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PART II.—PAPERS, ETC.

Somerset or Somersetshire.

BY THE RIGHT HON. SIR EDWARD FRY, D.C.L., F.R.S., F.S.A.

NOTE.—*The passages in square brackets have been added since the paper was read.*

OF late years a scruple seems to have arisen in some philologically sensitive consciences as to the use of the word "Somersetshire;" and as I find from the last volume of the *Proceedings* of this Society that this scruple for some years kept an eminent county gentleman from becoming a member of our Society (*Proceedings*, vol. 48, part i, p. 59), it may be permissible to ask you to consider the point somewhat more fully than was done by the Rev. C. S. Taylor in his note on the subject read before the Society last year (*Proceedings*, vol. 48, part i, p. 34).

The question whether the word "Somersetshire" is a right word to use must depend, as I conceive, on the usage of those

who speak, and know how to speak, the English language. If such persons have been in the habit, of long time, of speaking of "Somersetshire," then it is pedantry to reject it on any antiquarian or etymological ground. If, on the contrary, there has not been such a usage, but the word has lately been introduced, or has never been habitually used by those whom we regard as masters of English pure and undefiled, then we are entitled to expel it as a vulgarism or solecism. In a word, usage is the *jus et norma loquendi*, and must be decisive in this and all like cases.

Over and above this primary question, there may remain another, as to the original propriety of the use of the word ; but the two questions must not be confounded together.

Let me turn to the first question—the usage of the word. I say without fear of contradiction that it has been in use for many hundred years, that for the greater part of those years its continuous use is apparent, and that throughout the whole of that period its continuous use is probable.

Domesday is understood to have been completed by 1086, and the Book of Exeter (or as it is sometimes called the Exon Domesday) is believed to have been composed about the same time, and from the same materials as Domesday Book itself ; but it contains certain details omitted in the larger compilation (Sir Henry James, *Introduction to Domesday*). In Domesday itself the name of the county is written at the heading throughout as Somersete, and in the list of the tenants of the King in the county the same word is used. In the Exon work, on the contrary, we get three forms, Sumersete, Sumerseta, and three times Summerseta Syra,¹ *i.e.*, evidently our modern Somersetshire. This variation in the name of the county is interesting, as it shows that both forms were in use at least very soon after the Norman Conquest.

The next citation in point of date which I can give, is from

(1). *Libri Censualis Vocati Domesday Book Additamenta*, 1816, pp. 127, 428, 453.

the Peterborough copy of the *Saxon Chronicle*, for the year 1122 :—"On the night of the 8th of the Kalends of August, there was a very great earthquake over all Somersetshire and Gloucestershire," "Ofer eal Sumersetescire and Gleawecestrescire." (Thorpe's *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, i, 373).

I will hereafter say something on the suggestion that the east country recording monk carelessly applied the term "shire" to a west country division.

If I am not able to adduce any authority between the Norman period and the reign of Henry VIII, it is easy to remember how barren that period is, comparatively speaking, in English literature. But as we all know, the last Henry sent Leland on a tour of inspection throughout his kingdom, and three times he appears to have visited our county. The passages bearing on it in his great topographical work have been conveniently put together and edited by our indefatigable member, the Rev. E. H. Bates, in his *Leland in Somersetshire* : and looking through that I find that whilst the old traveller uses the longer form more than twenty times, he uses the shorter form only twice, and then in connection with the title of the Earl of Somerset.

Camden, our next great antiquary, who flourished in the reign of Elizabeth, has a chapter headed "Somersetshire," which begins with the words, "The County of Somerset, commonly called Somersetshire;" and Gough, the editor of *Camden*, uses like language.

Norden (who, I believe, wrote late in the sixteenth century) has in his description of England a bit of dialogue which may still be acceptable to the dwellers in our county. A boy speaks, and says, "I was once in Somersetshire about a place neare Taunton called Tandean. I did like their land and their husbandry well." To which the surveyor makes reply, "You speake of the paradise of England," (New Shakesp. Socy., p. 230, cited by Archbold, *Somerset Religious Houses*, p. 15).

[Celia Ficunes, a lady who towards the end of the XVII Century made a journey "through England on a side saddle," of which her account has recently been published (p. 199), writes of the county as Summersetshire."]

Our modern county historians are of the same mind. It will be enough to refer to Collinson, who on his two title pages entitles his work, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset*, and *The History of Somersetshire*; to Rutter on the North Western division of the county (see *e.g.*, pp. 11, 12, 19, 55); and to the author of the article on the county in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (xxii, p. 259).

One eminent writer on the history of our county remains to be cited—I mean Mr. Freeman. His interesting little book on the Cathedral Church of Wells (London, 1870), gives, on p. xiii, a list of "the Bishops of Somersetshire or Wells," and in the body of the work—in how many places I have not stopped to enquire—he makes use of the word in question without scruple or apology (*e.g.*, pp. 12, 23). So again, in his paper on Perpendicular Architecture, in the second volume of our *Proceedings*, he writes freely of "Somersetshire Models" (p. 35) and "Somersetshire Perpendicular" (p. 7). In vol. 3, writing on the same subject, he speaks of "The Perpendicular style of Somersetshire" (p. 1). In vol. 4, ii, p. 3, he talks of "The distinctive Somersetshire steeple." I will not multiply quotations from Mr. Freeman in subsequent papers. At the date of these writings he seems to have had no scruple about the word, but in 1879, he delivered an address, to which I shall hereafter refer, in which he denied that the County of Somerset was a shire. This address has been, I believe, the origin of the notion that the suffix is inaccurate.

I will now turn from the county historians to the geographers. Speed, in his *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain*, (ed. 1611) uses the inculcated word (see his map and

description of the county); so does Carey in his *English Atlas*, 1793 (see his map and description); [and so did the earlier map publisher, H. Moll (who came to London in 1698 and died in 1732), in the title to a map which he published of the county.]

The historians are in like manner free from scruples as to the use of the word in question. I will refer to Lord Clarendon (*Hist.* viii, 25, IX ed.): to Lord Hopton, a Somerset man by birth, and for some time member of Parliament for Wells (Hopton's *Narrative*; edited by Chadwyck-Healey, pp. 11, 17, 62); [to Chas. James Fox (James ii, 1808, p. 228)]; to Lord Macaulay (*Hist.* i, pp. 280, 283, 285); Chap. V, in the story of Monmouth's Invasion; to Froude (*History* iii, 436, 437); to J. R. Green (see *Making of England*, p. 392); to Sir Geo. Trevelyan (*Chas. James Fox*, p. 55); [to Mr. James Bryce (*Studies in Contemporary Biography*, p. 282)]; and to Mr. Walter Besant and Mr. Frederic Harrison and Professor Oman (in *Alfred the Great*, 1899, pp. 16, 50, 137)].

The natives or residents in the county have been equally free in the use of the word, as is evidenced by the name of our own Society, and of the Somersetshire Society. I have already referred to Lord Hopton as a man of the county. I may refer in addition to Coleridge ("Lines written while ascending Brockley Combe, Somersetshire"); to Mrs. Sandford (*Thos. Poole and his Friends*, i, 48, 80, 208, 248, 253, 303; ii, 273, 319; also correspondence cited, ii, 108, 113); to Walter Bagehot (*Lombard St.*, Introductory, ed. 1899, pp. 12, 289); and, lastly, to an anonymous poet of the XVII Century, who in *The Peasant in London*, writes,

"This famous city of Lungeon
Is worth all Zomerset-zhire."

(see Halliwell's *Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words*, prefatory description, p. xxvii).

[The legislature and legal authorities have not rejected the use of the word. The statute of 4 James I, cap. 2, sections 5

and 7, contains more than one instance of the use of Somersetshire, and in one case of the remarkable expression of "the said county of Somersetshire." Goddard in his *Extracts from the Sessions Rolls of the county of Somerset*, London, 1765, p. 19, gives a copy of a Certiorari headed "Somersetshire."]

Of the contemporary use of the word in question, whether in the popular or the literary language of the county, there can, I suppose, be no doubt. Kelly publishes a *Directory of Gloucestershire, Somersetshire and the City of Bristol*; Murray a *Handbook for Travellers in Wiltshire, Dorsetshire and Somersetshire*; and Prof. Maitland, one of our most learned antiquaries, writes of Bratton Court as "on the Somersetshire side of Exmoor" (*Bracton's Note Book*, i, p. 14).

These quotations, it will be observed, establish a long continued usage of the inculcated word for more than eight centuries. They show its use by men of the county, and men unconnected with the county; by the literate and illiterate; [by the legislature]; by antiquaries, historians, and geographers. He must, I think, be an excessive stickler for antiquity who is scandalised by the novelty of a word used by the Domesday Commissioners of the Conqueror; he must be a purist or a pedant who is offended by a word used by such writers as Clarendon, Coleridge, Macaulay, and Froude. At any rate, I think my citations are enough to clear the memories of the founders of our Society from the charge levelled against them of not knowing the name of the county of whose history they were studious.

But be this as it may, say the critics of the word, Somerset never was, and is not, a shire. "Of course," said Mr. Taylor, last year, "strictly speaking it is not. It was never carved out of a larger district, as Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire, and the rest, were carved out of Mercia."

I cannot see that the proposition is self-evident. I cannot see why Mr. Taylor says that "of course" it is not strictly speaking a shire. Middlesex, Essex, Sussex, each represent

an old kingdom, and no doubt had an organisation as a kingdom before they became shires; but so far as I can learn, there never was a kingdom of Somerset, and the Somersætan never had any organisation, (other than perhaps a tribal constitution), before they became part of Wessex—and surely Somerset was as much a part of Wessex as Oxford was of Mercia.

When Alfred took refuge at Athelney he was a fugitive from his capital and his court, but not from his kingdom; and when he led the men of Somerset, Dorset and Hampshire against the Danes at Æthendun he was at the head of his own subjects.

But, in point of fact, there is at least strong reason to believe that Somerset was a shire before Oxfordshire or Gloucestershire ever acquired a title to that name, for the shire appears to be originally a West Saxon institution, and Wessex seems to have been divided into *shires*, whilst Mercia was divided into *regiones* or *maegths*, (Stubbs's *Cons. Hist.*, i, 129).

Ini or Ine, the West Saxon king, who reigned from A.D. 688 to 721, was intimately associated with our county. To him we owe the restoration of Glastonbury, the foundation of Taunton, and the building of his palace at South Petherton. He was not only a great warrior and king, but a great law-giver, and the laws of Ine are the one West Saxon code which we possess. These laws contain three distinct references to the shire as an existing institution of the kingdom of Wessex. In Section 8, the scirmen are spoken of as judicial persons from whom justice may be demanded. Still more suggestive is the connection between the eolderman and the *scir* mentioned in the 36th Section, which enacts that if an eolderman permits a prisoner to escape he shall forfeit his *scir*, and the 39th Section shows that a man could not at his own choice remove from one shire to another without incurring a penalty.¹

1. Thorpe's *Ancient Laws*, i, 107.

Thus, then, some one hundred and fifty or two hundred years before Alfred ascended the throne, we find the *scir* as a known division for administrative purposes existing throughout Wessex. But though we have earlier codes in other of the Saxon kingdoms, we have in them no mention of the shire, which thus makes its appearance in English history in the laws of the king who dwelt at South Petherton, and did more for our county than perhaps any other monarch has ever done, (see Green's *Conquest*, p. 232).

The history of the word "shire" thus appears to be directly adverse to Mr. Taylor's suggestion that the Peterborough chronicler wrongly applied a Mercian word to a West Saxon division.

The names of the shires into which Wessex was early divided were derived sometimes from the principal towns within them, sometimes from the principal Saxon tribes inhabiting the district, and once at least from a local peculiarity. Thus, Hampshire or Hamptonshire is the division of which the chief town was Hampton, now known as Southampton to distinguish it from its Northern namesake; Wiltshire or Wiltonshire from the town of Wilton; Devonshire, or Defnashire from Dyfnaint, the Celtic name for Devon, which seems to have been adopted by the Saxon conquerors of that district; Somerset from the Somersœtan; and Dorset from the Dorsœtan; and Berkshire or Berroc-scire as the Saxons called it, from a wood abounding in that district. Some of these shires naturally appear in the Saxon Chronicles before others; Devonshire appearing in the entry for the year 851, and Hampshire and Berkshire in that for 860. If the division of Wessex into shires was a single act, then, of course, Somersetshire was contemporary with the others; if it was a process which began with the heart of the kingdom in Hampshire and spread thence to the remoter parts, it is not likely that Devon would have acquired its title of a shire at an earlier date than the nearer Somerset.

Mr. Freeman is no doubt responsible for the campaign against the word "Somersetshire," and in his address to the historical section of the Archæological Institute, at Taunton, in 1879, (republished in his *English Towns and Districts*, under the title of "The Shire and the Gà,") he addressed himself to the task of proving that whilst Northamptonshire was a typical shire, "Somerset is an immemorial gà." (p. 105).

In the Red Book of the Exchequer is an old document called "Numerus Hidarum Quarundam cis-Humbranorum," and there is another copy of this paper with some variations amongst the Cottonian MSS. (Claud D. 2), and this document Gale printed (*Hist. Brit. Scriptores*, vol. i, p. 748). The document is not of great antiquity, and nothing material is known about it. It is a list of names of places and the number of hides they contain, and amongst them are Nox-gaga, Othgaga, and Uncnungga, and three others ending in "inga." I do not think that anyone has supposed that the names ending in *ungga* or *inga* contain the element *gà* as a local word, but the two first names do end with that syllable in such a way that it is possible to consider that they retain the old word *gà* or *gau*, which undoubtedly existed and exists in German, as in *Brisingau*, *Ammergau*, and so forth.

Mr. Kemble printed this list of names and tried to identify some of them, but left Nox-gaga and Othgaga without any even attempted identification,¹ : and except that Mr. Freeman has said (why, he does not say), that these two places were in Mercia,² no one knows or pretends to know, where they were. Now these two names in a document of unascertained origin and date, are, I believe, the sole evidence, if evidence they can be called, of the existence in England of any division of the county or institution known as a *gà* or *gau*.

It is always rash to assert a negative in a subject of wide

(1). Kemble's *Saxons*, i, 72, et seq.

(2). *English Towns*, p. 120.

range, but so far as I have been able to trace out the matter, there is no mention in any law or institution of Saxon origin, in any chronicler or writer whomsoever, of a *gà* or *gau*, as an English division. Mr. Kemble (i, 72), has a chapter on the *gà* or *scir*, and assumes the existence of the word, though it has been, he says, "almost universally superseded by that of *scir*, or *shire*." So far as evidence goes at present, the *gà*, as an English division, may, I think, be regarded as a pure myth; nor can I find that any human being ever heard or thought that Somerset was a *gà* until Mr. Freeman, in the year of grace, 1879, propounded the theory.

It is strange, too, that Mr. Freeman, having found these two places with the termination *gà* in Mercia, transfers the word without evidence to Wessex, and says, "the Mercian shire is another thing from the West Saxon *gà*."

Bishop Stubbs's way of dealing with the question seems to me far more satisfactory. "A shire system," he says (i, 130), "had been at work in Wessex as early as the reign of Ini. Whether before the name of shire was introduced into Mercia, the several *maegths* or regions bore any common designation, such as that of *gau*, must remain in entire obscurity. There is extant a list of thirty-four divisions of England, gathered out of Bede, and perhaps other sources now lost, and recording the number of hides contained in each. The termination *gà*, which is found here in some cases may be the German *gau*, but the age and value of the document are very uncertain, and the divisions as a rule do not correspond with the historical shires."

But Mr. Freeman has yet another point to make against "Somersetshire." "The root of the whole matter," he says, "is that the names Somerset and Dorset are strictly tribal names" (p. 121); and he implies, without perhaps expressly asserting, that the Saxons never applied the word shire to a tribal name. But the context of the passage I have quoted negatives this implied proposition, for he quotes the use of

the words Defenascire (Devonshire) and Shropshire, the one a name derived from the tribe Defenan, who, as I have already said, seem to have adopted a name from their Celtic predecessors, and the other from the tribe of the Shrobsætan.

It might be a matter of interest to enquire what has determined the usage with regard to the word shire as applied to some, and denied to other of the fifty-two counties of England and Wales. I think that it is never applied where the county represents in its name an ancient Saxon monarchy. Thus we never add it to Middlesex, Essex, Sussex, and Surrey—the South Kingdom (see *Enc. Brit.*, s. vi, Surrey); nor when it represents a folk, as Norfolk, Suffolk; nor when it ends in land, as Cumberland, Northumberland (except in the case of Rutland, sometimes called Rutlandshire); nor when it describes an island, as Anglesea (the Isle of the Angles), Durham (Dunholm, Hill Island); nor lastly, where from some special vitality the Celtic, or pre-Saxon, name has been adopted by the Saxons, and hence descended to us, as Kent (known sometimes as Kentshire to the Saxons (Green's *Conquest*, p. 234), and Cornwall. To the remaining forty-one counties, I believe that the suffix "Shire" is commonly applied.

I lay these observations before the Society as the best I can offer on the subject, but with a full consciousness that they may be open to correction in many particulars; but, unless I am greatly in error, there is no need for the Society to be ashamed of its name.