

Names | A Journal of Onomastics



Book Review

Great British Family Names and Their History. By JOHN MOSS. Barnslet, United Kingdom: Pen and Sword. 2019. Pp. xii + 314. \$22.95 (Paperback). ISBN-13: 978-1526722805.

The popular study of surnames has experienced something of a rebirth in the English-speaking world, particularly when used as evidence of family “origins” and history. Constructing family trees remains a popular pastime, facilitated by a number of ancestry sites and commercial DNA services. John Moss’s *Great British Family Names and Their History* plays to this popular demand by exploring the etymologies and histories of a number of surnames currently widespread in the United Kingdom.

Moss’s brisk introduction is a valuable tool, highlighting the broad range of source material from which the surnames included here have been drawn. For those unfamiliar with the medieval context within which many modern surnames originate, this is both necessary and illuminating. The process of the emergence of hereditary surnames, from nicknames, is laid out.

The bulk of the book comprises an exploration of a number of notable surnames. The text is sub-divided into chapters focusing on the geographical areas of England: North East, North West, the West Midlands, the East Midlands, East Anglia, the South East, the South West, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. Although absent from the book’s title, evidence from the Republic of Ireland is also included within the corpus.

Moss’s book, self-admittedly, is not an attempt to create a complete dictionary of modern or historical surnames. Indeed, the modern scholar is already well served in this department by a number of key texts. Rather, it represents a selection of examples of surnames the author finds particularly personally interesting, historically relevant for their origin or famous later bearers. Even so, the breadth of names included within this book is impressive, and over three hundred examples are cited from across the country. It is worth noting, however, that while modern Britain’s cultural makeup is diverse, Moss’s book focuses only on those names that could be considered “British” in the strictest sense of historical (primarily medieval) origin.

ans-names.pitt.edu

ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

Vol. 70 No. 4, Winter 2022

DOI 10.5195/names.2022.2456



Articles in this journal are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



This journal is published by [Pitt Open Library Publishing](https://pittopenlibrarypublishing.com/).

In reality, the criteria for inclusion focus primarily on modern survival of surnames and subsequent relevance to the readership. A great percentage of this book's audience will pick it up out of a desire to research their own surnames and family history. In his acknowledgements, Moss identifies the help of a number of individuals who have provided the personal histories of their own surnames, and his book is tied closely to the process of personal genealogy. In places, this implicit focus on modern survivability leads to the exclusion of historically significant surnames as a result of their modern infrequency; whether a history of British surnames can exclude the important Anglo-Norman *Malet* family, for example, is a valuable question.

This modern focus is, of course, no bad thing. The result is a set of micro-histories structured around surnames, spanning broad periods of British history. Where this book succeeds best is as a stepping stone between the imprecisions of profit-making internet ancestry companies and a more serious study of onomastics. In this, Moss is to be congratulated.

Each surname is accompanied by a two-part background. Where possible, etymological evidence is explored. In establishing etymologies, Moss cites a number of notable surname dictionaries within his bibliography, the most recent of which are Reaney and Wilson's *A Dictionary of English Surnames* (2005) and Fiennes's *The Origins of English Surnames* (2015). Given the complexity and disagreement inherent in establishing any etymology, it might have been beneficial to note the exact source of the provided translations in each case. A notable omission here is Hanks, Coates, and McClure's *Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland* (2016), which is by now the authoritative exploration of surname etymologies in the UK and the Republic.

Alongside this etymology, each surname is accompanied by a short history of its famous bearers. This ranges chronologically from the Norman Conquest of 1066 through to modern history and the post-War period. Particularly good use is made of *Domesday Book*, the product of a complex survey of English landholdings written in 1086, as evidence for the first occurrence of a great number of these surnames. The *Mosley* family, for example, are charted from the Old English origin of their name through to the death in 1980 of Sir *Oswald Mosley*, founder of the British Union of Fascists.

The book's greatest success is its accessibility. The impenetrable terminology that often permeates onomastics is all but absent, and Moss's writing is engaging and well structured. Indeed, rather than a dense reference resource, the book is perfectly readable cover-to-cover as a collection of small-scale personal histories and onomastic biographies. As a further example of this focus on accessibility, included at the end of the book is a "useful web sources" section, citing a number of relevant websites and databases. It is refreshing to see traditional print media accepting the utility of websites and databases so openly. This proves especially significant for the intended audience of this book: a great wealth of onomastic evidence is locked away within prohibitively expensive dictionaries or behind paywalls.

Moss's *Great British Family Names and Their History* represents a useful and impressively broad introduction to the history of surnaming in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. It provides a lively and accessible synthesis of the state of the field of surname studies, the process and difficulties of etymology, and the writing of personal histories from an onomastic standpoint. It will undoubtedly provide a valuable tool for those looking to explore their own personal family histories, and it is superior to a great mix of imprecise and uncited evidence to be found online. More than this, Moss's book also illustrates well the role that onomastics can play in the writing of wide and engaging history; let us hope that this continues to be taken up more broadly.

References

- Fiennes, Joscelin. 2015. *The Origins of English Surnames*. London: Robert Hale.
- Hanks, Patrick, Richard Coates, and Peter McClure. 2016. *The Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland*. 4 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Reaney, Percy Hide, and Richard Middlewood Wilson. 2005. *A Dictionary of English Surnames*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Anne, and Geoffrey Haward Martin, eds. 2003. *Domesday Book*. London: Penguin Books.

T.K. Alpey
University of Oxford, UK