

Name that Past: Placenames in Autobiographical Writings

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Abstract

As discussed in two of my previous articles, placenames play a significant role in the creation of the past. In autobiographical reminiscences, both speakers and writers (with examples drawn from well-known Scots) reveal a strategic compulsiveness to evoke past places by naming them.

This essay is the third of a triad of papers. Of the first two, one was written for the festschrift in honor of a German folklorist ("Once Upon"), the other was contributed to a special issue of *Names* celebrating Alan Walker Read's outstanding achievements as a name scholar ("Toponymy"). Although the first two parts of the trilogy are therefore available to interested readers,² brief synopses appear to be in order of the other two panels of this verbal triptych which is to be completed on this occasion and whose central theme is the creation of the past through narration and naming. Underlying them all is the argument that, far from being purely a matter of time, the past is at least as much, if not more so, a matter of space, or more precisely, of place.

At the start of this continuing discussion lay the realization that in both the reading and the analysis of folktales we have far too long been seduced by that familiar "Once upon a time" formula which takes us out of historical or calendar time into ahistorical or narrative time, into thinking that the storyteller's chief, or sole, preoccupation is with the storying creation of manageable fictitious chunks of time which might be called episodes of the past. The frequency of this formulaic folktale opening has blinded us to the fact that traditional storytellers are just as interested in, and give verbal expression to, narrated space as to narrated time, especially in the symbolic act of the journey. I have suggested somewhat facetiously that we should use the formula "Once upon a place" to parallel the well worn and misleading adverbial phrase "Once upon a time" and its equivalents ("Once Upon" 360) and to draw attention to this lopsided perspective.

This innovative, perhaps even perplexing, angle on the folktale past is fully justified by the attitude of the storytellers themselves who, in many instances, are quite specific as to where this spatial past is in which the world of the folktale is situated although individual locations differ from tale to tale. The place that is the folktale past lies, storytellers inform us, beyond the beyond, or in a wild part of the country where strangers seldom come, or on a high hill in a lonely wood, or, more generally, simply "in a certain place." Though its location may be remote and inaccessible, it can be experienced in homely, familiar terms. It is other but not strange and therefore recognizable; paradoxically, it is sometimes said to be on both sides of a high mountain or of a deep river.

The world of the folktale is thus the unmappable, acartographic place where the ahistoric past is created through narration ("Once Upon" 364). In keeping with the nature of the folktale this world is, understandably, more often than not found in unnamed places, and if names of countries or other geographical features do occur these function metonymically to symbolize the exotic, the distant, or the very bizarre. Despite the limited scope which the largely unnamed geographical space of folktales has to offer to the name scholar, the findings just summarized are of considerable importance to those students of names who feel challenged to seek out, for instance, the principles involved in the structuring and mastering of landscapes with the aid of naming, even if these are the fictitious landscapes of the mind, as I have tried to show recently ("Maps").

In recent years, folk-narrative scholars have included in the materials which their discipline is legitimately called upon to study, so-called personal experience stories, stories, that is, that in oral tradition are usually told in the first person and relate some significant, even dramatic, event in the teller's past like "The day my father died," "How I met my wife," "The first time I drove a car," "The way we named our adopted twins," and so on. As it turns out, the linguistic structure of such stories is not very different from that of the so-called contemporary legends or modern myths in which a third person vicariously has to deal with what might well be our own fears, anxieties, wishes, etc. ("Linguistic"). In both these narrative genres, true portions of a past that never was are also created through narration but, in contrast to folktales, this is a past which is deliberately and apparently knowingly anchored both in historical time and in mappable space and whose precise spatial associations are usually named. To

increase the chances of believability, it is important for the tellers of such stories to make known where and when the event or events took place, and their undeniable veracity is even more enhanced through the infiltration of specific names. In order for such stories to be effective, the teller's credibility has to be matched by the listener's credulity, and the question how fictitious any of these accounts might be does not properly arise; for them fiction is made real as much as reality is made fictitious, and that applies to both third and first person stories. The truth of all such stories lies in their telling.

Let me illustrate what I mean.³ First a third person story which was told to me by a member of the History Department in the University of Aberdeen (Scotland) who knew about my interest in contemporary legends:

Last week the wife of a colleague of mine went shopping in Union Street. When she had finished she decided that, before going home, she might as well have a cup of coffee. She therefore went into Crawford's, got herself a tray, bought her coffee and a packet of biscuits and paid for them. Looking around, she noticed an empty table for two, put her coffee and biscuits down, and then decided to go to the ladies' room first. When she came back she saw that there was a Pakistani sitting at her table munching her biscuits. She was very angry but trying not to show her annoyance sat down and slowly sipped her coffee. When there was only one biscuit left in the packet she snatched it away from the Pakistani and said to him, "Surely, I can have at least one of my own biscuits!" She ate it, swallowed her last mouthful of coffee, and stormed out. She went to the nearest bus stop to catch a bus home, opened her handbag to take out her fare, and there, in her handbag, was her packet of biscuits!

Now the first person experience story:

When I was about three years old we lived on the outskirts of the city of Halle/Saale in Germany where my father was in charge of a farm on which the university's department of plant breeding conducted its experiments in the creation of new and better species of grain crops, etc. One day my father and a visiting agriculturalist went out to one of the fields in the visitor's car, and I followed them out of curiosity on my tricycle. When I had just reached them and was close to the rear of the car, they had finished their inspection and the visitor not knowing that I was there started to reverse his car. They heard a terrible crunching noise, immediately stopped the car, and rushed to the back where they found my tricycle completely mangled. There did not seem to be any trace of me but then they noticed me in a patch of beans by the side of the path. When my father lifted me up I said, "The tricycle wouldn't go fast enough, so I threw myself into the beans."⁴

In both these stories, one of comparatively recent origin (only four or five days were said to have elapsed when it was first told to me about seven years ago) and the other going back almost sixty years, the past is

named—*Crawford's, Union Street, Aberdeen*, on the one hand, and *Halle/Saale* on the other—and through its placenames is given verifiable spatial referents. For instance, in the first story which mixes personal embarrassment with racial bigotry, one is almost invited to go to the same restaurant (I have been there several times since then) and sit at the same table for two, and it would not surprise anybody if the same Pakistani were to sit there waiting to be falsely accused again. Yet this story, told to me by a reliable person about someone she knew well, on closer inspection turned out to be a version of a contemporary legend at that time widely told in Britain and, I am happy though not surprised to say, did not actually happen to the wife of a history lecturer in Aberdeen University at all but, as I discovered, to the notorious FOAF, the friend-of-a-friend who has remained, of course, untraceable.⁵ It is highly believable fiction, with all the trimmings of actuality, including the onomastic ones, and was believed by the teller at the time of the telling.

As far as my own story of about 1930 is concerned, it also has its own fairly precise location—a field on a farm near Halle (which still exists and which I revisited ten years ago)—and I know that this event took place because I was there and it happened to me (although my knowledge of it was undoubtedly reinforced by my mother's repeated later accounts of it); but I am also aware of the fact that, despite its persuasive autobiographical "authenticity," this story has, to a considerable extent, become fictionalized over the years, probably from its very first telling onwards, for we not only create our own pasts through narration but also turn them into fiction, or at least give them the structure of fiction. Even the placenames we insert become, in the last analysis, fictive, as we do ourselves. The *Halle* of my story, though an actual name on an actual map referring to an actual university city, is, in the end, no more mappable than, let us say, Stevenson's *Treasure Island* or Tolkien's *Desolation of Smaug* ("Maps"). That is why retracing one's steps or those of one's ancestors can become such a futile activity fraught with so many risks that it should be undertaken only by the very audacious or the very foolish.

If proof were needed for this assertion of inevitable fictionality, the toponymy of remembered childhood removes any lingering doubt. In the second panel ("Toponymy") of the triptych of which this paper is the third I therefore examined the places remembered and recorded by about seventy well-known Scots in autobiographical accounts of their childhood (Kamm and Lean). In the course of that survey, I noticed that, true to expectation, their reflections, several decades and a series of

shaping experiences later, revealed, filtered through the benign prism of hindsight and maturity, not only the personal deployment of subjective time but also the reconstructed localizations of subjective space. Such transformations are not without their almost unavoidable flaws and risks for, while reminiscing writers are apparently making the spatial components of their early years perfectly accessible to the public by revealing their names, what really happens is that the private contents of named places remains uncommunicated in spite of the writers' genuine, honest efforts, particularly when readers have, in response, not much contents or conflicting contents to bring to the names displayed, i.e., do not know them at all or know them only vaguely or from a different perspective, as such names as *Union Street, Aberdeen, or Halle* easily confirm.

Naturally, the naming of the past can be lavish or miserly in such reminiscences, or somewhere in between. For these writers for whom placenames are important ingredients of the story that begins "Once upon a place I was a child," names are often associated with journeys. For one of the Scottish personalities anthologized (Walter Coumts), for example, the sequence *Gleneagles, Tullibardine, Highlandman, Muthil, Crieff, Comrie, Dalchonzie*, apart from indicating a route taken by train in a nostalgically remembered childhood travel, is offered as a string of toponymic pearls, a succession of spellings and sounds associated with a loss not only of a railway line but of childhood itself and of its irrecoverable pleasures—placenames evocative of a loss of innocence, fossils not only linguistically but also generationally, reminders of a journey taken and completed ("Toponymy" 138). For another rememberer (the singer Moira Anderson), the names *Kirkintilloch, Glasgow, Stirling, Perth, Dunkeld, Pitlochry, Blair Atholl, Kingussie, Aviemore, Inverness, Lairg, Golspie, Dunrobin, Brora* make a desirable progression from south to north, from Lowland to Highland, from work and school to leisure and play—names which gradually increase in promise and hope and anticipation, names that are stages in a journey of expectation, names that not only pace movement but also space the testimony of childish delight, names as symbols of the spatial accommodation of youthful adventure (139).

Taken as a whole, what these several dozen Scottish reminiscences confirm is that, in the rearview mirror of autobiographical writing, adult rememberers of childhood feel constrained to name the focused, structured, private, and public places in which they were children, or perhaps rather in which they re-envision, re-create, re-invent themselves as the children they imagine themselves to have once been. Thus the toponymy

of remembered childhood, consisting of real names fictionalized in the imaginative process of remembering, is an externalized, non-etymological landscape of symbols, a specialized onomastic field representing location, juxtaposition, journeying, shelter, generational interior and exterior space—playful, adventurous, dangerous, calm, promising space of expectation and fulfillment. Complementing the longitudes and latitudes of youth, it is a constellation of named places, still map-found but no longer map-bound, whose major contents it is now to have once accommodated children (140).

Let us now complete the triad. At the end of my investigation of Scottish childhood reminiscences, I briefly interrogated the childhood sections of the autobiographies of three well-known Scotsmen—R. H. Bruce Lockhart, the Rev. James Dow, and John Buchan (or Lord Tweedsmuir, as he is better known to Canadians)—and found further confirmation of the principles which the anthologized seventy writers had revealed (139–41). As a continuation, I want to pick up their autobiographies again in order to ask, with the insatiable curiosity and delicious relentlessness of the scholarly inquirer, whether their well-developed sense of past places and their strategic compulsiveness to evoke them through naming continues just as strongly in their recollections of later years.

First of all, Bruce Lockhart again. Objective criteria for the quantitative and qualitative evaluation of name usage in a book are, of course, hard to devise but if the inclusion of a map of Scotland containing many of the names pertinent to the first seventeen and a half years of the author's life, until his departure and long exile from his home country—if such a map and the high proportion of placenames in the index are anything to go by, then names form an essential part of the Scotland of Lockhart's memory. We are certainly never left in any doubt as to where we are in any given phase of his growth into a prominent diplomat and traveler. Significantly, it is again the description of a journey in the section entitled "Highland Holiday" that makes his love affair with names and the places they depict clearest; this paragraph telescopes several summer journeys to Grantown-on-Spey in northeast Scotland into one, with special evocation of the stretch from Perth northwards:

The choice of seats was always a problem. The west side revealed not only the larger quantity of game but also the first view of Killiecrankie, of the rivers Tummel and Garry, and of Loch Ericht. But the east side had one supreme consolation, and for that reason I always chose it when the turn of the coin favoured me. From Struan began the long ascent to Dalnaspidal.

With many puffs and snorts the engine crawled its way up Glen Garry through scenery that every moment grew wilder and grander, past the Athole Sow and the Boar of Badenoch, on which occasionally a red deer could be seen looking down at the train from a high rock, until at the Druimuachdar Pass it reached the top of the watershed. (143)

Surely, these names not only direct, locate, and suggest locomotion; they also enchant and bewitch and sing the sounds of home to the Scot abroad. This is equally true of this more tranquil passage:

After that summer of 1896 near Grantown, my grandmother took the low-ground shooting of Rothiemurchus, and for three out of the next four years our summer headquarters were Inverdrue, a little clachan or hamlet about a mile and a quarter from Aviemore. The Doune, the ancestral home of the Grants of Rothiemurchus, which would otherwise have gone with the shooting, was let to Lord Manvers, and my grandmother lived in Inverdrue House, which, although too small for all her guests, commanded a superb view of the Cairngorms. (159)

Nobody will convince me that there is not longing in this voice and in the placenames it caresses, forty years after they had been first encountered and subsequently never forgotten, even in the obliterating distractions of a metropolis like London. It is therefore not surprising that the young Bruce Lockhart, on his way to Berlin to improve his German, leaves names behind as well as places, the names of home:

Even at this early stage Fate had seemed to decree that my life should be a series of comings and goings. Already I had had four homes: Anstruther, Beith, Broughty Ferry and the Highlands. I had lived in close proximity to Scotland's three leading cities. Now, without ever having crossed the English border, I was going to a capital which was larger than Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dundee put together. (359)

This new world into which Lockhart is about to move will be measured and assessed by him in Scottish terms. More than three decades later (in 1937), Scotland is revisited in the mind's eye, to be measured and assessed in terms of the world. Its placenames, their sounds and their spellings, help to ensure that Scotland is not found wanting.

James Dow's career as a minister took place mostly in Scotland, and the placenames which punctuated his life—*Paisley, Glasgow, Greenock, Lochranza*—are of the homelier kind, straddling the Firth of Clyde, and are fleshed out in the more local names of streets and parishes. On the whole, his reminiscences do not depend on the evocative shorthand of placenames, except in the chapter on his chaplaincy in Assam which appears to have overwhelmed him somewhat with the exotic un-Scottishness of its names:

To the north [of South Sylhet] was Cachar and beyond that was Manipur and the border of Burma. Farther to the north were the high hills which split Assam into two, and up on top was the capital, Shillong, reached by a rather hair-raising road. These were the Khasia, Jaintia, and Naga hills. (147)

This is toponymic poetry introduced into an otherwise unadorned passage of lexical prose. Not only pictures but also names can say more than a thousand words, in this case distilling the essence of a part of the globe that is not Scotland.

I have always been reluctant to paraphrase the language of John Buchan, novelist, politician, statesman, and one of my favorite writers. As is to be expected of someone who made his home in many parts of the world, his own account of his life contains a plethora of toponymic references, on occasion combining them into name clusters that haunt as never-to-be-forgotten evocations. Here is a small portion of his description of the countryside around Oxford. I hope that the readers of this essay will succumb to the lyricism of the song of names as much and as easily as I have done:

The key to the Oxford topography is the valleys, for they are the natural divisions. First there is the "stripling Thames," which above Goodstow becomes a different stream from the sophisticated longer river. It twines through its meadows like a brook in a missal, always within sight of uplands. If a man wants to recover the Middle Ages let him go there on a summer day when the grass is high, and he will see and hear nothing which was not there five hundred years ago when the monks of Bynsham caught their Friday's trout. Of the tributaries two are wholly lowland, the little Thame which threads the vale of Aylesbury, and the Cherwell which rises far up in the Midlands. But the latter has an affluent which traverses one of the wildest patches of south England, for the Ray, which enters it at Islip, flows through the great marsh of Otmoor. Otmoor is divided by rough hedges, but it is undrained, and perhaps undrainable. In a wet winter it is one vast lagoon; in summer it is a waste of lush grass, and its few mud tracks are pitted and ribbed like the *seracs* of a glacier. Once it was the preserve of the Seven Towns of Otmoor which pastured their geese on it, and there were riots early in last century when it was enclosed. Now the Royal Air Force has a bombing-station here, and by day it is apt to be a noisy place, but at night and in wild weather it recovers its loneliness. To ride or walk there in an autumn twilight is to find oneself in a place as remote from man as Barra or Knoydart.

But it is the little valleys which are the glory of the Oxford countryside—those of Coln and Leach, Windrush and Evenlode. The first two are in Gloucestershire, but the latter two are Oxford's avenue into Cotswold. There we have a landscape which is still unravished. The names of the streams are in themselves a melody, and the valleys wind into the recesses of the hills so softly that they combine upland austerity with lowland graces. (79–80)

“The names of the streams are in themselves a melody.” How I wish I could have been the one to have said that! It is the music of names to which we have to learn to listen, as much as to their meaning. Notice, however, how even Buchan’s eulogy is pronounced with the accents of the educated Scot who cannot but compare what he sees or hears elsewhere with the inheritance of his own Scottishness. Barra and Knoydart on the Scottish west coast, one an island, the other a peninsula, are therefore recalled to provide tartan points of reference. And shortly after the passage just quoted, Buchan comments: “The shallows of the Windrush are never the ‘wan water of Yarrow’” (80), referring to a Scottish border river prominent in the tragic themes of traditional balladry. Is it necessary to say more?

How, then, is the past named by some of those who elect to offer an account of their lives through the refracting prism of memory? It is perhaps no longer necessary to insist that the past can, by and large, only be named as place and that placenames are therefore appropriate onomastic devices for the process of remembering. Since in the creation of the past through narration and naming we fictionalize ourselves, as well as others, the real names we use—*Aberdeen*, *Halle*, *Grantown*, *Greenock*, *Windrush*, *Yarrow*—also become fictions; they are emancipated from the restrictions of the cartographic coordinates by their transfer into the narrated past of refracted memory. They only look and sound like the names of places that people know or that are knowable, but they now belong to a landscape that we see best when we close our eyes. The distance from convention through intervention to invention is much shorter than one thinks, for the ability to remember and the ability to imagine are twin skills of the human mind. It therefore behooves students of names in literature to realize that fact because otherwise there would be no end to ever yet more description and yet more etymology in their work allowing those critics who are suspicious of what those engaged in literary onomastics are doing to continue to think of them as intellectual hucksters. Students of names in literature owe it to themselves not to provide reasons for such pejorative labeling. It is my hope that this short third part of the triad, in addition to its two predecessors, has made a little celebratory contribution toward removing such misconceptions once and for all.⁶

Notes

1. This is a much revised version of a paper first read as an after-dinner address at the annual Conference on Literary Onomastics in Brockport, New York, June 6-7, 1988.

2. For a longer essay based on these two papers see my recent article, "The Past as Place."

3. The two stories which follow were told orally when this paper was first presented in order to show the contrast between the reading of a story and its performance. That contrast is unfortunately lost in this written rendering.

4. The poignancy of this story was enhanced in the original German version by the three-year-old's wrong usage of the past tense of the verb *gehen* 'to go,' replacing *ging* with *gange*.

5. The newsletter of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research is aptly called *FOAFtale News*.

6. The honoree of this special issue of *Names*, Kelsie B. Harder, is one of those rare scholars who have felicitously combined an impressive knowledge of everything pertaining to names with a considerable expertise in literary criticism, a prerequisite for a successful approach to the study of names in literature.

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