final score was three-zip"). Connected etymologically to this group is the cipher (from early Italian "zefiro"). With a cipher you have nothing, but if you are able to decipher, you have something!

One particular aspect of expressions of nonentity falls in a category that might be called avian nihilism. A recent article in Time about the Cincinnati Reds' Johnny Vander Meer mentions "his wild fast ball, goose-egging both the Boston Braves and the Brooklyn Dodgers." In a similar vein, an Associated Press report on how the US lost 5-0 to Sweden in the Davis Cup was headed "Americans lay big goose egg."

The egg shape, of course, is a close approximation of the zero--which accounts for another avian example well-known wherever cricket is played: the bird is a duck, and the analogy is to the duck's egg. To score nothing while at bat in cricket is called a duck.

In tennis we have yet another example of a score of zero being represented by the cipher of an egg--this time from the French for egg, l'oeuf. We know this in English as "love" (as in a score of "forty-love," i.e., 40-0). There is a tendency for tennis players to try to be creative when finally winning a game at (say) 5-0 down, by declaring "Hooray, no bagel today!" The bagel imagery is clearly self-evident.

The cipher 0 in its resemblance to the letter O results in the pronunciation of "oh" for zero as in a phone number such as five-two-oh, three-seven-nine-oh (520-3790). Technically, of course, this "oh" is a letter masquerading as a number.

Readers of this article might concur with these lines of Alexander Pope when he opined that

"Such labour'd nothings, in so strange a style
amaze th' unlearned and make the learned smile."

--Essay on Criticism, Pt II, lines 126-7

TWO TOWNS FIGHT FOR MARY'S LAMB

A century and three-quarters after "Mary Had a Little Lamb" was published, residents of Sterling MA and Newport NH are still arguing over ownership of the famous little ditty about a faithful lamb and unwelcoming schoolteacher.

According to the official town source on the matter, the Mary of the poem was a girl named Mary Sawyer born in 1806 in Sterling. One day in 1815 her devoted lamb followed her to school and up the classroom aisle when she was asked to recite a lesson. The teacher, alas, "turned it out" as the poem would have it. The incident so amused and inspired a boy named John Roulstone, who happened to be visiting the classroom that day, that he took pencil to paper and dashed off the first three stanzas. The Sterling Historical Society archives contain a copy of an 1879 letter written by Sawyer in which she described the incident and confirmed Roulstone's authorship.

To Newport's proponents, it's another story: every word of the poem was written by Newport native Sarah Josepha Hale. Hale, easily Newport's most distinguished citizen, was editor of the publication called Godey's Lady's Book from 1837 to 1877, and author of 20 books and hundreds of poems. "Mary Had a Little Lamb" was published in 1830 under her name, in a collection called "Poems For Our Children". Hale said she wrote it, in a signed statement that appeared in the Boston Transcript in 1889, written by her son on her behalf before she died.

A small bronze lamb statue stands in tribute on the Sterling town common, and the Historical Society sells Mary's Lamb T-shirts and fuzzy lamb statuettes. In Newport, a memorial plaque to Hale says that she composed the poem.