

Rhyme and Reason: the Methods and Meanings of Cockney Rhyming Slang, Illustrated with Some Proper Names and Some Improper Phrases

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“**A**RF A COCK,” SAID an English actress once on a film set to director Alfred Hitchcock, “while I lemon me Germans!”¹ This was probably immediately understood by Mr. Hitchcock who, though he has been in Hollywood since *Rebecca* (1940), was born in England (1899) and may well be able to trade Cockney rhyming slang—for such it was—with the best of them.

Rhyming slang has received contributions from the West Coast of America and even the out-back of Australia (which gave us “Wee Georgie Wood”—he was an actor—for “good”) but it is essentially a London product, the invention and pride of those born within the sound of Bow Bells.² From the Cockneys it has spread, in examples such as “elephants” (for “drunk,” from “elephant’s trunk”), “pimple” (for “scotch,” from “pimple and blotch”), and “plates” (from “plates of meat” for “feet”) to the trendy West End and entered the lingo of the private (the English of course call them public) schools. Today it is part of the fashionable speech of almost all classes of British society. A small part, but worth notice. “Oh Sairey, Sairey,” wrote Dickens, “little do we know what lays afore us!”

¹ *I.e.*, “Half a cock [linnet = minute] while I lemon [squash = wash] German [bands = hands].” Reported in a television interview on the *Tomorrow* show, November 26, 1973. Of course to “wash one’s hands” has long been a euphemism for “go to the toilet,” a room often called with elegant variation the “lavatory.” Another theatrical story, from John Mitchell, goes: “When a technician on the film set of *Diamonds are Forever* said ‘It’s a bit taters, I must get me weasel,’ everyone laughed but many were bamboozled. Few of them had any idea that the Cockney technician was feeling cold and was off to get his coat. One American on the set said, ‘that language grabs me but I wish I knew what the hell it was all about.’” *Taters* [*in the mould*] = cold, *weasel* [*and stoat*] = coat. The opposite might be: “It’s a bit peasy in here so I’ll shed my uncle.” *Peas in a pot* = hot, *Uncle Bert* = shirt. Doesn’t that make *18 pence* (sense)?

A version of this paper was read at The Names Institute, Fairleigh Dickinson University, in May, 1975.

² Bow Church (St. Mary-le-Bow, that is *beau*) was destroyed in the Great Fire of London (1666), rebuilt by Sir Christopher Wren, badly damaged in World War II (September, 1940) by air raids, one of eight Wren churches in “The City” so hit. The tower is repaired but weak and the Bow Bells ring out over Cockney London no more.

Rhyming slang very likely began, like the argot of the criminal classes and the Parlyaree of the costermongers,³ with the desire to prevent outsiders and The Authorities from understanding what they might overhear, but though Parlyaree is compounded of foreign words, rhyming slang is made of English materials exclusively, familiar words being given a clever twist to create a puzzling vocabulary.

Bob Aylwin writes in *A Load of Cockney Cobblers*:

In all probability the slang was devised as a language in which they held confidential conversations, gave out nefarious information or sounded warnings to their fellow 'Tea leaves' (thieves) and at the same time caused uneasiness and bafflement to eavesdropping bystanders, police, or hangers on. After all [,] what normal law-abiding citizen would in these days understand 'The Grasses are keeping their minces open for the babbling brook who half-inched the tomfoolery from Oishe the front wheel skid?'

The preceding load of seeming gibberish is a bit too advanced for the beginner to work out for himself so I will translate. "The police are keeping their eyes open for the crook who pinched the jewellery from Moishe the Jew."⁴

We must add that "grasses" is from *grasshopper* (copper, policeman), one who cops (or grabs) you. *Mince pies* = eyes. *Babbling brook* (a touch of Tennyson here) = crook, itself an American slang term, as is

³ Parlyaree seems to have arisen in the mid-eighteenth century among actors. The word comes from *parliare* (to speak) in Italian and the language may have derived from the introduction of Italian opera into England in the early decades of that century. Most of its words are adapted from Italian: *donab* = "woman," *nantee* (from *niente*) as in *nantee palaver* = "don't talk," *saltee* (from *soldi*) = "penny," *letty* (from *letto*) = "bed," and *madza* (pronounced *medzer*, from *mezzo*) meaning "half," as in *madza caroon* = "half a crown" (formerly a coin worth two and a half shillings). Its use is dying out slowly. London's latest "gay" picture magazine is called *Bona*, Parlyaree for "good," with presumably a pun on "boner" (in American slang, a "hard on," an erection). It still flourishes in some street markets, and was given general popularity by the characters of Jules and Sandy (Kenneth Williams and Hugh Paddick) on the BBC Radio show starring Kenneth Horne (d. 1969), *Round the Horn*, written by Marty Feldman and Barry Took. Jules' greeting "How *bona to varda* your jolly old *eck*" (How good to see your face) still echoes in selections from *Round the Horn* scripts published by Woburn Press (1974), on a *Jules and Sandy* record, and in the popular memory.

⁴ Bob Aylwin, *A Load of Cockney Cobblers*, Edinburgh & London: Johnston & Bacon, 1973. Julian Franklyn's classic *Dictionary of Rhyming Slang*, to which Eric Partridge and others are indebted, is more reliable than Mr. Aylwin's popular little paperback, but the latter is an amusing introduction to the subject. The popularity of the subject is proved by a little booklet in its sixth impression (1976) on *Rhyming Cockney Slang* edited by Jack Jones (Abson Books, first published 1971).

pinched (which gives us *half-inched*—note that the rhyming slang equivalent can be longer and less convenient than the actual word avoided). *Tomfoolery* contains some of the contempt of the poor for the jewellery of the rich and is useful in discussing thefts because it sounds like a matter of no significance. *Skid* suggests *Yid*, a low term for a Jew (from *Yiddish*), and *front wheel* is there without explanation in this “translation.” Another and more common word for *Jew* is *teapot* (*teapot lid* = *Yid*) and sometimes a *car park* (British for our “parking lot,” rhyming with *copper’s nark*, a police informer) will “tip off” the Bobbies (or Peelers, from the founder of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Robert Peel, 1788-1850). Cockney London was the first area to be so policed: the first (we might say keystone) cops were the Bow Street Runners. Mr. Aylwin’s “translation” needs some correction as well as explanation: *grass*s are really not policemen but *coppers’ narks* who “grass” (American gangsters would say “squeal” or “talk”) to the law-enforcement men. The subject is so complex that even the experts can go wrong on many a *dicky bird* (word) and be a nitwit (Dutch: *niet wit* = I don’t know).

The language of the Cockneys did much to determine the pronunciation of Australian and the vocabulary of South African English and it often creeps in where it is least expected and, perhaps, even unnoticed. In Sir Noël Coward’s song about *The Rose and Crown* (a popular pub name derived from the badge of the Tudor sovereigns, in Cockney slang the *Lousy Brown*) and its Saturday-night cheer there are these lines:

If you find that
 You’re weary of life
 And your trouble and strife
 And the kids have got you down
 It’ll all come right
 On Saturday night
 At *The Rose and Crown*.

An American might not suspect that “trouble and strife” are not two things but one: a wife.

Here Cockney humor and outlook are reflected in the slang created, though it must be said that Cockneys are not usually unsentimental about their wives.⁵ Humor is seen also in the way indelicacies are

⁵ More typical is this authentic old Music Hall song:

handled: *raspberry* = fart (from *raspberry tart*), a word Americans use for the “Bronx cheer” without being aware of its origin. The Cockneys call a child a *Godfer* (from *God forbid* = kid). A comedy in the vulgar, popular “Carry On” series was called *Carry on Up the Khyber*, hinting to the informed who recognize that *Khyber Pass* (famous from the days of the British *raj* in India) rhymes with *ass*. (For the latter the British are much more likely to use the childhood term, *bum*, part of the nursery language that everywhere survives in *ta* for “thank you,” etc.) No use objecting that the Cockney say *arse* and that it does not rhyme; how do you think he pronounces *pass*? (A Spanish teacher telling an East London class to “roll your r’s” is asking for trouble. . . .)

Sometimes the rhyme is extremely obscure, as are many jokes based on the slang. Few Americans would see why a British comedian was severely censored for saying on the air that he met Diana Dors on a narrow bridge and “didn’t know whether to toss himself off or block her passage,” which is to say masturbate or fornicate. Similarly, few or none would see the humor in this joke from a recreation at The Players’ Club of an old Music Hall act: “She thought Bristol Cream was a bust developer.” Now Cockney jokes are often subtle (“I shouldn’t want to be a pawnbroker’s sign on a night this cold!”, where you have to know about the fabulous Brass Monkey) but this one’s elucidation requires that you know (a) Bristol Cream is a brand of sherry and (b) *Bristols* = breasts because *Bristol City* rhymes with *titty*, the *y* being a common way in our language to make a diminutive or familiar thing out of a word. The speed at which these quips are supposed to be assimilated is underscored by the fact that they are thrown off at rapid pace by such comedians as Frankie Howerd (who ought to be called “King Leer,” I think) and the team who call themselves Morecambe (a

We’ve been together now for forty years
And it don’t seem a day too much.
There ain’t a lady living in the land } repeat
As I’d swop for my dear old Dutch }

The old Music Hall songs abound in slang. Witness:

I’m a slasher, a dasher, the up-to-date masher,
I’m Percy from Pimlico.

(Surely capitalizing on *Burlington Bertie from Bow*). And:

Boiled beef and carrots, boiled beef and carrots,
That’s the stuff for your Darby kell
Makes you fat and keeps you well.

The language there is as dated as the Edwardian desire to be fat, to ape the former Prince of Wales—and to look prosperous. The second line of

Oh, the fairies! *whoa* the fairies!
Nothing but splendour and feminine gender!

shows how slang has changed from Victorian times.

seaside resort) and Wise (perhaps a real name). On BBC television on October 29, 1975 they gave us this little exchange:

I grew spices for a man in India.
Ginger?
No, he was married.

Got it? No? Well *ginger beer* = queer. As Frankie Howerd says when they miss: "Please yourself!"

There's plenty more of the same on the stage. I think of Lionel Bart's comedy *Fings Ain't What They Used Ter Be*, the only stageplay I have ever seen that (like *Sparrows Don't Sing* in the films) needed subtitles. A Cockney girl rejects the present of a parrot because it is a *stuffed* bird. Her boyfriend's reply is: "Look 'oo's talkin'!" It may be enough to explain that a *bird* is a girl, as in the comedy title *The Secretary Bird*. Americans who flock to London's West End theatres must truly appreciate Shaw's remark that the United States and Britain are "divided by a common language."⁶ In one evening of watching the *custard* (custard and jelly = telly) in the London summer of 1977, I heard *scarper* on a musical nostalgia show, a comedy show, and a new cops-and-robbers series. No American would know the word. Presumably any Englishman would know it was *scapa* (Scapa Flow = go), to go, to flee. I have seen *loopers* (loop-the-loop = soup) on several (admittedly cutesy) London menus and often eaten *Kate and Sydney* (steak and kidney) pie, unknown as such in America.

American slang can be obscure too, but is widely known through such things as detective stories (in novels and on television) and the international youth cult of Rock 'n' Roll. But who can cope with *trolley* = copulate (from *trolley and truck*, in a country where our truck is a van!) and *Mozart* = drunk (from Mozart and Liszt and the American *pissed*, not *urinated* but *blotto*)?

Personalities well-known in Britain, unknown abroad, make it difficult to see that (for example) the comedy teams of Naughton & Gold and Nervo & Knox (who, with "Monsewer" Eddie Grey formed the famous Crazy Gang in palmier days) give us both *naughton* (cold) and *nervo* (television—otherwise "the box," often called the "telly").

⁶ I cannot forbear repeating a joke I have told before: an American struggling with British pronunciations of *Cholmondeley*, *Chiswick*, *garage*, etc., gave up and went home after he turned into the Strand and saw a theatre marquee with the words: GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S PYGMALION, PRONOUNCED SUCCESS!

The British still recall murderers *Jack the Ripper* (kipper) and *Dr. Crippin* (dripping, as in “bread and dripping”) and novelist *Marie Corelli* (telly, television).

Ever wonder why *daffy* means *silly*? (Remember the cartoon character Daffy Duck?) Well, *daffy-down-dilly* rhymes—silly! That’s “too bloody Irish,” which is to say true (*Irish stew*), while “that’s Irish” means not true but stupid.⁷

Some are so obscure as to be incredible: *taters* (cold). *Potatoes in the mould*, and then *potatoes* become *'taters* (as the Irish made them *praties*: “I met her in the garden where the praties grow”). Speaking of pub names elsewhere, I have dealt with the derivation of *Elephant and Castle* from *Infanta de Castilla* and now must note it means *ass* (recall it is pronounced *arse*) in Cockney slang. I never could find out why, even from those who used it, until I came across a bawdy song (the British often call them *rugby* songs, presumably because they are bawled in the showers by footballers) sung to the lilting strains of the Scottish folksong, *The Tangle o' the Isles*:

Oh, my sister's name is Tilly,
She's a whore in Picadilly,
And my mother is another in The Strand.
And my brother peddles arsehole
At the Elephant and Castle.
We're the finest f--ing family in the land.⁸

⁷ What Americans call “Polish Jokes” the British call “Irish jokes.” Folklore is full of bigotry disguised as humor in the Irish Firing Squad (it forms up in a circle); the Irishman who, finding his wife in bed with another man, pulls a pistol, puts it to his temple, and when the man in bed laughs with relief says: “Don’t laugh. You’re next”; “Paddy’s dead”: “What did he die of?”; “Nothing serious”; the Ulster Dairy Board advertising jobs available on milk trucks as rear gunners; Irishman to Farmer: “Could you use me on the land?”; Farmer: “No, we’ve got special stuff for that”; and the tale of the English dropping a hydrogen bomb on central Belfast as the only way of ending the Troubles in Northern Ireland (it caused £17 damage). In the jests of a people as well as in their language is what Ariès has called *l’histoire de mentalité* and they deserve study too. The jokes can show the indomitable spirit of a people (as in Leo Rosten’s *The Joys of Yiddish*) or the prejudices they have to suffer or cultivate. Cockney rhyming slang tells one a great deal about the cleverness and cheerfulness of its creators, even their love of puns (“There’s a great deal in Shoreditch but a shortage in Deal”).

⁸ Elephant and Castle (named from a nearby pub) was once a pretty tough section of South Bank London. Today it is a modern, ugly maze of new highrises and council flats (government housing developments) and the major danger is from traffic. Other London areas named from pubs include Swiss Cottage (a name from a nineteenth century opera) and The Angel, Islington (originally an old coaching inn). These have not been suitable for slang—what rhymes with *cottage* and *Islington*? But *Chalk Farm* yields *arm*.

The fact that the slang contains other meanings for *elephant*, or that *au fond* there are plenty of terms for *bottom—bottle* (and glass), *North Pole* (hole), and *Khyber* (as we have said)—deters no one. The peculiar Cockney pronunciation of *castle* (carsole) is to be found also in rhyming slang such as *Crimea* (beer), *Balaclava* and *chaver*, and so on.⁹

Undoubtedly Cockney rhyming slang was intended to be hard to decipher and today its origins are lost to many who use it extensively and frequently so that, to some extent, one cannot properly study its etymology merely by consulting what we might call native speakers, any more than one can ask the average English speaker to provide information about the “day’s eye” in *daisy* or the lion’s teeth in *dandelion*. People do not have to know etymologies to be able to speak a language fluently: *etymology*, *entomology*—both words “bug” them!

While some examples of rhyming slang are obscure, as far as their origins are concerned, even to their users, others are pretty well understood among those with any curiosity at all about the many strange dialects offered as “English,” from the *Strine* of the Australians (whom the Cockneys always ask: “How does it feel to be the right way up?”) to the constipated vowels of South Kensington and the Eliza-Doolittle howls of the East End. Time was when Cockney rhyming slang was so widely used that Henry George Lupino, a member of an old British stage family who appeared in music hall and cinema as Lupino Lane (1892-1959), was able to base a whole vaudeville act on it. Here is a snatch of the dialogue from the musical *Me and My Girl*, filmed (1939) after a long run on stage (owing largely to the hit song, *The Lambeth Walk*):

Bill Snibson: . . . I nearly lost me titfa.

Omnes: Titfa?

Bill: Me tit for tat.

Omnes: Tit for tat?

Bill: Me hat! It was so windy I had to pull it over me gingerbread.

Omnes: Gingerbread?

Bill: Me lump of lead!

Omnes: Lump of lead?

Bill: Me Uncle Ned.

Omnes: Uncle Ned?

Bill: O, me head—the empty part of me.

⁹ *Chaver*, really, and meaning sexual intercourse; perhaps derived from the French *chauffer* (to heat up) or the Romany *charvo* (to fool around with).

Now it is true that this passage sees Bill challenged to explain, but the writers clearly assume that the audience is “way ahead” of Omnes on the stage. The difficulty that arises from several equivalents in slang for a single simple word is also apparent.¹⁰

Most speakers of *apples* = stairs (*apples and pears*), *bees* = money (*bees and honey*), and *Rosy* = a *cuppa* (tea) know the full phrase, though the custom is to use but part of it. But many will say *boracic* (broke, impecunious) with no knowledge that it comes from *boracic lint*, that is *skint*.¹¹ So established are *Dutch treat* (from *eating in Dutch Street*) and *it's a breeze* (from *it's easy*) that the connections with rhyming slang pass unnoticed, as does *Jim Crow* from *saltimbanco* (an Italian word formerly used for street clowns and buskers, which is related to the mountebanks who jumped up on benches to entertain in the palaces of Renaissance noblemen).¹²

The euphemistic “perfumed terms of the time” (as Ben Jonson called them) embody much of the subtlety and humor of the Cockney, like his rhyming slang mysterious to outsiders. Take *vinegar boy*. He passes worthless cheques and leaves a sour taste in the mouth of those whom his sharp practices injure. Take *peter that!*, the Cockney for “shut up!,” derived (believe it or not) from the concept of container in *portmanteau*. So *U.S.* is not these United States but *fish* in the language of jails (gaols). It means “unconditional surrender” and takes an expert such as Eric Partridge in his *Dictionary of the Underworld: British and American* to elucidate:

a constant, overworked prison joke: the fish did not die,
it made no struggle, but just surrendered unconditionally.

Thus Fleet Street is Freshwater Bay in *The Sinks of London Laid Open* (1878) and *guy* for a dark lantern is explained in *Lexicon Balantronicum* (1811) as “an allusion to Guy Faux [Fawkes], the principal

¹⁰ Actually the writers seem to slip up, for *Uncle Ned* is bed, not head. But rhyming slang is an art, not an exact science; the practitioner is to be permitted a certain latitude. To argue whether tea is *Rosy Lea* or (as some have it) *Rosie O'Lee* is truly *Westminster* (*Westminster Abbey*, shabby).

¹¹ Eric Partridge defines *skint* as “very short of or wholly without money: jocular, lower classes and military: C. 20,” though it is older than our century. He adds: “I.e. *skinned*,” which helps.

¹² The husband of Gracie Fields worked under the name of Monty Banks. Another idea: “*Jim Crow*, despite its nineteenth-century American appearance, seems to go back to an earlier Worcestershire expression, *Jim Crow and Mary Anne*, used to describe unsettled weather”—Mario Pei, *The Story of English* (New York, 1968), s.v.

actor in the gunpowder plot," so one has to know both the geography and the history of old London as well as being sharp enough to discern that "you will ride a horse foaled by an acorn" (current mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries) means "you will be hanged," referring to the oaken gallows. As sure as there is an I suppose [nose] on your deuce 'n' ace [face], it is clever—if not "too clever by 'arf." Watch out or you will be "in the wrong box."¹³

English is rich in phrases referring to proper names, real or fictional. Just think of "a proper Charlie" (fool, victim), a charlie horse and Charlie over the Water ("The Young Pretender," "The Young Chevalier," Bonnie Prince Charlie); Davey Jones (of the locker); "rob Peter to pay Paul"; Nosy Parker (a real archbishop); Tom o' Bedlam (from St. Mary of Bethlehem's mental hospital); "standing Peter" (but not "standing pat"); Hop o' My Thumb and Tom Thumb; David and Jonathan and other figures from the Bible; a Johnny Newcome (new-born baby) and a Johnny Come-Lately and a Johannes Factotum (which is how the learned playwright Robert Greene put down his contemporary Shakespeare for being what we would now call a Jack of all Trades); "waiting for John Long" (a long time) and John Barley-corn; jackanapes and Jack in the Pulpit and Jack Tar and Jack o' Lantern; a Joey¹⁴ and a Mick (Irishman) and a Dago (from Diego?); and "every Tom, Dick and Harry," not to mention the more vulgar connotations of *peter*, *john*, *roger*, *dick*, etc. Let us take a butcher or varda (from the Romany *varter*, to observe) at how proper names figure in the clever inventions of rhyming slang in which (as Julian Franklyn writes in *The Cockney*, 1953), "in place of a word, a phrase consisting of two or three words that rhyme with it, is used." Sometimes these "two or three words" are proper names, names of people and places familiar (or once familiar) to the Cockneys but now often requiring some explanation, even to the users thereof.

If you are ready, old cock,¹⁵ we may as well begin with the enter-

¹³ This expression (best-known perhaps because of the title *The Wrong Box*—a joke about a coffin—in the comic novel Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in collaboration with his American brother-in-law) is sixteenth century. (Cf. Abraham Fleming, *Translation of Caius on Dogs*, 1575.) Cockney rhyming slang is principally nineteenth and twentieth century, "introduced about twelve or fifteen years ago" asserted "A London Antiquary" in *The Slang Dictionary*, written in 1858 and published the next year in London by John Camden Hotten (reprinted by Chatto & Windus, 1922).

¹⁴ Both a goat (from Joseph Hume, 1775-1855, who championed this coin in Parliament) and a clown (from the great Grimaldi).

¹⁵ This endearment (used like "ducks" or "luv") comes (I think) not from "game cock" but from "Cockney" itself. In Michael Davitt's *Leaves from a Prison Dairy* (1891) it seems equivalent to "Londoner": "Manchester 'hooks' [pickpockets] boast of being the rivals [equals] of

tainments which, with the “thrupperny hops” (three-penny dances) and “knees-up” and “booze-ups” in that poor man’s club the pub (public house), relieved the immense pressures on the poor in Victorian England—the music halls, the *empire*s of popular pleasure. Today this art form is almost gone¹⁶ and the subject of lively antiquarianism in the British Music Hall Society but once its stars were as famous as any matinee idols or film stars and their names were ideal raw material for rhyming slang. Today who remembers Lupino Lane (who gave us *Bonnie Dundee* for *flea*, *Bucks* [Buckinghamshire] *bussar* for *cigar*, *Harry Tag* (bag), *Herman Finck* (ink), and many other examples, making a whole career out of the use of this special language as others did with doubletalk and such in a tradition carried on, in a way by Prof. Irwin Corey, “The World’s Foremost Authority” on gobbledygook and mouth-filling nonsense or Daisy Dormer (warmer)? There was Edna May—now an Edna is a way—and Gertie Gitana, so that a Gertie is now a banana. (This fruit made theatrical history long before “The Black Venus,” Josephine “La Belle” Baker came on stage at the Folies Bergères wearing a skirt of them—and little or nothing else. The music-hall hit *Let’s All go Down the Strand* contained the famous “Ave a banana!” and created a musical phrase as beloved and hackneyed in Britain as the *Dum-diddy-ab-dad*, *DUM DUM* and the few notes that dance bands used to employ to signal the end of a “set,” a phrase so trite that George Gershwin accepted the challenge of making it the

the ‘cocks,’ or Londoners, in the art of obtaining other people’s property without paying for it.” In rhyming slang *cock* (and hen) equals ten (pounds).

¹⁶ The Player’s Theatre (since 1946 on the site of the old Arches and Hungerford Music Hall and Carlo Gatti’s “Under the Arches” beneath Charing Cross Station in London) preserves the tradition. The BBC has run a series (*The Good Old Days*) from a famous old music hall in Leeds, now something of a self-conscious museum piece (the audience attends in period costume). Early studies such as C. Douglas Stuart and A. J. Park’s *The Variety Stage* (1895) were followed in this century by numerous memoirs and biographies of music hall personalities such as Charles Coborn (*The Man Who Broke the Bank*, 1930), Albert Chevalier (*Before I Forget*, 1930), George Robey (*Looking Back on My Life*, 1916, and by Peter Cotes, 1972), Marie Lloyd (by Naomi Jacob, 1936, and by Daniel Farson, 1972), Jimmy Glover (*Jimmy Glover, His Book*, 1911), Charles Morton (by W. H. Morton and H. Chance Newton, 1905), Harry Randall (*Harry Randall—Old Time Comedian*, London, n.d.), Dan Leno (by J. Hickory Wood, 1905), Emily Soldene (*My Theatrical and Musical Recollections*, 1897), etc. Now collectors and enthusiasts of nostalgia, theatricalia, old photographs and old phonograph records, etc., have provided a ready market for modern successors to George Gamble’s *The “Halls”* (1901) and M. Wilson Disher’s *Winkles and Champagne* (1938). These include: Raymond Manders and Joe Mitchenson’s *British Music Hall: A Story in Pictures* (1965), *British Music Hall Songs* (ed. Peter Davidson), Diana Howard’s *London Theatres and Music Halls—1850-1950* (Library Association, 1969), G. J. Mellor’s *Northern Music Halls* (1970), Peter Gammond’s *Your Own, Your Very Own* (1971—a phrase commonly used by the “chairman” in introducing an *artiste*), and Ronald Pearsall’s *Victorian Popular Music* (1973).

basis of *The Man I Love*).¹⁷ Jenny Hills (c. 1870) gave us *Jennies* for *pills* (also suggesting “testi-kills,” balls, nonsense—as do the more modern *Beecham’s Pills*) and *Kate Karney* a near rhyme for *Army*. R. J. Knowles (“the very Peculiar Comedian,” of the ’90’s) provided a rhyme for *holes* (of all sorts) and a song of 1863 yielded *Tommy Dodd* for both *odd* and *sod* (related to *sodomy*, as in “sod you!” and puns on the Irishman’s “Ould Sod”).¹⁸ *Victoria Monk* means *drunk* (though she was Victoria Monks, the star who made *Won’t You Come Home, Bill Bailey?* a smash in Britain). We have already noted *Wee Georgie* (Wood), from Australian music hall, gave us “is it any Wee Georgie?” (any good?). Wilkie Bard gave us a rhyme for (playing) *card* and, especially, for admission card or ticket—what Americans would call an *Annie Oakley*.¹⁹

From names in music-hall songs came other rhyming slang examples such as *Obadiab* (fire), as *left in the lurch* was associated with *church*.

Up, up, a little bit higher,
Obahiah, do!

(The lady is on a swing.) And the plaintive refrain:

There was I, waiting at the church,
Left in the lurch, waiting at the church. . . .

“I can’t get away to marry you today.
My wife won’t let me.”

It is possible that *Tom Tug* (mug) ultimately derives from a song published by Francis Day & Hunter called *Billy Muggins*:

I’m Billy Muggins—commonly known as a juggins,
Silly Billy, that’s what my friends call me. . . .

¹⁷ The banana crops up in numerous music-hall ditties, as for example this refusal of the destitute dandy to accept the Prince of Wales’ invitation to “Come up and see mother”:

I just had a banana
With Lady Diana.
I’m Burlington Bertie from Bow.

It is to be expected that it was sometimes a dirty Gertie, a banana with a sexual innuendo.

¹⁸

Heads or tails are sure to win,
Tommy Dodd, Tommy Dodd.

The idea of “tails,” though not intended in the song, was helpful.

¹⁹ Elsewhere in print I have explained that this circus sharpshooter used to punch holes in playing cards resembling the holes punched by the management of “Buffalo Bill” Cody’s show in free or “complimentary” passes. Today these tickets do not bear holes and are so called *freebies*, used to pay off favors or to *paper the house* (so it will not look too empty).

I'm Muggins the Juggins
And Muggins I'll always be.

There is no reference here, surely, to William IV, Victoria's predecessor, probably Britain's dimmest monarch ("Silly Billy" he was called), but *mug* may be from *muggins*. *Juggins* did not catch on.

Phrases like that still played by ambient ice-cream vans in London

Let me alone-i-o, all on my own-i-o

(from *Oh, Oh, Antonio*) and

Pity the poor drunkard's child

(from *Please Sell No More Drink to My Father*) heard from the music-hall stage became for a time part of everyone's "flash language." The use of *Derby Kelly* (for belly) in *Boiled Beef and Carrots* shows the stage but echoed back the public voice (as Dr. Johnson once said). Let us repeat it:

Boiled beef and carrots, boiled beef and carrots,
That's the stuff for your Derby kell,
Makes you fat and keeps you well.

It was a fair and useful exchange.

The "legitimate" theatre, vaudeville, the cinema all in their time contributed names to rhyming slang: *Beattie & Babs* (crabs) harks back to entertainers of the 1930's; Binnie Hale gave her name to a (sad) tale (or con man's story); Charlie Wiggins his to an actor's *diggings* (temporary lodgings on tour); Dad and Dave, a radio team, to *shave*; Dolly Varden (who got her name from Charles Dickens)²⁰ to *garden* (the sort you send children out to play in, not where you grow things really); Dame Ellen Terry (1848-1928) is unsuitably remembered in *jerry* (chamber pot);²¹ George Robey the "Prime Minister of Mirth" is *toby* and Sir Harry Lauder the Scots comedian is *border*; Cockney pronunciation is also required to make a rhyme for *window* out of *Jenny Linder* (from "The Swedish Nightingale," Jenny Lind). The movies have contributed *Lillian Gish* (fish), *Tom Mix* (six), and *Mae West* (breast—a name also given to an inflatable life-jacket, as Americans

²⁰ Dickens' works also supplied *Artful Dodger* (lodger), *Barnaby* (Rudge—judge), and *Tale of Two Cities* (titties).

²¹ *Jerry* seems to derive from *Jeremiah*, that from Jeroboam (a King of Israel who gave his name to an especially large wine bottle).

know), but more recent stars are not commemorated. Musicals gave us Dame *Vera Lynn* (gin) and *San Toy* (a musical hit before World War I) for *boy* (though *Tommy Toy* and other rhymes tend to replace this very dated item). From the pantomimes, presumably, come *Sinbad the Sailor* (tailor) and from the Victorian melodrama *Sweeney Todd* (police Flying Squad, what Americans might call a tactical force). *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, cutting the throats of his victims in the barber chair and dropping the corpses into the cellar, where they were chopped up for meat pies, made a strong impression on generations of theatregoers. George Dibdin Pitt actually called his play which premiered at The Britannia Theatre (or Saloon) in the High Street, Hoxton, January 22, 1847, *The String of Pearls; or, The Fiend of Fleet Street*. The public singled out its real attraction and dubbed it *Sweeney Todd*. I saw it produced on St. Catherine Street in Montreal under the latter title as late as the 1940's. James Curtis in *The Gilt Kid* (1936) called the Flying Squad "The Sweenies" and in 1975 *The Sweeney* was the title of a BBC-TV series ("created by Ian Kennedy-Martin") about The Flying Squad, proving that the general public is still counted on as being familiar with the slang name.

From about the same 10-20-30 tradition (the American prices of admission to the *mellers*) come *Colleen Bawn* (horn, that is erection—the joke going back at least as far as Mr. Horner in Wycherley's Restoration comic masterpiece, *The Country Wife*), a Dion Boucicault show of 1862, an Irish play from the author of *The Octoroon*, *The Streets of New York*, etc., and maybe even *Orinoker* (poker). Of the latter Julian Franklyn writes in his authoritative *Dictionary of Rhyming Slang* (p. 105):

The term is suspect: in addition to the fact that it is untraceable, and apparently meaningless, it is not the kind of word employed by Cockneys or other users of rhyming slang. It probably derives from a mishearing.

I venture to guess it might be *Orinooka*, variant title, *Orinooko* (*The Royal Slave*), which gained great popularity as both novel and play, though earlier than Cockney slang (only one or two bits of which date to the seventeenth century). It was from the pen of England's very first major popular woman writer, Mrs. Aphra Behn. *Orinoker* is precisely what a Cockney would make of it, looking at it "a bit old-fashioned-like." How are we to under-con-stumble (the earlier form was "jerry-cum-mumble") to the meanings when the only "meaning" the rhyme

has to have is that it rhymes? The rhyme's the reason, and when *Mae West* fits *breast*, it is just by accident. A Cockney will go way out for a rhyme, as *on the mozzle and brocha* (for door-to-door peddling) demonstrates abundantly.²² And of course there is the characteristic Cockney pronunciation, only a bit of which is illustrated in "It's the 'ammer, 'ammer, 'ammer on the 'ard 'ighway wot 'urts the 'orses' 'eads." Many English dialects, however, drop aspirates and Cockney is most distinguished by the changes obvious in "Me farver finks l'il abaht wot me muvver 'as to sye."

More obscure are stage personalities Oscar Asche (cash; actor 1871-1936), Owen Nares (stairs), Harry Randall (candle), and Australian Roy Sleuce (deuce)—the latter a blend of his stagename (Roy René) and his real name (Harry Van der Sluice) with a spelling variation thrown in for good measure. That is as difficult as *Dieu et mon droit* (the royal motto) used in World War I trenches to mean "every man for himself." (To fathom that one you must tumble or twig to the fact that *droit* was pronounced, by the people who made *Ypres* into "Wipers" and *vin blanc* into *plonk*, a word still in wide use in Britain, as "drought"—which gave a rhyme for "f-k you, Jack, I'm alright.")²³

"Because everyone can talk, everybody thinks he can talk about language," complained Goethe. Not everyone can talk about *this* sort of language! One might well *stop* (shut) one's *north* (opposite of south = mouth).

The names of "showbiz" luminaries tend to fade. Less likely to be obscure are place-names. These, too, have contributed to Cockney rhyming slang and among them are Barnet (*Barnet Fair* is *bair*; while in Australia and the West Coast of the U.S., where *diggers* brought the slang with The Gold Rush, it is *Barney Fair*),²⁴ Bath (*Bath bun* is *son*), Botany Bay (*hit the bay*, sleep or *kip*),²⁵ Burton on Trent (*rent*, also

²² An American might note the Yiddish words for "good luck" (*mazel tov*) and "blessing" here more quickly than an Englishman, especially a Londoner (though there are Jews in the East End, and Golder's Green, as well as in the Midlands). The American would likely miss the rhyme intended, *on the knocker*. *Knockers* in American slang tend to be on—well, *Mae West* again—rather than on doors.

²³ This phrase is still well enough known in our generation to permit a Peter Sellers film to be titled *I'm Alright, Jack*.

²⁴ *Vide: Detective Fiction Weekly* for April 23, 1938, says Julian Franklyn, and Ernest Booth in *American Mercury* for May 1928.

²⁵ This is only for Australians (and Americans influenced by their slang). This place to which criminals were "transported for life" has been forgotten more or less in England, though the joke goes: "Australia? Where all the convicts go?" The reply is: "England? Where all the convicts come from?" Nor would a Britisher care about *Steak and kidney* (Sydney), though the place figures in another folk jest: two Australians got married but turned out to be homosexual, so she went back to Adelaide and he went back to Sydney.

featured in the World War II flyboys' word for "packing it in": *gone for a Burton*, out for a beer manufactured there—"Or why was Burton built on Trent?" asks A. E. Housman of *The Shropshire Lad*), Bushey Park (*lark*, the whim, not the bird), Camden Town (*brown*, that is a copper coin, while silver is *white*), Chalk Farm (*arm* or *'arm*), Charing Cross (*horse*), Chatham and Dover (from The London, Chatham and Dover Railway—*give over*, Cockney for "quit" or "stop"—often accompanied by "*DO you mind?*" or "*Do me a FAVour!*"), Chevy Chase (*face*—also a word *chivvy* from this source), Colney Hatch (matches—in theatre parlance), Covent Garden (farthing, pronounced *farden*, no longer a coin but, like a *scot* or a *rap*, "scot free," "don't give a rap," still in the language: "not worth a farthing"), Elephant and Castle (already dealt with)—and here we might self-justifyingly cite a passage from Capt. Francis Grose's Preface to his *Classic Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (eighteenth century):

when an indelicate or immodest word has obtruded itself for explanation, he [the writer] has endeavoured to get rid of it in the most delicate manner possible; and none has been admitted but such as either could not be left out without rendering the work incomplete, or in some manner compensate by their wit for the trespass committed on decorum.²⁶

Back to place-names, if you are still with us. Finnsbury Park (*lamp*, arc), France and Spain (rain), Gates of Rome (home—also Pope of Rome), Glasgow (boat—coat), Hackney Marsh (glass—of strong drink), Hampton Wick (prick—"he gets on my wick" means "he bugs me"), Isle of France (dance), Isle of Wight (right), Kentucky horn (corn—whiskey). (*Kentucky* is coming to mean "pancake house" or "fried chicken" because of food establishments in the land of wimpys and "chips with everything.") Khyber Pass we have noted before, but we might stress it designates the anus, not the buttocks. Kilkenny is penny, Kilarney is barmy (crazy), and so is Kilkenny cats (bats). London fog is dog. (London is "The Smoke" to the locals as in Margery Allingham's thriller *Tiger in The Smoke*.) Long Acre (baker), Maidstone jailer (tailor), St. Martin-le-Grand (hand), Newgate (gaol-tale, of woe), Newington Butts (guts, as in courage), Niagara Falls (balls—

²⁶ Those who eschew footnotes will not be faced, then, with such as *Tom Tit* (shit), *rattle* (and *biss*—piss), *you and me* (pee), *me and you* (screw), or *J. Arthur* (Rank—wank, that is masturbate). A new nightclub (disco) in Chelsea's King's Road is called "J. Arthur." The firm of Levy & Frank is now less known, less useful, than this cinema magnate.

which is nonsense, rubbish; or stalls—which are theatre seats), Oxford (scholar—dollar, collar),²⁷ Pall Mall (girl—either “Pell Mell, gell” or “Paow Maow, gaow” as Franklyn has it), Peckham Rye (tie—also *pig’s fry*), Plymouth (cloak-oak, a cudgel, one of the very few seventeenth century examples if indeed a seventeenth century source can be cited, which I have never seen), Pompey ’ore (24 in the game of Housie-Housie, where Pompey is Portsmouth, a seaport noted for its *two by fours*, whores, at least in sailing days), River Ouse (booze—as a verb), Scapa Flow (go—from the naval engagement of World War I combined with the Parlyaree for “escaper,” *scarper*), String of Beads (Leeds), Sydney Harbour (barber),²⁸ Tilbury Docks (socks; *Tommy Rocks, Goldie Locks, Chicken Pox, Nervo and Knox*, etc.), Tooting (Bec—peck, as in “I could scoff a peck,” meaning “I’m hungry”), Yarmouth (bloater—motor, that is automobile, also *tea for two and a bloater* rendered as *tea for*), Yorkshire (tyke—mike, microphone). Try those on your *Joanna* (piano) or your *constant screamer* (concertina—“Crueler and keener than a coster’s concertina” was the great line remembered from an ancient *Punch*. . .)!

Gar and Starter (Star and Garter, a pub sign), *London Blizzard* (Leighton Buzzard), *Turps* (Turpentine—The Serpentine, in Hyde Park), *Lousy* (or *Mousy*) *Brown* (Rose and Crown), *Smell burn* (Melbourne) and *St. Peter’s The Beast* (Oxonian for St. Peter’s in the East) do not exactly belong with the place-names of the previous paragraph, but such playing with names always goes on and is part (and parcel) of the same forces that shape slang. I recall that when I was a boy in Montreal (Quebec) there was an Anglican church on Sherbrooke Street next to the Art Museum, called St. Andrew’s and St. Paul’s. I referred to it as “The A & P.” It is all a lot of *cobblers* (awls—balls) and *fun and frolics* (bollocks—ditto).

When you *suss* (realize) that play as well as mystery lies behind slang, you will have it (as Edwin Pugh says in *The Cockney at Home*, 1914) *bang to rights*. “In point of fact,” as the cliché runs “at this point in time,” the secrecy aspect—“the substitution of words and sentences which rhyme with other words intended to be kept secret,” writes the

²⁷ C. Bent, *Criminal Life* (1891), makes it *Tommy Roller* (collar), to nab.

²⁸ A sentence from the Australian comic strip *Bluey and Curley* quoted in both Sidney J. Baker’s *The Australian Language* and Julian Franklyn’s *Dictionary of Rhyming Slang*, with my own interpretation: “Struth [God’s truth], a bag of coke [bloke] comes into the Sydney Harbour [barber] for a dig in the grave [shave], and finds the pitch and toss [boss] has gone down th’ field of wheat [street].” Note *bloke* and *boss* are themselves slang, or were. An Englishman would say *road* (not *street*) and “spell out” less of the phrases.

anonymous author of *The Slang Dictionary* (1859)—has been overstressed, since much of the pleasure of the rhyming-slang user comes from his showing off his wit, which requires that you understand what he is doing with language. One can no more stop at the literal meaning or the bare facts (*brass tacks*) than translate like a German jokes such as “You must have not ’arf given your mother a shock when you were born” or (for a freezing night) “I shouldn’t want to be a pawnbroker’s sign on a night like this.” The man who loved his “zoot suit with the reet pleat” and the man who called a Japanese (in World War II “a Jap”) a *tisket*²⁹ are one with the bloke who says *there you are* for *bar* and steps up to order *Brian O’Linn* (or *Vera Lynn*),³⁰ *Charlie Freer*, *Walter Scott*, *Daily Mail*, *Hackney Marsh*, *Jack-a-Dandy*, *Jack Surpass*,³¹ *Kentucky horn*, *Rosy Loader*, *Tom Thumb*, *pimple* (and blotch) or *Waterbury watch*.

The language is constantly changing, of course. I learned a new word (which I hope does not catch on—which hopefully will not catch on, modern jargon would say) today at The British Library (formerly The British Museum reading room). A notice was headed: *Books Outhoused at the Woolwich Repository*. In smaller type the communication was more straightforward and concerned itself with certain categories which, “because of shortage of space here, had to be moved to Woolwich.” But *outhouse* as a verb! Still, the language process gives us *derrick* and *magdalene* and *Pollyanna* and *alexandrine* and other names as words, so all must be welcome to the student of onomastics.

Derrick (like *Jack Ketch*) came from the name of a real hangman. So too from real persons’ names came *Aristotle* (bottle—often ‘*arry*), *Baden Powell* (trowel—though the name of the founder of the Boy Scouts and hero of Mafeking should be pronounced “Bayden Pole”), *Big Ben* (ten—through the bell at Westminster), *Burdett Coutts* (boots—from the philanthropist baroness of the famous banking family),³²

²⁹ Remember Patti, Laverne and Maxine, The Andrews Sisters?

A tisket, a tasket,

A little yellow basket.

Basket is close enough to *bastard* but *tisket* makes you think!

³⁰ This went through *Blue Rain* and *Mother’s Ruin* on the way; also known as *Mother’s Milk* in some circles.

³¹ This phrase for “a glass” occurs in Henry Mayhew’s standard *London Labour and the London Poor*, I, 418 (1851), but though he certainly had the best ear of any sociologist I have ever read, Mayhew does not go into Cockney slang—*per se*, as today’s sociologists would add automatically.

³² Gilbert & Sullivan: The aristocrat who hunts and shoots,
The aristocrat who banks at Coutts,
The aristocrat who cleans the boots,
They all shall equal be.

Captain Cook (book—as in betting), *Charles James Fox* (box—still commemorated in a Soho pub called *The Intrepid Fox*), *Charlie Dilke* (milk—another politician, this one involved in a juicy Victorian scandal), *Conan Doyle* (boil—the creator of Sherlock Holmes in *The Strand Magazine*), *Dick Turpin* (13—a score in a darts game recalling the famous highwaymen whose Staffordshire figurine stood gaudily on many a Victorian mantelpiece), *Dunlop* (tyre—liar), *Harry Wragg* (fag—in the sense of *cigarette*, not *pouf*—a once-famous jockey, now forgotten so that *oily rag* has come into use in this context), *Hobson's choice* (voice—from the famous livery stable owner who gave the hirer no option but to take the horse next in line, nearest the door), *Jack the Ripper* (kipper—from the mass murderer of Whitechapel), *Jane Shore* (whore—a royal mistress who died in a ditch, still called Shoreditch), *Jem Mace* (face—a boxer 1831-1910), *Joan of Arcs* (sharks—maybe “loan sharks,” also *Joe Marks*), *Joynson Hicks* (sit—an unpopular Home Secretary: more recently cabinet members have provided expressions like “I can’t get me 2p in before the Stafford Cripps [pips] stop” or “I’d like to boot him right in the Barbara Castle”), *Lady Godiva* (fiver—£5), *Lord John Russell* (bustle—the lady’s fashion), *Lord Lovel* (shovel), *Ned Kelley* (belly—an Australian bush ranger repopularized by a Mick Jagger film), *Oliver Cromwell* (tumble—pronounced “Crummell,” of course), *Richard the Third* (bird—in the theatrical sense of jeer), [Sir] *Walter Scott* (pot—of ale), *Steele Rudds* (spuds—potatoes, from an allegedly “popular Australian author”), *Vicar of Bray* (tray—or three, both from an eighteenth-century ecclesiastic determined to hold his benefice whatever the vacillations of Established opinion), and *Victor Trumper* (bumper—that is what Americans call a cigarette butt and Englishmen a fag end). Trumper was an Australian cricketer. Such sports personalities have varying periods of fame. *Dr. Grace* (face) is still with us, beard and all. *Georgie Best* temporarily competes with *Mae West* but when he retires from soccer will probably vanish from the “slanguage.” Some fairly recent names of the sports page (Spasky, Spitz, Muhammad Ali, Joe Namath, “Catfish” Hunter) have not been particularly useful.

Real companies inevitably get into the act. *Fortnum & Mason* may be out of the Cockney’s price range but not out of his ken and the

How was this banking aristocrat known to the poor Cockneys of the East End (more likely to be cleaning boots than “huntin’, shootin’ and fishin’”) ? She sponsored various charities which touched the lives of the poor in the age of Working Men’s Institutes, The Salvation Army, The Band of Hope (*soap*, or Cape of Good Hope), and similar missionary efforts among what was called “the deserving poor.”

name rhymes with *basin* (what Americans might call “a snoot full” of drink). Marks & Spencer are usually *Marks & Sparks* (larks) and C&A (gay—homosexual)³³ and *Army & Navy* (gravy) are not unknown. Those are all department stores. Other companies include *Bryant and Mays* (formerly useful to refer to corset stays, manufacturers of matches), *Camera Cuss* (bus, from the eighteenth-century firm of clock-makers, *The Vanguard* and all subsequent omnibusses being thought of as clockwork machines), *Derry & Toms* (bombs, from a department store),³⁴ *Barker’s* (starkers—nude), *Harvey Nichol* (pickle, a *jam* or predicament, not a condiment—actually Harvey Nichols), *Lilley & Skinner* (dinner, the midday meal for Cockneys—from the shoemakers established 1825—when comedienne Bea Lille wanted a string of “lily” sounds she produced, among others, Lili Marlene and Lilley & Skinner in a song), *Mark Foy* (boy, as in “one of the boys,” i.e., gang—a cartage contractor), *Robinson & Cleaver* (fever), and (for Australia) *Robertson & Moffat* (profit). Add: *Army & Navy* (gravy), *Gordon and Gotch* (watch), &c.

An odd example, with no rhyme indeed, is *Drummond & Roce* (for *knife and fork*). Let Julian Franklyn explain:

Recorded by Michael Harrison in *Reported Safe Arrival*, 1943, who elucidates in a footnote specifically stating ‘Cockney rhyming slang,’ but records no rhyme. The explanation was given in a private letter 7 October 1958. *Drum and fife—knife*; reduce to *drum and*, pronounce *Drummond*. *Roast pork—fork*; reduce to *roast*, pronounce *roce*. Connect the two with an intrusive ‘and’. This is a magnificent specimen of Cockney verbal agility and subtle humour. Messrs. Drummond & Roce sound like an old-established very dignified firm of Sheffield manufacturers producing table

³³ The rhyme could possibly be for *that way*, the British preferring their own *bent* or *queer* to the American euphemism, so the Cockney will say *Brighton Pier* or *King Lear*. *The Slang Dictionary* (1859) used the latter to mean *queer* in the sense of ill (“I feel proper queer”) but modern slang has altered the meaning. *Ginger* (beer) has already been mentioned. The confusion of *queen* and *quean* persists in gay circles and has entered common speech along with *camp* words popularized by Kenneth Williams (BBC Radio *Round the Horn* with Kenneth Horne to 1969) and other comedians: *dolly* (pretty), *naph* (ugly), *bona* (good) and other Parlyaree (“show biz”) expressions, *troll* or *cruise* (walk around looking for contacts). B. Rodgers’ *The Queens’ Lexicon* (1972) defines *troll* as walking about with the fly open! Another “private” language making inroads on the general vocabulary for humorous, “in” or fashionable reasons.

³⁴ A *derry* is a dislike of someone, to be “down” on someone, from *Derry-down-Derry*.

cutlery. It is a classic example of the possibilities of rhyming slang—even without rhyme.³⁵

Among trade names are *Oxo cube* (tube—underground, American subway), *Quaker Oats* (coats) and *foater* (photo-finish, Guinness). *Beggar boy's* [ass] is Bass, an ale. I believe *Sweet Margaret* (cigarette) may come from a British brand I once knew in Canada, Sweet Caporals. *Rock of Ages*, however, comes not from the brand of tombstone known in America but from the hymn itself; it means *wages*. *Bottle of cola* means *bowler* (hat).³⁶ *Daily Mail* is *tail* or *tale*.

From literature come names like the biblical *Adam and Eve* (believe) and *Cain and Abel* (table) and *Annie Laurie* (three-ton lorry of the Royal Army Service Corps in World War I), *Bo-Peep* (sleep), *Goddess Diana* (tanner—the coin), *Gunga Din* (chin), *Jack and Jill* (till), *Jack Sprat* (fat), *Jeremiah* (fire), *Jack Horner* (corner—corner pub), *Noah's Ark* (nark—from the Romany *nak*, nose; Spoonerism gives us “'ore's nark”), *Old King Cole* (dole—welfare, while *beggar my neighbour* takes the name of a card game for *on the Labour* [Exchange], for unemployment), *Oliver Twist* (fist—traced to Augustus Mayhem's *Paved with Gold*, 1857), *Robin Hood* (good), *Robinson Crusoe* (do so), *Rob Roy* (boy), *Simple Simon* (diamond), *Tommy Tucker* (supper), *Tom Thumb* (rum), not to mention *Friar Tuck* (f-k).³⁷

Note how many of these are drawn from children's literature (like *Mickey Mouse* for *house*, or is that for all ages?), for the education of the Cockney, especially in the last century, was more in “the school of hard knocks” than in institutions of higher education. *Alphonse* (ponce)³⁸ and *Mutt and Jeff* (deaf) come from comic strips and *Billy Bunter* (punter and shunter) and *Sexton Blake* (cake) from the school and detective stories in such children's weeklies as *Chums*, *Hotspur*, *The*

³⁵ *A Dictionary of Cockney Rhyming Slang* (1960), pp. 59-60.

³⁶ Franklyn claims this is named from Kola, a soft-drink bottled by R. White (London) “long before the Americans sublimated their world conquering complex into the soft-drink industry.” Someone should study the onomastics of “coca-colonization,” copyrighting nicknames like “coke,” etc.

³⁷ “Why don't you Friar Tuck?” “I'd sooner fry a sausage.” *Goose and duck*.

³⁸ *Ponce* is also *candle sponce*, *Charlie Ronce*, *dillydonce*, etc., and of course is *MacGimp* (pimp). The character is, I believe, the famous polite Frenchman's friend: “After you, Alphonse.” “After you, Gaston.”

Boy's Own Paper (BOP), etc., today sought-after collectors' items but once cheap and as plentiful and entertaining as the "penny dreadfuls" of the Victorians. *Captain Kettle* (settle—as in "settle his hash") is another hero of boy's stories.

Abraham's willing (shilling) is instructive. It does not come from The Bible, I should say, and might have been (in the hands of a Dickensian) *Barkis is willin'* (a famous iteration in *David Copperfield*). In fact, though there may be some anti-skid (Yid) prejudice here—a comment on the unwillingness of *how d'ye do* (Jew) to part with a shilling—no particular person is intended, the name being chosen for its rhythm and no more apt for its purpose than that of Billy Button (a journeyman tailor) whose name is attached to "mutton." Any name would do, as with the *Berkeley Hunt* (cunt).³⁹ Nor is *Barney Dillon* (shilling, chiefly Scottish) any person, just an invented name, like *Jimmy O'Goblin* (sovereign, Australian usage). But, on the other hand, there are real persons behind *coat and badge* (cadge money) and *Thomas Tilling* (shilling).⁴⁰

It is with caution, then, that we must list examples of rhyming slang which seem to involve names just made up for a rhyme, such as *Anna Maria* (fire) and *Barney Maguire* (for the United States, where *Maria*

³⁹ Also seen or heard as *Burlington Hunt* or *Birchington Hunt* but usually in the phrase "you stupid berk!". Some dialogue from *The Gilt Kid* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), previously cited:

'The berk.'

'I won't have you using that bad language.'

'You know what it means alright, so don't get all pound-notish.'

(The American for *pound-notish* is *high-bat*.) Many people use *berk* who are vaguely aware that it is vulgar but wholly unaware of the sexual background, as Americans use *sucker* and *uptight* without considering their origins. *Funky* no longer means "the smell of sex" or, indeed, anything really definite, being part of the "you know, like" uncommunicative vocabulary of the inarticulate (irresponsible, afraid of precision) teenagers.

⁴⁰ The actor Thomas Doggett left money to provide a coat and badge for the London waterman who could make the best time from London Bridge to The Swan, a pub in Chelsea. Norman Shaw, the architect, built Swan House on Cheyne Walk in Chelsea on the site of the now-demolished Swan. (Many defunct London pubs linger in the city's onomasticon: The Elephant and Castle, Swiss Cottage, The Angel [Islington], etc.)

The race has been held annually since the eighteenth century. Thomas Tilling ran livery stables and supplied horses to the Fire Brigade, the Royal Mail, etc., in the nineteenth century. *Thomas Tilling* is used in Michael Harrison's *All the Trees Were Green* (1936) but seldom or never heard now in common speech. As with all rhyming slang expressions, and slang in general, permanence is unpredictable. Who hears *Prussian* (Guard-card) today? And *Paddy* (Quick-stick) is much more likely now to appear in a phrase about someone getting angry: "He got his paddy up." I love *rhubarb* ("roobub"—sub, i.e., an advance on wages) and *split asunder* (costermonger) and *Brown Bess* (yes) and *Brown Joe* (no), but know no one who uses them. *Brown Bess* was (of course) a standard issue rifle of earlier times. *Brown Joe* means "know" (not "no") in Australia.

is pronounced *Mar-ee-ah* and will not rhyme with *fire*). These include *Barney Moke* (poke—pickpocket), *Bob's my pal* (gal—as in “Bob's your uncle”), *Bubbly Jock* (turkey cock—obsolete, used by Thackeray), *Catherine Hayes* (long days),⁴¹ and a lot of “charlies”: *Charlie Beck* (cheque), *Charlie Brady* (cady—a hat, a *Battle of the Nile*, tile), *Charlie Chalk Charlie Chan* (scrans—eat) apparently older than the fictional detective, *Charlie Freer* (beer), *Charlie Howard* (coward), *Charlie Mason* (basin—as explained earlier, a goodly share—of drink, in the pools, etc.) *Charlie Pope* (soap), *Charlie Prescott* (waistcoat, “weskit”), *Charlie Wheeler* (a Sheila, Australian for a girl, a *bird*), and even *Charlie Rocks* (socks—an alternative for *Almond rocks*, a kind of candy). In none of these does a real person, any more than the traditional “Charlie,” the *schnook* who is left “holding the baby,” what we might call the personification of The Age of Aquarius (he “carries the can,” takes the onus or the blame), figure.

As Franklyn notes (p. 15), “neither Colonel Prescott nor Major Loder ever had so much as a fictitious military career—they are simply names that rhyme with their meanings,” though of course rhythms exist in these and other such examples (as well as in the choice of real names) to be explained in terms of psychology and the deep structure of the matrix language, English. Why *Captain Merry* (sherry)? In any language, certain things “sound right” for a variety of reasons.⁴² The influence of such factors on the onomastics of our language needs a study of its own elsewhere and would reward research, but we must (as the French say) return to our sheep.

Dan Tucker (butter, a name that occurs in folksong in Britain and America) and *Darby and Joan* (alone, from the names of the proverbial faithful old couple who have given their names to old peoples' social clubs, Sir Noël Coward's *send up*—“we loathe one another”) were not

⁴¹ D. W. Maurer (with Sidney J. Baker), “Australian Rhyming Argot in the American Underworld,” *American Speech*, XIX, no. 3 (October, 1944) claims this as exclusively U.S.; American reference books such as Joseph A. Weingarten, *An American Dictionary of Slang and Colloquial Speech* (1954), and Harold Wentworth and Stuart B. Flexner, *Dictionary of American Slang* (1960), do not make much of rhyming slang of the Cockney type.

⁴² Sidney J. Baker in *The Australian Language* (which involves among other peculiarities the rhyming slang transported Cockneys established “Down Under” in the cities and “outback”) claims that “Australians are inclined to resist its use if only for the fact that it is a dull, unimaginative, foolish type of slang, and that there is little of the sharp, business-like nature of other Australianisms about it.” Here, in a typically Australian self-satisfaction and even jingoism, we have a comment on what might be called (in one sense of the word) the genius of the “Strine” brand of English, an anti-*pom* assertion of antipodean antipathy. The English (on the other hand) like rhyme (witness *argy-bargy*, *hocus-pocus*, *namby-pamby*, *shilly-shally*, *dilly-dally*, *willy-nilly*, etc.).

real people. No more were *Dora Grey* or *Gray* (tray, so that a thrupenny bit was a *dora*), nor the nobles of *Duchess of Teck* (neck), *Duke of Teck* (cheque), *Duke of Cork* (talk), *Duke of York* (talk, chalk, or fork), *Duke of Fife* (knife), *Duke of Kent* (rent, or *bent*—the extreme of which is *kinky*), or *Marquess of Lorne* (*horn*, erection). These were real titles—though it was a Princess Victoria Mary Augusta Louise Olga Pauline Claudine Agnes of Teck (1867-1953) and not a duchess of Teck that became the source of British imperial grandeur as Queen Mary, consort of George V—and so known to the general public, but no specific person was intended by the rhymer. *Egyptian Hall* (ball-dances were once held at this place in Picadilly, long gone) was real. *Gertie Lee* (33 in *Housie-Housie*) was not, any more than *Irish Kerby* (derby, a hat named for a place or perhaps a person of that title), or *Isabella* (umbrella). (Today an umbrella is a *gamp*, from Dickens' Mrs. Gamp, or a *broolly*. I even have heard a Cockney with gay abandon concerning both the nature of the object and the nature of French—in which the slang is *robinson*, after Robinson Crusoe's goatskin parasol in an early nineteenth-century pantomime—call an umbrella *a pair of ploos*, obviously from *parapluie*.)

There was no *Jackie Lancashire* (handkerchief),⁴³ or *Jack Jones* or *Jack Malone* (alone, all on his own), or *Jack O'Brien* (train), *Jack Scratch* (match), *Jack Shay* (tea, pronounced in the way Alexander Pope rhymed it with “obey”—slay, in the United States), *Jack Surpass* (glass), *Jack Tar* (bar), etc. *Jack* (one of Wilde's characters dismisses it as “a notorious domesticity for John”) was just the common form of the commonest male name in England: the vast majority of the men who sat to condemn Wycliff were named John and John was reported in the *London Times*' annual survey most recently (1975) among the

⁴³ Pronounced “Lancashir” it still does not rhyme. But consider this chorus of a music-hall standard made famous by a Cockney comedienne:

The boy I love is up in the gallery,
The boy I love is looking down at me.
There he is, can't you see?
A-waving of his handkerchief,
Happy as the robin that sings on the tree.

Perhaps in neither case is the rhyme really intended to be very close. Language historians of the future (if they give as much credit to pop lyrics as, for example, Professor Richard Poirier has done to the lyrics of immensely popular songs by The Beatles, Bob Dylan [*né* Zimmerman] and such) may imagine incorrectly that common American speech had rhymes which exist only in the tin ears of Tin Pan Alley. Making such artifacts into the equivalent of *Peter Piper's Practical Principles of Plain & Perfect Pronunciation* (1830, recently reprinted by Dover, New York) is extremely unwise. On the other hand, folk materials often record “English as she is spoke” far better than the dictionaries people respect but do not follow. Caution, as in every branch of linguistic science, is essential.

“top” names for boys christened that year.⁴⁴ If more syllables are wanted, *Jenny*, *Jerry*, *Jimmie*, *Johnny* will do: *Jenny Lea* (tea), *Jerry Diddler* (fiddler—one who works a sharp deal or cheat), *Jerry McGin* (chin), *Jerry Riddle* (*piddle*—childish for the equally childish *pee*), *Jimmy Skinner* (dinner), *Johnnie Rutter* (bread and butter). As a one-syllable substitute for *John*, there is *Joe* (as in the American *Joe Blow*, *Joe Schmo*, *G.I. Joe*): *Joe Brown* (town), *Joe Erk* (jerk—more usually as in *physical jerks*, exercises, than in the American sense of “fool” or “masturbate,” *jerk off*, for which the British is *wank* or *50 up*, etc.),⁴⁵ *Joe Goss* (boss, only U.S., the Cockney being *guv-ernor*), *Joe Girr* (stir, prison), *Joe Hunt* (same as *Berkshire Hunt*), *Joe Rook* (crook—from *rook* = to rob or some O’Rourke?), *Joe Hop* (cop—policeman who *cops* or *nabs* you).

Major Loader (or *Loder*, soda) and *Major Stevens* (evens), are nice rhythms, not real ranks. *Malcolm Scott* (hot) sounds real but no one has traced it. *Mary Ann* or *Mary Jane* are not *bang to rights* rhyming slang for marijuana (*loco weed*, *Mexican laughing grass*). *Mary Blane* means “meet a train.” Partridge thinks that *Mary Ellen* is “prob. ex the name of a notorious pickpocket” and means to *roll* or *dip* a victim. I think it may have had something to do with the idea of “shy” in the music-hall song *I’m Shy*, *Mary Ellen*, *I’m Shy*, but we are in a field in which *allacomplain* (rain) may come from “all complain” or *elecampane* (a plant) or *none of the above*, so it is foolish to go beyond a “prob.” Oddly, many users think *Mary Ellen* rhymes with something but *don’t rightly know what*. As some people do not realize they are using rhyming slang at all when they get down to *brass tacks* (facts, the elegant variation being *tin tacks*) or *Madame de Luce* (*spruce*, deception), so others imagine it to be operative when it is not. It is a hot potato—which in London rhymes with “waiter”, and is so used. One must take care not to be a Fred (foolish dupe).⁴⁶ It is enough to make you *do your nut!* What *agro!* Still, *not to worry!*

⁴⁴ Objections (by Christopher Bond and others) that the *Times* list was not representative of the Great Unwashed led to regional surveys. *James*, *Thomas* and *Nicholas* were then seen to be preferred in Southern England but the North clung to *John*, *Andrew*, *Stephen*. John ranked in the top three in Brighton, Birmingham, and Liverpool (where it led), though not in Sheffield.

⁴⁵ In the RCAF I noted that borrowed RAF slang (*prang*, *write off*, *Wingco*, *bumf*, *gen* and *crate*, etc.) used *erk* for *warm body*, insignificant person, the lowly AC2 (Aircraftsman Second Class). Nobody knew where it came from.

⁴⁶ Cockneys find this name funny and it appears in numerous expressions. It is used in the sense I mention in *The Mysteries of London*, II (1846) by the now-forgotten, once best-selling writer (and translator of Hugo, essayist, newspaper founder, etc.), the redoubtable G. M. W. Reynolds.

Mrs Chant (aunt) and *Mrs Duckett* (well—forget it!)⁴⁷ continue the list of proper names adopted only for their sound. Others are *Ned Skinner* (dinner—though a *dog's dinner* is a mess and *dog's dinar* is a shilling), *Nellie Blighs* (flies), *Pat and Mick* (or *Uncle Dick*, prick), *Pat and Mike* (bike), *Pat Malone* (or *Tod Sloan*, alone), *Rory O'More* (floor or whore, while *Rosy O'More* is the same as *three or four*, door), *Sammy Hall* (one ball, monorchid),⁴⁸ *Sandy MacNab* (cab), *Steve Hart* (start, as of a race, U.S. only), *Tilly Bate* (late), and *Tom, Harry and Dick* (sick). *Tommy* got into British slang through the sample entry on the Army's recruiting form (signed "Tommy Atkins," a name only Kipling ever used in full for a soldier) and rhyming slang yields *Tommy O'Ran* (*scran*, to *scoff* food), *Tommy Rabbit* (pomegranate), *Tom Noddy* (body), *Tom Right* (night), *Tom Tart* (fart, or sweetheart!), *Tom Thacker* ("terbacca," a smoke), *Tom Thumb* (rum), with no reference to the fairytale character of Henry Fielding's *The Tragedy of Tragedies*, *Tom Tripe* (pipe, a smoke). Relatively simple are *Uncle Ben* (ten in Housie-Housie), *Uncle Fred* (bread), *Uncle Willy* (silly). "He's uncle," then means "He's silly" in Britain—while "He's an auntie" in the *omipaloni* (homosexual) cant is "He's an elderly queen."

Dickey (as in *Dickey dirt* = shirt, at least as old as George Parker's *A View of Society* of 1781, where it specifically means "a worn-out shirt," not a detachable shirt-front; and in *he's feeling dickey*, that is, ill) is not really a proper name, any more than *April fools* (football pools) or to *nick* (arrest) someone or *in good nick* (good condition) are.

Surely names like *Harrods*, *Chipping Sodbury*, *Lloyd George* and *Harold Wilson*, to cite a few, would have entered rhyming slang if only

⁴⁷ The more polite expression is *I don't want to know* or, less vulgar because the reference to *sodomy* is half hidden, *sod it*.

⁴⁸ An Australian variation on a well-known (American?) folksong runs:

Oh my name it is Sam Hall
And I've only got one ball,
But it's better'n none at all,
Damn your eyes!

The subject crops up often in folk rhymes and songs. For example:

There was a young fellow named Hall. . . .

and this relic of World War II propaganda:

Hitler has only got one ball.
Goering has two (but they are small).
Himmler has something sim'lar
And poor old Goebbels has no balls at all.

This (like "Bullshit was all the band could play," an incredible ditty) was sung to the tune of the march *Colonel Bogey*. Now you realize what Alec Guinness' British troops meant by whistling it at their Japanese captors in the film *Bridge Over the River Kwai*. Subtle!

anyone had been able to get them even vaguely to rhyme with something.⁴⁹ In other branches of wordsmithing a man (or woman) can get his or her surname immortalized as a noun whatever it might be, whether seemingly appropriate (like that of the Thomas Blankett who introduced weaving into Lancashire) or at first very strange-sounding, such as Tattersall or Boycott or Gage (he invented the greengage). In rhyming slang familiar names are needed, but they have to conform to other requirements as well.

The admittedly extremely flexible rules for the creation of rhyming slang can easily be deduced (at least so far as name usage is concerned) from the numerous examples which form the basis of this paper. There is no hard and fast rule, as might be expected, governing when one uses the whole rhyme (always *airs and graces* for *Epsom Races*) and when one rather bafflingly to the uninitiated uses but part of it (generally just *apples* for *stairs*, never with any reliability *apples and pears*). So long as the whole rhyme is given, even if one has not heard the expression before there is a chance one can *twig* to it—provided one realizes that it is indeed rhyming slang one is encountering. When one just hears *battle* (and not *battle of Waterloo*) one can hardly be expected to guess that *stew* is meant, and it could be *battle of the Nile* (tile, hat), as we have noted above. It is, after all, the lingo in which the verb to *maffick* has been derived from *Mafeking* and *dead* means *exactly*.

This complicated and amusing Cockney slang has been collected in the books we have noted above and is recorded or discussed, to one extent or another, in many other linguistic studies.⁵⁰ This is the first study of the use of names in this slang; and although necessarily limited

⁴⁹ Lloyd George has entered folklore in the song *Lloyd George Knew My Father* (sung to the tune of *Onward, Christian Soldiers!*). I noted in my article in *Names* 21:1 (March, 1973) 1-21, on the various names and nicknames of British coins, that the then new 50 pence piece, someone suggested, ought to be a *wilson* ("because it was many-sided and two-faced"). That idea has not caught on. Indeed slang words for the new decimal coinage have not been forthcoming. A new phenomenon (such as *squatting*—illegal or quasi-legal occupation of previously vacant housing) demands a new word and gets it, but more recent trends appear to be away from wholesale manufacture of slang and old-fashioned slang (such as that of the Cockneys) fades more slowly partly because it does not have to compete with vigorous new coinages. Increased communications media and the prominence of *trendies* who instantly spread (and soon wear threadbare) anything new are both inimical today to the creation of special vocabularies, solid slang, and lasting cant.

⁵⁰ The student will consult bibliographies of personal and place-names by R. J. Roberts, K. Jackson, W. F. H. Nicolaisen, M. Richards, A. D. Mills, M. E. Traylen, Elsdon Smith, and others. The leading expert on slang is Eric Partridge. His books include *Slang* (for The Society for Pure English) 1940; *A Dictionary of the Underworld* (1949); *Slang Today and Yesterday* (1933, rev. 1950); and the standard *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*. Other

in its approach is capable, I hope, of suggesting some of the problems and the joys of this minor but interesting branch of onomastic and linguistic research. It could not have been attempted solely on the basis of library research in linguistics but has required an extensive knowledge of fiction in which the language discussed is recorded (and recorded in a way that guarantees a more or less broad understanding of it, which field work does not always have to back it) and of the less literary records of popular speech (such as the jokes and songs of the commonality).

The Cockney's speech has often been thought comical or colorful, ever since Shakespeare's time and a spelling like *bylyffe* (bailiff) proves it was spoken in the sixteenth century. It has also been misunderstood and misreported on more than one occasion, even by writers (such as Shaw) who undertake to feature it. (Franklyn points out that the punch line "Not bloody likely" which electrifies a scene in *Pygmalion* of course would have to be "No bleet'n fear" to be correct. But then *Pygmalion* was a play for *toffs* in the days when Cockney characters were still used for nothing but low comedy, the days before "The Kitchen Sink" school of drama, the common man—commoner the better—as hero. And *My Fair Lady* on stage and screen played to international audiences who did not realize how hard it was for Julie Andrews or Audrey Hepburn to abandon their carefully-cultivated English for the howls of Eliza Doolittle—or how ridiculous it was to cast as Professor Higgins, the eminent expert on accents, an actor with so ineradicably *low* class an accent as Rex Harrison.) For us to learn something *in depth* (as the jargon of today has it) about even a limited aspect of it and to encounter some accurate examples of its liveliness and wit can surely not be out of place. To those who love words the people who invented *snog* (to *neck*) and *natter* (to talk incessantly) and

books relevant here include: Anonymous, *A Dictionary of Rhyming Slang* (London: John Langdon) 1941; Burke, W. J., *The Literature of Slang* (1939); Ekwall, E., *Street-Names of the City of London* (1954); Farmer, J. S. and W. E. Henley, *Slang and Its Analogies, Past and Present*, 7 vols. 1890-1904 (reprinted 1965); Franklyn, J., *A Dictionary of Nicknames* (1962); Gardiner, A. H., *The Theory of Proper Names* (1940, rev. 1954); Granville, W. H., *A Dictionary of Sailors' Slang* (1962); Hassall, O. W., *History Through Surnames* (1967); Irving, J., *Royal Navalese* (1946); Nicholson, E. W. B., *The Pedigree of 'Jack' and of Various Allied Names* (1892); Partridge, E., *Name into Word* (1949, rev. 1950); Smith, A., *Dictionary of City of London Street Names* (1970); Smith, E. C., various works including *Treasury of Name-Lore* (1967); Thielke, K., *Slang und Umgangssprache in der englischen Prosa der Gegenwart 1919-1937* (1938); Thomas, R., *Handbook of Fictitious Names* (1868, reprinted 1969); and Eva Sivertsen, *Cockney Phonology* (1960). My chief source of information, however, has been the citizenry of London themselves and I have to thank even taxi drivers who have been generous in giving *me* tips.

gave new meanings to *tapper* (street beggar), *busker* (street musician) and *punter* (street-walker's client) must ever be dear. Surely Cockney partakes of the "richness, good sense, and terse convenience" Jakob Grimm found in English.

By now the reader must be getting *tiddly* (*tiddlywink* = drink) at this feast of rhyme and reason and flow of Cockney soul, so we conclude with the assertion that this rhyming slang in what Sam Weller would call its verbosity and wit cleverly contradicts one of the dicta of the great Otto Jespersen. "That language ranks highest," he wrote, "which goes furthest in the art of accomplishing much with little means, or, in other words"—always a bad sign that, especially in the works of linguistic experts—"in other words, which is able to express the greatest amount of meaning with the simplest mechanisms." Rhyming slang is often cumbersome as well as cute, hardly necessary or even possible these days as a secret means of in-group intercommunication, inconsistent, illogical, irrepressible, as romantic in its way as the fabled land of Cockaigne (whence "Cockney"?), a land where the rivers supposedly flowed with wine and the streets were paved with pastry and roast goose.

If languages were all scientific and regular and reliable, we should have to choose between the Greek *telorama* and the Latin *proculvision*, whereas we have *television* (or *the telly* or *the idiot box*) and are no worse off for it. Nor does *automobile* bother us, and some do not even blanch at *I could care less* for *I could not care less*, or utilization of *fun* as an adjective, let alone military authorities who can describe outbreaks of anarchy in Northern Ireland as "non-ceasefire situations." You cannot legislate linguistic morality: Jonathan Swift said *mob* should not catch on, but the mob defied him, adopting *sham* and *bubble* and even *don't* and *shan't* against his learned advice.

All you can do with Cockney slang is to admire its vigor, wonder at *Rawalpindi* rhyming with *window*, explain some references without being too *stone* (*jug* = mug) about it, trace some *rifles* (*rifle ranges* = changes), note and footnote some *dizzy dames* (names),⁵¹ and not be a stupid berk about it. Right, mate? Right.

⁵¹ From the *Handley* (stage, from Handley Page, the aircraft manufacturing firm founded in 1909 by Sir Frederick Handley Page, b. 1885) we get *Lucy Locket* (a character from John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, pocket) and *Swanee* (liver, from *Swanee River*, the minstrel song), while Shakespeare's old man with a *just as I feared* (beard) *King Lear* can also mean *ear* and *beer*. The cinema adds the dashing *Errol Flynn* (1909-1959) for *chin* and *Gregory Peck* (b. 1916) for *neck* though younger actors are not making their mark. Scottish-Canadian actor *Matheson Lang* (1879-1948) may be unknown to you but gives us the rhyme for *rhyming slang* itself.

This is a field of investigation where one is apt to encounter some totally unreliable information⁵² and where one needs a good ear and a good sense of humor. Witness this comic Cockney alphabet:

A for 'orses	N for lope
B for mutton	O for the garden wall
C for yourself	P for relief
D for dumb	Q for the bus
E for brick	R for mo
F for so nice	S for as I'm concerned
G for police	T for two
H for mellowness	U for got
I for nated	V for la différence
J for nile delinquent	W for a match
K for teria	X for breakfast
L for leather	Y for off the face of the earth
M for size	Z for blowing

“Eave a brick” and “Arf a mo” may themselves puzzle us for a moment along with “kaff” for *café* and “sigh” for *say* and *wotcher!*

⁵² Witness Captain Francis Grose in his eighteenth-century *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, often a very useful early work on unconventional English but, on “Cockney,” more like Partridge in a pear tree, way off the mark: “Cockney is a nickname given to citizens of London, or persons born within the sound of Bow Bells, derived from the following story: A citizen of London, being in the country, and hearing a horse neigh, exclaimed, Lord! how that horse laughs! A by-stander telling him that the noise was called *neighing*, the next morning, when the cock crowed, the citizen to show he had not forgot what was told him, cried out, Do you hear how the *cock neighs*?” A lot of cock, that, just *rubbish*. A form of the word appears in Chaucer’s *Reeve’s Tale* (equated with *daf*, a fool—whence the modern Cockney for “crazy,” *daft*) and early references connect it with the idea of milksop, petted child, unformed being. Robert Whittington (Whittington) about 1520 shows the term was not restricted to Londoners, for he mentions *cokneys* in “great cytees as London, York, Perusy” (that is, Perugia, just then known in England as site of the New Learning of Italian universities). By 1600 we have “a Bow-bell Cockney” and the English dramatist of Dutch descent, Thomas Dekker, in *Westward Hoe* of 1604 gives us a feminine form also: “Cockneys and Shee-Cocknies.” Sir James Murray (Academy, May 10, 1890), the lexicographer, discusses the name and Thomas Carlyle created two new words: *cockneity* and *cockneydom*, neither of which caught on, though Lockhart’s belittling of Leigh Hunt, William Hazlitt, *et al.*, in *Blackwood’s Magazine* (1817) gave us “The Cockney School of Poetry,” one example of the opprobrium so often attached to the name once it was restricted to the poorer class of Londoners. The origin of *Cockney* is hardly less obscure than that of *bloke*, a common Cockney word which may come from as far away as Romany *loke* (man) or Hindi. Like *Cockney*, *bloke* seems at first to have been a term of opprobrium and was generally combined with “aged” or “old” as in this bit of criminal parlance from Henry Mayhew’s classic *London Labour and the London Poor* III (1851): “If we met with an old bloke we propped him,” which is to say knocked the props from under him, perhaps kicked away his crutches, certainly knocked him over.

(roughly, “How are you?”).

By now, however, the reader may be able to cope with such a locution as “Do you want any fisherman’s with your pimple?”

“Shove this saucepan lid into your sky” (*sky rocket* = pocket, but you have to know that a pound is a “quid”), or

“I never laid me minces on anyfink so Westminster.”

And here is an extended passage from the novel *Up the Frog* by Sydney (“Steak”) T. Kendall, even more elaborate than Ronnie Barker’s rhyming slang sermon (featured on BBC-TV in 1977 and so popular it was repeated on the best of *The Two Ronnies*, a comedy show starring Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett) but presuming hardly less knowledge on the part of the average Briton:

I was taking the cherry ’og for a ball o’ chalk up the frog and toad the other night, when I met a China plate o’ mine. We ’ad a few dicky birds an’ then ’e suggested we ’ad a tumble dahn the sink together.

Well, instead of going into the Red Lion, we went into the first rub-a-dub we comes to. I sez ‘what are you going to ’ave?’ ’E sez, ‘I’ll ’ave a drop o’ pig’s ear,’ so I gets a pint o’ pig’s ear for ’im an’ I ’ad a drop of needle and pin, just for a start.

We got chatting an’ one fing led to anuvver when we ’ears the Guv’nor calling ‘Time, gents please!’

I could ’ardly Adam and Eve it that we ’ad bin at it so long. So I gets an Aristotle of In-and-out for the plates and dishes, picks up the cherry ’og an’ orf we Scarpa Flow.

As it’s so ’Arry Tate I gets on a trouble an’ fuss, an’ when I gets ’ome, I find the plates ’n’ dishes is out ’avin’ a butcher’s ’ook round the rub-a-dubs for me and the cherry ’og. So I gets up the apples and pears an’ into the ol’ Uncle Ned and when she comes in, there I am wiv me loaf o’ bread on the weeping willow, readin’ the linen draper. She starts a few early birds but I don’t want no bull and cow, so I turns over an’ in a couple o’ cock linnets I’m Bo-Peep.⁵³

In this paper, as sportscaster Red Barber used to say, “I have skum the surface” only.

⁵³ I was taking the dog for a walk up the road the other night, when I met a mate of mine. We had a few words and then he suggested we had a drink together.

Well, instead of going into the Red Lion, we went into the first pub we came to.

“This must be the wood where things have no names,” we read in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*. “I wonder what’ll become of my name when I go in.” Here we have seen in a survey of place-names and personal names, real and fictional, in one dying but delightful special language within the broad rubric “English” how onomastics functions in a jungle of jargon or wilderness of wit. Sometimes the use of names is arbitrary—“and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof” suggests that this is among the oldest so-called rules of naming. Sometimes there are more or less obscure reasons behind the selection—and origins and nuances of which even the user of language himself remains blissfully ignorant. And behind it all lie clues to the nature and concerns, the psychology and sociology, the history and *histoire des mentalités*, of the Cockney Londoners and the Island Race of which they are a colorful part:

*For there’s something just a something rather difficult to name,
Though her foes delight to call it British Gall!
But it’s something that is something and it gets there just the same,
There’s something in the British after all!*

Brooklyn College
The City University of New York

I said, ‘What are you going to have?’ He said, ‘I’ll have a drop of beer,’ so I got a pint of beer for him and I had a drop of gin, for a start.

We got chatting and one thing led to another, when we hear the landlord calling, ‘Time, Gents, please!’

I could hardly believe that we had been at it for so long, so I got a bottle of stout for the missus, picked up the dog and off we go.

As it’s so late I got on a bus and when I got home, I found the missus is out having a look round the pubs for me and the dog. So I got upstairs and into bed, and when she came in, there I was with my head on the pillow, reading the paper.

She started having a few words but I didn’t want a row, so I turned over, and in a couple of minutes I was asleep.