

French Surnames and the English¹

L. R. N. ASHLEY

THACKERAY'S MISS CRAWLEY loved "French novels, French cookery, and French wine" – and the English, particularly the aristocracy, have always loved French names.

It is well known that the French influence came to England even before the Conqueror; that the Anglo-Saxon king and saint Edward the Confessor had a Norman mother and a host of French courtiers; that the influence that began with him (if not earlier) continued for hundreds of years. It was not until the fourteenth century that English once again began to replace Norman French as the language of the aristocracy and its literature. The first eighteen lines of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* contain at least eighteen words of French origin. His name itself indicates a French background: it marks his ancestors as makers or sellers of *chausses*, an Old French word for leggings or boots. Throughout Chaucer's time French was the language of all Acts of Parliament (still assented to with "*La reine le veut*" in the 1960's!).

No wonder, if the French influence was so long-lived and pervasive, that so many of the names we think of as being particularly English are really derived from the old Norman nobility or their servants' occupations or objects familiar to them.

Today we think rather effete some of the names of ancient warriors. Take, for instance, *Algernon*. It perfectly suits a character in an Oscar Wilde play, but it comes from William de Percey, who bore an *ekename* (nickname) derived from *aux gernons* (bewhiskered). The village he left behind, Percé, near St. Lô, gave us *Percy*. Today the name is such that one man named his son Percy not to commemorate the burly old warrior but to make the boy himself a fighter. "Anyone named Percy," he explained, "has got to learn how to fight."

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Percival, an even more sissified name today, came from a different French source and was invented for an even greater hero in one of the twelfth-century romances of the famous Chrétien de Troyes.

Other formerly warlike names include *Chauncey* (from a village near Amiens), *Bruce* (from the ancestral estates, near Cherbourg, of Robert de Bruis, forebear of Scotland's great hero), and *Bayard* (from *le chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*, Pierre de Terrail, Chevalier de Bayard). Just as *Chester* no longer reminds the average man of its Roman military background (*castra*: camp), so we have forgotten the warriors whose lands were made famous in *Chesney* (*Le Quesney*), *Lacey*, (*Lassy*), *Lester* (*Lestre*), *Lucy* (*Lucé*), and *Munsey* (*Monceaux*, Calvados). "Saki" (H. H. Munro) uses the name *Clovis* for a character very unlike the first Clovis, the fifth-century Chlodowig, first Frankish king of France, whose name was Latinized as both *Clovis* and *Ludovicus* and so started a long succession of people named not only *Clovis* but *Louis* and *Lewis* as well.

Some of the French origins of English names are obscured by the English penchant for mangling foreign words. In a country where *Calais* is pronounced "callous," no wonder *Bacquepuis* becomes *Bagpuz*, *Choques* becomes *Chokes*, and the aristocratic *Giboïn* is demoted to *Gubbins*. *Brett* developed from *Brètagne*; *Boyce* is the closest some could come to *bois*; *Miners* (which sounds very English) is really the French *Minières* which, as early as 1204, had become *Mineres*. Students of English place-names like to tell the story of how *Shotover Hill* was triumphantly traced back to *Chateau vert*. On the other hand *Rotten Row* in Hyde Park is and always has been thoroughly British: it's a *ratton row*, not a *route du roi*.

Radical changes disguise the French origin of a great many names. *Beecham* comes from *beau champ*, *Bewley* from *beau lieu*, *Buckley* from *beau cleric*, *Mowbray* from *Montbrai*, and *Parlabean* from someone who spoke well! *Pierce* may be of English origin, for we have such a verb, but it may also be a version of the popular name *Piers* (*Pierre*), as in Piers Gaveston. Some of the *Duffys* are not Irish but descended from blacksmiths, "hommes de fer." *Crawcour* comes from some "heart-breaking" (or heart-broken) ancestor. One of the origins of *Brimson* is French: *Briençon*, in Normandy. *Boffey* and *Buffey* have come a long way from *beau foy* (or perhaps *Beaufour*, Calvados) and *Keynes* from *Cahagnes*. *Mumford* no longer suggests

Montford-sur-Risle and *Marbrow* might set us to thinking of some disfigured forehead or ravaged hillside if we didn't remember that *un marbrier* quarries marble. *Passmore* sounds very English – but some of the *Passmores* came from across the sea, *passee mer*.

Names that no longer suggest a French origin are *Bacon* (*Bacune Molay*), *Alabaster* (from *arbalastier*, a soldier armed with a cross-bow), *Bigot* (a place-name), *Saunter* (derived, along with *Santer*, *Samter*, and several other names, from *sans terre*), and such surnames as are the same as certain English words. We have rabbit warrens. We also have *Warrens* from *Varenne* – and both *Warrens* and *Garners* from *warrenier* (sometimes *garennier*), a game warden. “Marshal” is a high title, but some of the *Marshalls* are descended from veterinarians (*mareschaults*), and some of the *Butters* from loudmouthed forebears who were nicknamed for the bittern (*butor*) who booms so resoundingly during the mating season. People named *Bunney* have a choice and can please themselves: they can trace their name back to a rabbit or a swelling (*beugne*).

Aristocrats very often took their surnames from their estates. Many of these French geographical names have come to us nearly unchanged. The list would include a great many names generally thought “typically English”: *Balliol* (*Bailleul-sur-Eaulne*), *Chandos* (from *Candos*, Eure), *Curzon* (from Hubert de *Curçon*), *Giffard* (*Longueville-la-Gifart*), *Grenville* (*Grainville-la-Teinturière*), *Marmion* (*Fontenay-le-Marmion*), *Vere* (*Ver*, La Manche), *Sackville* (*Saugueville*), *Talbot* (*Talebot*), *Buckerell* (*Bouquerel*), *Quincy* (*Cuinchy*), *Fancourt* (*Fallencourt*, which by the twelfth century was already *Fanucurt*), even *Haig* (from *La Hague*, west of Cherbourg). So we got *Harcourt*, *Tracey* and Dick *Tracy*, *Darryl* (from *d'Orrell*), *Granville* (“large city”), *Pomeroy* (“of the apple orchard”), *Redvers* (*Reviere*), and *Montgomery* (*Mont Goumeril*). The *Ros* family (of Kent and elsewhere) has no Scottish or Irish background: they trace themselves back to *Rots*, Calvados. Some of the *Bryants*, *Brians*, *Briands*, *Briens*, etc., are of Irish extraction; some go back to the Old Norse *Brián*; but some bear a Breton name that has been in England since the Norman invasion.

Who would guess that *Wast* (and sometimes even *West*) comes from *Le Vast*, La Manche? Or that the *Santlers* and the *Sandlers* may be from *St. Lô* (La Manche, Somme) or *St. Laud* (Maine-et-

Loire)? English pronunciation has hidden the hagiographical origins of such names as *Seymour* (*St. Maur*), *Sidney* (*St. Denis*), *Simmery* (*Ste. Marie*), *Sinclair* (*St. Clair*), and *Marlebone* (*Ste. Marie-la-bonne*) and the English spelling of *Maurice* (*Morris*) has disguised *maure* (“a moor”).

Who thinks of a small beak when he hears *Beckett* or of *la biguerie* in connection with *Bygore*? How many *Fletchers* know their ancestors made or sold arrows, or that the *Grosvenors* were chief huntsmen (*gros veneur*)? Some *Faulkners* or *Falkners* cared for birds – *fau(l)connier*: falconer – but others operated a *faucon*, a windlass or crane. The first *Pauncejote* had an “arched belly” (or, worse, was “belly-faced”), the first *Vernon* suggested Spring, the first *Réné* (and at least some of the subsequent *Rainey*s) were thought of as “re-born,” and all the *Parsloes* and *Pashleys* (and such *Parsleys* as were not named for a vegetable) came from across the sea (Old French *passелеwe*). Some people were named for trees: *Perry* reminds us of the pear-tree, *Leverne* translates as “the alder,” *Cheyney* is the old *chesnai*, an oak grove. Some were named for birds: *Merle* is the blackbird, *Russell* is from *roselle* (the redwing), *Arundel* from *arondel* (“little swallow”).

I wonder if Dickens realized that Tiny Tim Cratchit’s name originally came from *crichet* or *criquet*, a French word that at first was used to mean a crooked man and came to be used to describe a small one.

Surely so appropriate a name was no accident, but I have never heard anyone comment on this fact.

Some of my favorite names are derived from the hard-swearing Normans. (By the way, we haven’t mentioned *Norman* as a surname!) Consider *Dabney* and *Debney* (“God bless”), *Dugard* (“God save”), and all those named *Pardew*, *Purday*, *Purdy*, *Purefoy*, and *Pepperday*. I particularly like the name *Bonger*, which enshrines what the English made of *Bon jour*!

Occasionally they blended Anglo-Saxon and Conqueror in a single name: *Melville*, for example, is half-English hill and half-French city. But be careful here: *Neville* is *Néville* not “new city” and *Dunstanville* has nothing to do with *Dunstan* – it’s *Dénestanville*. *Leroy* is clearly from *le roi* – but is *Grant* from *Grand*? *Cummings*

may possibly be derived from *Bosc-Benard-Commin*, Eure, but it's more likely to be Irish.

Still, in these days when even French airmen find the English *jets* and *flaps* preferable to their own awkward *avions à réaction* and *volets de flexions*, when *English* is not only the native language of 300 millions but is rapidly replacing French as the international language, it is both interesting and fitting to recall the old French origins of some of our "typically English" names.

Brooklyn College

ANS Notes

MEEMZ. – In *Roanoke Voyages*, D. B. Quinn, ed., London, 1953, Dr. Geary surmized this name to be onomatopoeic. White pictures a bird with the long thin tail of the Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher, *Poliophtila caerulea*. Other names were recorded for several birds with similar eating habits.

This one seems explainable as a condensation of **maamwi-ise-wa*, 'he eats continuously while flying swiftly.'

Such an explanation is ecologically valid. It seems to be phonetically plausible.

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Chas. Edgar Gilliam

Note: Others seem to regard the double-*e* in the record as intended for *ee* as in *bee*. My analyses depends on *a* plus *a*, or *e*-sound in *they* being intended: **amwi-* 'to eat animate things,' reduplication (haplology) *ma-amwi-*; Alg., *-ise-* 'to fly,' its Fox form *-isä-* implying *swiftly*; 3rd animate suffix *-wa* lost as in most names. Elision of *wi-* and *-ise-* could produce a sound heard by the English as a prolonged *z*-sound.