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Whose Day? Well, at Least It's Not Who's

By CLYDE HABERMAN

On Monday, Radio Shack offered special prices for Presidents' Day. Office Depot had discounts, too, in honor of President's Day. Not to be left out, Macy's advertised sales of its own to celebrate Presidents Day.

Never mind that the federal holiday observed on Monday didn't go by any of those names — not officially, anyway. It was Washington's Birthday, observed on the third Monday of February, as dictated by a 1968 law. But that statement of fact is a lost cause by now. So let us turn to a more cosmic matter:

Is it not possible, at long last, to settle on a broadly accepted use, or nonuse, of the apostrophe to describe the day? It is, after all, a major holiday, even if it is devoted more to shopping than to contemplating the relative merits of the 43 men who have held the country's highest public office.

That apostrophe floats more than the dollar does in international currency markets. In the process, logic is sometimes held hostage.

At the surviving Barnes & Noble store on the Upper West Side, for example, a sign on a book-laden table announced a "President's Day" theme. The placement of the apostrophe sent a clear signal that the focus was on a single man — maybe Washington, even? But the books on the table were about no fewer than 14 presidents.

The apostrophe is accustomed to abuse, since long before there was a holiday called Presidents' Day or President's Day or Presidents Day.

Most people can come up with examples without blinking, from restaurant bathrooms marked Mens and Womens to welcome mats laid at the doorstep of the Anderson's. Breathes the soul who has not at some point, in absent-mindedness or ignorance, substituted "its" for "it's," and vice versa?

The vice versa is now causing trouble in Terrebonne Parish in southern Louisiana, where punctuation and tight budgets have collided. New welcome-to-the-parish signs urge visitors to “please put litter in it’s place.” Local officials acknowledge the blunder, but they have told reporters that they simply have no money for replacement signs.

We in hard-pressed New York feel your pain, Terrebonne Parish.

“Getting your itses mixed up is the greatest solecism in the world of punctuation,” Lynne Truss said in her best-selling book of several years ago, “Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation.” Not that everyone would abide by Ms. Truss’s ideas — note the possessive apostrophe — on how to punish persistent offenders. Do they really, as she wrote, “deserve to be struck by lightning, hacked up on the spot and buried in an unmarked grave”?

Her opposite number is George Bernard Shaw, who wanted nothing to do with possessive apostrophes. “Uncouth bacilli,” he called them. But what, then, might Shaw have done with a name like Truss? Would he have denounced “Ms. Truss’s ideas,” sounding like Sammy the Snake from an old “Sesame Street” segment?

Given his feelings, Shaw might have been pleased by certain aspects of Twitter, a medium that, within its 140-character confines, has furthered the suffering of the poor apostrophe. The punctuation mark is often the first thing to disappear from tweets (a word that could stand some rethinking itself).

USUALLY, comprehension is not sacrificed. But what if “The King’s Speech,” the oddsmakers’ favorite, indeed wins the Oscar for best picture on Sunday. To call it “The Kings Speech,” as many Twitter posts surely will, is to alter the meaning. Kings speech is what you hear at Brooklyn Borough Hall.

Is the apostrophe sometimes a mystery? As Frank McCourt might have said, ’Tis.

Would “Finnegans Wake” not have had varying meanings if James Joyce had inserted an apostrophe here or there (not to mention thrown in a comma). Would Lil’ Kim have enjoyed the same level of hip-hop popularity had she spelled her name like Li’l Abner? What gives with the missing apostrophes in Governors Island and Rikers Island? And why did the girl in the title of the last Stieg Larsson novel kick the hornet’s nest in America but the hornets’ nest in Britain?

No doubt, arguments over the apostrophe will continue for many Presidents’-President’s- Presidents Days to come. But if you belong to the ranks of those who believe the apostrophe

remains an essential tool, you will probably object when others dismiss it as an irritant. If won't is your wont, you simply can't stand the cant.

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