

**Adrian Room**

# **NAMING NAMES**

**A Book of  
Pseudonyms  
and Name  
Changes  
with a  
'Who's Who'**

Hieronymus Bosch  
Dirk Bogarde  
Robert Taylor  
Bobby Darin  
Kenny Everett  
John le Carré  
Jersey Joe Walcott  
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Lewis Carroll  
Elton John  
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John Wayne  
Boris Karloff  
Man Ray  
Jennifer Jones  
Charles Atlas  
Laurence Harvey  
Vivien Merchant  
Cliff Richard  
Harry Houdini  
Lew Grade  
Bob Dylan

**Naming Names**  
Stories of Pseudonyms  
and Name Changes  
*with a Who's Who*

*by*  
**Adrian Room**



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# Introduction

This book takes a look at the names we create for ourselves. Not so much the names we are born with, although these will also be considered, but the new names we adopt and the pseudonyms we assume.

The book is designed to work on several levels.

The first level (the six chapters that open the book) is a consideration of names in general and pseudonyms and changed names in particular. What are these names? Who adopts them? Why do they adopt them? *How* do they adopt them?

At the second level the book contains a fairly generous selection of name stories. This is really the jam of the sandwich. Here are the tales behind the well-known names, often told in the words of the personalities themselves. Why did Vladimir Ulyanov call himself Lenin? How did Greta Garbo come by her name? Who was Little Tich? They're all here.

The third level is the other half of the bread and butter that forms the sandwich. It comprises lists of names arranged by categories, and is designed both for reference and for browsing. Here are found embarrassing names, anagrammatic names, humorous names, papal names, and many more.

That, if you like, is the first half of the meal.

The other half is a Who's Who, not only of the names considered throughout the book, but of hundreds of well known or important pseudonyms and adopted names. Here you can find out the real names of the personalities that interest you, as well as their dates of birth and death. At the same time, the Who's Who is an index, giving the page numbers where some of the names are dealt with specially in the first six chapters of the book. It also indicates which of the names feature in the Names Stories. (The symbol for a name that comes in the Name Stories is a degree sign, as °George Eliot. This is used right throughout the book.) The Who's Who is thus reasonably comprehensive, ranging from A.A. (George Anthony Armstrong Willis, English humorist) to Z.Z. Zangwill, English novelist).

The book concludes with five Appendices—dessert, perhaps—listing some special names (and, in case you are bemused by all these false names, some *real* ones), and, finally, with a Bibliography.

Each section of the book except the first opens with a brief explanatory introduction outlining its aims and objectives.

That, then, is what will be found in the book. But, since it will be all things to all men, there is no need to begin at page one and work your way through. Have a look through: dip into the Name Stories (page 69), flip through the Who's Who (page 227), see what books were used as material for this book (Bibliography, page 346). Or begin at page 1 after all for an account of how we get names and how we give them...

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I have made every effort to trace the copyright holders of material used in this book, and it is my belief that the necessary permissions have been obtained. Should there be any omissions in this respect, however, I apologize in advance and shall be pleased to make the appropriate acknowledgments in future editions.

*Adrian Room*  
Petersfield, Hampshire, England  
January 1981

*As for your name, I offer you the whole firmament to choose from.* (Opening words of “On Choosing a Name” by Alpha of the Plough. The sentence was spoken by the editor of the *Star* as an invitation to the English essayist to write for that paper under a pseudonym.)

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*With a name like yours, you might be any shape,  
almost* (Lewis Carroll, "Through the Looking-Glass")

# 1 The Nature of a Name

"What's in a name?" agonized lovelorn Juliet, for she was a Capulet, and he, her roaming romantic Romeo, was a Montague, and the two families were deadly enemies.

Shakespeare himself well knew what was in a name. One need only mention his Aguecheek and Ariel, his Benvolio and Malvolio, his Pistol and Doll Tearsheet and of course his Romeo — was there ever a more evocative name? — to see and sense the charm of well chosen names.

We shall be examining in due course and in some detail "what's in a name," but first we should touch on a more basic question: what *is* a name?

We all of us have a name. Conventionally, at any rate in the Western world, we have, as an accepted and acceptable minimum, a forename, or Christian name, and a surname, or family name. We are John Smith, or Mary Brown, or Clark Gable, or Betty Grable, or even, like the famous social leader from Houston, Texas, Ima Hogg. The names are different, and serve different purposes — a forename is essentially private property, and a surname public — but in their respective and differing ways both names carry equal weight, both actually and legally, as a means of identification.

By custom and tradition, our first name is given to us soon after we are born, at a christening or baptismal or naming ceremony, while our last name is already there, and we simply become one more member of the family to share it. In most cases, we get our names from our parents, since our forename is chosen for us by our parents and we inherit our parents' surname. Our first name is our own special individual property — although there may be hundreds of other people who also bear it — and it lasts as long as our life lasts. Our surname may well have existed for centuries and generations before us, in one form or another, and will probably continue to be borne by our own children long after our own life has ended.

Assuming that our ancestors did not deliberately change the surname that we now bear, how far back can we trace this name? Theoretically, at least, must there not have been a time, going back as far as we can, when we come to the first of our forebears to be so named? How did

*he* get his name? In other words, more generally, where did the very first names of all come from?

It is worth taking a look at this original process of name creation, since this is the process that we are chiefly concerned with in this book.

Many English, but perhaps not quite so many Americans, can trace their surnames back in written form to the Domesday Book of the late 11th century. If your name is Gridley, for example, there is a chance, admittedly an extremely slim one, that Albert Greslet was one of your ancestors. His name was recorded by the Domesday Book in Cheshire in 1086. Or if you are a Tallboy, perhaps Ralph Tailgebosc of Hertfordshire, who likewise lived nearly a millennium ago, was one of the greatest of your great-grandfathers. Both Albert and Ralph have names that to our modern eyes are recognizably personal names, in the familiar forename-surname form. A number of names cited and recorded in the Domesday Book, however, are single names, or are for example names that belong to a person who is said to be the “*filius*” or son of someone else. The name that today is Jarrold or Gerald, for instance, occurs in the Domesday Book as *Robertus filius Gerald* — “Robert Geraldson,” as it were — while people today named Bishop will find, at any rate in Northamptonshire in 1066, that their Domesday ancestor was simply called Biscop.

The Domesday Book thus also records the early stages of our present binomial (forename-plus-surname) system. Originally, therefore, people had only one name. One person with one name; quite enough. But we want to go back even further. Where did these names come from in turn? Did they have a meaning? For example, was the original Tallboy (actually Tailgebosc, as we have seen) a tall boy, and was the early Bishop a bishop? What does Gridley (or Greslet) mean, and where did Gerald come from?

The answer is both simple and complex. Simple, in that all these original names did indeed have a meaning. Complex, in that many of these early names do not mean what they seem to mean. Ralph Tailgebosc was not a tall boy but was himself the descendant of someone who was a woodcutter, from the Old French *tailler* “to cut,” and *bosc*, “wood.” Over the centuries his surname became smoothed and assimilated to something that had an *English* meaning and pronunciation. The original Bishop, too, although his name has not changed anything like as radically as Ralph’s, was almost certainly not a bishop but a man who looked like one or, more likely, had the manners or deportment of one — an episcopal posture, if you like. His name was thus more what we today would call a nickname. Albert Greslet’s surname was really a nickname, too: it means “pockmarked,” literally “marked by hail,” also from Old French, while Gerald, these days more common as a Christian name, meant “spear-ruler.”

Woodcutter, Bishop-like person, Pockmarked person and One Who Ruled with His Spear. An impressive foursome! But we can go fur-

ther back than that. We are limited by written or pictographic records, of course, but we have evidence that as long ago as 3050 B.C. there was a man named N'armer, who was the first Egyptian Pharaoh. And further back still, some two thousand years before him, in about 5000 B.C., there lived a Sumerian queen named Ninziddamkiag, which is believed to mean "the queen [who] loves the faithful husband"...

Romeo was not the only one to have had an evocative name...

Our names thus have their origin where language itself has its cradle—with this Egyptian Pharaoh and that Sumerian queen. More specifically, they originated where the English language did: with the Greeks, the Romans, the Celts, the Germanic peoples such as the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings, and the Normans. All these races in fact had a naming system that was in many ways similar, since although it developed into the binomial system as we know today, or, earlier, the famous trinomial system of the Romans (praenomen, nomen and cognomen), it originally involved the conferring of a single name that had a meaning.

This single meaningful name was in many cases what we might today think of as a nickname, as we have seen, or as a descriptive title. As such, it related directly or indirectly to the person named. If directly, it perhaps described his appearance, manner, gait or general image—either what he was or what he might become. The name might consist of a single element, as the Celtic word *ruadh*, "red," for someone who was of ruddy complexion (today the name is Roy), or a double element, as the Gerald mentioned, whose name derives from the Germanic *ger*, "spear," and *vald*, "rule." (This latter name was not so much an actual description but a desirable description: the child Gerald was so named in the hope that he would grow up to be a fearless ruler-by-the-spear. Might not his name help him to do this? Even today the power or suggestiveness of a name is strong. Kirk is probably more likely to be a modern "spear-ruler" than, say, Kevin.) If a name related indirectly to a person, it would usually derive from his or her family, home area, or occupation. If the first of these, it would often derive from the name of the father or grandfather. The Greeks, for example, named the eldest son after his paternal grandfather and later children after other relatives. Sometimes, however, a Greek boy bore the same name as his father. This was the case with Demosthenes, the orator, whose name, like the Germanic Gerald, was a two-element one and meant "people-strength." (Like Gerald, too, it is a desirable image name.)\* Examples of names deriving respectively from a person's place of residence and his occupation are the Anglo-Saxon Grene (modern Green), for someone who lived near the village green, and Cupere (Cooper), for a man who made or repaired wooden casks.

*\* Women's names were formed similarly but with a feminine ending. An unmarried Greek woman would derive her name from her father, a married woman from her husband, a widow from her son.*

These four categories—nickname (or descriptive), familial, residential and occupational—form the basis for most modern European and transatlantic surnames.

An interesting study, which regrettably would take up too much space to be made in this present book, would be to trace the fortunes and popularity of the original names as they evolved down the centuries, and to consider why many such names became fixed as surnames only (in the modern sense), while others remain in common use as Christian names or forenames. Of the few names we have already mentioned, for example, Bishop, Green and Cooper are more familiar today as surnames, while Gerald and Roy, although also occurring as surnames, are probably more frequent as forenames. Generally speaking, it can be said that *any* surname is capable of being put into use as a forename—Dudley and Sidney were English surnames that made this transition in the 16th century, just as later in America Chauncey and Washington were adopted as Christian names—but that many surnames, in particular familial, residential and occupational ones, just never made it.

As to why surnames exist at all, the answer is much more straightforward. Surnames were found necessary to distinguish one particular person from others, perhaps many others, who had the same single name. And the simplest way to find another name—as we shall also see when we come to look specifically at pseudonyms—is to use your own father's name, as well as your own. This, after all, is what a surname is—a name that is “super” to, or added to, your own. (The word *surname* is not related to *sir*. As the 16th-century English historian and antiquary William Camden concisely but carefully put it, in his *Remains Concerning Britain*, “The French and we termed them *Surnames*, not because they are the names of the *Sire*, or the father, but because they are *super*-added to Christian names.”) And to make it clear that you are using your father's name in your capacity as a son, many surnames came to incorporate an element that actually means “son.” One we have already seen, since the Latin *filius* in the Domesday Book's Robertus filius Geraldi survives, in assimilated French form, as the Fitz- that begins many surnames, while a number of recognizable Christian names have become surnames by the simple process of having the actual word “son” tacked on to them. Thus both a Fitzwilliam and a Williamson had, originally, a father named William. Parallels to this I-am-the-son-of-my-father label exist in many other languages besides English. The Jewish equivalent, and a far more ancient one, is the *bar* or *ben*, meaning “son,” in such names as the biblical Simon-bar-Jonas and the Talmudic Joshua ben Hananiah (*bar* is the Aramaic form, and *ben* the Hebrew), while although not a surname in the modern sense, the Russian patronymic—the middle of three names that all Russians have, as Lev *Nikolayevich* Tolstoy or Maya *Mikhailovna* Plisetskaya—is still obligatory.

Subsequently, once a surname had been acquired, it became a

family name proper and passed on, ordinarily, from father to son and daughter in the manner we have long become accustomed to. Perhaps it is a pity that in English we call this name, at times misleadingly, as we have seen, a "surname." The French, with their *nom de famille*, and the Germans, who know it as a *Familiennamen*, are much nearer to the real nature of the thing.

We have referred, too, to one of the four categories of surname as *nicknames*. This also is perhaps not quite the right word here, since properly, a nickname is an additional name or an extra name, and how can one refer to a single name as an extra name when it is the only one there is? (Even the word *nickname* has become distorted. By rights it should be not "a nickname" but "an ickname," since it derives from the now rare word *eke* meaning "also.") On the other hand to call such names *descriptive* names is to be almost too wide-ranging, since in a sense the other three categories are also descriptive. A reasonable alternative might be to call such direct names, which relate to the person him or herself, *characterizing names*.

But we have so far mentioned only once the type of name that this book is really about, the *pseudonym*. And since we shall be using the word continually we must define it here, before going any further.

Literally, of course, a pseudonym is a "false name," as the two Greek elements that make up the word indicate. The term is a relatively new one. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records its earliest appearance only as late as 1846, although the adjective "pseudonymous" dates back to 1706. The most recent (sixth, 1976) edition of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines a pseudonym as a "fictitious name, especially one assumed by an author." Not a false name, a "fictitious" one. The same dictionary defines *fictitious* as "assumed," when applied to a name. And this, basically, is the sense in which we shall be using "pseudonym" in the present book: as a name that, whether it subsequently becomes a person's "proper" or permanent name or not, is one that has been consciously assumed or taken on instead of, or in addition to, the person's real name. In fact, it would be better to play down the "fictitious" side to such a name and emphasize the "assumed" aspect, since we shall be considering name changes of all kinds, even legal ones undertaken by such means as a deed poll. Is there in fact any point in saying that an assumed name is a false one? Name is a name is a name, as Gertrude Stein so nearly said. (Well, she was talking about Rose, and everyone knows what would smell as sweet.)

*A good name is better than  
precious ointment (Ecclesiastes 7, 1)*

## 2 Why Another Name?

Who are the people who choose to adopt a pseudonym or to change their name, and why do they do it?

Broadly speaking, people assume a new or additional name because they have to, because they are expected to, or simply because they want to. The name that they assume is then made known to the public at large, to a particular group of people, or just to one other person. An actor, for example, wants his whole public to know his new name, while a spy or secret agent operates under a cover name that is known only to a select few. An individual, on the other hand, can communicate a message to a friend or loved one in a press announcement, for example, by using a disguised name that is known to his or her correspondent alone.

Let us see who exactly the main groups of people are.

One of the most common and striking situations in which people will change their original names for new ones is the act, to a greater or lesser degree traumatic, of emigration and subsequent naturalization. A person leaves his or her native country for some reason — often driven out by war, persecution or destitution — and, arriving in another, where very likely a new language is spoken, officially or tacitly starts a new life, assumes a new identity, and takes on a new name to go with it. One of the greatest migrations in history was the mass emigration to America by around 35 million people from all parts of Europe between 1820 and 1930. In their flight from poverty, famine and persecution, inhabitants of Great Britain and Ireland, Germany and Scandinavia, Italy and the Balkans, Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, many of them Jews, poured into America in the hope of setting up a new life in a country that seemed to offer refuge and opportunities. And when they eventually reached the immigrant depot at Ellis Island — “Heartbreak Island” many of them called it, for fear of being denied entry — they were faced with a number of questions, of which the first was always, “What is your name?”

Immigrant names were a constant source of difficulty. Many of the newly arrived were barely literate and could not even spell their names, with the result that officials frequently simplified or anglicized them haphazardly. This meant that a number of immigrants left Ellis Island with a new name, perhaps not even realizing this, although many, especially the more literate, acquired a new name only in due course.

There are two well known stories about “on-the-spot” name changes of this kind.

The first concerns a German Jew named Isaac. Confused by all the questioning, he replied, when asked his name, “Ich vergessen” (“I forget” in Yiddish). The immigrant officer recorded his name as Fergusson.

The second incident is an occurrence in °Elia Kazan’s film *America, America* (1963). A Greek shoeshine boy, Stavros Topouzoglou, frightened that he may not be allowed into the country, answers to the name of a dead friend, Hohannes Gardashian. The officer tells him that if he wants to be an American, he must change his name for something shorter. “Hohannes—that’s *all* you need here!” And he writes the name “Joe Arness,” adding, “Well, boy, you’re reborn, you’re baptised again. And without benefit of clergy. Next ...”

Whimsical though such tales are, they illustrate some important realities about the process of changing one’s name. First, a name change can be quite an arbitrary thing. Indeed, although many of the changes recorded in this book were undertaken consciously and deliberately, thousands of American immigrants came to have their names changed by random and gradual processes—a letter dropped here, a repelling adopted there—and changed most of all, perhaps, by what Howard F. Barker, one of America’s greatest authorities on surnames, called “the abrasion of common speech.” Second, the immigrant officer’s comment, “You’re reborn,” states a basic philosophy that underlies virtually all name changes. For a human being, after all, a name is far more than a mere identification tag. It is not like a place name, for example, where *London* denotes “the capital of Great Britain” and *Fort Knox* signifies “military reservation and air base in Kentucky, where most of the U.S. gold reserves are stored.” Our names not only identify us, they *are* us: they announce us, advertise us and embody us. Stavros the shoeshine boy, like many other immigrants, had his name changed for him, but many people choose a new name simply because they feel that the name itself can bestow a new image and a new persona. “In assuming a new name,” the French literary critic Jean Starbinski wrote of °Stendhal, who assumed over a hundred pseudonyms, “he not only grants himself a new face, but a new destiny, a new social rank, new nationalities.” On a rather different plane, but approached by the same path, the pop singer °Elton John commented, on adopting his new stage name, “I’m still the same guy, but a new name gave me a new outlook on life, and a new drive to do things.”

Short of an actual physical reincarnation, a change of name is one of the most popular and efficacious ways, many believe, of becoming a new or a different person.

For the many Jews in this great immigration, the adoption of a new name was nothing new in itself. A hundred years previously, for example, Jews in many European countries had been ordered to assume fixed family names as the result of a radical change in the political and cultural climate. It was at this time, in fact, that many Germanic Jewish