

The Name of the Comet

William E. Kruck

Edmond Halley (1656-1742) did not, of course, "discover" a particular comet, as some people say; instead, it would be more accurate to state that he correctly calculated that its orbit was elliptical (not circular or parabolic or hyperbolic, as other scientists of Halley's time believed),¹ that its flight would be slowed by gravitational pull as it passed Saturn and Jupiter,² that the comet he observed in 1682 was the same one seen thrice before, and finally, that this comet appeared with a predictable regularity every seventy-six years.

Now, many things lead me to believe that the comet of the year 1531, observed by Apian, is the same as that which, in the year 1607, was described by Kepler and Longomontanus, and which I saw and observed myself, at its return, in 1682. All the elements agree. . . . I may, therefore, predict with confidence its return in the year 1758.³

When the comet did return in late 1758, it was named, retrospectively and in perpetuity, *Halley's Comet*. The honor, however, was posthumous, for Edmond Halley had died sixteen years before the comet's return. Nevertheless, we can assume that the honor was accorded by people who had known Halley and thus knew how he pronounced his surname. But for us, today, 228 years after the naming of the comet, certainty of pronunciation has been lost among the decades: Is the name pronounced "hay-ley," "hal-ley," or "haw-ley"? Or to put it in IPA notation, is the stressed vowel [ey] or [æ] or [ɔ]? And how might we determine which pronunciation is correct?

Dan Rather, reporting on the *CBS Evening News* a few days before Christmas, 1984, told of the launch of a Soviet spacecraft, Vega One, which is carrying aloft a small package of instruments designed and donated by Dr. John Simpson of the University of Chicago, and which would pass through the tail of Halley's Comet in early 1986. "And it is pronounced *Halley's Comet*," said Rather, rhyming the name with "rally." "We looked it up. [short pause.] Three times!"⁴

Is the name really pronounced [hæli]? Rather apparently was surprised by this pronunciation, and seemed to assume that his audience, too, would be disbelieving unless he provided a mild and informal form of documentation. But Rather failed to tell us where it was that Halley's name was looked up . . . three times!

Where would one look? What sources could the curious onomatologist use? To begin, sources seem to be of three types: modern-day Halleys, our well-known library reference works, and written material from Edmond Halley's own time.

"How Halley pronounced his name is not uncontroversial," wrote the prescient Nigel Calder in a 1981 book about the comet, "and possibly of some momentary importance to newscasters during the present [i.e. 1985-86] apparition of the comet." To settle the controversy, Calder had his assistants telephone sixteen Halleys living in London and ask them what they call themselves. Three refused to say; the remaining thirteen all replied "hal-ley," though one said his brother called himself "hay-ley."⁵

Some Halleys in Virginia, however, pronounce their name "haw-ley." These people are descendants of James Halley (1707-1792), who is believed to be a descendant of an uncle of the astronomer and who was an immigrant to Fairfax County, Virginia. But their kinsmen in Kentucky pronounce the name "hal-ley."⁶ Thus we find that inquiry among Halleys living today produces all three variants, with "hal-ley" apparently in the lead.

If we look into reference books, as Dan Rather or his staff at CBS did—such reference books as Kenyon and Knott's *A Pronouncing Dictionary of American English* (1944), *NBC Handbook of Pronunciation* (1964), the eminent phonologist Daniel Jones's *Everyman's English Pronouncing Dictionary* (1972), *The New Century Cyclopedia of Names* (1954), Joseph Thomas' *Universal Pronouncing Dictionary of Biography and Mythology* (1930) — we learn, as Dan Rather learned, that "Halley" rhymes with "valley."

My first inclination in such matters is to reach for the *Oxford English Dictionary* and then the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The *OED* lists neither the astronomer nor the comet; the *DNB* gives a detailed biography of "HALLEY, EDMUND or more accurately EDMOND," but says nothing about the pronunciation of his surname.

If we seek the *Urnahme*, or at least the earlier forms, of the name *Halley*, we find more confusion than confirmation. A suggestion was made linking *Halley* to the Irish Ó hAilche or Ó hAille from Munster, but nothing

more came of it.⁷

The confusion over whether Halley's first name was spelled *Edmond* or *Edmund* probably arose from the fact that he used the former but then was buried beneath a stone, erected by his two surviving daughters, upon which was engraved

EDMUNDUS HALLEIUS, LL.D.

The man closed almost all of his letters with the abbreviated signature "Edm. Halley." Some of his letters, however, as well as his will,⁸ are signed "Edmond Halley." Another author, a man with considerable interest in the astronomer, sought confirmation in *Scottish Notes and Queries*:⁹

the French or German Hallé, citing ... one Antoine Halley, who was born in 1595, and died at Caen in Normandy, 1675. His name usually terminates with the letter "y." As the surname Halley is said to be not uncommon in parts of Scotland, perhaps a correspondent can give its origin.

Eugene Fairfield McPike

Chicago, U.S.A.

A discursive reply covering several nations was printed the following month.

James Halley, A. B. — There seems no reason to think that Britain and the Continent are indebted to each other over the Hall and Halle names, as each has ample material to suggest a derivation from different sources. In Blackie's "Place Names," page 98, there occurs the following: — "Hall and Halle in German topography is a general name for a place where salt is manufactured," and several examples are there given, such as Hall in Upper Russia, near Salzberg (a hill with salt mines), Hall near the salt mines in the Tyrol, and Halle in Prussian Saxony [sic], on the river Saale. The Halleys in Scotland might be the equivalent of the English Hawleys, or the word might be a lengthened form of the common name Hall, as in Black, Blackie, Bow, Bowie [etc.]; or a shortened form of Halliday, or Halliwell, where the first part of the word signifies *holy*. Other possibilities are that Halley may be related to Hallet, derived from the Plantagenet Harrys or Hals; and it seems also a fair enough suggestion that as we have Brownlie and Whittle in Scotland — denoting the colour of the lea or ley (cleared or cultivated land) — why should not Halley mean the lea land attached to the hall or mansion-house?¹²

T.H.S.

"Edmond Halley" also appears in his dedication of Volume XXIX of the *Philosophical Transactions*,¹⁰ and on the journal of his third and last scientific voyage, the only journal with his full signature.¹¹ These signatures, using the spelling *Edmond*, and a complete absence of *Edmund* in his own hand, seem to settle the question about the correct form of his first name.

But Halley left an inadvertent red herring for the inattentive: He used the Latin form of his name as the signature in letters he wrote to scientists on the Continent, which letters were, of necessity, written in the lingua franca of educated men of that time. In Classical Latin, an "o" in final closed syllable was raised to "u," so perhaps Halley changed this vowel in his first name to avoid writing the anomalous *Edmondus*.

John Aubrey, whose mind the details and mechanics of spelling and punctuation failed to engage, used *Edmund* in his sketch of the astronomer in *Brief Lives* (1669-96); the book, so widely read, perhaps removed the correct spelling from public ken and from subsequent writings, and gave currency to *Edmund*.

While P. H. Reaney's *A Dictionary of British Surnames* (2nd ed., 1976)* and Elsdon C. Smith's *Dictionary of American Family Names* contain no listing of the name *Halley*, Charles Wareing Bardsley's *A Dictionary of English and Welsh Surnames* (1901) has the following entry:

Halley. — Local, 'of Halley.' I cannot find the spot. Derbyshire seems to be the home of the Halleys. Other references to the county might have been given.¹³

Bardsley then lists some early versions of the name he had found in the Hundred Rolls (1273): William de Hallee, John de Hally.

Most works, including the *DNB* and Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, seem to be in agreement that Derbyshire was the home of the astronomer's ancestors. Halley biographer Ralph J. Beevor writes that "we lack proof of the connexion with the county of Derbyshire" but "there is no reason to doubt that [Edmond Halley] came of a Derbyshire stock. But further patient investigation is needed before the fact is established beyond controversy."¹⁴ Beevor writes of the family tree, but back beyond Humphrey Halley (d. 1672), a London haberdasher and vintner who was the astronomer's grandfather, it is, as he admits, mostly speculation. Thus

* Reaney lists *Hailey*, *Haily*, *Haley*, *Haly*, *Hayley* as variants of the same name, all of which designated people who dwelt at the hay-field or -clearing. He also lists *Hall*, *Halle*, *Halls* as, originally, "a worker at the hall" (cf. OE *heall*).¹⁵

the source of the name is unknown, though such information, if found, would likely not settle the question of how to pronounce Halley's name today. From this etymological excursion we merely see that there is another dimension of uncertainty to an already uncertain name. But let me mention, once again, that the five reference books I looked into (Kenyon and Knott, *NBC Handbook*, Daniel Jones, *Century Cyclopaedia*, and Joseph Thomas) all proclaim without uncertainty – and without proof or explanation – that Halley rhymes with "valley."

The third and final line of investigation takes us back through written records contemporaneous with Edmond Halley himself, but here the evidence brings more confusion than clarification to the enquiry. Read, for example, the entry of the marriage of Halley to Mary Tooke as we find it in the parish register of St. James's, Duke's Place, outside Aldergate, City of London:

Aprill 1682

20th

Edmond Hailey Br: Mary Tuke Sp^r: Thomas Crosse ffr.

[*ffr.* identifies Crosse as a "friend"; he, in lieu of Mary's father, gave away the bride.]¹⁶

When Halley's friend Robert Hooke (1635-1703) learned of the wedding a month later, he entered it in his diary:

Tues. May 23, 1682. Hally marryed.¹⁷

Because of Halley's frequent lectures before the Royal Society, Hooke often mentions his friend in his diary, maintaining through the years the spelling given above.

Another well-known diarist, John Evelyn (1620-1706), also attended lectures at the Royal Society and made notes: In May, 1683, he heard a talk on magnets given by a "Mr. Baker (a most ingenious young man)," although records of the Royal Society show that the speaker was, indeed, Edmond Halley. In April, 1692, Evelyn attended Halley's lecture on magnetic variation of the poles, but wrote no mention of the speaker's name.¹⁸

Our most famous diarist is, of course, Samuel Pepys (1633-1703), but – strange to say – he made no mention of the astronomer in his diaries (1660-69). In Pepys's collected correspondence, on the other hand, we find numerous references to Halley, and some even use the correct spelling.

George Tollet, Secretary to the Commission of Excise, wrote to Pepys on January 24, 1701/2, mentioning that "[i]n the beginning of this week Captain Haly desired me to give him the opportunity of waiting on" some friends, whom Tollet found to have "among them a deal of learned chat."¹⁹ ("Captain" refers to Halley's command of a Royal Navy ship, the *Paramore*, for the purposes of scientific investigation and exploration.)

John Houghton, a writer on trade and agriculture, wrote to Pepys on July 13, 1702, saying that "Captain Hally [gave] by word of mouth to me" his calculations of England's size, which Halley put at 40 million acres.²⁰

Pepys himself believed Halley's name was spelled "Hawley," for that is how it appears in the two citations I was able to find in the diarist's own hand. He cataloged among his own papers "A copy of Mr. Hawley (Secretary of the Royal Society) his letter to Mr. Houghton, Fellow thereof," stating England's acreage.²¹ And finally, Pepys, apparently impressed with Halley's ability to command His Majesty's Ship the *Paramore* on her three scientific voyages (1698-1701), wrote the following parentheses-packed panegyric:

Mr. Hawley — May he not be said to have the most, if not to be the first Englishman (and possibly any other) that had so much, or (it may be) any competent degree (meeting in them) of the science and practice (both) of navigation?²²

A brief look at Halley's voyages yields more variation in the spelling of his name. For example, the idea was first presented to the Royal Society in a paper dated and titled

March 1693 — Proposal of Mr. Middleton and Mr. Haly to compass the Globe for Improvement of Navigation.²³

The ship was built for the Royal Navy upon orders of Queen Mary II in the spring of 1694 and launched two years later. Benjamin Middleton would pay for provisions and crew. "M^r. Edmund halley" was commissioned "to be Master and Command^r" on June 4, 1696. There is a letter from Josiah Burchett, Secretary of the Admiralty, to "M^r. Hawley — In Town" dated August 11, 1698, and an entry in the Navy Board minutes for the 26th of September, 1698, setting aside 100 pounds for "Cap^t Hally."²⁴ Many more such examples are available, but I think the point is clearly made: There was a great deal of variety in the spelling of Halley's name.

To illustrate, let us look once again at John Aubrey's biographical sketch of the astronomer in *Brief Lives*. In the first paragraph, the subject is twice named as "Edmund Hally" (which, it might be recalled, was also

Hooke's spelling); in the second paragraph, "Edmund Halley"; and near the end, in the last reference, "Edmund Haley." (Edited texts nowadays, of course, print *Halley* throughout; the preceding variations are found in Andrew Clark's edition, which "seeks to give in full all that Aubrey has written in his four chief MSS. of biographies, MSS. Aubrey 6, 7, 8, and 9.")²⁵

And what about Halley himself? He used the spelling *Halley* unwaveringly in all the papers (reproductions) that I have been able to look at: his letters, his will, minutes of his own lectures before the Royal Society, etc.

Just as it has been proposed that the American pronunciation of the Japanese ritualistic act of suicide, *hara-kiri*, has been changed to conform to the more familiar name of the sports broadcaster Harry Caray (pronounced as a rhyme, "harry carry"), so, too, might the name of the comet have been changed to match the name of America's first rock-and-roll band. When, in 1952, a band in Chester, Pennsylvania, changed its repertoire from country-and-western to a speeded-up form of rhythm-and-blues, Bill Haley and the Saddlemen became Bill Haley and the Comets, rock music was born, and the name of the comet became increasingly, and in some cases almost irreversibly, fixed as "hay-ley."²⁶

"Hay-ley" is the pronunciation that I, my family, and our friends used whenever we had occasion to mention Halley's Comet. Now that the comet is here, I hear it named on radio and television as "hal-ley." Is this the correct pronunciation? Dan Rather claims it is, as do the several reference books I consulted. Newspaper columnist William Safire also agrees: "Some people will mispronounce the first syllable as 'hale' rather than 'hal.'"²⁷ More despairing is J. Donald Fernie, Chairman of the Astronomy Department at the University of Toronto, who offers a lament for "those of us who toil to educate the young . . . [to stop] mispronouncing the name of Edmond Halley as 'Hailey.'" Fernie then mentions "a rude shock" he received some years ago when "recently discovered contemporary correspondence, but perhaps it was of the same kind that was discovered by Brian Harpur of London, founder and president of the Halley's Comet Society. "We [in the Society] pronounce the great man's name 'Haw-ley,'" says Harpur. "There is no question in my mind that, while he was alive, that is the way his name was pronounced. It's even spelled that way in the Navy List [of officers] of 1699."²⁹ Biographer Ralph J. Beevor is in agreement: "I think that the astronomer's name was pronounced Hawley, and we have seen that at Youlgreave [a small town in Derbyshire where the astronomer's family is thought to have originated] the forms Halley and Hawley were used almost indifferently."³⁰

I discount Safire out of hand, for he offers no proof; I discount Harpur just as quickly for basing his contention on just one of the many spelling variations to be found in the contemporary writings. Fernie seems ambiguous in his choice of pronunciation, and he commits both errors: no proof in one instance, and not enough browsing in the other.

I assume that the pronunciation of Halley's name in Halley's day would be the correct pronunciation for us today, but there seems to be no fool-proof way to find this correct pronunciation, past or present. It is more peculiar that we should have lost our way in spelling the astronomer's first name and in pronouncing his last name, for he has left his name not only with the comet, but twice in the dictionary, once in the gazetteer, and once upon the surface of the moon. We find listed *Halleyan lines*, nowadays called *isogonic lines*, which are lines on navigation charts connecting points on the Earth having equal magnetic declination; and *Halley's method*, his way of determining the distance to the sun by measuring the parallax of Venus and the only method available until the relatively recent development of spectrometry and radio astronomy. In 1957, the Royal Society named its permanent scientific base in Antarctica after the astronomer: Halley Bay, at 75 degrees 30' south and 26 degrees 42' west. And at 8 degrees south and 6 degrees east on the moon lies a crater named for him.

Does Halley's Comet still honor Edmond Halley, even if we mispronounce the name, or pronounce it with uncertainty, or pronounce it three different ways? Of course it does. A study of names in English brings forth many examples of error and irresolution. We have no difficulty talking about Wisconsin, although, as F.G. Cassidy recently pointed out in these pages, it has been "impossible, up to now, to explain with certainty the name." We know that the capital of Thailand is Bangkok, although this name for the city was changed by the Siamese emperor two centuries ago. We can discuss the Holy Roman Empire, although it was not holy, not Roman, and not an empire. And we know that Madagascar lies off the east coast of Africa, although the name was erroneously applied to an island, not to the region on the mainland so named by the natives.

This last error, caused by an apparently travel-weary Marco Polo, is used by philosopher John L. Pollock in his book *Language and Thought* (1982) to illustrate one of his observations concerning the use of names: "If a name is repeatedly used erroneously ... that [use] eventually becomes a correct use of the name."³¹ Thus, the repeatedly-used "hal-ley" among present-day Halleys in London, some fairly creditable reference books,

Kruck

and assorted handers-on seems to indicate that, erroneous or not, *this* has become, for this passage of the comet, the correct pronunciation of the name of the comet, and that is all that I, the aforementioned curious onomatologist, really wanted to know.

Notes

¹Eugene Fairfield MacPike, ed. and arr., *Correspondence and Papers of Edmond Halley* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1932; New York: Arno Press, 1975), 92, 95-97.

²Ibid., 92.

³Edmond Halley, "Astronomiae cometicea synopsis," *Philosophical Transactions* 24 (1704-05 [publ. 1882-99]), n.p.

⁴Dan Rather, *CBS Evening News* (New York: CBS Television, 1984), Thursday, December 20.

⁵Nigel Calder, *The Comet Is Coming* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), 44.

⁶Eugene Fairfield McPike, "Halley Families in America," *Notes and Queries* 155 (November 24, 1928): 375. McPike, of Chicago, was a descendant of Edmond Halley. He is the same person who edited the *Correspondence and Papers of Edmond Halley* (see my n.1, above), but I cannot account for the change in spelling in his last name.

⁷Brian deBreffny, *Irish Family Names: Arms, Origins, and Locations* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1982), 109.

⁸McPike, "Jottings About Dr. Edmond Halley," *Notes and Queries* 155 (July 14, 1928): 25.

⁹Eugene Fairfield McPike, "James Halley, A.B.," *Scottish Notes and Queries* 6 (March 1905): 139.

¹⁰McPike, "Jottings About Dr. Edmond Halley," 25.

¹¹Norman J.W. Thrower, ed., *The Three Voyages of Edmond Halley in the Paramore 1698-1701*,

2nd series, no. 156 (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1981), fig. 12.

¹²T.H.S., "James Halley, A. B.," *Scottish Notes and Queries* 6 (April 1905): 159.

¹³Charles Wareing Bardsley, *A Dictionary of English and Welsh Surnames* (London: Henry Frowder, 1901), s.v. "Halley."

¹⁴MacPike, *Correspondence and Papers*, 173-74.

¹⁵P.H. Reaney, *A Dictionary of British Surnames*, 2nd ed., corr. and add. R.M. Wilson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958; rev. 1976), s.v. "Hailey, Haily, Haley, Haly, Hayley."

¹⁶Daniel Hipwell, "Dr. Edmond Halley's Marriage," *Notes and Queries* 4 (July 29, 1911): 85.

¹⁷MacPike, *Correspondence and Papers*, 184.

¹⁸E.S. deBeer, ed., *The Diary of John Evelyn* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1955), IV:314, V:97. DeBeer's footnotes show the reader the way to the appropriate places in the *Philosophical Transactions* where identification of the speaker as Halley can be confirmed.

¹⁹J.R. Tanner, ed., *Private Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers of Samuel Pepys*,

1679-1709, (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1925), II:251.

²⁰Ibid., II:263.

²¹Ibid., I:39.

²²J.R. Tanner, ed., *Samuel Pepys's Naval Minutes*, (London: The Naval Records Society, 1926), 420.

²³Thrower, 30, 250 n.1.

²⁴Ibid., 257, 264, 267.

²⁵Andrew Clark, ed., *Brief Lives, chiefly of Contemporaries, set down by John Aubrey, between the Years 1669 & 1696*, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1898), I:6.

²⁶Mike Jahn, *Rock, from Elvis Presley to the Rolling Stones* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973), 13.

²⁷William Safire, "Halley's Sure Thing," *New York Times*, Friday, 18 May 1984, sec. A.

²⁸J. Donald Fernie, "Candid Posterity and the Englishman," *American Scientist*, September-October 1985, 471-73.

²⁹"Halley's Comet Interest Shared by Many," *The Chapel Hill Newspaper*, Sunday, 27 October 1985, sec. A.

³⁰McPike, "Halley Surname," *Notes and Queries* 6 (December 28, 1912): 507. McPike is here quoting from a letter he received from Beevor dated June 6, 1912.

³¹John L. Pollock, *Language and Thought* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), 104. Press, 1982), 104.