

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

The Origin of English Surnames. By P.H. Reaney. Pp. xvii + 415, bibliography, index, maps. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980. First published, 1967. Paperback. Price not given.

Reviewed by Warren E. Roberts

Among the books available dealing with British family names, P.H. Reaney's **The Origin of English Surnames** is a particularly fine one. First published in 1967, it has now been made available as a paperback. It can be used as a dictionary of surnames, for there is an alphabetical listing of names at the end of the book. That is to say, if one is interested in the origins of a specific name, one can find it, assuming that it is one of the 6,600 names included. The purpose of the book, however, is to discuss the ways in which names have originated. Hence, it has sections devoted to such topics as "Surnames from towns, villages and estates," "Patronymics," and "Surnames of occupations."

The feature that distinguishes this book from others on British surnames is the extensive research Reaney did in early written records of all sorts. Research in early records sometimes adds to our knowledge of the age of words important to folklife research. Take the word "broadax" as an example. While it might refer to a weapon used in earlier times, it is far more likely to refer to a carpenter's tool used in the hewing of timbers for buildings, ships, and the like. Thus the antiquity of the word tells us something about the antiquity of the technique. The earliest use of the word as describing a carpenter's tool that the editors of the **Oxford English Dictionary** could find dates from 1400. Reaney, however, finds Broadax used as a family name as early as 1214.

The Origin of English Surnames is clearly written and contains a wealth of information both interesting and instructive. It will prove a valuable addition to the library of any folklorist or folklife researcher working with British or British-American materials.

Folklorists, it seems, have completely ignored surnames in the past. Placenames and the legends connected with them have interested a number of folklorists in the United States over a period of years.¹ Some attention has also been given to nicknames and the like,² but I have been unable to find any folklorist who has treated family names as folklore or who has suggested that family names might belong in the canon of folklore.

The reasons for this neglect of family names by folklorists are not hard to find. Families in Great Britain assumed their names or were given their names so long ago that these names are simply taken for granted. It is a rare person in the United States who tells legends about the origins of his family name. The British placenames from which so many family names are derived are remote and generally meaningless to Americans. The fact that a family name may indicate that one's ancestor came to England with the Norman conquerors does not seem to interest many Americans even though it may interest the English. The fact that one's ancestors came over on the Mayflower interests Americans, but the situation regarding the family names of the Pilgrim fathers is rather different. Their names are generally English, but so are thousands of other American names.

The neglect of family names by folklorists seems to me to be unfortunate. I would propose that any scholar working in folklore or folklife research should be at least aware of some aspects of family names, and I would like to advance some justifications for this proposal.

My first one is a suggestion that much could be learned from an analysis of surnames about the folklife and material culture of the period (roughly 1250-1450) when family names were being taken or given. This is a period that is difficult to find information about. The usual sources that help us with the folklife and material culture of later periods (fieldwork, written records, and the like) are out of the reach of most Americans, but family names are as near at hand as the telephone directory.

For example, family names can tell us what crafts, trades, and professions flourished in that earlier period and can even give us some indication of the relative frequency of craftsmen, tradesmen, and professionals in

that period. When we find names such as Fletcher (arrow maker), Weaver, Dyer, Turner, Carpenter, and a host of others, we know that many crafts still flourishing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were flourishing centuries earlier (Carpenter, for example) while some such as Fletcher have pretty well died out. When we reflect on how common a name Smith is, we must conclude that there were a great number of smiths (mostly blacksmiths) in that earlier period. But when we see how rare the name Painter is, we must conclude that paint and the specialists who applied it were pretty rare.

The matter of relative frequency, however, must be applied with some caution. Why have I never found a person named Cabinetmaker? Does the absence of this name in my experience mean that no one made or had furniture in that early period? No. It is probably because a man who devoted much of his time to making furniture would have been called a joiner. But because even Joyner is a fairly uncommon name, we should probably conclude that carpenters and wheelwrights made a great deal of furniture in that period. And what about the absence of (in my own experience, at least) Basketmaker as a family name? Didn't people have baskets in that earlier period? I'm sure they did. I believe that basketmaking was practiced by great numbers of people as a sideline, people who were perhaps primarily farmers, and that basketmaking was not commonly regarded as a specialized craft. Even today in my field work I find that the few traditional basketmakers who still work consider basketmaking as a sideline, something for when other work is slow.

The list of kinds of information that could be culled from family names about folklife and material culture in that earlier era is practically endless. Take the name Boltinghouse, common in the Bloomington area, as an example. It tells us that in some area of England at least flour must have been bolted in a building separate from the mill in which it was ground. But limitations of space force me to leave such a list to the interested reader.

Another reason for folklorists and folklife researchers to be aware of family names is that placenames and family names in the United States are intimately connected. One can hardly study placenames, and folklorists as I have previously mentioned do study them, without some awareness

of family names. Take the southern Indiana town Cumback, for example. One might think that some booster named the town as an invitation to the tourist to return for another visit unless he knew that Cumback is a family name. Or Bean Blossom, Indiana. Was it named because the early settlers found beans in blossom when they arrived (the Indians had planted them, presumably) as is generally believed, or because of an early settler named Beanblossom? I incline to the family name as an explanation. I have never met a person named Beanblossom I will admit, but I have met some people named Turnipseed, and it seems to me that if Turnipseed is a family name, why not Beanblossom?

And what about Solsberry, some twenty miles west of Bloomington? It is pretty well accepted in this area that the place was once named Sol's Berry Patch but that, over the years, the "Patch" was dropped off. A placename scholar should know, however, that "Solsberry" is a phonetic spelling of the common pronunciation of "Salisbury."³ (My desk dictionary gives the pronunciation of Salisbury as "SOLS'BERI.")⁴ The town might have been named for Salisbury, Maryland by someone who spelled as he pronounced, a common practice until relatively recently, or for Salisbury, England. It could also be named for a person whose surname was Salisbury or Solsberry because his ancestors lived at that place in England. Cottle lists Salisbury as a British surname with Salisberry as a variant spelling.⁵

A few miles west of Bloomington is Green Ham Hollow. When I first heard the name I had been recently reading Dr. Seuss' book **Green Eggs and Ham** to my daughters, and I wondered if the book was older than I had thought. Some local residents say that, in pioneer days, some improperly smoked ham turned green and gave the hollow its name. Actually, the hollow is named for a long-time resident, J. Greenville Ham, called "Green" by all who knew him. I have visited his grave in the cemetery of a nearby town, so that I know a person with such a name really lived.

One final example of family names as placenames will have to suffice. In western Monroe County a county road runs straight up hill and down and true north and south for at least three and a half miles. It is named Hart-straight Road, Hart Straight Road, or Hart's Trait Road depending on whom you ask, what map you consult, or what

road sign you look at. At one time different road signs at different intersections gave all three possibilities. I say at one time because I haven't driven along the road for several years so that I don't know what the current status of the signs is. People who favor one form of the name over the others usually have a legend to support their choice. These legends involve a pioneer logger named Hart who built a straight road on which to haul his logs, an Indian named Johnny Hart, and a trace (as in Natchez Trace) beaten down by harts (i.e., male deer).

A few years ago I was asked by a man who lived along that road to appear at a meeting of the County Commissioners to set them straight on the proper form of the name. He, of course, assumed that I would support his spelling and etymology based upon the logger named Hart. I chose to sit that one out, however. I knew that my explanation would please no one but would probably unite the warring factions in an attack on me. The name of the road, I suspect, is derived from the family name Hartstraight. I say this because although there is now no family with that name living on or near the road, there are families with that name not far away. A recent candidate for Mayor in Bedford, twenty miles south of Bloomington, was named Hartstraight, for example. Moreover, ninety-five percent of the county roads in Monroe County are named for families or individuals that live or once lived on them.⁶

A third reason why folklife researchers and students of material culture in general should be aware of family names is that they are closely and often confusingly bound up with craft objects, craft tools, processes; in short, the whole world of material culture. If a fieldworker asked a woodworker what the tool he was using was called, and was told that it was a "badger plane," said fieldworker might wonder for a long time how the plane resembled the animal. He would never guess that it was named for its inventor, one Charles Badger, "a member of the firm of Badger & Galpin, of No. 1 Stargate, Lambeth, in 1863."⁷

There are other examples. Much has been written about the sailor's folk art called scrimshaw which involves carving and engraving ivory and whalebone. Several writers have tried to explain how this art got its name and what the name means.⁸ No one, as far as I know, has pointed

out that Scrimshaw is a family name. It is not a common one, of course, but it is one. I do not intend to claim a simple, direct connection between the folk art and the family name; that is, I am not saying that a sailor named Scrimshaw invented it. I do, however, suggest that anyone writing on the origins of the term "scrimshaw" ought to be aware of the family name.

Another example is the word "wainscot," used in England mostly to refer to "panel-work of oak or other wood, used to line the walls of an apartment" (**Oxford English Dictionary**), but used in the United States generally to refer to such paneling extending from the floor upwards about thirty inches. The etymology of wainscot has puzzled dictionary compilers. The editors of the **Oxford English Dictionary**, for instance, state that "The original meaning. . .remains obscure." No etymologist has ever pointed out that Wainscot is a family name. It is not a common one, but there is one person with that name (spelled with two t's) in the current Bloomington telephone directory. It is certainly possible that the panel-work derived its name from a person named Wainscot who first ordered it or made it or something of that sort.

I want to turn now to another topic; namely, the concept of initial occupancy and family names. Folklife researchers and cultural geographers are rightly concerned with the concept of initial occupancy. It holds that the first settlers in a region in the United States will establish a number of patterns in such elements as architecture, agriculture, and speech. These patterns will be like those in the areas the first settlers came from. Later immigrants tend to conform to the patterns established by the first settlers even though the later comers may have been from an area with rather different patterns. This concept is of great importance in dealing with many aspects of folklife and folklore.

Some examples from one geographical area will have to suffice. My mother was born in England and came to the United States when she was twenty years old. My father was born and grew up in North Carolina. The newly-wed couple moved to a small town in Maine where I was born and grew up. Not surprisingly, I grew up speaking **not** with an English or North Carolina accent, but with a Maine

accent. (After I moved to another part of the country, my friends used to ask me to say "Park your car in Harvard Yard" and then double up with laughter at my pronunciation.) My mother must have adapted to the local patterns in folk cookery rather quickly. As long as we lived in Maine we had baked beans every Saturday night just like all our Yankee neighbors. Baked beans, I hasten to say, are virtually unknown in the traditional cooking of North Carolina (the canned variety has been introduced in recent years, of course) and of the part of England my mother came from.

That one family moving into a new area should have adopted many of the traditional patterns of that new area is to be expected. But what makes the concept of initial occupancy more significant is the fact that great numbers of French Canadians had moved into the area in the early 1900's to work in the mills. While the older French Canadians spoke French among themselves, when they spoke English they spoke it with a Maine accent, as did their children, and they all ate baked beans on Saturday night. Moreover, even later in the 1900's substantial numbers of Finns moved into the area. The terrain, rocky and hilly, with many small lakes and birch trees, perhaps reminded them of their homeland. At any rate, when they spoke English they spoke it with a Maine accent (they, too, would have said "Pahk yuh cah in Hahvud Yahd") and they ate baked beans on Saturday night.

The concept of initial occupancy needs much more study and research, but it is obviously of importance to folklife research and folklore as well as other disciplines. How does one determine who the initial occupants were (after, of course, the Native Americans) and where they came from? History books and census records will help, of course, but so will local telephone directories. Once one discovers what the common family names are in an area, he is well on his way to determining who the initial occupants were in the area and where they came from as well as being able to identify later immigrants. (A small town with a large university in it like Bloomington presents some special problems of course, but the college faculty and foreign graduate students in the telephone directory can be sorted out if one is willing to take the time.)

This leads me to raise a problem I have been unable to solve concerning the common family names in Monroe County and nearby areas in southern Indiana. First of all, there is no doubt that the people who settled in this county in the first half of the nineteenth century came mostly from the mid-south (Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, Tennessee, and Kentucky) and are ultimately of British origin. Census records, local histories, and the like, which I will not bother to detail, all support this assertion as do the common family names. There were a few early settlers from Pennsylvania with Pennsylvania German names. In the 1840's a few immigrants from Germany settled in the county as is shown by the placename "Dutch Ridge" and the family names of people who lived there. Up until the Civil War, however, there were no other ethnic groups of any significance represented in the population.

What puzzles me is that I cannot find many of the names in reference books on British surnames.⁹ Following is a sampling of old, common names in Monroe County that are of this sort:

Bohall, Boltinghouse, Boruff, Brummett, Canada, Chitwood, Cracraft, Deckard (one of the most common names in Monroe County), Dittemore, Endwright, Fiscus, Fleenor, Holtsclaw, Hovious, Kinser, Lanam, Lincicome, Linthicum, Minks, Mullinix, Niswander, Ooley, Purtlebaugh, Smoot, Spanker, Stalcup, Stansifer, Stipp, Swango, Vest, Waldrip, Wampler, Whisnand, Zikes.

There are probably several reasons why these names cannot be found in reference books on British surnames. First of all, some of the names may be variant spellings of those listed in the reference books, though I have tried to be alert for variant spellings. Canada, for example, may be related to Canaday and Canady, both of which appear in the Boston telephone directory and may also be connected with the fairly common Kennedy.

Another possibility is that some of these names may not be of British origin. Deckard and Kinser, both very common names in Monroe County, may be of German origin and may represent a Pennsylvania German element among the early settlers. Again, a hasty check of reference works on German surnames failed to turn up any leads.¹⁰ I realize

that American spellings of foreign names present special difficulties.

The most likely reason I can advance for the absence of these names from the reference books on British names is that many of them are Scotch-Irish and that the British reference books have missed Scotch-Irish names. Why the books overlooked Scotch-Irish names I cannot say. It is certainly true that there was a strong Scotch-Irish component in the wave of settlers who moved from the East Coast into the Midwest.

In general, I would suggest that there is a real need for studies of specifically American surnames. Such studies would be of great help to researchers in many fields, including folklore and folklife research.¹¹

NOTES

¹ See the useful bibliography in Jan H. Brunvand, **The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction**, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), p. 50.

² Ibid., pp. 50-51.

³ The authors of the standard book on Indiana placenames either did not know this or did not care, for they do not mention it in their book in the entry on Solsberry. Marvin D. Carmony and Ronald L. Baker, **Indiana Place Names** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975).

⁴ **Webster's New World Dictionary of the English Language** (Cleveland, Ohio: The World Publishing Co., 1964).

⁵ Basil Cottle, **The Penguin Dictionary of Surnames** (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 247.

⁶ Hence, Rock East Road, named, of course, for Mr. Rockford East. The road is in the western part of the county and generally runs north and south. The namers of the road must have concluded that calling it just "East Road" would have been confusing.

⁷ R.A. Salaman, **Dictionary of Tools** (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), p. 304.

8 See for example, Edouard A. Stackpole, **Scrimshaw at Mystic Seaport** (Mystic, Connecticut: The Marine Historical Association, 1958). Stackpole writes, "The term scrimshaw is in itself of uncertain origin. It is thought to be a derivative of early terms--'skrimshander,' 'scrimshonter,' and 'scrimshorn.' So far as may be ascertained, this word appears to come from the Dutch **Skrimshander**, meaning one who indulges too much in laying [sic] around or a 'lazy fellow.'" p. 7.

9 Books I have consulted include:

Basil Cottle, **The Penguin Dictionary of Surnames** (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1967). ["An analysis of over 8,000 English, Welsh, Scottish, and Irish surnames."]

C.L. Ewen, **History of Surnames of the British Isles** (London: Kegan Paul, 1931). [Includes about 10,500 English, Welsh, Irish, and Scottish surnames.]

P.H. Reaney, **A Dictionary of British Surnames**, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976).

P.H. Reaney, **The Origin of English Surnames** (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967). [Includes about 6,600 surnames.]

10 Josef K. Brechenmacher, **Etymologische Wörterbuch der Deutschen Familiennamen** (Limburg a.d. Lahn: C.A. Starke-Verlag, 1957).

11 Elsdon C. Smith, **American Surnames** (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1969) is a useful beginning.