

## Nicknames

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One of a kind

Reflections on the nicking of names.

You can call them pet names, sobriquets, or monikers if you like, but the fact is they are nicknames – the handles given to people by their friends or enemies. They may be badges of honour, scars of shame, compliments or insults, and they can only become stamps when seasoned by time. They prove their credentials by overpowering whatever names their subjects were known by before.

Smoochie Moo and Honey Pie do not count for this exercise; those are not nicknames, they are endearments. Lionheart and Longshanks, Stonewall and Sammy Shtum sound more like the real thing, because they are original, descriptive and full of the personality of the ‘someone’ they represent.

Most human beings who happen to live closely among their fellows, like children at school, soldiers in barracks, and prisoners in jail, are quick to dish out alternative names to some of those around them. An unusually short boy would well expect to be saddled with ‘Shorty’, although under the law of human perversity, he could just as easily be ‘Lofty’. Likewise, a fat chap could be re-branded Slim, Bones, or Fatso. You’ll only know how Curly got his name when you meet him; he may have no hair at all or be covered in lush, dense and shiny curls. The art of making up names is sly and deceptive.

GK Chesterton is supposed to have made the curious observation that poets have been ‘mysteriously silent on the subject of cheese’. They have also been rather quiet on the subject of nicknames – if you exclude ‘The Ballad of Eskimo Nell’, and TS Elliot’s ‘Naming of Cats’, that is. Yet, it is historically a rich field. From the Roman Emperor Little Boots Caligula to King Longshanks Edward of England, and right on to the present day, our annals are littered with the alt. names of the good, the great, the famous, and some truly rotten sods.

King Edward was known as Longshanks because he was so tall – six foot two inches in his socks, apparently a great height back in those ill-nourished days. He was also known in the vernacular of the time as Yes-No, not because he couldn’t make up his mind, but because those were the two words he most often uttered: ‘Yes’ as in ‘permission granted’, or ‘No’, as in ‘at the risk of your head don’t even think of it!’

Ivan The Terrible, and Bloody Mary are among many top nobs remembered by name for the nasty things they did, and there is no shortage of them. William The Mad and Charles the Bad sound bland by comparison, while Ethel the Unready may have been nothing worse than a bit of a ditherer.

Back in my own world I recently made a careful search through old school and army photographs\*. It was revealing. Of the 85 boys at my school, five had hard and fast nicknames. Among the soldiers who shared my barrack room, the percentage was higher: seven out of 32. This imbalance is perhaps not surprising. At school, alcohol and sex played scarcely any part at all in the alt. branding of boys, whereas those things loomed large in the army.

My school friends included Mango, Spike, Snake and Jumbo. In the barrack room the most memorable were Brandy, Randy, Button and Horse.

I have long forgotten what we called most of the teachers at school; I may have subconsciously thrown them out on the day I walked free. Yet, two remain affectionately fixed and set: Stompie and Eagle Eye.

No one at the school, in my time, knew exactly why Stompie was Stompie; he had been that for many years already. There were two equally compelling reasons for the tag. He was a heavy smoker who liked to smoke his cigarettes down to the tiniest stub, just a 'stompie' was all that was left to be flicked into the bushes. On the other hand, he was very short in stature – there were few boys over the age of 14 who did not look down on him. Despite his size, Stompie was not to be taken lightly, his caning arm was as big as the best, and powerful enough to inflict much pain, which it did from time to time. As for old Eagle Eye, the name was a typical schoolboy response to a unique style of maintaining discipline in class. Pacing endlessly up and down the aisles between the desks while keeping up a steady flow of pearls for us to memorise or write down, he would spot the slightest hint of insurrection or loss of attention anywhere among his class of 28 young idiots, even among those temporarily out of sight behind his skinny frame.

"I see you, boy!" he would rap out without changing pace of walk or talk.

"I see you there Jones! Pay attention boy! I see you!"

It was hardly intimidating, but it kept us more or less in order. And so it was that Mr Ellwell became Eagle Eye, still remembered with a mixture of mirth and affection by all who darkened his classrooms.

But what of Rat MacPhail? As I write, his name springs out from nowhere. I wonder when and why he acquired that curious tag. Could it have been his appearance? Or was he once regarded by his mates as a traitor? We will never know. But Rat he remains for the rest of my life, a good teacher and a pleasant man, lumbered with a shabby name. If it worried him, he certainly didn't show it. Perhaps he secretly liked the exclusivity of it all.

Like many others before and after him, he may have understood that for all the laughter they may provoke, nicknames truly are a distinction, an honour conferred, usually by contemporaries.

They tell the world that you are what we all would like to be – one of a kind.

\* Old boys of a certain age and a certain college in Johannesburg may remember some of these. They are given exactly as they were, and nothing has been altered to protect survivors.