

## Coromuel and Pichilingue

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### Abstract

*Coromuel* and *Pichilingue*, established as minor placenames near La Paz, Baja California, derive from English and Dutch pirates and privateers who careened their ships in coves on the uninhabited peninsula in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. *Pichilingue* (from Dutch *Vlissingen*) is documented to the early eighteenth century, but *Coromuel* (from *Cromwell*) only to the mid-nineteenth century.

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On the west side of the rocky little peninsula that projects into the Gulf of California just north of the Bay of La Paz in Baja California, Mexico, are two exotic placenames, *Pichilingue* and *Coromuel*.

In current usage the term *Coromuel* is not primarily a placename. It refers to the cooling westerly breeze that blows over La Paz every afternoon. Its meteorological basis is straightforward. Waters of the Pacific Ocean are notably cooler than those of the Gulf of California on the other side of Baja California, so a mild thermal low pressure develops regularly in the latter area. Frontal passage and tropical cyclones that might alter this pressure gradient are infrequent, and, most significantly, the area west and southwest of La Paz is the only place in the entire length of the peninsula where a mountain or upland spine does not impede the air flow. *Coromuel* is also a placename applied to a *balneario* or swimming resort on the little peninsula that extends north from La Paz and is just outside its somewhat polluted bay. The *Coromuel* blows right against it. The resort was well established when I first visited it in 1952 (see also Jordan, plate facing 242), but the placename is probably only a decade or two older and clearly is named after the wind.

All the long-term residents of La Paz speak of the *Coromuel*, and it is a significant amenity in their environment. Even in summer, when all other coastal places on the Gulf of California swelter in stifling heat and humidity, the La Paz climate is tolerable and attractive to tourists who exploit the fishing opportunities of the Gulf. There is also a widespread agreement that *Coromuel* is a hispanicization of the English name *Cromwell*. The fanciful stories of how the name was implanted in Baja California are more varied.

One of these stories was made into a radio feature on "Bob Ferris News," KNX (Los Angeles), on December 5, 1955. Ferris obtained it from the Russo family, important and well-established merchants in La Paz. Cromwell, a great and clever English pirate, hid in the Bay of La Paz and used the regular wind to sally forth to the cape to attack laden Manila Galleons as they sailed by. He claimed several prizes and buried them somewhere in the sands around the bay. A final feature is that early in this century a great *chubasco* or tropical cyclone altered the character of the bay, obliterating all landmarks and losing the treasure forever. Other tales have Cromwell becalmed in the bay and being threatened from land and sea by Spanish forces. The afternoon wind permitted him to get out through the narrow channel and elude his pursuers in the darkness. The investigative journalist Fernando Jordan, in his 1951 book *El Otro Mexico*, discounts this legend but from old residents obtained another one, that the name comes from the sailing vessel *Cromwell*, which used the wind to exit the bay (247). Jordan gives no date and no one has found a record of a ship named *Cromwell* in those waters.

Among the scores of English pirates and privateers identified by Peter Gerhard in *Pirates on the West Coast of New Spain 1575-1742* the name *Cromwell* does not appear at all. One suspects, though I have found no documentation for it, that the reference is to Oliver Cromwell. In actuality, Oliver Cromwell never left the British Isles, but during his rule in the mid-seventeenth century, Britain was particularly active in interfering with Spanish shipping and in making incursions in Spanish territories around the Caribbean. That the British leader should become the English pirate incarnate to colonial officials and mariners attempting to defend the long Pacific Coast of the Spanish Empire is not unreasonable. This extended, poorly defended frontier, with slow and interrupted overland communications and sea travel often actually blocked by real pirates, was repeatedly swept by rumors of buccaneering raids that were completely fictitious, probably with fictitious captains.

Furthermore, in the sixteenth and twice in the eighteenth centuries English privateers (Spaniards would have identified them as pirates), lying off the southern tip of Baja California, did intercept the Manila Galleon as it stayed close to shore en route to Acapulco. Twice they were successful. It is likely that the fearsome British leader became the bogeyman to Spanish mariners in the Pacific that Sir Francis Drake was in the previous century.

Documentation for seventeenth- or eighteenth-century use of *Coromuel* has not been discovered, however. Permanent Spanish settlement of Baja California began with the Jesuit mission in 1697 at Loreto. This was too far up the Gulf, an impoverished region, to be of interest to

pirates. No mission was established in La Paz until 1720. Nonetheless, the Cape region of Baja California was not an unvisited country. Although unsuccessful, Cortez' attempt at settlement in the La Paz area in 1534 and 1535 had obtained some pearls of high quality. Over the more than a century and a half that followed, licensed and unlicensed pearling expeditions worked the gulf coast at least as far north as latitude 28°N. Although crossing from Sinaloa in small boats was risky, small entrepreneurs, who were willing to risk criminal penalties to avoid the royal *quinta* (twenty percent tax) and the hassle of getting licensure, were more numerous and regular visitors than the dozen official expeditions. The latter often had the mission of founding a permanent settlement but clearly focused their energy on getting pearls.

In addition, beginning with Thomas Cavendish at Cabo San Lucas in 1587, English and Dutch privateers and pirates in undetermined numbers used any embayment in the Cape region to take on water and wood and careen their ships, badly in need of such attention after the voyage around Cape Horn. Though Cabo San Lucas was the place from which to ambush the Manila Galleon, the protected Bay of La Paz was a favored place for careening ships. These foreigners must have interacted with the pearlery; there were reported instances of their relieving them of their pearls (Gerhard 117-18, 205). Less hostile interactions, especially with illegal pearl seekers, would not have been reported to Spanish authorities, but they would become part of the mariners' lore of the West Coast of New Spain. It is my conclusion that the Coromuel legend arose from these interactions.

As an aside it may be noted that the English and Dutch visitors consistently reported friendly receptions from the local Indians. They wanted peace and quiet to attend to their repairs and limited reprovisioning and could make minor gifts to the Indians. The pearlery, however, were concerned to induce or impress the Indians into the laborious and dangerous activity of diving for pearls. Spanish authorities and, especially after 1697, the missionaries regularly complained bitterly that abuses of the Indians were impeding missionization and making the latter hostile to Spaniards in general. The temporarily successful revolt by the Pericú in 1734 must have stemmed in part from this hostility.

The earliest written reference to Coromuel that has been found is in the Los Angeles *Star* in 1857: "At the commencement of summer rain squalls gather about the mountain tops ... and the coromoel [sic] comes off the mountains, cooling the air."<sup>2</sup> In Southern California the wind described would now be called a Santa Ana, a descending and warming wind, but at its inception air movement could make it seem fresh and cooling. It can be noted that when the United States, in the treaty of

Guadalupe Hidalgo, returned Baja California to Mexico in 1848, those resident in La Paz who sided with the United States found it expedient to be evacuated and many wound up in Los Angeles, then the most comfortably Mexican town in California. It is likely that they attached their own wind name to one prominent in their new homes. In the Southern California site the name did not last long. The reference, however, would document Coromuel in La Paz to before 1848.

A stranger reference comes from the French novelist Gustave Aimard. His adventure tales, mostly set on the American frontier, were popular and most were translated into English with later editions abbreviated into dime novels. In *The Freebooters* (1861) *Coromuel* appears several times, but it has become a violent gusty storm wind, and the locale is shifted to the Texas Gulf Coast. This is far from La Paz, but Aimard had spent a youth collecting adventures which he would later use in his novels. One of his adventures involved participating in the filibustering expedition of Gaston Raoux Raousset de Boulbon who, simultaneously with William Walker in Baja California (1852), attempted to set up a state in Sonora and Sinaloa. Raousset de Boulbon was executed in Guaymas, but Aimard was finally freed. The exotically named wind, probably picked up from Sinaloan pearlers, was inviting to use creatively in any dramatic context. Aimard also invents a topographically impossible hill fort on the Gulf Coast of Texas.

Santamaría, in his *Diccionario General de Americanismos* associates Coromuel with Baja California and derives it from “the famous English pirate Cronwell [sic].” But he makes it the prevailing northwest wind that blows along the Pacific Coast from San Francisco to the Cape. This normally careful lexicographer evidently attempted to extrapolate rationally from fragmentary information.

Immediately north of the Balneario Coromuel, just outside the Bay of La Paz, is another placename that by a similarly shadowy route came from Dutch buccaneers to be attached to the Baja California coast, presumably a place where ships were careened: *Pichilingue*. In an exhaustive study in 1944 Engel Sluiter derives the term (his variant is spelled *Pechelingue*) from *Vlissingen*, a former seaport in the southwestern corner of Zeeland in the Netherlands. The strange set of sound shifts came from the name entering Spanish by way of French, with the shift from [v] to [p] coming from the lack of an [f] or [v] sound in Basque; it is only slightly more bizarre than *Vlissingen* becoming *Flushing* in English, as in New York. The small, moated town of Vlissingen in the southern Netherlands was one of the principal ports from which Dutch “sea beggars” and later privateers set forth to harass Spanish shipping in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In contrast to *Coromuel*, *Pichilingue* became a general term applied to Dutch ships sailing in violation of Spanish law wherever they were encountered. It is mentioned as a placename in the Venegas manuscript written in 1739. Gerhard (194), in a manuscript by Sigismundo Taraval, who left the Cape region in 1734, found mention of Pichilingue Island near La Paz. Taraval stated that the name came from a pirate who careened his ship there many years before 1697. Sluiter (695) discovered a Dutch map, published in Amsterdam in 1765, on which Puerto de los Pichilingues appears close to the position of the present placename. The map title refers to recent discoveries by the Jesuits in California. These discoveries probably were made around 1720 when the Cape region was explored and the mission at La Paz founded. *Pichilingue* shows up as a placename also in Sinaloa and Ecuador and, with variant spellings, possibly near Cartagena in Colombia and on Chiloe in southern Chile.

These two exotic placenames open a window on the considerable part Baja California played in the history of the Pacific during the more than a century and a half between its discovery and permanent settlement. It is also remarkable how these names, casually attached because of real or imagined events, have persisted in a sparsely populated, at times uninhabited, locality for two or more centuries.

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### Note

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented in 1989 to the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers in Querétaro, Mexico.
2. David Schulman's article on Spanish words in American English led me to this reference.

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**Fall and Winter 1992 Conferences**

- October 3, 1992:** Eighteenth Annual Connecticut Onomastic Symposium at Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantic. Contact Dean A. Reilein, 50 Mountain Road, Mansfield Center, CT 06520. (Send proposals by September 1, 1992.)
- October 20-22, 1992:** Second Annual Central New York MLA Conference at SUNY Cortland, Cortland, NY. Contact Wayne H. Finke, Dept. of Modern Languages, Box 340, Baruch College, 17 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10010.
- November 6-7, 1992:** Eighteenth Annual Conference on Literary Onomastics at the University of Georgia, Athens. Contact Betty J. Irwin, English Dept., Park Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602. (Send abstracts by September 1, 1992)
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