

NAMES FORUM

On the Need to Legitimize Onomastics in Academia

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On the inside back cover of the first issue of *Names* (March 1953) there appeared probably the first widely distributed statement of the purposes of the American Name Society. Prominent in that statement — second, in fact, only to “the study of...names...and the dissemination of the result of such study” — was the following goal: “to make the American people conscious of the interest and importance of names in all fields of human endeavor and in all subjects taught in our schools and colleges.”¹ What I will argue in this essay is that to an important extent, we members of the ANS have failed in this goal. In short, while we may well have succeeded in persuading a majority of lay Americans that names are important in “all fields of human endeavor,” just as clearly we have *not* been successful in convincing much of the academic community that onomastics is a serious discipline.

I

I wish to acknowledge from the outset the parameters of my evidence for the thesis stated above. I have not attempted to systematically poll either the academic community as to their opinions regarding onomastics and the people who study it, or onomasticians regarding how their work is received by their non-onomastic peers. Such polls may be effective for the gathering of certain kinds of data, but in general they suffer from such significant epistemological drawbacks that their overall usefulness in collecting personal opinions is questionable at best.² Instead, the evidence presented below has come to me primarily through personal

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anecdote — in other words, through stories gleaned from friends, acquaintances, and electronic bulletin boards.³ I have rejected all second- and thirdhand retellings as possible distorted hearsay; the numbers reported below represent only primary accounts of the facts being related (accounts which, not insignificantly, can be corroborated with outside written evidence in slightly more than half the cases cited). Finally, though their omission may soften the impact of the evidence, I will not share the names of any of the parties involved in the various actions reported. To do so could threaten the careers of those who have been victimized, and would certainly compromise the integrity of several departments and colleges/universities throughout the United States.

Consider now the following, all of which occurred between 1986 and 1994:

- Fifteen individuals, at all ranks of the professoriate, were penalized (that is, by virtue of not being rewarded) in their annual reviews for publishing refereed articles in journals devoted to onomastics (nine of the 15 are authors of essays in *Names*). Moreover, comments from department Chairs and Heads, or from the committees that oversee the process of review, make it plain that *it is not the quality of the work that is at fault, but the nature of the work itself*: "We can't give you credit for that article. It's on names, for heaven's sake! Next we'll have someone claiming credit for an article on stamp collecting or astrology."
- Six assistant professors (two at "major" universities) and three associate professors were denied tenure and/or promotion at least partly because some of their work was in onomastics. Again, examples of the written comments of the Chairs or Heads of the departments under consideration are instructive: "You have not contributed significantly to the intellectual mission of the university," or "Your work, though extensive, was found to be somewhat sophomoric in that it deals almost exclusively with personal names," or "The senior members of the department felt that your work in 'onomastics' was a bit too peripheral to be given serious consideration," or (from a Dean)

"Names? You study names? Where's the intellectual rigor in that?!"

- Nineteen professors, 13 of whom were untenured, were denied a variety of regional or national grants because the scope of their work was onomastic. On one of these individuals' applications, in the space labeled "reason [for lack of funding]," one particularly acerbic referee scribbled the following: "I have no doubt that such work would *require* funding, but does it *merit* it? I think not. Searching through telephone books for names of one ethnicity or another is hardly an academic endeavor...in fact my grandmother used to do that, and she had only an eighth-grade education!"
- Though editors and even associate editors of scholarly journals are routinely given "release time" from teaching and other academic obligations as compensation for the time devoted to their editorial responsibilities, at least two editors or editors-designate of major journals in onomastics were denied such a benefit, one being cautioned that to assume the editorship would cause other "more important work" to suffer.

There is no apparent pattern to these grim misfortunes: besides happening at various stages of the individuals' academic careers, some occurred in departments of English, others in departments of linguistics, geography, psychology, or one or another foreign language, and some, in fact, occurred extradepartmentally, at the level of the college or university; and some transpired at private schools of liberal arts while others happened at large land grant institutions. Perhaps the only thing all the events reported have in common is that they reflect the intellectual prejudice that onomastics and onomasticians sometimes suffer at the hands of their narrow-minded academic colleagues.

II

Some may argue that the ignorance implied in the situations described above occurs in people or departments or institutions which, all things considered, are relatively few and far between. Others would opine that such intellectual prejudice will decrease naturally with the passing of time and the further maturation of

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onomastics as a discipline. Still others would offer the philosophical view that because similar incidents occur in professions other than academia and in disciplines other than onomastics — because, in fact, such events are an inescapable part of the human condition — they should be overlooked or at least easily forgiven. And a few might combine two or more of these arguments into the simple belief that I am “over-reacting.”

Let me here advance some brief counter-arguments: First, because of the nature of my data-gathering, of course I cannot say precisely how isolated or widespread is the kind of prejudice reported above, though intuitively I believe that much the larger portion of the proverbial iceberg remains hidden (see n. 3). In the end, however, surely numbers must be unimportant. If even one person is disadvantaged for pursuing the study of onomastics, there is cause for alarm; surely no discipline or any of its practitioners deserves to be the object of intellectual contempt.

Second, certainly the bias underlying the judgments enumerated earlier will diminish with the passage of time, but how long should we be willing to wait, and how “mature” must onomastics become? *Names* has been indexed in the *International Index of Periodicals* since March 1955 (Bryant, 35), and, according to the *MLA Directory of Periodicals*, is one of at least two dozen major onomastics journals published throughout the world (many others regularly print names-related articles, though not exclusively so).⁴ Moreover, numerous regional, national, and international onomastic organizations hold periodic conferences and symposia, as the first page of any *ANS Bulletin* readily attests. Finally, as Margaret M. Bryant noted nearly two decades ago, “[I]f one looks at the annual [Ehrensperger Report]..., compiled each year...since 1954, one can observe the steady growth of interest in onomastics and observe the vast amount of activity in the field since...[December 29, 1951, when the American Name Society was founded]” (30). Again I ask: How long must we wait, and how “mature” must onomastics become, before we receive due recognition from our non-onomastician peers?⁵

Third, perhaps it is indeed true that intellectual bias is an inherent part of the human condition; certainly I cannot deny that it occurs in professions outside academia and in disciplines other than onomastics. But those who argue that we should therefore acquiesce

to it, *ipso facto*, are seriously shortsighted. (Parallel arguments would also have us accept disease, famine, and world hunger as "inherent" aspects of being human). *Especially* in academia, given the advanced level of education required of its members, and *especially* with regard to onomastics, considering its highly interdisciplinary nature, we ought to expect far lower levels of intellectual prejudice than the norms of humanity might dictate. When such narrow-mindedness does arise, however, we must confront it with every available weapon.

Finally, to those who would claim that my outrage at the situations presented earlier is the simple product of over-reaction, I can only suggest that we agree to disagree. It is clear to me that the available facts suggest a predicament from which onomastics must work hard to extricate itself; those who believe that I am tilting at one of Quixote's windmills need not participate in the extrication.

III

More important, and perhaps also more interesting, than justifying my concern over the low esteem in which onomastics is too frequently held by many non-onomasticians, is considering why this state of affairs has developed and what, if anything, can be done to rectify it.

Several causes may underlie the negative perception of onomastics as I have outlined it, only some of which we can or even should strive to change. For example, we ought to acknowledge that *any* discipline which attracts as much lighthearted media attention as onomastics does will inevitably raise more than a few academic eyebrows. And the fact is that the media have always been and will continue to be fascinated by names and naming procedures. Rightly so; indeed, another of the goals of the American Name Society that was listed on the inside back cover of so many issues of *Names* between 1953 and 1990 was that its members should give "contributions to the daily press" and provide "popular lectures on the subject" of onomastics. I would never suggest that we rescind such a goal, just that we accept the consequences of striving to fulfill it.⁶

We must also accept the fact that onomastics is, by definition, interdisciplinary in nature; in fact, as Edwin D. Lawson has pointed out, the study of names may well be the *most* interdisciplinary field in existence ("For Editors, Authors, and Readers," 6; cf. the comments of Nicolaisen "Field Collecting," 165, in which onomastics is

termed an "inter-discipline"). Again, rightly so. Onomastics thereby attracts researchers from several of the humanities and social sciences, at least, and their various kinds of inquiries, not to mention their diverse approaches to those inquiries, will continue to enrich what we know about names and naming processes. But in the eyes of many academicians, *interdisciplinary*, beyond a certain point, is nearly synonymous with *soft, ill-defined, inexact*, and even *illegitimate*. And, of course, onomastics goes far beyond that nebulous point of acceptability. Why else would no American college or university offer a degree in onomastics, either at the undergraduate or the graduate level (Gourman *Rating of Undergraduate Programs, Rating of Graduate Programs*)?⁷ Why else would so few institutions offer regular courses in onomastics, and when such courses *are* offered, why else would they be taught so frequently as "special topics" rather than under their own titles? And why else would there be no "true" onomasticians *per se* — that is, as opposed to "psychologists who study names," "philosophers who study names," "linguists who study names," and the like? One could hardly argue that the interdisciplinary nature of the study of names be abandoned, but we must be prepared to deal with the consequences of being almost *entirely* interdisciplinary.

In short, onomastics may be objectionable to some academic non-onomasticians *just by virtue of its goals and nature*. So be it. Arguments could be mounted in defense of such things, but would probably ultimately fail (they would convince an open mind, but the minds of people who begrudge onomastics its rightful place in academia can hardly be said to be open). We would do better, perhaps, to turn our energy in directions that will yield greater success. For example, though we have done a remarkably good job of delineating how other disciplines inform the study of names (see, e.g., Lawson "Social Science Contributions," "Personal Names," "For Editors, Authors, and Readers"), we have been rather less successful in demonstrating how onomastics informs other disciplines (a notable exception to this lies in literary onomastics; see, e.g., Grimaud "Onomastics and the Study of Literature," "Whither Literary Onomastics?"). Nicolaisen has written that "linguistics, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, history, geography, folklore, archeology, theology, and so on are...sub-disciplines of onomastics"

("What Crisis?," 16). The time has now come to demonstrate rather than just assert, for this kind of extra-disciplinary *raison d'être* is precisely the kind of evidence that would appeal to even the narrowest of academic minds.⁸ "Applied onomastics" could do for the study of names what "applied linguistics" has done for the scientific study of language.⁹

Another way for onomastics to earn respect from the American academic community is for onomasticians to do their work more rigorously. Note that I am not advocating an alliance between onomastics and another discipline such as linguistics (cf. Markey). Note, too, that I quite agree with Nicolaisen's comments that "only the onomastician has the right to say where the limits of onomastics lie and what its standards are to be," and that

[t]he study of names and naming is not only a science but also an art, and while undoubtedly there has to be scientific rigor, there also has to be sensitivity, a sense of aesthetics and an understanding of the human psyche. ("What Crisis?," 22)

On the other hand, many of us simply do not "do" onomastics very well. How many of us, when it is appropriate to our work, follow the methodological precision outlined in the articles by Nicolaisen ("Field Collecting") and Weitman? How many of us, upon completing a study in quantitative onomastics, validate our results using even the simplest of statistics? How many of us attempt to place our work within a theoretical paradigm, as opposed to merely compiling "agglomerations of information about individual names" (Stewart "The Field," 75-76)? How many of us follow even the minimal standards of secondary research (Lawson ["For Editors, Authors, and Readers"] notes that the authors of many essays he has refereed over the years have simply overlooked previous relevant work)?

Again, why should European journals of onomastics typically have better scholarly reputations than *Names*?¹⁰ Why was the ANS's statement of purpose removed from the inside back cover of *Names* and replaced by what amounts to nothing more than a checklist for style? Why, as an occasional referee for *Names*, do I so often find myself commenting that the essay I have been asked to read looks like a hurriedly-composed first draft of a poorly conceived and executed project?¹¹ Margaret M. Bryant characterized *Names*

in its early years as "scholarly but not dull and interesting but not amateurish, [a journal]...of interest not only to the scholar but to the general intelligent reader, thereby forming a bridge between the learned and everyday worlds" (36). I certainly am not suggesting that this bridge be dismantled; rather, that we continue to construct and strengthen it, but that our standards for building materials remain consistently high.¹²

My final suggestions for legitimizing onomastics in academia again hearken back to the earliest days of the ANS. First, another of the original goals of the Society was to have "annual national and, given sufficient interest, regional meetings." In the last several years, there has *not* been "sufficient interest" to hold a regional meeting in the Midwest. As designated Chair, however, I have not wanted to lose our valuable affiliation with the Midwest Modern Language Association (MMLA), and so have scheduled the meetings anyway. As numerous colleagues will attest, I have cajoled, wheedled, and coerced people into giving papers,¹³ *but the presenters have almost always outnumbered the members of the audience*. Why should this be the case? I might guess that university budgets are so restricted that travel to regional conferences is prohibited, or that there is simply low interest in presenting papers at such venues, but the number of non-onomasticians who attend MMLA every year suggests otherwise on both counts. I might also guess that the ANS simply does not have many members living in the Midwest, but the current membership list records dozens of members.¹⁴ Where, then, are they?

Next, the ANS might begin to offer prizes for the best original contribution in onomastic research, published in *Names* or elsewhere, within a given period of time (perhaps annually or bi-annually). The earliest issues of the journal reveal that such an award once existed — the annual Mary Glide Goethe Prize of \$100 — but no longer. Why? Would not the creation or reinstatement of such a prize inspire continued research in onomastics as well as the highest standards of quality in that research? Other organizations and societies in academia offer such awards; the ANS should as well.

Finally, and ironically, we might rethink the wisdom underlying the names that our predecessors gave some two generations ago to our journal and our organization. Objectively, of course, both *Names* and *American Name Society* are descriptively accurate, and each has

its respective counterparts in other academic fields — *Language* and *American Speech* for journals and *American Folklore Society* and *American Dialect Society* for organizations come most readily to mind. But these are perceived quite differently from *Names* and the *American Name Society*, by the non-academic and especially the academic public. Perception is far from objective, but from my general experiences and observations, I more than suspect that *Names*, and to a lesser extent, *American Name Society* all too often suggest amateurish dilettantes who, lacking anything more substantial or worthwhile to do, have turned their interest to the “study” of names. I would ask you to consider which of the following commands more respect: *Names* or *Onomastica Canadiana*? *American Name Society* or *International Congress of Onomastic Sciences*? Given that businesses spend millions of dollars trying to discover the “right” names for their products and that prospective parents often spend months trying to find the “right” names for their babies, perhaps the time has come for the ANS to begin searching for names that will lend a greater sense of authority and seriousness to who we are and what we do.

IV

My final remarks are brief. First, I hope that in these few pages I have been able to call attention to the ongoing intellectual bias that festers against onomasticians and onomastics, at least in the United States. The problem is real, and deserves attention. Second, the suggestions that I have made for coping with this bias are limited — a beginning to a solution, not the solution itself. More brainstorming must occur, perhaps at national and regional meetings, and then we must all make a concerted effort to implement the ideas proposed. Finally, we must realize that even the best-laid and best-executed of plans will not remedy the situation any time in the near future: prejudice accumulates in layers, over time, and usually dissipates in the same way.

One final thought: Even if, several decades hence, onomastics and the people who practice it are still routinely considered as among the illegitimate children of academia, the discipline will be stronger for the efforts that will have been made.

NOTES

¹The same statement of purposes appeared on the inside back cover of every issue of *Names* published through 1990, when it was replaced by a lengthy checklist pertaining to the submission of essays to the journal.

²This is true of polls conducted in person as well as via questionnaire. Will the people polled, for example, necessarily tell the truth? (Anonymity on the part of the respondent certainly does not guarantee truthful responses). Do they even *know* the truth well enough to be able to report it? That is, asked to consider a hypothetical situation, will they be able to predict how they would react?

³People certainly can and do lie in the telling of anecdotes, too (see n. 2), but rarely to their own detriment. As humans, we most often like to present ourselves in the best light possible rather than in ways that may reveal our weaknesses and imperfections. Thus the numbers that I will give shortly in the text should be viewed as *absolutely minimal indices of occurrence*, the implications of which are frightening.

⁴Many regional onomastics journals also exist or have existed in the United States — among them *Names in South Carolina* (see Neuffer), *Indiana Names* (later the *Midwestern Journal of Language and Folklore*, and currently *Midwestern Folklore*), and the *Journal of the North Central Name Society*.

⁵Do not misunderstand: I am arguing only that the longevity of and proliferation of work within a discipline necessarily equate with the maturation of *that discipline*; the work itself may certainly be of a low quality, and may in fact detract from the discipline's reputation.

⁶My own academic interests have focused not just on names, but on dialects, slang, dirty words, and such specialized subcultural lexicons as those used by bodybuilders, fighter pilots, railroad workers, tramps, sexual sadomasochists, and patrons of singles bars — all of which, of course, the media have had a nearly insatiable desire to know more about. The result, predictably, is that the Dean of my college of arts and sciences has only limited respect for my work, and is all but certain that I obtained my Ph.D. from a mail-order service. And yes, I will gladly concede that I am one of the victims enumerated in the earlier list of evidence: In December 1993, I was informed by the Dean that I would not be promoted to Full Professor; some of his comments were quoted earlier.

⁷Apparently Brigham Young University comes the closest; there undergraduates can earn a degree in genealogy.

⁸It would be good for example to see a volume that would contain essays with titles such as "Onomastic Contributions to Sociology," "Onomastic Contributions to Folklore," "Onomastic Contributions to Linguistics," "Onomastic Contributions to Law," "Onomastic Contributions to Medicine," and the like. I would appreciate hearing from interested potential contributors.

⁹Linguistics has fought an uphill battle, just as onomastics is now doing. Even after the creation of the American Philological Association (1869), the Modern

Language Association (1883), and the American Dialect Society (1889), linguistics was frequently considered a second-rate discipline. Following the creation of the National Council of Teachers of English (1911), however, and its commissioning between 1931 and 1940 of three studies in language usage (see Finegan, 91-105), the link between linguistics and education was made, and the future of linguistics was secure. The recent spate of research done on various aspects of literacy has further augmented the position of linguistics in the academic community, just as it has highlighted the necessity for competent scholars in rhetoric and composition (which, 20 years ago, also too frequently suffered from intellectual snobbery). Folklore has long waged a similar war — though not as successfully; folklorists merely collect things, and of what intellectual importance is that? — and it is interesting to watch the new (and highly interdisciplinary) field of Cultural Studies attempt to find its place in academia as well.

¹⁰In the early 1980s, while still a graduate student at Indiana University, I had the good fortune to take a seminar from the folklorist W. Edson Richmond. At the beginning of the course, he gave us an annotated bibliography that listed, among its other entries, *Names*, with the following summary: “By no means the equal of many of the European journals devoted to onomastics, *Names* is nevertheless useful. It should be consulted for all manner of information dealing with names.”

¹¹I will gladly admit that some of the essays I have written over the past decade have been substantive clunkers, and I am grateful to one or another referee for telling me so. But at least those essays have always been thoroughly researched, methodologically sound, and mechanically correct, and none was sent out with stray pencil marks or food stains.

¹²I am not the first to ask the kinds of questions that appear in the previous paragraphs, and I do not mean to echo Markey’s comment that there is a “low price of admission to the arena of onomastic inquiry” (131). Neither do I mean to imply “a general absence of rigor, training, or standards” among onomasticians (Nicolaisen, “What Crisis?,” 19). I simply am encouraging all of us to avail ourselves of established methods and procedures so that our standards need never be open to question. (Cf. the remarks of Stewart, “State of the Society,” 59, who opined that *Names* needed “a continuing flow of good, *and better*, articles” [my emphasis]).

¹³An interesting aside: Some of the people I have asked to present papers have not been members of the ANS, and have expressed some reluctance in participating because of their perception of how academia views onomastics.

¹⁴The ANS, does not, of course — in the Midwest or elsewhere — have all the members it needs; far from it. What Stewart (“State of the Society,” 59, 60) noted is still true: the ANS needs to be recruiting new members constantly, and reminding existing members of their obligations to the Society.

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