Notes and Queries

The word *nickname,* as many *Names* readers doubtless know already, takes its present shape from a misunderstanding that dates back to the days of Middle English. At one time, it was *an eke name*; that is to say, "an also-name" or one that was used in place of the regular name. Then, by a process exactly the opposite of the one which today gives us *an apron* for what was earlier *a napron, an ekename* became *a nekename* and later *a nickname.* Akin to nicknames are epithets, designations that are, as the etymology of the word implies, "placed upon." To many of us, nicknames are "pet names" that we use among family and friends; and epithets are descriptive tags associated with Homer (Hector *of the flashing helmet, golden* Aphrodite) or with royalty long gone (Richard *the Lion-Hearted,* Alfred *the Great,* or even the original *Bloody* Mary).

A careful reading of almost any newspaper or news magazine will demonstrate that epithets and nicknames are a strong force in contemporary nomenclature, and that they are not limited to intimate relationships or to the distant past. After noticing a few of these, one begins, inevitably, to seek a pattern among them and to wonder whether certain occupations or ways of life include more wearers and bestowers of epithets and nicknames than do others. The answer offered by your correspondent of the moment is a highly tentative "yes" which will be stated and qualified shortly.

We might begin with the world of crime and rascality, one of the most productive onomastic areas since the days of Robin Hood and Little John, to say nothing of Shakespeare's delightful pun in the name of Corporal Nym. A recent *New York Times* story mentioned Fred "No Nose" De Lucia and "Tony Ducks" Corallo as having been active recently. Once the stream begins, the names flow in spate: "Trigger" Burke, "Specs" O'Keefe, "Greasy Thumb" Guzik, "Baby-Face" Nelson, the brothers Capone ("Scarface" Al and Ralph "Bottles"), "Dutch" Schultz, "Lucky" Luciano — and a host of others. Interesting, too, is the absence of epithets for Jesse and Frank James or for John Dillinger, men who, in their day, were among the most hunted outlaws in the country. (Clyde Barrows had no epithet either, but he did have a moll named Bonnie Parker who smoked cigars, and that may have compensated somewhat.)

In the field of sports, where a breezy, informal climate prevails, hardly any major figure is without a nickname; some bring their own, others acquire them from team-mates or from sports writers. The names are legion, so to get to heartwood, let's first eliminate those that are obvious truncations (Di Mag, Klu) or hypocorisms (Jimmy, Nelly, Tony); for the time being, let's even put aside those epithets that include part of a given name in a combination often inspired by internal rhyme or alliteration (Stan-the-Man [Musial], Wilt-the-Stilt [Chamberlain], Slammin' Sammy [Snead], Joltin' Joe [DiMaggio]). There is still a plentiful supply, including "Scooter" Rizutto, "Crazy Legs" Hirsch, "Schoolboy" Rowe, "Dizzy" Dean, Joe Louis, who used to be called "The Brown Bomber," and, of course, George Herman Ruth, who was both "Babe" and "the Bambino" to fans. On the whole, the nicknames and epithets in athletics appear less original, and their origins are more readily guessed than those of the underworld.

Even Academia has nicknames and epithets, both in its groves and in its shrubbery. Many of them are not widely known because few of their owners are national figures; furthermore, there is good reason to believe that many a nickname that is common knowledge on the campus or in the school halls is *not* known to the person to whom it is applied. Surely the dear, sweet music teacher of long ago whose beastly little fourth graders called her "Old Pinch Goggles" year after year was unaware of the nickname that her pince-nez had occasioned. It is also difficult to believe that a physical education teacher named Miss Hurlbut could have known that to many generations of students she was "Miss Flingfanny." There are exceptions, however; the late "Wild Bill" Kiekhofer, at the University of Wisconsin, knew his name and gloried in it. "Papa" seems frequently given to older men teachers, and connotes affection; "Ma," on the other hand, is likely to be visited upon the rather pathetic kind of woman teacher who releases her maternal instinct on her not-always-willing students, and the name is usually applied with embarrassed derision.

Among printable military nicknames, we have "Skinny" Wainright, "Blood-and-Guts" Patton, and "Vinegar Joe" Stillwell to wonder about; but, colorful as soldiers and sailors may be, their nicknames seem, by and large, to be restricted to base.

Among professional musicians, the public nickname seems fairly well restricted to jazzmen — Dizzy Gillespie, Muggsy Spanier, Kid Ory, Satchmo Armstrong are typical; but outside of Toscanini, who was called "Maestro" by many who worked with him, classical musicians are known by forthright names such as Dame Myra Hess, Rudolf Serkin, Joan Sutherland, and Pablo Casals. We take our scientists seriously, too; Salk, Sabin, von Braun, Pauling — we know none of these by public nicknames. Poets are treated quite formally: Robert — neither "Rob" nor "Bob" — Frost, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams; Hemingway was known as "Papa" to some of his friends; John Steinbeck's characters have colorful epithets indeed, but his name remains plain. T. H. and E. B. White use businesslike initials; so do J. D. Salinger, C. P. Snow, and T. S. Eliot.

About a year ago, President Kennedy's resistance to the public use of "Jack" was discussed on these pages; shortly thereafter, Josef Berger, in an entertaining article in the *New York Times* magazine section, discussed some famous American historical nicknames. It would seem that statesmen and government figures seldom use nicknames on their own initiative during their careers; though Adenauer is called "Der Alte" it is assuredly not his idea, and one would be surprised indeed if the other members of the U.S. Supreme Court were to call their colleague by his college football nickname, "Whizzer" White.

Many, probably most, prominent people have nicknames that are used by their friends and families; the use of a public nickname is not necessarily a token of affection, though this seems to be the case with "Ike" Eisenhower. It remains a moot point how many of these names are, so to speak, kennel names and how many are call names, used consistently to the person's face. The field is open for speculation and collecting, particularly names on the recent or contemporary scene. Outlaws and athletes would, on the surface of it, seem to offer the greatest numbers, but this statement could be misleading. The sources of more unusual or less obvious nicknames and epithets would make an interesting study: "Scarface" Al Capone isn't very hard to figure out, but there's a sort of challenge in "Greasy Thumb" Guzik and "Tony Ducks" Corallo.

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NEWS OF *ANS* MEMBERS

ANS past president Mamie Meredith, far from real retirement as ever, and G. Thomas Fairclough have organized a Nebraska Folklore Society to collect, preserve, and eventually to publish folk tales, verses, and sayings. Interested persons may write Miss Meredith at 2340 Sumner Street, Lincoln 2, Nebraska.

Spring, 1962, saw a reprinting of Thornton's *American Glossary* edited by Louise W. Hanley with an introduction by Past President Margaret M. Bryant, who has had a busy year of it indeed, having published *Current American Usage* as well as a second edition of *Modern English and its Heritage.*

Another busy past president is George R. Stewart, who retired last June from the University of California, where he had taught for the last 39 years. His latest book, *The California Trail,* is soon to be published; when last heard from, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle,* he was off in the Sierra foothills, fishing trout and planning more good books.

Frederic G. Cassidy of Wisconsin, a member of the *ANS* Board of Managers, is the author of *Jamaica Talk,* a recently published account of the English language during the 300 years it has been spoken in his native Jamaica. He reports good progress on the forthcoming *Dictionary of Jamaican English,* and is also at work on the place-names of Brown County, Wisconsin.

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