AN EPIPHANY OF EPONYMS

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An eponym is a word derived from the name of an actual person or a fictional or mythical character. There are lots of them in everyday use, for example boycott, sandwich, spoonerism and erotic, which can be traced back to Captain Charles Boycott, the Earl of Sandwich, Rev. W. A. Spooner and Eros, the Greek love-god. Here are 26 interesting eponyms, one for each letter of the alphabet. Some may surprise you!

- **abigail** a handmaiden or lady’s maid, after Abigail, wife of Nabal, in the Book of Samuel in the Bible.
- **burke** to murder, especially by smothering, from Irish navvy William Burke, who with his fellow countryman, William Hare, murdered up to 30 people in Edinburgh between 1827 and 1829, selling the bodies for dissection.
- **chauvinist** one who has a fanatical or extravagant attachment to any group, place, cause, etc., from Nicolas Chauvin, an old French soldier who became the laughing-stock of his peers because of his overenthusiastic devotion to Napoleon.
- **derrick** a stationary crane with lifting tackle at the end of a boom or jib, from the surname of Goodman Derrick, a notorious 17th century Tyburn hangman who is said to have carried out over 3,000 executions.
- **epicure** a person of refined taste, from the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who set great store by happiness and even regarded virtue as worthless if it did not also produce an agreeable life.
- **Ferris wheel** a fairground attraction consisting of a large upright revolving wheel with seats suspended around its rim. The first such wheel was built by American engineer G. W. Gale Ferris in 1893. It stood 250 feet high and carried 36 carriages, each of which could seat up to 40 people!
- **guppy** a small tropical fish, originally from Venezuela and Trinidad, discovered by R. J. Lechmere Guppy in 1866.
- **hansom** a light two-wheeled horse-drawn cab, designed and patented by Joseph Hansom (1803-82).
- **isabella** a dingy yellowish-gray colour, possibly after Isabella of Castile, queen of Spain, who made a vow not to change her linen until Granada fell into her hands. Unfortunately the siege in 1491-2 lasted longer than ladies usually wore their body-linen!
- **Janola** a domestic bleach popular in New Zealand and Australia, named in honour of the inventors’ wives, Jan and Nola.
- **Kit Kat** a chocolate bar, apparently from the Kit-Cat Club, an 18th century literary club located at the pie-house of Christopher (Kit) Cat in Shire Lane, London.
- **lindy** also lindy hop, a type of jitterbug dance that originated in the Harlem district of New York. It commemorates the dramatic solo crossing of the Atlantic in 1927 by American aviator Charles Lindbergh (nicknamed ‘Lindy’). A ‘hop’ is slang for both a dance (at the hop) and a short plane flight.
- **Moonlight** a locality on the West Coast of the South Island in New Zealand, named after colourful 19th century prospector and gold miner George Fairweather Moonlight.
- **nicotine** a poisonous narcotic alkaloid obtained from tobacco leaves, after Jean Nicot, a French diplomat who introduced tobacco into France in 1560.
- **ocker** a typical Australian male, from a nickname for Oscar, especially the character Ocker portrayed by Ron Frazier in the 1960s Australian TV series ‘The Mavis Bramston Show’.
Peggy square  a small knitted woollen square, numbers of which are sewn together to make
blankets for charity, named after Peggy Huse, a young Hutt Valley, New Zealand, girl associated
with the initial popularising of the squares in the early 1930s.
quisling  a person who betrays his country by helping an occupying enemy force, after Vidkun
Quisling, the pro-Nazi Norwegian leader from 1940-45.
Rachmanism  the extortion of high rents from tenants in slum properties, from Percy Rachman,
an unscrupulous London landlord who died in 1962.
saxophone  a brass wind instrument popular with jazz musicians, invented by Belgian Adolphe
Sax, (1814-98), who was also responsible for the saxhorn and saxtuba.
trilby  a soft felt hat with an indented crown, named after Trilby O’Ferrall, the heroine of
George du Maurier’s novel Trilby, published in 1894. The hats were worn in the original London
stage production based on the novel. The plural can be either trilbies or trilbys.
Uzi  a type of sub-machine gun designed by Israeli army officer Uziel Gal after the Arab-Israeli
war of 1948.
vandyke  a short pointed beard, as sported by 17th century Flemish painter Sir Anthony
Vandyke, and many of the famous people who posed for him.
wellies  colloquial for ‘wellingtons’, waterproof rubber boots covering the calves, gumboots,
named after Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington (1769-1852), who wore such boots
during both his military and political career.
Xanthippe  a scolding or bad-tempered wife, from Xanthippe, the shrewish wife of Greek
philosopher Socrates.
yapp  to protect a book with leather covers, a process devised by 19th century London
bookseller and religious zealot William Yapp, who apparently became frustrated by the
increasing tattiness of the Bible he always carried in his pocket.
zinnia  an annual flower of the aster family, named by Linnaeus in honour of German botanist
Johann Gottfried Zinn (1727-59).