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“PIGEON” by Father G.

Let's have a little respect for that word—“pigeon.” As I understand the story, the term “pigeon”, to refer to a newcomer in Alcoholics Anonymous, came from Dr. Bob, one of the two co-founders of A.A. It was Dr. Bob's habit of saying, “I must see the pigeon in 218”, or “I have a pigeon coming tonight.” Suppose I told you that Dr. Bob didn't pick that term, referring to heavy social drinkers, out of the air. The word, “pigeon”, has a very good “lexicographical” standing.

From all accounts, Dr. Bob was a very light sleeper. He loved to read when he could not sleep. One of his favorites was H. L. Mencken. The gruff Baltimore newspaperman wrote “The American Language.” It was first published in 1919, revised and supplemented several times. This book was a natural for a man of Dr. Bob's temperament and training. Mencken and Bob were the same age, both were witty, had contempt for shallowness and conceit. Mencken, always a heavy drinker, reserved some of his harshest words for those he called the Prohibitionists. He referred to the 18th Amendment in capital letters—“The Thirteen Years.”

When Mencken reaches the words which he introduces as: “terms still used by American boozers,” he waxes eloquent. You can see he knows his stuff. He notes, first, the words about drinking imported from England, then those which were homegrown on this side of the Atlantic. Mencken points out, correctly, that Benjamin Franklin was the first American who wondered why tavern habitues never referred to a patron as being drunk. They were “soused”, “corned”, or “stewed.” The genius, Ben Franklin, who gave us the lightning rod, the bifocal lens, the fuel saving stove, good postal service, also gave A.A. its “pigeons.”

Franklin addressed himself twice in

his lifetime to the subject of synonyms for the word—drunk. (The American Slang Dictionary claims that there are more synonyms for “drunk” than any other word in American speech.) Ben first wrote about it when he was learning the printer's trade in his home town of Boston. He was working under his older brother, James, who did not have too high an opinion of Ben's talents. The 16 year old teenager was forced to write articles under the pen name of “Ms. Silence Dogood”, and slip them under the door of the printshop. James Franklin admired the letters and printed them until he discovered that Benjamin had written them.

The two brothers quarrelled constantly. The next year, Ben ran away to Philadelphia, then the largest city in the colonies. At age thirty, as a successful owner of the Pennsylvania Gazette, Franklin returned to his boyhood hobby. The Silence Dogood letter had only 19 expressions, now the Philadelphia newspaperman had collected 225 words referring to fuddled imbibers. He published “The Drinkers Dictionary” which amused H. L. Mencken immensely.

Some members of A.A. may take offense at being compared to the lowly pigeon, take heart, Dr. Bob, Mencken and Franklin could have made you a bear, bee, cat, fox, toad, goose, rat, dog (or puppy), or a sow. Franklin was descriptive. He claimed that compulsive drinkers “eat a toad and a half for breakfast” or they are “dizzy as a goose” or “as good conditioned as a puppy.” The actual entry in Franklin's dictionary which Mencken quotes, says that people who hung around taverns referred to drunks as being “PIGEON-EYED”. Dr. Bob, knowing English grammar very well, referred to anyone who was “pigeon-eyed” lovingly as being “his pigeon.”

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You may still resent being called a pigeon. Franklin may agree with you. He added this paragraph to his work, “The phrases in this dictionary are not (like most of our terms of art) borrowed from foreign languages, neither are they collected from the writing of the learned in our own, but gathered wholly from the modern tavern conversation of tiplers. I do not doubt but there are many more in use; and I was even tempted to add a new one myself under the letter B, to wit “brutified.” But, upon consideration, I feared being guilty of injustice to the brute creation, if I represented drunkenness as a beastly vice, since it is well known, that the brutes are in general a very sober sort of people.”

Dr. Bob would agree—pigeons don't drink.