

More names into words

by Sabine Eiche

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In an earlier column I wrote about words that perpetuate the names of historic figures. Since then I've read a book mentioning others that I'd never suspected. Before I knew it, I'd woven them into a silly story. Can you spot the 10 words that originated with names?

"The woman wearing a leotard and clutching a doily dozed on the chesterfield. A shadow crept across her face and woke her. When she opened her eyes she saw the silhouette of a man. Galvanized by the sight, she groped behind the cushion for her derringer, but it wasn't there. As the man inched forward, the woman noticed nicotine stains on his fingers and a belcher around his neck. 'A hooligan,' she thought. Suddenly the man stamped his foot. 'Darn! I forgot my shrapnel device.' 'Whew!' said the woman as the man fled."

The list starts with leotard, a one-piece costume covering the torso, worn by gymnasts and dancers. It takes its name from Jules Léotard (1838-1870), the French acrobat who popularized the outfit (he also invented the flying trapeze).

Next comes the doily, a small ornamental napkin sometimes used as a mat. Originally it signified a type of fabric sold in London by the linendraper Doyley (17th century).

The chesterfield, often incorrectly called a couch, divan or sofa, is believed to be named after Philip Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield (1694-1773), who first commissioned such a piece of furniture. Its distinguishing feature is the buttoned upholstery.

Silhouette, which we use to describe a solid dark shape seen against a light background, was the name of an 18th century French finance minister. The severe economic measures introduced by Silhouette during the Seven Years War led to his name being linked to things done cheaply. By the 19th century, silhouette had become the term for a profile portrait cut with scissors from black paper, an inexpensive form of portraiture.

Luigi Galvani (1737-1798) was an Italian physician, physicist and philosopher, famous for his pioneering work in bioelectricity. The verb galvanize is used figuratively to mean to stimulate, prod.

The American gunsmith Henry Deringer (1786-1868) designed a small pocket pistol that became known as the derringer. Easy to hide in a stocking or muff, it was the pistol preferred by ladies. It was also the weapon used to assassinate Abraham Lincoln.

In 1828 scientists isolated the poisonous alkaloid in the tobacco plant, which was given the name nicotine after Jacques Nicot (1530-1600), the French diplomat who brought tobacco plants from Portugal to France in 1560.

The belcher, a blue and white polka-dotted neckerchief, is named for the famous pugilist Jim Belcher (1781-1811). Conan Doyle included Belcher in his boxing novel *Rodney Stone*.

According to the Oxford English dictionary, the word hooligan, a street rowdy, is based on the name of the 19th century Irish Hooligan family living in south-east London, who were known for their ruffianism.

Shrapnel was the term given in 1803 to a particular kind of ammunition invented by Henry Shrapnel (1761-1842), officer of the British Army. It now refers generally to fragmentation from an explosive device.

Want more? Try words based on names from ancient history. They're tantalizing.