

# Words into surnames, back into words

by Sabine Eiche

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Among the English, the practice of giving surnames is less than a thousand years old. Surnames – family names – were formed from occupations (Baker), place names (Lincoln), patronymics (Johnson, meaning son of John), or nicknames (Dolittle, meaning a lazy person). In other words, a surname is a word or phrase taken from the language and applied to a person.

But the process can also be reversed. Every now and then, someone comes along who leaves an indelible mark on society, with the result that their name makes its way back into the language as a word in its own right. Such words are called eponyms.

In school we learned that Louis Pasteur (1822-95) invented a method of sterilization – it became known as pasteurization. When the science teacher explained electricity to us, he used the words watt – a unit of power, from the name of the Scottish mechanical engineer James Watt (1736-1819); volt – the practical unit of electromotive force, from the Italian physicist Alessandro Volta (1745-1827); and amp – the unit of current, from the French physicist André-Marie Ampère (1775-1836).

The list of eponyms continues. Macadamisation, for instance, is a technique for building durable, smooth roads composed of small stones, invented by the Scottish engineer John McAdam (1756-1836). Later, when tar was added as a binding medium, the road surface became known as tarmac (still a term for airport runways).

Mercerised cotton takes its name from John Mercer (1791-1866), an English chemist who discovered a means of treating cotton fibre to make stronger, more lustrous threads.

In 1823 Charles Mackintosh (1766-1843) patented a process for waterproofing cloth with india-rubber. Mackintosh (or mack) became the generic word for a raincoat.

Lord Cardigan, who led the charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War (1853-56), is now more widely remembered for a type of knitted jacket associated with his name – the cardigan. His compatriot Lord Raglan lost his right arm in the Crimea, after which he favoured an overcoat designed with the sleeve set into a wide, loose armhole – the raglan sleeve, still popular today.

The term that's become a synonym for organized ostracism – boycott – originated with Captain Boycott, land agent in Ireland, who in September 1880 refused to lower the rents of protesting tenants. The President of the Irish Land League advised everyone to cease dealing with him, which had such an impact that already in November 1880 the London *Times* referred to the action as boycotting.

Bobby, the nickname for an English policeman, comes from Sir Robert Peel, who established the London Metropolitan police force in 1829.

John Montagu, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Sandwich (1718-92), couldn't stop gambling even to eat, so he had ham between two pieces of bread brought to the card table. The eccentricity caught on, and we've been eating sandwiches ever since.

My list has many more names – Hobson, Bloomer, Bowdler, Mesmer, Spooner, and others – but I've run out of space. A final remark – to the best of my knowledge, there are no enduring eponyms from the post-WW II era. Unless, that is, hoovering (W.H. Hoover developed the vacuum cleaner, 1908) will soon

be replaced by dysoning (James Dyson, born 1947, invented the revolutionary Dual Cyclone vacuum cleaner).