

NUGAE ANTHROPONYMICAE

I

Determinism Takes Over

For those of my colleagues who have missed them I quote some remarkable findings recently published in the press about the hereditary principle in naming.

The first report, which appeared in The Sunday Times for 25 May 1980 (pp. 33-4), arose from an American investigation into identical twins who had been reared separately (in abbreviating, some punctuation has been slightly modified):-

'It all started with the "Jim twins", ... adopted into different families when they were five weeks old. ... For the similarities between James Lewis and James Springer are astonishing. It is, of course, a coincidence that their Christian names are the same. Their adoptive parents were responsible for that. But what about the others:-

- * Both had married a girl called Linda, divorced her, then married a second time, both to a woman called Betty.
- * Lewis had named his first son James Alan. Springer called his James Allan.
- * Both had owned a dog as boys and called it Toy. ...

... Both grew up with an adopted brother called Larry (though it is difficult to see how that was caused by their twinhood). ...

'Bridget Harrison and Dorothy Lowe, like the Jims, are in their late thirties and identical twins. ... One woman had named her son Richard Andrew, the other had called hers Andrew Richard. Bridget's daughter is Catherine Louise, Dorothy's is Karen Louise (and they chose Karen only to please a relative - Dorothy really wanted to call her daughter Katherine). ... Both ... have cats called Tiger. ...

'Genes influence our lives more than we think. ... Jim Lewis was right in the beginning: "spooky" is the word for it.'

The second, more startling report appeared in Radio Times for 14-20 June 1980 (p.15):-

'Two unrelated women both called Edna met for the first time in hospital where ... they had given birth to daughters who ... had both been named Patricia Edna. ... Their husbands were both called Harold. ... Pure coincidence? Not according to astrologers, for whom the most important similarity linking the two ladies is that they were both born on the very same day. This makes them astrological "time twins", whose identical horoscopes could be expected to lead to parallel life patterns.'

II

Friends Dumb but not Deaf

Subsuming zoonyms under anthroponyms is rash. But animal-names may more nakedly express the feelings people partly mask when baptizing their own young or even when nicknaming their neighbours. Certainly some pets' names allude to habits such as would hardly nowadays be remarked on among humans. And racehorses, for instance, bear names which when not dynastic (GRUNDY by Great Nephew out of Word from LUNDY), tend to be either augural, sometimes straightforwardly (Quick As Lightning), sometimes e contrario (L'Escargot), or else possessory (Chummy's Special, hope of an owner known as 'Chummy') - much the same motives perhaps, only writ bolder, as inspire parents naming children. So Adrian Room's new booklet (Pet Names, New Horizon: Bognor Regis, 1979, v + 91 pp., £2.50), which assembles owners' comments on how and why they named their four-footed, feathered or fishy friends as they did, may not be irrelevant to our loftier concerns.

The less original animal-names consist of human ones transferred (Fred for goldfish after goldfish, Maisie for cow after cow): 'just a lovely name', 'nice and feminine', 'a pretty name', 'I always wanted to call a dog Trixie', 'couldn't think of a new name', the owners say. Even there significant parallels may lurk. And sometimes satire breaks through, as with a Large White sow called Blanche after her owner's cousin.

In human terms, animal-names often approximate to nicknames. At one extreme, as just noted, less care may be taken over animals (one Bay Mare never being individualized beyond B.M.), but at the other fantasy runs wild. Many names play on physical (Socks, Spot) or temperamental (Casanova, Satan) characteristics, being sometimes motivated just like human sobriquets (Tiny for a 17hh. gelding). Pairs and groups of animals often get linked names, Whisky and Soda being especially popular. Allusions abound (Chippendale 'with cabriole legs', Malvolio 'with yellow legs', Pobble 'with toes missing'); and so do puns (Buccaneer for an over-lively horse, Bury the hatchet-fish, Magnificat for a fine feline living at the parsonage). Some names commemorate specific incidents (Rhododendron for a pony who lunched off the blooms, Sherry for a dog who knocked over a glass of wine the colour of his coat). Playful coinages are often indulged in (Bitser, Bobbity Bumpkins, Snaggles, Stumblebum, Woomsey and Wopsey, Wooshams, Yackie - as these examples suggest, even coinages usually exemplify accepted modes of hypocoristic formation).

Most of these procedures - allusive, augural, descriptive, dynastic, inventive, perfunctory, possessory, punning - can be paralleled, if in muted form, among human names. But, being restrained only by human censorship (a few owners reported having to change names which for various reasons had proved embarrassing) and not by the victims' own reactions, animal-naming gets a freer rein. For that very reason it may offer insights into the ways in which our less mealy-mouthed ancestors may have named each other.

III

Juvenilia

The following reminiscences of childhood nicknaming were confided recently to The Sunday Times Magazine for 25 May 1980 (p.97):-

'Michael Rosen writes: Not long ago I was thinking about the nicknames that people have called me.

'Some are to do with my being big: the girls at one school called me "Bigfoot" and "The Green Giant". Some are to do with my name: "Rosie" or "Rosybum". My dad used to call me names that were meant for the moment: I'd come in from playing outside, all covered in mud, and he'd say: "Look out, here comes Dirty Dick". And when I was very young I was called some very friendly Yiddish names - "Boychik", "Schmarel" and "Tottala". But one of the cleverest nicknames was one from my mum. So I wrote about it, like this.

"My mum had nicknames for me and my brother.
One of us she called 'Waiter',
and the other she called 'Juster'.
It started like this: she'd say,
'Lend me a hand with the washing-up will you, you two?'
and I'd say,
'Just a minute, mum,'
and my brother'd say,
'Wait a minute, mum'.
'There you go again', she'd say,
'Juster and Waiter.'"

The writer invited contributions from his (juvenile) readers, and in due course reported on his mailbag (*ibidem*, 6.vii.80, p.98):-

' ... I've made up a big Nickname poem ...
"Neil Wheatley said:
Some people call me 'Weetabix'.
Paulette said:
My nickname is 'Record Player',
because my last name is Rickard.
Paul Thorne's dad says to him:
'Tommy Gun, can you get a cup of tea?'
because he always plays Army.
Christopher Barrow calls his mum 'Fag Ash Lil',
because she flicks ash everywhere.
Jason Baker's mum's friends call her 'Taxi',
because her initials are C.A.B.
And there's
'Honk-Honk', because her name's Hornet;
the Grandad called 'Wasp',
because he found a wasp's nest;
'Sloon', because when he was small that's how he said 'spoon';
'Forget-it', because she forgets things;
'Green Cheese', because he always wants what other people ask for,
and 'Titch No. 3', because she's third smallest in class.'"

Two offerings from young readers were quoted in extenso: one from a Teresa Nichols:-

'My nickname is Branston
because my second name is Nicholls,
so they call me Pickles
because it rhymes with Nicholls
and Branston Pickles;'

and the other from a Stephen Mulholland:-

'We all have nicknames
And so have I.
My mother calls me Flash Gordon,
Flash Gordon
because I am so slow.
My father says I have two speeds
dead slow and stop.
All my friends call me
Mulholliebush
because I have so much hair.
My sister calls me D.D.
because when she first came into the world
she said affectionately, "D.D."
A teacher in my school calls me
Staffan Rabonski
I do not know why.
We all have nicknames
And so do I.'

Further contributions are promised. Perhaps we too could start a collection. Meanwhile, no prizes are offered for relating items from III to the procedures mentioned under II, and still less for guessing the identity of your zoonymous, pseudonymous scribe.

SOURIS