The Surname *Bye*

ARTHUR EDWIN BYE

T HE ORIGIN OF THIS PATRONYMIC is revealed by the history of the
Bye family, according to which it is a contraction of Bayeux, the
name of a city in Normandy. But before explaining this, it would
be interesting to investigate the various surmises which philologists
have made as to its meaning or origin; for the subject has aroused
considerable curiosity and speculation, with little agreement, among
the etymologists. It is understandable that philologists, lacking the
clue to its history should have been mistaken, for they could hardly
be expected to know the history of every family whose name they
discuss; yet their surmises must be taken into consideration as
scholarly opinions.

There are at least eight different explanations of the name.

1. As a Habitation or Village

This definition is proposed by Lower,[1] one of the earlier writers on
English surnames. To quote from his work, "By is Danish, meaning
a habitation. Bee is probably a corruption of it. It is an old Scandi-
navian word signifying primarily a farmhouse or dwelling and after-
wards a village or town. As a termination it is found only in what are
called the Danish counties. In Lincolnshire there are two hundred
and twelve places with this desinence. Several names of places seem
to have reference to the particular nation or tribe by whom these
places were first colonized, viz.,

> Saxby, Willoughby, Haconby,
> Danby, Rollesby, etc."

Lower's theory is supported by Sir James Murray,[2] who says that
By or *Bye* is an obsolete Old English word for habitation, village or
town, derived from bua, meaning to dwell. In the Lindisfarne

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[1] Mark Antony Lower, *Essays on English Names* (London: John Russell Smith,
1849) p. 66; also *A Dictionary of Family Names* (London: John Russell Smith, 1860)
p. 48.

[2] James Murray, *A New English Dictionary.*

Gospels, circa 950, it is written, "Se the hus vel lytels 'by' haefde in byrzennun" which is the passage from Mark 5:3.

In 1300 another passage from the New Testament is "To preche he come until a bi (pronounced be) that men cleped Samarii." In order to preach he came to a *town* which was called Samaria. Again in 1314 – "Balder bern was now in 'by.'"

Indeed the use of the word "bye" meaning town was once quite common. To this day in North Kelsey, Lincolnshire, England, there is a spring called "The Bye Well," which simply means "the town well." Bywell is also a place name in Lincolnshire, and in Durham there is mention (*Ripon Chronicle* for 1228) of a Bye mill. There is little doubt that the word is of Danish or Norse origin, brought in by the settlers of King Alfred's time, and it is still found in all countries where Northmen settled. In Denmark, Norway and Holland, and even in Northern France there are families with this name.

In Norway it is one of the most common names, meaning "town," and is pronounced "Bwee" (Booee). Here I wish to add, that many Norwegian settlers in the United States who have come over in recent times bear this name. It does not follow, therefore, that because one bears the name of Bye, he or she is related to the Norwegian family even distantly.

There is another name in Norway, pronounced "bye" meaning "bee," but it is spelled *Bay,* and in Denmark and North Holland there is the name of *Baay,* pronounced as we pronounce *Bye.* While I was copying a picture in the Rijks Museum in Amsterdam, an amusing incident occurred. There was a Dutchman whose name sounded just like mine also painting there; our paintings got mixed, and only after a lengthy argument could I discover that the reason lay in "Mr. Baay" and "Mr. Bye" being mistaken for each other.

2. Meaning a Neighbor

Barber states that Bye is derived from the Scandinavian "bui" meaning a neighbor.[3] This root is found in the Northern countries of Europe, or wherever Norse influence penetrated. It was the name, under the German form, *Boi* or *Boii,* of a tribe which gave the name to Boiaria or Bavaria to a large district in Germany.

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[3] Henry Barber, *British Family Names* (London: Elliot Stock, 1894) p. 99 and 100.

In Flanders the name is also seen in the form of *Baye*, in Denmark as *Beyer*, and in Holland as *Bie*, *Bey*, *deBie* and *deBye*.

3. As an Obsolete Form of Bee the Insect

Sir James Murray[4] states *Bye* is an obsolete form for "bee" the insect with the implication it signified industry. *Bee* is the surname of many families and is more widespread than *Bye*. Because of the etymological similarity of the two words there is some danger of their being confused.

4. As an Obsolete Form of *Bee*, a Jewel

But there was another meaning to the word, suggested by Halliwell.[5]

"The word 'by,' spelled also 'bie,' once meant a collar or a bracelet, that is, a jewelled band. This word, meaning a jewel is sometimes found as 'beye.' Dame Elizabeth Browne in her will 'Paston Letters, III, 1464,' bequeathed' a bee with a great pearl, a dyamond and emerald, another bee with a great perle, etc." Catholicon Anglicum p. 24.

5. Meaning a Corner

Two authorities surmise that *Bye* comes from "byge," a corner. Harrison[6] suggests that a man so-called would be a dweller at the corner, which opinion is repeated by Reaney.[7]

6. The Name as a Gaelic Form

There are well-known Scottish variations of the name. "Bay," states George F. Black[8] "is perhaps from the Gaelic buidhe (pro-

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[4] *Op. cit.*

[5] James Orchard Halliwell, *Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words* (London: J. Russell Smith, 1850) pp. 171 and 223.

[6] Henry Harrison, *Surnames of the United Kingdom* (London: The Eaton Press, 1912) p. 63. But Harrison is not always reliable, for he also says that the name "Byus" found in the Hundred Rolls (Adam de Byus) comes from Byhouse, a farmhouse or homestead, although there are innumberable proofs that Byus is a rendering of Bayeux or Bayous; of this, more later.

[7] Percy H. Reaney, *Dictionary of British Surnames* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958 and 1962).

[8] George Fraser Black, *Surnames of Scotland* (New York: New York Public Library, 1946) p. 121.

nounced buy) meaning yellow." The author gives several examples of the name in Scotland in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, but none earlier. "Mac Bey, Mac Bee, and Mac Bay come from the Gaelic Bheatha (there was a St. Beathan). Beatha means 'life.' The name Mac Veagh is the same."

7. Meaning a Pool or Dam

"There are many names," states Ernest Weekly,[9] "which have several well-attested etymologies, and others that have a subsidiary origin which never occurs to superficial observation. Bay, a name in Cambridgeshire may mean att Bay, near the water, pool or dam, or leBay, the fair-haired."[10] He does not mention the extinct family name of *Bayeux*, which became *Bay*, for which there are literally hundreds of pieces of evidence.

The Actual Etymology of the Name

That *Bye, Buy* and *Bee* are from the same old English root word is agreed upon by two authorities not yet mentioned, Ferguson,[11] and Skeat[12]. They were at one time pronounced the same, but it must not be supposed that these words were pronounced then as now. Skeat gives the following evolution of the name.

> I. Bi. Old English. "The original Anglo-Saxon *i* was pronounced /i:/ as in beet, and has become in English, Dutch and German altered with the same final result. In Dutch it has become ij, in German ei, and in English ī as in mile, whereas if the original sound remained "mile" would be "meal." Later this i, as a final letter, was ornamentally written "y." Thus bī became by, mī, my, etc.
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> II. "In the course of time a sound resembling ā ā as in baa (sheep's bleating) was developed before this i, so that it became pronounced as a diphthong, which would almost correctly be represented by ai or aai, and bi would then be phonetically rendered "baay."

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[9] Ernest Weekley, *Surnames* (London: John Murray, 1916) pp. 33, 51, 53 and 71.
[10] This would be an eighth definition.
[11] Robert Ferguson, *Surnames as a Science* (New York: P. Dutton, 1940) pp. 60 to 66.
[12] Walter W. Skeat, *Principles of English Etymology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884) p. 69.

III. Finally this superfluous "a" was dropped, and we have "By." The letter *e*, sometimes added, has no etymological significances. It is an additional letter which means nothing.

In "The New English Dictionary" Murray also says that *Bye* is an obsolete form for *Bay*. It would naturally follow from what we have just said that *Bye* and *Bay* would be the same. In the Northwest of England, it would have been written in the Middle Ages, "The ships were lying in the bye."

An analogy is given in Murray's Dictionary on the word "eye." Old forms for eye were *ee, ey, aye*, while the plural forms were *ees, eyes, eyghe, ayes* and *ayen*. Thus "eye" and "aye" were (as they are today when aye means yes) pronounced the same, like *Bye* and *Baye*. (Compare "aye," "yay" and "nay.")

In a record of the Public Record office in London ("Ancient Miscellanea of the Exchequer," JRE 256, file 317 and "Parliamentary Petitions" pet no 1823, file 37) occurs an account of a certain Gascon petitioner of a Parliament which met at Westminster July 1. (33 Edward I,) 1305, whose name was James de la Bay, merchant of Bayonne in Gascony. As a subject of Edward King of England and Duke of Acquitaine he petitioned for certain rights and redresses. He is also referred to in the same lawsuit as James de la Bye. The two ways of spelling his name in the English records show the identity of *Bay* and *Bye*.

Mayhew,[13] discussing this name, confirms Skeat, and also says "The y added to the vowel a indicates the i, long sound, before it, so that Bay would sound Bye today." Ekwall[14] also confirms this fact.

Halliwell[15] states that in Berkshire (whence the Bye family came) and Oxford, the short *a* was pronounced *i* or *aoy* – therefore, supposing a man named Ralph Bye (to give the modern spelling) came into court, and so pronounced his name, the clerk would write it *Bay* and sometimes *Biay*, which is exactly how we find the name in Wallingford, 1320.

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[13] Anthony Lawson Mayhew, *Old English Phonology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891) pp. 47 and 96.

[14] Eilert Ekwall, *Early London Personal Names* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1947) p. 191.

[15] *Op. cit.*

William A. Caffall, archivist of the College of Arms and Genealogist, explained to this writer. "The genealogist goes by the way a name was pronounced. If a record was written by a clerc, it was apt to be spelled reliably, but if by a layman, it might be spelled any way the writer thought fit. A man named Bye might go into court and pronounce his name Bi (long *i*) or Boi, or B*a* (long *a*), and the clerc might write it Bay, Bey, By or Baye. When you find the name written Bay, you certainly should pronounce it Bye today."

The philological evidence[16] is confirmed by the history of the family from the fifteenth century on they were cloth manufacturers, often magistrates, in the city of Reading, Berkshire. Before that they were franklins, merchants or yeomen in the parish of That-cham near Reading. There are frequent references to them in the court rolls of the fourteenth century manor, where the name is variously spelled *Bay, Bey. Bays* and *Bye*. And at Wallingford in the same county they held land which had been handed down to them from the early barony of *Bay* in the twelfth century.

The Name-Shortening of Bayeux

Bayeux is the name of a town in Northern Normandy, near the coast, between the cities of Cherbourg and Havre. It is chiefly famous for its cathedral and a tapestry picturing the Conquest of England. The name today is pronounced Ba-yé or Bye-yáh. Originally it was a Roman town called Augustodorus. Early in the period of the migrations of the Gothic peoples into the Roman Empire, long before the Saxons came to England, a tribe of Saxons, the Baii, whose name meant "the Fairhaired" (cf. Weekley's Definition, no. 7), the people who gave the name of Bavaria, or, as they were called in the Frankish Latin Manuscripts, the Baiocasses, settled in Augustodorus and gave the name Baiocassinus, or Pagus Baiocacensis (which is the Latin for "the country of the Baios") to all the district round about. Their city became thoroughly Saxon, and later, when the Danes, their kinsmen, became "Norman" they found the town of the Baios a congenial home. As the Latin tongue

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[16] Other authorities consulted by the writer are Albert H. Smith, *Danes and Norwegians in Yorkshire* (Saga Book, 1929), *Early Northern Nicknames and Surnames* (Saga Book, 1934), *Early Place Name Element* (Place Name Society, 1956), C. W. E. Bardsley, *English Surnames*, and C. L. Ewen, *A History of Surnames of the British Isles*.

developed into Romance French, the clumsy name of the Savon
district became known as *Bayeux*, which was pronounced "Bayeus."

In his book "The Bayeux Tapestry," p. 68, Fowke states that
"the name was sometimes spelled locally 'Bagias,' which he adds is
a crasis of Bajocas and equivalent to Baias, which approaches the
style of those monuments in which the town is termed 'Baia," and
'Baiae' and 'Baiarum.' The name Baius is given in Leland's "Roll
of Battle Abbey" as that of one of the followers of the Conqueror."

This name the Counts of Bayeux brought with them to England.
It assumed many forms; *Bayeus, Bayous, Bayhus, Bayousse,*
Bayus, Byus, Bayes, Bays and *Bay* to give only a few. Eventually,
as English became the written language of the country, the second
syllable was dropped, being Latin, and the name was written *Bay*
and *By*. The "s" was often preserved, but the original pronunciation
of the first syllable has been preserved to the present day.

Mario Pei, in *The Story of Language* explains the pronunciation of
aux in old French: "the word Chevaux, the plural of Cheval, from
the Latin Caballos, meaning horses, was Chevaus in old French. The
x replaced s because at one time scribes wrote a final s with a long
flourish, (like a large f) crossing the end of the preceding u; this
flourish was erroneously interpreted by later scribes to be an x, and
slavishly imitated." This final s was also sometimes mistaken for
a "t."

Examples of all the various forms of the name are innumerable.
Two will suffice here.[17]

In the Inquisitions Post Mortem, taken after the death of John,
feudal baron de Bayeux and Justice itinerant of England, it is
recorded that "Stephen de Baiocis, alias de Bay, his brother, aged
60 and more, is his heir." 33 Henry III., 1249.

Sir Thomas Banks, in his work on "Extinct and Dormant Peer-
ages of England," calls the Barony of Bayeux, "the Barony of
Bay." In the Survey of the Barony of 1288, "Sir Hugh de By holds
of the King in Capite two knights fees in Roncewel, Caburn and
Coxwad." Chancery Inq. post mortem 16 Edw. I No. 39.

This explanation may also be found in *Lincolnshire Notes and*
Queries, July 1912, p. 46 H, with valuable comments by W. O.
Massingberd.

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[17] Other instances may be found in the Patent Rolls, Hundred Rolls, Close Rolls
etc., too numerous to list.

Up to the end of the fourteenth century the family of Bay was of considerable prominence in the counties of Lincoln, Northampton, Bedford, Cambridge and Buckingham. They were barons in Lincolnshire until the first quarter of the century, when the barony became extinct through heiresses. Cadet branches were lords of many manors scattered throughout these counties, as well as in Somerset and Dorset.

Before the end of the Middle Ages, the name *Bayeux*, as an English patronymic, disappeared.

One of the properties held by the barony was a Knight's fee (i.e., land of sufficient income to support a Knight) in Wallingford Berkshire. This property had been acquired shortly after the Conquest by the marriage of Ranulph de Bayeux with the Saxon Heiress of Alan de Lincoln, who, in turn, was an heir of Milo de Wallingford. The possession of this holding by a branch of the Bays early in the fourteenth century explains the occurrence of the name in Berkshire.

NECROLOGY

It is with regret that we announce the death of Albert Hugh Smith, the first life member of *ANS*. Professor Smith was an outstanding scholar in English onomastics and served as Hon. Secretary of the English Place-Name Society, President of the Council for Name Studies in Great Britain, and President of the Ninth International Congress of Onomastic Sciences (London, 1966).