

Pow-ell or Pole? The knotty problems of how to pronounce a tricky surname

By Georgia Powell

I wouldn't be surprised if future Powells opt for the uncomplicated "ow" sound.
But my poor children and their surname are another matter .

All my life I have been battling with the problem of whether to pronounce my surname with an "ow" (as in trowel); or with an "oh" (as in "troll"). Powell or Pole, that is the question. So many assumptions about class and politics ride on that single syllable. How beautifully British. As discussions rage about what Margaret Thatcher would make of David Cameron's EU renegotiations, we are reminded that even brothers do not always agree. Charles Powell, foreign policy adviser to Margaret Thatcher, is firmly in the "oh" camp. Lord Pole. But his brother Jonathan, Tony Blair's first chief of staff, is an "ow" man.

My grandfather, the novelist Anthony Powell, was very much a Pole. So much so, in fact, that if I choose to introduce myself as Georgia "Pole", I am usually asked if I'm "any relation to Anthony?" Yes, I reply, hence, of course, my confident trilling of "Pole" – a correct and ancient pronunciation of a name which can be

traced back, according to my grandfather, to the early kings and princes of Wales. Pronouncing the name "Pole" is like a Masonic handshake for readers of *A Dance to the Music of Time*. No fan worth his salt of all things Powellian (pronounced "Poe-ellian", naturally) would pronounce the "ow".

Beyond that somewhat rarefied company, however, the entire Powell versus Pole debate must seem like some kind of ridiculous snobbery. Yet I'm not sure that is the case. General Colin Powell (whom my grandfather used to refer to as "Cousin Colin") pronounced the "ow" in his surname and then confounded us all with "Cole-in". There is some pleasure to be had in having a "difficult" surname. And there's definitely a pleasure to be had in knowing how to pronounce a surname correctly.

In my case the truth is that, like the late David Bowie (pron. Boe-ie?) I really don't



Anthony Powell poses with his house, The Chantry, in the background

know how to say my name. I am particularly pathetic when it comes to introducing myself on the telephone. I mutter a feeble mixture of both versions and often end up with people thinking that I'm the far more exotic "Georgia Pearl", which sounds as if I am running a house of ill-repute in one of America's southern states. Sometimes I refuse to say it at all and simply spell it out, leaving my listener to choose their own pronunciation.

It's not snobbery that makes me persist with "Pole". Rather, I have a certain attachment to my grandfather's pronunciation of the name and I'm unwilling to relinquish it. It was so much part of him and it does, in some way, keep his memory alive. But I'm not wholly convinced by his Welsh history. True, there is an old Welsh fairy tale which refers to the King of Fairyland and father of the clan of Powell being called Pwyle. But I'm afraid that I find myself pronouncing his name as "Pile". Which is altogether worse.

All in all, I wouldn't be surprised if future Powells do not burden themselves with the multiple variants, and opt instead for the uncomplicated "ow" sound. That has long been my brother's tactic and I rather envy him. Part of me wishes that I'd done the same from the start. So much simpler. My father, meanwhile, has mastered a subtle "Poe-well", which seems to satisfy everyone.

But my poor children will suffer an even worse fate than I have had. Their father's surname is Coke – pronounced Cook, obviously. ■

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