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The Etiology of Place Naming*

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Place names differ all over the world according to the languages of the namers, but because the reason for name-giving is basically the same everywhere – to identify a place so that it can be referred to when not visible or indicable – there ought to be some universal properties in place-names, or some widely common processes that human beings go through in name-giving – processes that presumably follow patterns. Thus, the "etiology" of place-naming. If such patterns do exist, they should be discoverable in their plainest form in a place where names are being given for the first time – a place perhaps uninhabited before, where a fresh start may be made. This would not eliminate patterns already familiar to the namers, of course – but for that very reason one might see more clearly the etiology of such patterns as manifested themselves. To test this I have chosen a place recently named, about whose naming we have good information: the island of Tristan da Cunha.[1]

Tristan da Cunha is a British possession in the South Atlantic ocean which came to world attention in 1961 when its volcano erupted so violently that virtually the entire population of 262 had to be evacuated. They were taken to Britain, where they stayed nearly two years, though the majority have since returned. The name of the island, properly, is that of the Portuguese admiral, Tristão da Cunha, who discovered it in 1506. Settlement was not attempted till 1817, however, and the population fluctuated greatly, not reaching 100 till about 1910. The great majority were speakers of some form of English, as the names make evident. The names have been carefully collected by Arne Zettersten, and I use his study as the corpus on which these notes are based.[2]

A name is not the same thing as a word. Words designate classes; names designate individuals: persons, places, or things. The class of objects that we label "chair" includes a great variety of members with many differences but enough common characteristics to set any chair apart from a "bench," "stool," "couch," or other article of furniture intended to be sat upon. A place-name normally has a generic part which serves to classify it, and a specific part that individualizes it. *River* and

mountain are words, generics; *Mississippi River* and *Green Mountains* are place-names. Even imaginary names for non-existent places such as *Cloud-Cuckoo Land, Oz,* and *Shangri-La* will conform to these "rules" of place-naming. Where (as in the case of Oz) the generic is not expressed, it is nevertheless there in suspension or by implication: the *land* of Oz, the *country* of *Shangri-La.* Similarly, we say *Chicago* or *San Francisco* without saying "the city of," unless that degree of specificity is required for legal purposes.

Tristan da Cunha has a number of names of a primitive type, here called "*The*-names," in which the article *The* serves as the specific and is followed by a geographic-feature word or pair of words that serve as the generic. Tristan has fully twenty-five of these (*The Bank, The Big Fall, The Knobs, The Stony Hill, The Valley, The Ugly Road,* and so on) – a disproportionately large percentage (12%). This use of a definite article states that the feature is unique, or uniquely named and this type of name also implies a low density of similar features (banks, hills, valleys) prominent enough to require naming. Further, *The*-names could not serve unless the populated area were fairly limited and the population closely enough knit and intercommunicating so that no greater degree of specificity was necessary. It is because Tristan is a relatively small island with a concentrated population that so many *The*-names could come into existence and survive.

Tristan's names include, for similar reasons, what are here called "Extended-locational" names, in which the generic, expressed or implied, is accompanied by a prepositional phrase or *where*-clause or both. Because these are so unusual and characteristic, Zettersten's entire list is given, and in his punctuation.[3]

By-the-big-Piece
Down-by-the-Pot
Down-by-Thomas's Oil-House (later, Tommy's Eyeloose)
Up-the-blue-cliff
Up-the-East'ard
Where-Cook-hunt
Where-Times-fell-off-Gulch (Times was a dog)
Down-where-the-minister-land-his-things
Down-where-Joey-has-his-cat-garden (later, Joey's garden)
The-Beach-where-the-anchorstock-wash-up (later, Anchorstock Point)
The-Hill-with-a-hole-in-it
The-Ridge-where-the-goat-jump-off
The-Gulch-come-down-the-west-side-of-the-Ridge-where-the-goat-jump-off
The-Hill-with-a-pond-in-it-on-the-east-side-of-the-Gulch-come-down-by-the-Ridge-where-the-goat-jump-off

The last of these are narrative, almost anecdotic. Such names could hardly

exist except in a community where small incidents are of great and general interest, and stories about them are repeated. Otherwise they would tend to fall of their own weight, to be reduced to much shorter forms, as has happened recently to some of these. Nevertheless, on Tristan in the past they have furnished seven per cent of the names. An especially interesting example of reduction is *Tommy's Eyeloose,* "earlier Down-by-Thomas's-Oil-House, after Tomaso Corri, an Italian, who had stored oil drums in his hut here before the British garrison arrived in 1816."[4] *Eyeloose* is, of course, a fanciful phonetic spelling of an English dialectal pronunciation – hardly a genuine folk-etymology. *Charlie Taylor's* Hut has been similarly telescoped into *Shateller's Hut.*[5]

Other "Incident" names are twice as numerous (14%) though of normal length. *Trypot* is a district where blubber used to be tried out (melted down) in large pots; hence *Trypot Bay. Pigbite* is a ridge where a pig chased and bit one of the islanders. *Shirt-tail Gutter* is a gulch where Charles Green's shirt-tail once caught fire. *Deadman's Bay* is where the body of a dead man was once washed ashore. *Calf yard* is a place where wild calves were marked. In the life of an island, boats and ships are of primary importance; Tristan has six boat names: *Phoenix Beach* and *Julia Reef* mark the wrecks of boats: the *Phoenix* and the *Julia; Herald Point* is for H.M.S. *Herald; Falmouth Bay* where H.M.S. *Falmouth* anchored (1816) and *Carlisle Beach* where H.M.S. *Carlisle* was forced to land (1932); *Quest Bay* commemorates Sir Ernest Shackleton's ship, the *Quest,* which came there in 1922. These are a subtype of incident names.

A large class of names, as anywhere else, is that showing possession, either directly, as in *Pike's House, Dick's Hill, Nellie's Hump, Doffey's Piece, Jenny's Watron.* ("Watron" is a local version of "watering.") These with the possessive *'s* amount to 10%; others without *'s,* such as *Bugsby Hole, Swain Bay, Hagan Point, Calshot Harbour* are only 6%. Together, however, these two account for the second-largest class of names.

The largest, of course, is the descriptive: fully half of Tristan's place-names are of this type. The majority are literal: *Big Hump, Little Green Hill, Long Ridge, Yellow Cliff, Flat Rocks, Sandy Point, Noisy Beach,* and so on. Others are locational: *East Beach, West End Bluff, Upper Road, Halfway Beach, Farmost Point.* Some verge on "incident" names (related to an incident or occurrence at the place): *Seal Bay, Sea Elephant Bay,* and *Blackinhole Hill.* A very few leave the literal for the metaphorical: *Hag's Tooth* (transferred from Gough Island), a sharp rock earlier called the *Pinnacle; Goat Ridge* from its narrow-backed shape; *Stone Castle,* a rock formation reminiscent of a battlement. *Devil's Hole*

was perhaps named merely for the roughness of the terrain – but it probably also reflects the commonplace nineteenth-century "romantic" taste in naming.

The source of seven names is uncertain: *Hackel Hill, Redbody Hill, Longwood, Dockel Gulch, Fem's Gulch, Knockfolly Gulch,* and *Hottentot Gulch.* Some of these were probably from surnames; the last two may have been imaginative or fanciful, or they may be incident names drawn from unrecorded occurrences. They were probably genuine Tristan names, however, not imported ones.

The last class to mention is what one might call "honorary" names – names bestowed officially or semi-officially, usually because of some circumstance attaching the island to the outside world. The first name offered for Tristan was the *Island of Refreshment,* proposed by the American, Jonathan Lambert, who proclaimed his sovereign rights to it in 1810. But nothing came of that: He was lost at sea shortly after, and the name of the original discoverer, *Tristan da Cunha,* already in general use, became official when the island was annexed by Britain in 1816. What had been simply "the settlement" was dubbed *Edinburgh* in honor of Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, who visited it in 1867. *Queen Mary's Peak* and *Mount Olav* are similarly honorific. Individuals who performed valuable services for the islanders were similarly honored: *Lyon Point, Marie Riley Point,* and *Gane's Beach.* Honorific names may be expected as any society becomes self-conscious, with organized government and social usages. They recognize its association with the outside "power structure" to which the smaller society is attached.

The "etiology" of our title may be illustrated, then, by noting the different types of names found on Tristan da Cunha and the evident motives or reasons for giving them. A feature is named only if it is in some sense prominent: triviality or commonplaceness does not call for naming. But what is "prominent" in one community may not be so in another. Prominence may be purely physical: a feature is highly visible or impressive, as *The Peak,* or it may have orientational value as a landmark: *Farmost Point.* This will evoke descriptive names (by far the most numerous), literal ones designating size, color, shape, compass direction, position with respect to another feature, or (less often) metaphorical, imaginative, symbolic ones. Prominence may also be felt in psychic terms – an attractive place, or, contrariwise, one presenting some danger or difficulty will also call for a name. The Ridge *Where-the-goat-jump-off* or *Shirt-tail Gutter,* where a memorable event occurred, calls for an Incident name, or an honorific one. Here also would come, as prominent or important to individuals and consequently to the community in general,

personal or possessive names, with or without -'*s*. Size of the area and density of population would be important factors influencing the relative frequencies of the various types of names. As has been noted, only in a small and closely-knit community such as Tristan's could there be so many *The*-names or extended-locational names. Remoteness from the busy world, the small-island limitation, the slower pace of events would all have their effect. On the whole, Tristan's name-giving has been simple, practical, and direct, except for the disproportionate number of *The*-names and extended-locational names. There has been no great display of imagination.

When the Tristaners returned in 1963 from their refuge in England, they came upon a section of beach which the lava-flow from the volcano had spared. True to Island patterns, they named it *Small Beach.*

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Notes

[1]Arne Zettersten *The English of Tristan da Cunha,* Lund Studies in English 37 (Lund: Gleerup, 1969).

[2]Ibid, 109–121. Further names and other information may be found in Peter A. Munch *Crisis in Utopia* (New York: Crowell 1971).

[3]Zettersten remarks that this type of name is also characteristic of Pitcairn Island, and refers to the study of A.S.C. Ross and A.W. Moverley *The Pitcairnese Language* (London: The Language Library, 1964).

[4]Zettersten, *op. cit.,* 110.

[5]Munch, *op. cit.,* 23, renders these names as *Tommey's Ileous* and *Shatler's Hut.*

* Meredith Burrill has been the outstanding collector of United States place-names during a long and distinguished career. His path and mine have crossed less often than I could have wished but always to my benefit. This short contribution to his honorary volume is my modest but warm tribute to him for his splendid work.