

The Place-name 'Frome.'

BY HUGH NORRIS.

MORE than once have I been asked, and again and again have I asked myself the question, "What is the origin or derivation of the place-name 'Frome'?"

Collinson (ii, 185) says, "The simple appellation of the town arose from the river Frome, in Saxon 'From,' " an assertion that no one present would be bold enough to dispute, but which is no more to the point than if he were to tell us that the origin of his own name is to be discovered in the fact that his father was called 'Collinson' before him.

In the Domesday Survey the word appears as 'Frome,' both in Somerset and Dorset.

Seeing that there are at least three rivers in the western part of England bearing the name 'Frome,' one is naturally prompted to ask the question, "Has the word anything to do with water which according to its condition, characteristics or situation has given rise to the qualifying words Usk or Axe or Exe, Dwr, Stour, Llyn, Loch, etc., in addition to the general term for rivers, Afon or Avon; and if so, what inherent quality is it that has given rise to the name Frome?"

I can find no explanation in the publications of our Society.

Canon Taylor, in "Words and Places" (p. 145, Ed. 1882), only refers to Frome as one "amongst river names which invite investigation."

Pulman, in his "Local Nomenclature" (p. 19, Ed. 1857), gives it as the Keltic "*Yr Afon Ffrwm*, the river of rank vegetation, a quality with which anglers (in the Dorset river) are soon made acquainted;" *Ffrwm* being the modern Welsh for rank or luxuriant.

Camden (*Britannia*, Gibson's Ed., 1772, vol. i, col. 56), quoting Asser, in his "Life of King Alfred" (*sub* Wareham), says, "Into the north-west corner of this Bay (*Poole Harbour*) Frome, a famous river of this county (*Dorset*), discharges itself; for so it is commonly call'd, tho' the Saxons nam'd it *Fpau*; and because this bay was formerly call'd *Fraumouth*, later ages have probably imagin'd that the river was call'd *Frome*." This is not a bad shot of our old friend's, but if we admit such mode of begging the question what becomes of the two other Fromes which have no mouth? Moreover, he altogether fails to tell us what *Fpau* means.

The Saxon Chronicle (*sub* A.D. 1015) speaks of Cnut's having his head quarters at *Fpau-muð*, when engaged in harrying the counties of Dorset, Wilts, and Somerset.

The editor of Murray's Handbook of Dorset (p. 180, Ed. 1869) remarks that *War* or *Var* seems to have been the Keltic name of the Dorset river Frome.

In Hutchins's Dorset (Ed. 1867, p. 447, vol. ii) we read, "On the south side of the church rises a spring called St. John's Spring, which is reputed to be the head of the Frome." And then in a quotation he adds: "Mr. Baxter (*Glossarium voce Durnovaria*) derives the British name *Varius* or *Var iii. q.d. Profluens Varii, sive undæ Mansuetæ*." (By which I understand him to mean that the river was called 'Var,' because its stream was smooth and placid and its current gentle).

He then says, "It is synonymously called *Frau*, from a dialect of the Scoto-Brigantes, with whom *Frew* is a stream or river. (In British, *Frau* signifies the same; and in another dialect *Rhig* and *Rhüü*, which agrees with the Latin *Rivus*, from the Greek $\rho\epsilon\epsilon\upsilon\upsilon$, in the Eolic dialect $F\rho\epsilon\epsilon\upsilon\upsilon$, to flow);

whence the ancient palace of the British kings in the Isle of Anglesea was called from the neighbouring river *Aber-Frau*, quasi *Fraumæ Ostium*. That *Varius* was another name for *Frauma* is evident from the modern name of Warham, *ad Varium* a dwelling on the *varius*,"* (the Latinized form of *Var*.)

The writer mentions a number of adjacent places, taking their name from the stream; the oldest being *Wareham* as containing the Keltic root, the rest Saxon or later, comprising five *Fromes* at least and one *Frampton*.

Accepting these remarks as true of the Dorsetshire *Frome*, the question arises, "are there any features possessed by the Gloucester and Somerset *Fromes* that would link their history with that of Mr. Baxter's river?" Camden says that "our river *Frome* washes *Farleigh*, a castle on a hill, belonging not many years since to the *Hungerfords*;" and a glance at the map shews us that there is an ancient market town called *Wickwar*, not far from the head of the Gloucestershire river.

These are instructive facts, and tend to show that the three *Frome* streams are members of one family, in that they possess similar names in virtue of possessing generally similar qualities.

There is yet another remarkable feature common to them all, and this is that neither of these rivers pours its waters directly into the sea; each either flows into or unites with another stream before an estuary is formed, *e.g.*, the *Frome* *Frome* flows in a northerly direction to join the *Avon* at *Freshford*, near *Bath*; the Gloucestershire stream, taking a southerly course, pours its waters into the same river at *Bristol*; whilst the Dorsetshire *Frome* goes nearly due east to join the *Piddle* or *Trent* in forming that queer, winding, muddy estuary which at high water we know by the name of *Poole Harbour*, the ancient *Frau-muð*.

* "*Glossarium Antiquitatum Britannicarum, accedunt Edv. Luidii de Fluviorum, Montium, Orbium, etc., in Britannia Nominibus, Adversaria Posthuma.*"—By William Baxter, Lond., 8vo., 1733.

Whether this coincidence may be regarded as a factor, direct or indirect, in giving a similar designation to the three water-courses, I must leave for others to discuss. Unfortunately, I am not sufficiently acquainted with the physical characteristics of either river to offer an opinion as to its deserving the appellation "*unda mansueta*," but it is just possible that the fact of a stream flowing a number of miles under circumstances which cause it eventually to lose its independent existence, may tend to render its course smooth and tranquil, rather than boisterous and rude. The river here, I noticed when approaching the town by the railway yesterday, was winding, and its surface smooth. I was also informed by a Frome gentleman that such is its general aspect until it reaches the Avon.

We may, moreover, conclude that the Dorsetshire river possesses similar features, or Hutchins's remarks as to its earliest recorded name would not have been made.

I am not a Keltic scholar, but I happen to know that in Welsh, as now spoken, the word *Gwâr* means placid or gentle. I know also that by a natural and easy transition *Gwar* may become *War* or *Var*; in fact that the words may in many cases be inter-changeable. This, surely, tends to corroborate the assertion of Mr. Baxter that *Var* in Keltic times had precisely the meaning he assigns it, and which is expressed by the Latin word *mansuetus*.

Assuming this to be correct, I have only to add that if the suggested dialectic connexion between the words *Var* and *Fᵛau* commends itself to philologists, and if they can stand sponsors for the legitimate introduction of the final 'm' in the later Saxon word *Fᵛaum* or *Fᵛom*, it will not be very difficult to trace the process by which the Keltic *VAR*, of two or possibly three thousand years ago, has become the English *FROME* of the present day.