

# 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 navy 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 Frazer 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 Perec *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).