



Book Review

The Real McCoy and 149 Other Eponyms. By CLAIRE COCK-STARKEY. Oxford: The Bodleian Library. 2018. Pp. 131. ISBN-13: 978-1-85124-498-0. \$17.50.

From *algorithm* to *wisteria*, this slim volume abounds with both common and uncommon eponyms arranged in alphabetical order. Hand-drawn images on the book jacket and the front and end pages depict a vacuum cleaner, a saxophone, and turn-of-the-20th-century pugilists. The curious juxtaposition of these objects alludes to the contents and raises the question, “What is the relationship between these illustrations and their eponyms?”.

The answer to that question, the author explains, begins with the Canton, Ohio, company named for its owner, William Henry Hoover. The tradename *Hoover* became a household word in the first half of the twentieth century when the company manufactured and distributed the vacuum cleaner machine, a household appliance that immediately appealed to American housewives. In England, the vacuum cleaner was so successful that the proper noun of the tradename, *Hoover*, was appropriated and then morphed into a common verb, to hoover, and a gerund, hoovering. Whatever the brand of their vacuum cleaners, the British cling to the use of the eponym *hoover* to clean their rugs. The saxophone, in the second illustration, was invented and patented by Antoine-Joseph Sax in the 1840s. It is a single-reed wind instrument made of metal with the ability to “overblow” a second octave at a higher register. Originally intended for military use, the instrument was so versatile that it was quickly adapted by musicians into the genre of modern jazz. In this instance, sax, the abbreviation of saxophone, makes use of the inventor’s name as its informal eponym. The final illustration, that of two pugilists, relates to the French circus performer and inventor of the flying trapeze act, Jules Leotard. His legacy was the one-piece, close-fitting garment that allowed him to perform aerobatics and to attract audiences because it showed off his physique. The leotard was later adopted by gymnasts and ballet dancers.

There is considerable variation among the 150 eponyms selected for inclusion in this book, and it is of singular importance to note that the author uses the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) definition of an eponym: a

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person after whom a discovery, invention, place, etc., is named or thought to be named (1). When there is a clear relationship between a person's name and its eponym, as for the founders of the separate temperature scales *Celsius* and *Fahrenheit*, the entry consists of a straightforward biography and a discussion of definition and usage. At other times, when the historical usage is uncertain, apocryphal, or speculative, the author is careful to insert appropriate caveats such as those found in the entries for *dunce* and *mackintosh*. Other entries include a brief historical discussion of the person, object, or god, and the evolution of changes to the name, its definition, and its use. Some of the terms are culturally specific. *Pavlova* (pudding), *JCB* (a mechanical digger), *biro* (ballpoint pen), and *chesterfield* (a leather sofa), for example, are British in origin and use, while eponyms such as *gerrymander*, *maverick*, *lynch*, and *foxtrot* have their origins in the United States.

The end pages (125–131) offer two useful indexes. The first, Index of Eponyms, divides entries into general subjects such as botanical, fashion, geographical, mythological, and scientific, followed by the appropriate page number. The Index of Names is more straightforward—i.e., the real *McCoy*, the genuine article—and an alphabetical list of the diverse eponyms in the book.

The author, Claire Cock-Starkey, describes herself as a writer, copy editor, and indexer of non-fiction titles. She has thirteen books and an extensive list of articles, published in hard copy and on blogs, to her credit. Two of her publications have the word “miscellany” in the title, an apt description of the focus of her research and writing, and of the title of this book as well. Cock-Starkey's website, *nonfictioness.com*, describes her work as “practical and entertaining”, and laced with “curious, unusual, and interesting facts derived from arcane historical research” in venerable institutions like the British and Bodleian Libraries and their extensive archives. Her work, quoting from the website, will appeal to “library enthusiasts, bibliophiles, [. . .] wordsmiths [. . .], and readers everywhere”. She advises her readers to “dip in and share” examples of highbrow and lowbrow material.

That said, before I dipped my toes very far into the text, Cock-Starkey's choice of eponyms raised questions. There is no doubt that this is a miscellaneous collection of catchy terms with interesting backstories. The author has clearly found a market for her well-researched publications. However, in an academic setting and certainly for *Names* readers, the OED definition of an eponym is at odds with, or at least more general than, the precise terms preferred by onomasticians. According to the International Council of Onomastic Sciences (ICOS), eponyms are proper names which form the basis of another name for a person, place, or object. *Bolivia*, named for Simon Bolivar, the *Hudson River* and *Hudson Bay*, named for Henry Hudson, and the *Munros*, mountains in Scotland named after Sir Hugh Munro, clearly fall under the broad classification of eponyms, and as such are included in this book. It should be noted, however, that these examples would also be categorized as *toponyms*.

Somewhat more problematic for me is the author's inclusion of words that were once associated with a specific name, but which no longer retain that link. They are common, rather than proper nouns. *Bloomer*, *boycott*, and *gerrymander* are commonplace words that are no longer capitalized and have largely lost their association with the person from whom the word was derived. To categorize them as eponyms, rather than deonyms, threatened to drive me *berserk* (furious Norse warriors)! For greater clarity, a symbol (*) with a corresponding key might have been attached to such entry words to denote the more precise onomastic definition. For example, indicating the specific term *deonym*, defined as “a common noun derived or originating from a proper name” (ICOS), would be helpful in preventing such dissonance for the academic reader, even though, as ICOS notes, “[i]n many languages the term *eponym* is used in this sense”.

Cock-Starkey includes a section of suggestions for further reading at the end of the book. It is quite possible that these titles might offer some solutions and address the questions raised in this review related to the derivation, usage, and definition of eponyms. Even without such closing thoughts, however, *The Real McCoy and 149 Other Eponyms* offers plenty to entertain both popular readers and serious onomasticians.

References

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