Welsh Naming Practices, with a Comparative Look at Cornish

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The paucity of family names in Wales[1] has often been exaggerated, espe-
cially in English books, articles, and films, which would lead us to believe
that there are only a handful of such names (*Jones, Davies, Owens*) in the
entire country. Actually considerable onomastic diversity is there, but it must
be admitted that a small number of names play a disproportionate role
statistically. In practically all Welsh communities the name *Jones* over-
whelms all competitors, thus vindicating the impressionistic opinion of
neighbors and visitors. *Jones* is followed at a respectful distance by the
following, approximately in the order given: *Williams, Roberts, Davies/
Davis, Hughes, Evans, Edwards, Owen(s), Griffith(s), Thomas, Pri(t)chard/
Richard, Parry, Lloyd, Lewis, Morgan, Morris, Ellis, Rees/Rhys, Powell.* A
glance at the telephone directory and similar listings reveals this at once. I
have read that in some towns separate telephone books for the name *Jones*
alone have been contemplated, not only in Wales, but also in places like
Chester, England, which is near the Welsh border and has a sizeable Welsh
component in its population. I have not learned whether the project has been
carried out. It should perhaps be mentioned that the name *Jones* is common in
England too, and that it is by no means necessarily indicative of a Welsh
origin of the bearer.

Family names come relatively late to Wales, as they did to other lands like
Armenia, Frisia, Iceland (where, in a sense, they may not have arrived even
now). Although the combination of given name plus family can be found in
records in Wales as early as 1495, cf., e.g. *Thomas Ferrour*, Head Forester
of Snowdonia, and *Richard Young*, Woodman of Caernarvon, these names
are not really Welsh and evidently designate English officials of the king,
Henry VII.[2] A few family names appear as early as the sixteenth century;
more were acquired in the seventeenth; but the use of Welsh family names as

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[1]Portions of this article were included in a paper read at the meeting of The American Name Society in
New York City, December 29, 1976.
[2]Robert Richards, *Cymru'r Oesau Canol* (Wrexham, 1933), pp. 158-59.

a universal practice was apparently not established until after the middle of the eighteenth century.

For a long time before the adoption of "permanent" family names that were to be passed on from generation to generation, a system of patronymics served, although not as the sole method of naming, cf. *Huw ap Risiart* (Hugh, son of Richard); his son might be called *Gwilym ap Huw* (and there could be variants of *ap Huw: Puw, Pugh*). The patronymic particle *ap,* a reduction of *map/mab* 'son' had the variant *ab* before vowels; hence the son of *Owen* could be either *ab Owen* or *Bowen,* in a process that is well known in Welsh onomastics. At one period *Map* or *Mab* seems to have been used by Englishmen as a disparaging nickname, which is reminiscent of the later application of its Goidelic cognate, *Mac(k), Mick* to Irishmen, then others, with varying degrees of intended calumny.[3] A corresponding feminine construction did not endure long. It used *erch/arch/ach,* reduced from *merch* 'daughter', with attestations like *Marcyret arch Forcan* (c. 1490) Margaret, daughter of Morgan.[4] There were much earlier attestations in mythical and other references, cf. *Branwen uerch Lyr,* Branwen, daughter of Llŷr, in the second "branch" of the *Mabinogi.*

Sometimes a prolix repetition of a lengthy section of genealogy was employed in literary identification, or in personal boasting, a sort of reverse recitation of "begats": *Evan ap Thomas ap Morgan ap Risiart ap Rhobat ap Gwilym,* Evan son of Thomas, son of Morgan, son of Richard, son of Robert, son of William. Novelists in England have poked fun at this, as if it were the normal way of giving a name of a Welshman. This is obviously closely parallel to the Old Norse system, with no implication of relationship between the two, but without ruling out the possibility of ultimate connection: *porsteinn Egilsson Skalla-Grimson Kveld-Úlfsson,* Thorsteinn, son of Egill, son of Skalla-Grímr, son of Kveld-Úlfr. The feminine equivalent is also used in Norse, with *dóttir* 'daughter', e.g.: *Bergþóra Skarphedinsdóttir,* Bergthóra, daughter of Skarphedin (the name of Njál's wife in the *Njál Saga*). This formation endures in modern Icelandic, cf. *Sigurdur Bjarnadóttir,* Sigurd, daughter of Bjarn. Cf., also, *Kristin Lavransdatter* in Norwegian. There are other Scandinavian names of similar formations in the various languages.

One way of establishing what was intended to be a permanent family name was to "freeze" a patronymic and to let it serve as the new surname, thus *Jones,* son of John; *Williams,* son of William; *Evans,* son of Evan. The *s* is

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[3]It is uncertain whether the name of the twelfth century author, Walter Map (Mapes) was derived from Welsh *map/mab,* although the claim is occasionally encountered.

[4]R.J. Thomas and Staff, *Geiriadur Prifysgol, A Dictionary of the Welsh Language* (Cardiff, 1950—), fascicle 3 (1951), p. 179 s.v. *arch/ach.*

clearly a Saxon element and may be viewed as a sort of replacement of Welsh *ap/ab*. In a name like *Thomas,* the *s* is either dropped or is swallowed up in the ending already present (in a name like *Rhys,* of Welsh origin, the same, of course, holds true). Interestingly enough, the plural of these names is formed with native Welsh suffixes: *Thomasiaid* 'Thomases', etc. Some modern forms of Welsh names like *ap Roberts* redundantly exhibit both designations of 'son' (*ap* and *s*). In rare cases *-son* has been used to replace *ap,* and names like *Hughson* result (instead of earlier *ap Hugh, ap Huw, Puw,* etc.) with a singularly un-Welsh aspect, though occasionally borne by ''very Welsh'' individuals. At the present time a few independent souls are reverting to the old practice of forming a patronymic, usually based on the father's first name. Thus the son of *Richard Jones* may call himself *Thomas Richard,* and the son of *Ifor Williams* becomes *Gwyn ap Ifor.* The practice is not excessively widespread but seems be growing. There may be difficulties for future genealogical studies, but, in view of the nature of Welsh onomastic development in the past, it is difficult to see how there could be anything but difficulty in the attempt to trace a family tree beyond a few centuries.

Not all Welsh family names have derived from patronymics, although the ones that have endured most sturdily are mainly of such origin. But some are examples of a different sort: *Lloyd* is 'grey' (Welsh *llwyd*). *Gwyn* is 'white' (also 'blessed'), and *Vaughan* 'little' (Welsh *bychan/fychan*); formations based on epithets are involved here. The nonpatronymic names are, perhaps coincidentally (not entirely) the ones of native Welsh (and Celtic) origin (hence they have transparent cognates in Irish: *liath, find, bec(c)án*). We could add *Morgan, Rhys, Howell, Griffith,* and *Llewelyn* to the list of native family names, but it is difficult to find many more. The paradoxical result is that the family names now regarded as typically Welsh by the average speaker of the language (*Jones, Williams, Roberts,* etc.) are not Welsh at all in origin, the vast majority of them being Norman, but apparently acquired in most instances via English, save for those few actually transmitted directly by a few prominent Norman families.

Curiously enough, the Celtic land closest in language to Wales, Cornwall, though it has lost its Celtic tongue, has a much higher percentage of family names of native Celtic origin than does Wales itself. The old jingle, ''By *Tre, Pol,* and *Pen* ye shall know the Cornishmen,'' reflects this (and other elements, *Ros, Lan,* and *Car* have been added in expanded versions of the rhyme). These are all geographical elements, and a fairly high percentage of Cornish family names are derived from place names with these native onomastic morphemes. There was a vogue in some popular novels of nineteenth-century England with ''up country'' settings to introduce ordinary Cornish names like *Trelawny, Polwhele, Penrose,* and so on, as if they designated

gentility or aristocracy. This often amused Cornishmen who knew—or may themselves have been—very common folk with such names. But, as Henry Jenner pointed out,[5] the names may, in some instances, have been those of people of rank. He reminds us, nevertheless, that some names of this type denote very small holdings, not great manors. And the bearer of the name was sometimes merely a tenant, not the owner of the estate, however small.

Some Cornish names derived from occupations, trades, or callings are of genuine Celtic origin, such as *Marrack* (knight), *Angove* (the smith), *Tyacke* (farmer), *Hellyar* (hunter), e.g., all of which have cognates in Welsh nouns, although not as family names: Welsh *marchog* 'knight,' *cof* 'smith,' *taeog* 'churl, serf,' *heliwr* 'hunter.' Furthermore, Cornish names stemming from epithets referring to physical characteristics, less probably to heraldic connections, outnumber those in Welsh. Cornish has those which have cited for Welsh (grey, white, little), but additional Cornish names are derived from native adjectives for 'red, blue, old, moist,' etc. A perplexing Cornish name is *Curnow* 'Cornishman,' which can hardly have been very distinctive in Cornwall! Wales had a nickname *Sais* 'Englishman, Saxon' applied at one time to a Welshman who knew English besides his own language, probably not at first a term of opprobrium. Subsequently it was used for a Welshman who knew English but not Welsh, or to one who looked down on his native culture and admired that of the Saxon conquerors. It became a family name and has persisted in the form *Sayce* (there have been variants *Sayse, Saies, Seys, Saise*). It seems not to be generally recognized as having a Welsh origin, and the few Welshmen who have pointed out to me the identity of *Sayce* and Welsh *Sais* have been onomastically sophisticated.

When the policy of turning patronymics into surnames was adopted by the Welsh, most people seemingly chose theirs from a short list. Possibly there were not too many different names available. Since a name like *Jones* or *Evans* was not overly distinctive in the average Welsh village or town, and since even the addition of a given name did not always increase the specificity of identification very much (*John Jones, Evan Thomas, Thomas Evans, Edward Evans,* et al.), a qualifying name was suffixed, a practice that has been followed in many ages and in many cultures, granted, but which is done with a special flavor in Welsh Wales. The colorful practice was, to be sure, once far more prevalent than it is now, but conspicuous vestiges persist. If it seems to thrive more in literature than in ordinary speech, the literature nevertheless duplicates a phenomenon that is still a real one.

Merely adding the person's occupation is perhaps the least imaginative

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[5]Henry Jenner, *A Handbook of the Cornish Language* (London, 1904), pp. 197-98.

procedure and one that differs hardly at all from what scores of other cultures have done: *Hughes the Carpenter, Jones the Draper, Lloyd the Baker, Watkins the Joiner,* etc., with, however, strange overtones or undertones of more exalted titles (Arthur the Great?), despite the relatively humble station of those named.

Identifying the person by his place of abode is not much more imaginative, although it frequently produces poetic expressions in Welsh: *Mostyn the Grove, Jones the Meadow, Williams Holly Dingle, Richard Riverbank* (sometimes with disguised genitival relationship). Somewhat different from these is the employment of metonymy: *Evans* the *School,* e.g. *School* in such names means 'teacher.' (Cf. "School beat me for speaking Welsh.") The position of *Jones the Titshiar* is a lower one, being that of a teacher in training. *Jones the Fish* is not a piscatorial specimen but one who purveys such. *William the Herring* is persumably a specialist. *Evans the Post* is not for hitching but brings the mail. Similar metonymy (or synecdoche) is seen in *Ellis the Stable, Meredith the Shop (Merédith* is accented on the penult), *Roberts the Colliery* (strange, because the colliery no doubt employed dozens named Roberts; possibly he was the only one from his hamlet), *Owen the Boats, Ned the Engine, Mike the Union, Wil the Milk, Jacob the Bell, Caradoc the Quarry,* and so on. The definite article is not always present, cf. *Jones Drapes,* contrasting with *Jones the Draper,* above. Since the first member in these combinations is sometimes a family name and sometimes a first name, two types may be represented here, possibly with merger. *Will Waterworks* is a more opaque formation than it appears on the aqueous surface, for it designates, not an employee of a town department, but a weepy preacher in a normally dry denomination.

Appellations like *Will Mouth, Harry Crooked Nose (Harri Trwyn Cam), Robin Stump, Ned One-eye, Cecil Mami* (who supposedly was mollycoddled until the age of sixty) are fairly transparent. A choice possessive compound (*bahuvrīhi*) or two can be found among them. But *Dick Mysterious* requires elucidation. Dick was a quarryman who had once read *The Mysterious Universe* and was constantly spouting knowledge gleaned from that book. *Wil Trombôn* was, surprisingly enough, the trombonist in the town band. *Hopkins Schopenhauer* was one of the "dark philosophers"—those amazing miners who, in the depths of the depression, studied Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer and discussed them with more than a modicum of understanding. Foreign visitors were sometimes astounded at the libraries and the philosophical learning of some Welsh miners. Fictional accounts have, unfortunately, overly sentimentalized and embellished the situation, but a hard basis of reality is behind them. *Jones First Corinthians* was a bus driver whose theology was restricted to First Corinthians 13 and who informed his

passengers that Welsh *cariad* included the meanings of both Latin *caritas* and Greek *agápē*—learning which he had acquired in chapel, of course.

Jim Gorilla, a minor character in a major novel, represents a rather feeble bilingual play on words, rendering Welsh *Jim Gŵr Ella* ("Ella's husband Jim"). In addition to uxorious subservience he exhibited obvious affinity to the great apes. The bilingual status of almost every Welsh speaker is always relevant, and the interplay of Welsh and English seems to be more active, and even more inevitable, than may be realized by the speakers themselves. *Jones Da-da* spoke neither Russian nor baby talk; he ran the candystore or sweets shop. *Da-da* ("good-good") means 'goodies, candies'.

The list could be expanded at some length, both from the writer's personal experience and from many Welsh novels, plays, and narratives (although not all such works utilize these devices of naming). Some are more realistic than others. A few pander to English prejudices (not the works written in Welsh, however). *Jones Categorical Imperative* comes to mind, also *Jones the Rock, Jones Nymbar Ten* (from his work assignment in the quarry), *Jones the Crown* (not a royalist, but a loyal patron of the pub of that time), etc., not forgetting *Owen Old Fox,* who earned his Indian-like title thus: upon arriving at the quarry the first day Owen remarked to the other workmen that he realized that this was a "terrible place for nicknames," and assured them that he was too much of an old fox to say or do anything that would make him earn one.

Most of the naming devices discussed were assaults from outside, so to speak, the names being supplied by friends or enemies, although an occasional *Evans Beethoven* can be adduced as a man's own choice of sobriquet, betokening no false or genuine modesty. But another category of names was usually self-inflicted: when the mother's maiden name was coupled with the father's name in a hyphenated construction reminiscent of similar formations in English (and, to a lesser degree, German). This might lend apparent distinction if the mother's family was a relatively prominent one, or it might convey pseudo-nobility in its very hyphenated form. Hence *John Morris Jones* became *Professor John Morris-Jones,* later *Sir John Morris-Jones* (as if the hyphen did, after all, attract distinction). And *Thomas Hudson Williams* became *T. Hudson-Williams.* Other such newly acquired, or newly-altered, names, which were transmitted to succeeding generations, are *Lloyd-Hughes, Lloyd-Jones, Morgan-Jones,* and so on. *David Lloyd George* somehow achieved the same result without the hyphen, and his children were named in such a way as to imply that *Lloyd George,* not merely *George,* was the family name. Recent mentions of the redoubtable Welshman have, without apparent justification, added the hyphen. The writer of these lines

has been addressed in correspondence from Wales as *Robert Allen-Fowkes,* but will probably resist the temptation to adopt that form.

There is a certain amount of embarrassed disowning of the facetious use of names like *Jones the Fish* and *Evans the Post* in present-day Wales, and friends there assure me that such things are more frequently encountered in fiction than in life. That may be true, in part, but perhaps the disparagers protest too much. For attestation of the practice is found in works of non-fiction, especially biographical and autobiographical writings, memoirs, and other works of that character, some of which are rich mines of supplemental names. I cite at random from such books the following appellations, which were applied to real people and show that the fictitious names must also be based on actuality: *Morys y Post* (Morris the Post), *Thomas Roberts Jerusalem* (*Jerusalem* being the name of a chapel), *Sam y Ship* (Sam the Ship, the ship being a tavern), *Robert Ellis Ysgoldy* (Robert Ellis Schoolhouse), *Lewis Wiliam y Ddôl* (*y Ddôl* means the Meadow), *Gruffydd y Mynydd* (Griffith of the Mountain), *Dacota Dic* (a name resulting from boyhood reading of wild west stories), *Jac Bach Felin Hen* (Little Jack of Old Mill), and (continuing in English translation) *Evans Shoes, Rhys of the Grove, Lizzie Williams the Gas, Owen Jones Tea, John Parry Roughfield, Ned Jones the Kennel, William Griffith Lakeshore,* and on and on.[6]

Welsh poets, ancient and modern, have customarily made use of bardic pseudonyms. Modern ones are bestowed as honors (upon election to the "Gorsedd," which is connected with the *Eisteddfod*), but the poet is ordinarily asked to choose his bardic name. Surprisingly enough, not too much imagination is shown in most of these creations, which are either archaizing patronymics or geographical designations, or consist of the poet's given name plus an epithet ("the Red," etc.), or of the word *bardd* (poet) preceded by the poet's given name ("Richard Bard," e.g.). Hence the results are sometimes quite prosaic. Greater diversity and more resourcefulness is often shown by rock groups and similar aggregations, although they often imitate

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[6]In writing the above I have made use of my own lists as well as materials contained in the following works of fiction and non-fiction: D. Tegfan Davies, *Rhamantwr y De* (Rhydaman, 1954); E. Tegla Davies, *Nedw* (Wrexham, 1928); three novels by T. Rowland Hughes: *O Law i Law* (London, 1943), *William Jones* (Aberystwyth, 1944), and *Y Cychwyn* (Aberystwyth, 1947); also David Jenkins, *Thomas Gwyn Jones* (Denbigh, 1973); Alun T. Lewis, *Y Dull Deg* (Llandysul, 1973); Richard Llewellyn, *How Green Was My Valley* (New York, 1940); H.V. Morton, *In Search of Wales* (London, 1933); Ivor Owen, *Siop Gwalia* (Denbigh, 1973); E.G. Pines, *The Story of Surnames* (London, 1966); Thomas Richards, *Atgofion Cardi* (Aberystwyth, 1960); John Rowlands, *Ienctid yw 'Mhechod* (Llandybie, 1965); Emlyn Williams, *George* (New York, 1961); plus several issues of the Welsh weekly newspaper, *Y Cymro,* 1976-1981.

American practices, and their naming does not really belong to the same sort as that discussed here.

It would appear, after all, that the most productive and the most effective naming stems from average members of the population. Common sense may tell us that each invention must somehow be the creation of an individual, rather than the spontaneous achievement of a whole group. Still, the specific coiner or selector can hardly ever be pointed to, and it is almost legitimate to see these names as somehow being devised by "the people"—almost.

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A thosand fantasies
Begin to throng into my memory,
of Calling shapes, and beck'ning shadows dire,
And airy tongues that syllable men's names
On sands and shores and desert wildernesses.

Milton, *Comus*, 201–205.