

# Eponyms

by **Edwin D. Reilly, Jr.**  
for the Sunday Gazette

“By the time the stairs had been hoovered, tea-towels hung up to dry,  
and the daily girl sent home, it was evening.”

–William Trevor, *Love and Summer*, Viking, NY, 2009, p. 8

I love the way our precious English language has been enhanced over the centuries through the introduction of colorful new words, neologisms concocted from the names of people. Such words are called “eponyms.” Some vanish quickly, but many have endured to the point where they are perfectly legal in Scrabble. The one used in the opening quote is more common in England than here, but even an American reader reading Trevor’s novel, set in Ireland, will quickly realize that the reference is to cleaning stairs with a particular brand of vacuum.

The particular Hoover whose name became an eponym was not our 31<sup>st</sup> president, Herbert Clark Hoover, but rather one William Henry “Boss” Hoover (1849-1932). Boss Hoover did not invent the vacuum that bears his name, but rather founded a very successful company based on a 1908 patent purchased from the actual inventor, a janitor by the name of James Murray Spangler (1848-1915). And Spangler, a star inventor who held many patents, could not become an eponym because by 1908, there was already a star spangled banner.

President Hoover has not been eponymized, but he did become the victim of another kind of wordplay. There was once a William Archibald Spooner (1844–1930), who had the reputation of uttering phrases for which the sounds that began words were interchanged such as to create amusing nonsense. My favorite “spoonerism” was uttered in 1931 by radio broadcaster Harry von Zell (1906-1981), who, during a live tribute on Hoover's birthday, introduced the President as “Hoobert Heever.”

Most eponyms are nouns, and tend to be less interesting than the rarer verb form. Many automobile names are eponyms, Ford being an obvious one. Other examples are the cars named for Louis-Joseph Chevrolet (1878-1941), Enzo Ferrari (1898-1988), Honda Scichiro (1906-1991), Ferdinand Porsche (1875-1951), Ransom Eli Olds (1864-1950), and one named for “a Toyota” (a palindrome!), in particular for Kiichiro Toyota (originally “Toyoda”), (1894-1952). And the very new all-electric Tesla is, I assume, named for the electrical wizard Nikola Tesla (1856-1943).

Automobile engines are often eponyms, too. There are ones named for Rudolf Diesel (1858-1913), Felix Wankel (1902-1988), Nikolaus Otto (1832-1891), and Gottlieb Daimler (1834-1900).

Guns are often named for their originators, notable ones being Luger, Uzi, Garand, Gatling, Winchester, and Glock. I’ll leave it to you to look up their full names and dates.

Several chemical elements are named for scientists. In alphabetic order are bohrium for Niels Bohr, copernicium for Nicolaus Copernicus, curium for Pierre and Marie Curie, einsteinium for Albert Einstein, fermium for Enrico Fermi, lawrencium for Ernest Lawrence, meitnerium for

Lise Meitner, mendelevium for Dmitri Mendeleev, nobelium for Alfred Nobel, roentgenium for Wilhelm Roentgen, rutherfordium for Ernest Rutherford, and seaborgium for Glenn T. Seaborg

It's easy to turn prominent names into adjectival eponyms. We have Jeffersonian democracy, Kennedyesque pertaining to JFK, Dickensian for Charles Dickens, Jamesian for Henry or William James, Caesarian for Julius Caesar, and a host of similar constructions.

The rare verbal eponyms include bowlderize from Thomas Bowlder (1754-1825), an English physician who created an expurgated edition of Shakespeare that he deemed more suitable for female readers; boycott from British land agent Charles Cunningham Boycott (1832-1897); galvanize from Luigi Galvani (1737-1798), an Italian physician who discovered that the muscles of dead frogs legs twitched when struck by a spark; gerrymander from Elbridge Gerry (1744-1814), fifth vice president of the U.S.; guillotine from French physician Joseph-Ignace Guillotin (1738-1814), who proposed (but did not invent) the guillotine even though he opposed capital punishment; hoover, which we've covered; lynch, from "Hanging Judge" Charles Lynch (1736-1796) a Virginia revolutionary who was prone to condemn loyalists, not negroes; mesmerize from German astrologist Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815); pasteurize from Louis Pasteur (1822-1895); sandwich from John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich (1718-1792); and silhouette from Étienne de Silhouette (1709-1767), the French Controller-General of Finance under Louis XV. Several of these eponyms can also be used as nouns, of course.

It seemed to me that "bilk" should have been a verbal eponym, but the only candidate I found was the Englishman Henry Bilk, born in 1856, who had nothing to do with that interesting verb.

The newest eponym is that named for Robert Bork, who was denied a seat on the Supreme Court in 1973 by supposedly overly partisan senators. I remember the hearings, and I thought that a sufficient reason not to confirm Bork was the incident whereby Attorney General Elliot Richardson and Deputy AG William French Smith resigned on principle when Richard Nixon ordered them, in turn, to fire special prosecutor Archibald Cox. But Solicitor General Bork, the third in command of the Justice Department, couldn't resist promotion, fired Cox, and stayed on the ship that sank in 1974. Ever since, nominees are often considered being "borked" if their confirmation hearings get unusually nasty and drawn out.

The inspiration for today's exercise is the recent incident whereby the notoriously unreliable blogger Andrew Breitbart caused Shirley Sherrod to be fired (though later rehired) based on a maliciously doctored transcript of a speech about race relations. I was tempted to say that Sherrod was breitbarded, but I think more deserving of the proposed new verbal eponym is Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, who fired Sherrod without asking her to explain her speech of years ago. When notable people are fired for no particular reason, the press likes to write that they were "sacked." Though there are people of surname Sack, "sack" is not an eponym. So from here on out, whenever someone is sacked through the particularly egregious error of a boss who jumps to an erroneous conclusion, I propose that we write that he or she has been "vilsacked."

Edwin D. Reilly, Jr. lives in Niskayuna and is a regular contributor to the Sunday Gazette opinion page.