Celtic Lenition in English Nicknames*

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In an article written a number of years ago,[1] I demonstrated that certain English nicknames and proper names, and even some words – otherwise unexplainable – were to be accounted for by the apparently once widespread substitution of initial *h* for initial *r* in the names Richard (giving Hick), Robert (Hob), and Roger (Hodge). I believe I established that this occurred in northern English dialects, specifically Northumbrian, because of the uvular *r* once prevalent in those dialects; and I showed that this fact had widespread implications.

In the course of that investigation I also became intrigued with nicknames which substitute initial *p* for initial *m*: Peg for Meg, Polly for Molly, and at least one other. The *h* for *r* alternation is, of course, no help with these. Can an explanation be found ? I think so, but I have for some time been looking in vain for conclusive evidence. I believe the time has come to present what I have found out as a theory for discussion, out of which something concrete may be established.

I am substantially convinced that we must look for our answer to the mutations found in Celtic languages. If it be asked why we should look to Celtic languages for the explanation of forms in English, I would answer that Welsh was (and still is) widely spoken in a large part of Britain; Ireland was predominantly Irish-speaking (though with much bilingualism, of course) until the Famine; and Gaelic was once the predominant language north of the Highland Line. There is some evidence, also, that in the area of northwest England known as Strathclyde Celtic was once spoken.[2] In other words, opportunities for influence on English by Celtic languages were plentiful during most of the history of English.

Welsh initial mutation is, it seems to me, the only process that can explain how Meg (from Margaret) can become Peg. In the Welsh language, the initial consonant of a word can be altered by the word which precedes

* It is well known that Professor Dobbie's accomplishments included familiarity with a number of languages, but many of his admirers may not have had occasion to know as well as I did his proficiency in Old Irish and Celtic generally. This paper will serve, I hope, to memorialize that aspect of his broad scholarship.

[1] John P. Hughes, "On H for R in English Proper Names," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, LIII (October, 1954), pp. 601–12.

[2] G. M. Trevelyan, *History of England* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1929), p. 215; Kenneth Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1953), p. 9.

it in a sentence. One such word, in the case of names, would be the possessive adjective *fy*, "my." (The occurrence of *f* for *m* in this word is itself probably due to Celtic lenition.) The word for "my," in Welsh, causes the initial mutation of the next word known as the "nasal mutation," changing a *p* to a voiceless *m* (written *mh*). (In actual pronunciation the *m* is not completely voiceless – otherwise it might function as an *h* – but is pronounced as [m̥m], rather like the *mh* in *Amharic*.)[3]

Since a proper name or its nickname would frequently be preceded by *fy* – as testified to by other English nicknames, for example, those which show a drift of the nasal from *mine* to the following name (*Nan* from *mine Ann*, *Ned* from *mine Ed*, and so on),[4] a non-Welsh name introduced into Welsh – like Meg – might be thought of by Welsh speakers as being under the influence of *fy* (*fy Mheg*); when this influence was absent, an unmutated form might be "restored" – namely, Peg. The process is well attested in Irish, where "flour" is *plúr* (because "my flour" is *mo phlúr*), "blankets" are *plaincéadaí* (since "our blankets" are *ár bplaincéadaí*), and "Francis" is *Proinnseas*, because "my Francis" is *mo Phroinnseas*.[5]

It will probably be noticed that different words cause different mutations, and that they are not the same in Irish as in Welsh. In Irish the possessive adjective singular causes *lenition* (which would be the "soft mutation" in Welsh), whereas in Welsh it causes *nasalization* (the "nasal mutation"). In both languages, however, the vocative exclamation causes lenition, and this too is a word that might frequently be associated with a name. "O Mary!" would be *a Mhuire* in Irish (pronounced *wirra*), and "O David!" would be *a Tafydd* in Welsh (which is why a Welshman is called Taffy, since St. David is the patron of Wales and the name is especially popular there).

The only instances of this *p-m* alternation I have found are Peg from Meg (of course Dickens' "Peggotty" is "Peg" plus the suffix *-ot-* plus the diminutive *-y*; perhaps a derivative from *Meggotty*, since there is a proper name *Maggott*); Polly from Molly (which in turn is from Mary > Mally, as Sally is from Sara and Dolly from Dorothy), and Patty, a nickname for Martha (or rather for its nickname Matty). It would seem that Billie might be from Millie (from Millicent or Mildred), but I cannot think why *m* in Millie might have been heard as voiced (*fy Millie*, leading to Billie) when *m* in Meg was heard as voiceless (*fy Mheg*, leading to Peg). I have

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[3] See John T. Bowen and T. Rhys Jones, *Teach Yourself Welsh* (London: The English Universities Press, c1960), pp. 65–66.

[4] Otto Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* (Copenhagen: Einar Munksgaard, 1928), Vol. I, 2.426 (p. 35).

[5] See Patrick S. Dinneen, *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla* (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1927), s.vv.

the impression that Billie is a newer nickname than Peggy or Polly, and might therefore be merely a feminization of Billy, which is itself more recent than the nicknames for other popular names, as will be shown below.

Comprehensive and authoritative data on nicknames are far less easy to come by than on surnames. Since the names here in question are all feminine there seem to be few surnames derived from them, although Peggs, Pigot, Matchet and Maggot may come from Margaret; Marriott or Marryat from Mary; and Tillot from Matilda – an alternative source for Patty. (Pattison would seem to be more probably from Patrick.) As nicknames, too, they would not be so likely to give rise to family names. Hence we lack what we badly need – and can usually be obtained for surnames – information as to *when* and *where* a nickname originated or first became popular. It has been said that Margaret was more common in Scotland, Ireland and the north of England than in the South.[6] The O.E.D. gives 1616 as its earliest citation for Polly, 1630 for Poll, and 1694 for Peg. Meg and Moll, however, are recorded from 1538 and 1567 respectively.

What information can be gathered seems to confirm the supposition that, unlike the *h* for *r* alternation, this is not a regular substitution of phonemes in a dialect of English – hence to be found in ordinary words also – but a reconstruction, according to the rules of Welsh grammar, of forms thought to be implied by the occurrence of certain non-Welsh names within phrases like "mine Ann" in Welsh conversation. We would like to be able to establish the place of origin of the P-nicknames and the locations where they first appeared, but I have been unable to locate evidence establishing that Peg, Polly and Patty first appeared in Welsh-speaking (but probably quite bilingual) territory. Yet I know no other plausible explanation of the substitution of *p* for *m*.

As to why Will becomes Bill, this is quite easily accounted for by *Irish* mutation, if we assume (not illogically) that the name William might have been used in Irish (or Scottish) conversation. According to the rules of that language – we consider Irish and Scottish Gaelic essentially the same language[7] – either "my Will" or "O Will!" would be interpreted as *mo Bhuill* or *a Bhuill* in some dialects (others would say *mo Bhill* or *a Bhill*, changing the English name to Vill; the standard form of William in Irish, however, is *Uilliam*, pronounced [wɪʎiəm] – Liam for short). Now, Irish has no *w* except as a mutation of *b* (Irish names like Ward have mutated *b* in Irish: *Mac an Bháird*, "the bard's son"). Hence, an Irishman who heard someone say *slán leat, a Uill* ("hello, Will") would inevitably assume that the name of the person greeted was Bill.

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[6] Helena Swan, *Girls' Christian Names* (London: Swan, Sonnenschein & Co., 1900), s.v.

[7] John P. Hughes, *The Science of Language* (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 75.

We have used Irish for the above examples, but the same would be true for many dialects of Scottish. The place-name Stornoway, for instance, is *stòr na bháidh*, "the cliff of the bay."

I rather have the impression, but again no solid evidence – it is especially hard to prove a negative – that the nickname "Bill" was little known, if at all, at least around London in Shakespeare's time. He himself was always called Will. (The Anglo-Saxon personal name Bil, found in the Domesday Book, is probably not the nickname.) The O.E.D.'s earliest record of Billy is 1795, of *billyboy* (a word), 1855, and of *billy-goat*, 1861. One may usually assume that a word has been in use in speech for a century or more before it finds its way into written records.

It would seem that Billy might first have come into English during the eighteenth century, the English having extended their rule to all parts of Ireland after 1698.

There are a few words related to the nicknames discussed here, but they are of only marginal interest since they all presuppose the nickname and are derived from it. A "dolly" (in the sense of a mechanical agitator) is also known as a "peggy," and the "jack o'lantern" is in certain regions called "peggy-with-her-lantern." A "peggy" is a type of bird, from 1616 usually a parrot ("parrot," by the way, is "little Pete" – Pedroquito), but sometimes other birds. "Patty-cake" may be related to "johnny-cake." Sunflower seeds are sometimes known as "polly seeds" – no doubt from Polly, another name for the parrot. (It is not true, of course, that a *polygon* is an escaped parrot.) And Pollyanna, the heroine of novels by Eleanor H. Porter (1868–1920), has become (with the addition of *-ish*) quite a well-known adjective. Though not involving any of the nicknames, it is curious that the word *maggot* is probably from Margaret, or more likely its alternative form Margot.

To summarize, then, the hypothesis that I wish to present is that Peggy, Polly and Patty originated in Welsh in the seventeenth century, and Bill in Irish or Scots Gaelic in the eighteenth century, in communities where the Celtic language was current but contact with English speakers, or bilingualism, occasioned the introduction of English names. The non-mutated forms which were constructed in Welsh and Irish resulted in the names acquiring alternative shapes, which were convenient as nicknames outside the Celtic-speaking area. (Within that area, of course, Meg and Peg were no doubt thought of as identical.)

Why did only the names Margaret, Mary, Martha or Matilda, and William participate in this process? It would have to be assumed that these were the English names that were the most popular in Wales and Ireland at the time when the process was operating. William and Mary are not surprising, since they have always been among the most popular English names. The others may have had local popularity at a certain

date for reasons now forgotten. We have thought of connecting the popularity of names with the reigns of popular kings and queens. Victoria and Albert were highly popular in England during Victoria's reign; but Alfred – even more popular – was king more than a thousand years ago. Of Tom, Dick and Harry, Tom was never a king; of Richard, Robert and Roger, neither Robert nor Roger were ever kings. Why certain names achieve popularity at certain times can only rarely be answered with certainty.

Such is the theory, admittedly lacking in some of the essentials for solid proof. Perhaps, in submitting it for consideration, I may raise the possibility that one or more of the scholars who investigate names may be in a position to bring forward some of the proof that I have been unable to supply.

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RESOLUTION OF THANKS

Resolution passed unanimously at the *ANS* Business Meeting in Chicago, December 30, 1971:

"The membership of the American Name Society expresses its deep appreciation and warmest thanks to Dr. Conrad M. Rothrauff, editor of *Names*, for the excellent work he has performed during the three-year period, 1969–1971: work done with care, patience and competence. The production of the three volumes of the journal, culminating in the Twentieth Anniversary Volume of 1971, is in itself the best index of his performance."