Last word

ILLUSTRATION BY BRETT RYDER

Ben Macintyre

'Here we are - Limeys, Lobsters, Teabags, Kippers and Come-ons all'

"JEEZ," SAID THE GRIZZLED COWBOY as my wife, my children and I galloped over the Montana prairie on a ranching holiday last week, shouting "Yeee-Haaa!" in English accents. "You all must be the Limey Posse."

The remark was not, I think, intended to flatter, but I have long assumed that the term "Limey" is a back-handed compliment referring, as it does, to the sensible British naval practice of eating citrus fruits such as limes to ward off scurvy during the long transatlantic crossing. We owe the word to the British naval surgeon James Lind (1716-94), who worked out that Dutch sailors suffered less from vitamin deficiency than his own sailors because of their consumption of boiled cabbage. From 1795, lemons or limes were a mandatory part of the diet on British ships.

A less flattering etymology, however, holds that "Limey" has connotations of parsimony, since captains had a choice between buying lemons or limes, and the British apparently opted for the cheaper limes. Hence Limey is intended to stigmatise a race that values money over human life, rather than lauding our appreciation of the benefits of vitamin C.

The word "Yank" is similarly malleable. It was originally deployed in the 17th century by the Flemish against Dutch freebooters, sometimes referred to as *Jan Kaas* ("John Cheese", in mockery of their favourite food), which became *Jan Kees*, then Yankees, and finally Yanks. The Dutch of New Amsterdam (later New York) then appropriated it as a term of abuse for English colonists in neighbouring Connecticut. By the time of the American Revolution, it had been taken up by the British as an insult aimed at all the inhabitants of America.

A little like Limey, Yank has lost much of its power to offend, since Yankee in America is usually understood as a geographical term, referring to an inhabitant of New England, or else an allusion to the baseball team.

Much ink was used in Australia during the Ashes cricket series last year debating over the term "Pom" (adjective: "Pommie" or "Pommy", often followed by "bastard") was, or was not, deliberately offensive to Brits. The Australian Advertising Standards Board finally ruled that it was "playful or affectionate", and could therefore be used in advertising, which it was, in such cheery slogans as: "For backyard fun, tonk a Pom."

"Pom" may be an (inaccurate) acronym for "Prisoner of His Majesty", referring to the fact that many British arrivals were convicts; possibly it refers to Port of Melbourne, where the ships docked, or naval slang term for Portsmouth, "Pompey", where many set sail. More likely, however, it is a shortened form of "pomegranate", rhyming slang for "immigrant". (Yes, in Australia, "immigrant" apparently rhymes with "pomegranate", which makes one wonder why so much Australian poetry is so good.) D. H. Lawrence accepted this, writing in his 1923 book *Kangaroo* that pomegranate is "a near enough rhyme to immigrant in a naturally rhyming country", adding "furthermore, immigrants are known in their first months, before their blood 'thins down', by their round and ruddy cheeks".

Most slang terms for other nations result from bafflement and disdain over different culinary habits. Hence "Kraut" from sauerkraut-eating Germans, "Frogs" for Frenchmen and "Herring Chokers" for Scandinavians. The British are known as *Les Rosbifs* (in France), "Kippers" (in parts of Australia and Canada), "Teabags" (in German-speaking regions of Switzerland) and *Fajfokloki*, ie five o'clocks (in Poland), because we insist on drinking tea punctually at that hour. Other French terms for the British that have sadly fallen from use are *Les Goddams* (on account of our swearing) and *Les Homards*, recalling military redcoats, the colour of cooked lobster.

One German slang term for a Briton, a slur on our insular evolution dating back to the First World War, is *Inselaffe*, Island Ape. With typical practicality and mildness, the Dutch refer to us as *Linksrijers*, left-hand drivers, to avoid any accidents.

The Afrikaans slang for a Brit is *Rooinek*, meaning red neck, recalling the effect of brutal South African sun on delicate British skin. Kipling used the term when covering the Boer War. In Argentina, remembering conflicts ancient and modern, we are *Piratas*, or pirates, but surely the most charming term for a Briton is *Camones*, the Portuguese word that derives from the sound that tour guides make when urging British tourists to hurry up: "Come on!"

Which is exactly what our cowboy guide, or Buckaroo (from the Spanish, *vaquero*), kept shouting last week as my horse insisted on carrying this particular greenhorn deep into the sagebrush. When it comes to rounding up cattle, I turn out to be a maverick — incidentally, the best cowboy word in the dictionary, being the linguistic legacy of the late Samuel Augustus Maverick (1803-70), a Texas cattleman who flatly refused to brand his cows and allowed them to wander all over the range doing whatever they pleased.

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