Notes

James Fenimore Cooper: Onomastician

As Warren S. Walker points out, in an article in the Summer, 1979 issue of *New York Folklore*,[1] a wealth of information on the naming practices of Americans in the early decades of the Republic is evident in the writings of the novelist, James Fenimore Cooper. Not only did Cooper include thousands of proper names in his published works, but he also occasionally expressed, in parenthetic statements therein, his own strong feelings about the onomastic partialities of his countrymen.

Cooper's onomastic ideas were most revealing in one particular novel—*The Crater or Vulcan's Peak: A Tale of the Pacific,* first published in 1847.[2] He actually opened the novel with this gratuitous statement: "There is nothing in which American liberty, not always as much restrained as it might be, has manifested a more decided tendency to run riot, than in the use of names." He decried the apparent exhaustion of traditional sources of Christian nomenclature—the Bible, the classics, and Heathen mythology—and the preference of early nineteenth century parents for such imaginative creations as *Lowina, Orchistra, Philena, Ithusa, Seneka, Antonizetta, Almina, Deidama, Cythéra, Saraletta, Aminda, Marinda,* etc., as well as the use of "a family for a Christian name."

Several other observations and suggestions about naming patterns were made in this novel. Cooper felt that the French and Spanish method of identifying a person by both lines of descent is more useful than the typical English and American style of naming him for his father alone. He was also partial to the French practice of a married woman's adding the husband's surname to her own family's name. He also suggested that, for clarity in tracing lines of descent, a woman's dual family identity should be revealed in her title, as "Jane Smith, wife of John Jones, or Jane, daughter of Thomas Smith and wife of John Jones." He observed that, in some countries, "a woman's name is not properly considered to be changed by marriage, but she becomes a Mrs. only in connection with the name of her husband. Thus Jane Smith becomes Mrs. John Jones, but not Mrs. Jane Jones." The English, whom Cooper claimed to "pay so much more attention to such matters than we do," refer to the wife of, say, "Lord John Russell, (as) Lady *John*, and not Lady (her Christian name)." In England, apparently, the wife simply loses her own identity to that of her husband.

Cooper may also have been one of American's first "odd name" collectors as he referred, in an early footnote in *The Crater,* to his own collection of unusual given names, gathered from real life, which he hoped to publish some day. He also encouraged a scholarly interest in personal nomenclature in America when he wrote: "This business of names is a sort of science in itself and we do believe that it is less understood and less attended to in this country than in almost all others."

We might, therefore, well do credit to James Fenimore Cooper's anticipatory contributions to onomastic studies in America.

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[1]Vol. 5, Numbers 1 and 2, pp. 33-41.

[2]The passages are taken from pp. 7-9 of the Thomas Philbrick edition of Cooper's novel, 1962, Belknap Press.

Re: *James*

The derivation of *James* as either a given name or as a surname is not as clear-cut as may have been implied in the papers of E. W. B. Nicholson and those who have utilized Nicholson's notions as exemplified in his *Pedigree of Jack and Allied Names*. Indeed, in relatively modern works, *James* is said to have been derived from *Jacques* (whereas *Jack* supposedly wasn't), from the Spanish *Jaime* (according to ecclesiastical references), from an earlier French name (*Jaume; Jamme; Gemme*), from the Italian *Giammo,* or from *Benjamin* (according to a Flemish source). There are other possible derivations which I have not yet run across. While the *Jacques-James* derivation may be found frequently (i.e., it may be the most popular in terms of dictionary citations), it is not the sole derivation nor (despite the Nicholson argument) is it necessarily the most compelling.

The pejorative use of *Jacques* in French (e.g., "Jacques Bonhomme") and the equally derogatory use of *Jake, Jakes,* or *Jack* in English (e.g., latrine, common person, lower class person, etc.) lead one to suggest that in English a Christian saint may have become essentially nameless for a period of time as far as the common people were concerned. That is to say, that while the clergy may have read to the people concerning the "brother of the Lord" (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3; Galatians 1:19), he was probably referred to as "Santo Jacobus." Again, the laity may have heard about the pre-Christian Jewish Patriarch *Ya' aqobh,* and they may have named their sons in his honor, but the given name *James* as indicating either of these two biblical figures probably did not become popular among the common folk until after the Scottish Jameses became kings and until a compromise among churchmen was reached wherein *James* became the name of "the Lord's brother" and *Jacob* became the name of the ancient patriarch (*c.* 1600).

There seems to be little reason to doubt that *James, Jacques,* and *Jack* have common roots extending back in time to *Ya'aqob*. The present question involves whether *James* was derived from *Jaime, Giammo,* etc., while *Jack* was derived from *Jacques*, or what the derivational sequence might have been. The Nicholson argument may yet prove to have the best support, but what about *Jaime, Jaume, Jamme, Gemme, Giammo*, etc.? What is certain is that both Irish and English travellers were exposed to *Jacques, Jaime, Giammo*, etc., during regularly occurring pilgrimages, during the Crusades, during the occupation of various areas of English, Ireland, Scotland, etc., by the Vikings, among others, or during other historical events. Furthermore, it can be argued that rather than living a highly insular existence, goodly numbers of all classes of Europeans intermixed relatively freely due to commerce, conquest, occupation, or religious fervor. Thus, *James* could have arrived in England by any of several ways, not merely by way of France and *Jacques*. And should this argument gain additional support with additional research, Nicholson's papers may be seen as having become a classic case of *argumentum ex silentio*.

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