

About a Name

Maurice Cole, Reginald Kenneth Dwight, Archibald Alec Leach, Harry Rodger Webb, Norma Jeane Mortenson, Terence Nelhams-Wright, John Robert Parker Ravenscroft and Eric Arthur Blair. You know them all because these are the proper names of Kenny Everett, Elton John, Cary Grant, Cliff Richard, Marilyn Monroe, Adam Faith, John Peel and George Orwell. Now try these. Steve Wright, Peregrine Gresham Wodehouse, Laurence Olivier, David Jacobs and Peter Sellers. That was easier. These professional names are the same as their real names.

Some writers, actors, singers and disc jockeys adopt professional names for their stage and studio work. Why? And why not all the time...like the female half of the population when they take their husband's surname...and Christian names too on occasion...as when Miss Helena Constance Elisabeth Nilsson becomes Mrs. Stephen Gardener. Eric Blair returned to Britain from Burma in 1927 via Paris and London to become a writer under a pseudonym because his proper name smacked too much of an upmarket Scot. His publisher Victoria Gollancz was given four options...Kenneth Miles, H. Lewis Allways, George Orwell or his *Down & Out in Paris and London* tramping name of P.S. Burton. No doubt the others also have a story to tell. Let me tell you mine.

My parents christened me Peter William Etherden. My brothers and teachers called me Peter. But my friends tried to call me something else. More often than not this was 'Oy!' to avoid the issue. The nicknames never stuck. Those who knew me as a person rather than a role had trouble reconciling me with peterness. My behaviour reflected the fact.

At boarding school I acquired an official profile...head of house, captain of rugby, commander-in-chief of the combined cadet force, third in line when presented to the Lord Mayor of London on St Matthews Day 1964, a role model for the eight hundred and forty seven pupils at Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Charles Lamb *alma mater*.

But concealed beneath this *persona grata* and away from the public gaze was another personality. I was caned just once for the minor infringement of being out and about in the early hours. On hundreds of other occasions my nocturnal ramblings were known only to that select few who shared the records of Brenda Lee and Johnny Cash. The school held no bounds. My country stretched beyond the school farm and the armoury to the banks of the River Arun.

I kept this up at university...a middle class scholarship kid punching above his social weight with an MGB sports car and a *Churchill College* scarf. My dual personality became a way of life. By my thirties I could even prove it with one curriculum vitae for public consumption where I made money and invented ingenious ways to plaster over the gaps in my career and a shadow life commuting between Cambridge and Stockholm and driving into the heart of darkness and beyond to Nairobi and Johannesburg. By the time I reached forty the pretence was hard to sustain and the need to do so had dwindled as I decided to retire while I still had fifty years of active life ahead of me.

To survive outside the world of jobs I had to make myself unemployable. The plan was to never sit another exam, never take on another salaried job but to accept work offered me provided it was *Good Work* that met the criteria of *A Good Day's Pay for a Good Day's Work*. As Bob Dylan expressed it, when you got nothing, you got nothing to lose. But, as my mother would remind me, making money instead of making sense was a lucrative option for me. Resisting the temptation was going to cost me.

And so William Shepherd entered my life. It happened like this. 'Did you know,' I said to my daughter one day, 'that herde is shepherd in German, so Etherden could be Old Saxon for a shepherd.' She was heavily into naming and had recently acquired her *Elfquest* soul name. 'Makes sense.' she said, quick as a flash, 'So you're William Shepherd.' Of course I now rationalise the name and my use of it...and I will do just that below...but that was how it began.

When Tom Paine published *Common Sense* he did so anonymously...it kept the redcoats at bay. When George Bernard Shaw had a weekly classical music magazine to produce he did not stand on ceremony but wrote all the articles himself...each under a different name. As for young Blair, he wrote *Why I Write* where he tells us the name Orwell came from Suffolk. But I had to dig deep for the origins of his professional name.

I have not investigated the claims for Sir Francis Bacon as the author of Shakespeare's poems and plays but the fellow has my initials and I liked the idea of demonstrating that FB might have been WS. My first published work went out under the William Shepherd name. I was the publisher and my daughter appears as production editor...a few clues for posterity would not go amiss.

In the mid-1980s my political writings began being published by a London-based journal *Fourth World Review*. I decided to try something. I would submit my book reviews under the Etherden name and my feature articles under the Shepherd name. The first time it went through I could scarcely believe my eyes. I had prepared my position and expected a row with the editor. This was the turning point. I changed my will instructing my heirs to keep my journals in the family for two hundred years, and I wrote a profile of William Shepherd. I updated it recently to bring the not-quite-so-young man into the 21st century and even thought about dropping ten years off his life on the grounds that I look 50 and not 60 but ended up fudging the issue. We will see how he ages.

When the internet arrived at the end of the 1990s I tracked the rising fame of William Shepherd and Peter Etherden. Then Google spoiled it. There was William Shepherd the astronaut and William Shepherd the writer of energy text-books. Recently Wikipedia introduced disambiguation so William N. Shepherd acquired the old Etherden family name of Norris for his Wikipedia entry. The next question is whither Peter Etherden. Will he converge with William or will they go their separate ways. Watch this space.

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