Unfortunate Connotations Acquired by Some Canadian Toponyms[1]

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A pleasant, well-written article by Ron Graham[2] about the Trans-Canada Highway appeared in the 100th anniversary issue of *Saturday Night*, a popular if somewhat elitist Canadian monthly magazine. After venturing 7,821 kilometres (4,784 miles) west from St. John's, Newfoundland, he arrived at "Mile 0" in Victoria, British Columbia. There, after dipping his hands into the waters of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, he turned to glance at the street sign, and noted "the last street in Canada: *Dallas Road*. Frankly, it's a hell of a way to end a country (p. 16). [1)]

Frankly, this is a snide comment on an historic name in Victoria's odonymy. The statement implies Graham's distaste for the antics of J.R. Ewing and Company on the long-running Friday evening soap opera on the television, but it is discourteous to disparage a similar name far removed from the commercial capital of the American Southwest.

Dallas Road commemorates a distinguished official of the Hudson's Bay Company, Alexander Grant Dallas, who served at the company's Pacific coast headquarters in Victoria from 1857 to 1861, and was Governor of Rupert's Island[3] from 1860 to 1864. A mountain on San Juan Island[4] in the state of Washington was named for Governor Dallas in 1858.

In Victoria, a principal thoroughfare is called *Foul Bay Road*, but a review of maps will fail to reveal a water body called *Foul Bay*. And why not? In a fit of feigned propriety in 1934, the Geographic Board of Canada substituted *Gonzales Bay* in honor of Gonzalez Lopez de Haro, a first mate on a Spanish vessel involved in west coast exploration in the late 1700s. Surprisingly, the introduced name gained local acceptance. But the road, which forms part of the boundary between Victoria and the Municipality of Oak Bay, still goes by the name of *Foul Bay Road*.

Two other names in southwestern British Columbia were also tidied up in 1934. When the Board was presented with *Kokshittle Arm* and *Kowshet Cove*, it decided that the public's sensitive eyes should not have to

come across these opaquely vulgar names, and introduced *Kashutl Inlet* and *Cullite Cove*. The British Columbia member of the Board, George Griffith Aitken, declared: "We do not wish to have the daughters of our present and future citizens feel embarrassment in naming the location of their homes....As development proceeds such names will be a constant source of irritation and agitation and will, no doubt, eventually be changed. We cannot, as a Board, in this democratic country, ignore these objections of the citizenry when these objections are founded on good taste and reason."

Perhaps a half century later we can scoff at such concern for the ladies of 1934, especially when the flag of democracy is held high, but, in reality, little has changed in the 1980s. In 1985 the embarrassed burghers of *Gayside*, in Newfoundland (the home of many of Canada's most amusing and colorful names), decided that they should not have to continue to live with this unfortunate name, and opted to adopt the innocuous *Baytona*. Canada Post accepted the new name but still lists it in the records as being in the community of *Gayside*. One of the oldest names in Newfoundland is *Dildo*. The incorporated settlement, at the head of Trinity Bay on Dildo Arm and adjacent to such amusingly named features as *Spread Eagle Bay, Hopeall Harbour, Tickle Bay, Great Pinchgut, Big Chance Cove, Backside Pond, Provincial Park, Broad Cove Pond* and *Come By Chance*, went through some trying times in 1985. Robert Elford, a Dildo resident, collected the signatures of about 350 of the 800 area residents in order to petition the government of Newfoundland to have the name changed. Fortunately, the name, which was used on charts as early as 1771, has not suffered the fate of Gayside, but continues to reside with honor among the official names of Newfoundland, including a number of others with Dildo as an element.

The successful defense of democratic ideals by the Allied powers in the 1940s prompted the provincial governments of Ontario and British Columbia to honor several world leaders such as Churchill, Eisenhower, Roosevelt, Eden, Truman, and Stalin in the naming of geographical features. In Ontario, the provincial government named *Stalin Township*, then and now an unoccupied area near the city of Sudbury. In British Columbia, *Mount Stalin* was placed adjacent to *Mount Roosevelt* and *Churchill Peak*. In the 1970s, the use of Stalin's name in British Columbia gained some minor notoriety, but it was not until 1985 that the matter of the in-

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appropriate Canadian glorification of the ruthless Soviet dictator was raised by Dr. J.B. Rudnyckyj with Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. The correspondence was referred to the minister responsible for the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names. In the minister's response, it was stated that the members of the CPCGN would not consider a change unless a substantial proportion of the general population demanded it. And further, it was stated that the CPCGN was reluctant to change names on the sole basis that the person for whom it was named may have been dropped from favor.

Subsequently, Dr. Rudnyckyj delivered a ringing address at the 1986 annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Names in Winnipeg, demanding that the names given for Stalin be eradicated. His address was picked up by the Winnipeg, Vancouver, and Toronto press. Even this writer was quoted in the Victoria *Times Colonist* as saying: "I hate seeing names changed, as there is a reluctance in Western countries to alter names to fit current findings of history" (November 25). In an editorial, the Victoria newspaper declared that "where new information has come to light and people who survived the horror he [Stalin] perpetrated are still alive, the change is not just desirable but imperative" (November 30).

In November 1986, when Rick Hansen, the noted wheelchair athlete, was in Toronto on his celebrated Man in Motion world tour, a member of the Ontario Legislative received unanimous approval for his motion to have *Stalin Township* renamed *Hansen Township*. On April 24, 1987, the British Columbia Minister of Environment and Parks, Bruce Strachan, renamed *Mount Stalin* for Don Peck (1920-1980), a well-known rancher, guide, and conservationist in the northern part of the province.

Names authorities in Canada are not always reluctant to rename geographical features to reflect current interpretations of events. In 1916, the city fathers of *Berlin*, Ontario, addressed the question of their German name, and called for a plebiscite. When the vote for a change carried, six names were proposed: Adanac, Benton, Brock, Corona, Keowana and Kitchener. Lord Kitchener, the distinguished British military leader, had recently lost his life at sea, and his name, not surprisingly, was the popular choice.

During the same time period the council of the town of *Strassburg* in Saskatchewan was persuaded by the federal names authority and the

provincial government to change the town's name to *Strasbourg*, since the
French had regained Alsace, where the town's namesake is located. They
may have changed the spelling, but the German pronunciation "stras-
berg" and not the French "straz-boor" has been maintained.

The authorities and residents of Berlin and Strassburg may have ac-
quiesced in their new names, but the good people of *Swastika* in Ontario
refused to abide by a move in 1940 to rename its post office *Winston*. The
community was named long before the Nazis adopted the swastika as their
emblem. The cross of Sanskrit origin is supposed to denote good fortune
and good will. In the 1970s the area of Swastika expressed fears that their
name would be dropped. They were assured that the names authorities
would continue to respect their community's name. In 1987, a high school
student wrote to one of the federal ministers to express his indignation
that Ontario boasted a name that was a sign of horror, misery, and death
for millions. In response, it was pointed out to him that the name was given
about 1906 for a good and valid reason, i.e. to bring luck and prosperity to
the area's mining activities. Further, it was stated that there should be no
obligation to change such a long established name even though Adolf Hit-
ler had chosen the swastika symbol to promote his evil objectives.

A few offensive epithets have made their way into Canada's
toponymy. A search of records in the 1960s revealed 15 names with the
specific "nigger." Subsequently, some human rights activists petitioned
the CPCGN to expunge such names from maps. Some people suggested
substituting "negro" or "Nègre," but such terms were not considered to
be synonymous with "nigger," nor was it felt that they would meet with
local acceptance. Near Belleville, Ontario, the proposal to give *Nigger Is-
land* the name *Maketewis Island* ("island of the black man" in Ojibwa) was
accepted. Also *Niggertoe Mountain* near Penticton, British Columbia, was
renamed *Mount Nkwala*, derived from the fictional name of an Indian
chief. Two "nigger" names remain unchanged, one being the rural com-
munity of *Nigger Rapids* near Maniwaki, Quebec. The adjacent water fea-
ture was renamed *Rapides du Nègre*. The other "nigger" name is *Nigger
Rock* in Quebec near the United States border.

In 1960 the Saskatchewan member of the CPCGN proposed sub-
stituting "iskwao" for all names in his province with the specific "squaw."
He changed two names, but the Saskatchewan Power Corporation was not
persuaded that its *Squaw Rapids Power Station* was an objectionable name,

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and local councils also saw no objection in the word. In 1987, the issue of the name of the power station came up again, with the prospect that the Corporation will substitute another name to remove the offensive epithet.

Several names in western Canada have the specific "siwash," derived from the Chinook jargon for the French "sauvage." Although British Columbia will not accept new names with the term, it has no plans to alter any established names.

In 1959 a family of Finnish origin by the name of Suni advised the Ontario department of Natural Resources that "paska," a name for the township, meant "shit" in Finnish. Although the word means "flat" or "shallow" in Ojibwa, the unfortunate connotation in the Finnish community was acknowledged, and the name of the township, along with the associated lake, creek, post office, and station were all renamed *Suni*.

Names authorities and their staffs rarely play active roles in removing and changing names that for one reason or another cause offense in either a local community or in a specific cultural group. Although this writer took a fairly strong "behind the scenes" role in the 1970s to dump *Mount Eisenhower* in favour of *Castle Mountain*, it is not a usual practice for the Executive Secretary of the CPCGN to take steps to modify or change any Canadian placenames. It is often wiser to keep a fairly open mind for all kinds of epithets and words that in themselves may be indelicate, vulgar, suggestive, or offensive. On the other hand, when some people or communities object strenuously to particular names, such as those named for Joseph Stalin, it is the duty of names officers to ensure that such views are brought to the attention of the appropriate provincial or territorial names authority, and to follow up to ensure that action has been taken, either to reinforce the original decision or toam end it.

The interpreting of tastes and the rendering of advice to names authorities and the public contribute to making the role of the Executive Secretary of the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names one of the more interesting positions in the Canadian public service; and contributed to a satisfying career for this writer from 1973 to 1987.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of a paper read at the annual meeting of the American Name Society in Dallas, Texas, in May 1987.

2. Ron Graham was an associate editor of *Saturday Night* until 1987.

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3. The Hudson's Bay Company was granted in 1670 all the lands of the Hudson Bay drainage, which the company called Rupert's Land for Prince Rupert, the first governor. The lands comprised much of present northern Quebec and Ontario, and most of present Manitoba, Saskatchewan and southern Alberta.

4. In 1858, the Hudson's Bay Company considered San Juan Island to be British territory, but the United States disputed the claim. Emperor Wilhelm I of Germany was invited to arbitrate and in 1872 awarded the island and adjacent islands to the United States.

Works Consulted

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