

Book Notice

Ohio Place Names. By Larry L. Miller. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. Pp. ix-xiii, 3-286. Price not given.

Miller's book is welcome because it is one of the few treatments of Ohio placenames. However, it is disappointing since it is neither a scholarly book nor is it successful as a popularization of onomastic research.

Miller, who is identified as "an advertising copywriter," does not claim to be an onomastics scholar; rather, he refers to himself as a "compiler," whose "main accomplishment is centralizing between two covers data that were widely scattered" (xi). He apparently put a great deal of effort into compiling this book, writing to newspapers throughout the state, reading the county histories and corresponding with an astonishing number of societies and individuals. (More than 200 are acknowledged explicitly.) But there is no formal bibliography and practically no references within entries. Thus the work falls prey to an unusually large number of questionable, fanciful or just plain silly interpretations of placename origins. Miller has given his correspondents license (and perhaps encouragement) to engage in onomastic diletantism of the most destructive sort, which trivializes solid onomastic research and publication. The entries abound with statements such as "It is said...", "Another source says...", "It is thought...", "It is believed..." One or another of these stories may be true, but as they are presented, they are little more than the thin air of fancy.

The folklore of naming is, of course, a valuable source of information and deserves to be considered seriously. And I have no complaint (and indeed welcome) Miller's inclusion of these and other anecdotal materials. As Miller says, "wherever interesting stories regarding the naming process existed and could be located, a capsule account has been included" (x). What I object to is lending these speculations the weight of authority and "let[ting] the reader make the judgment as to how much credence to place in them" (x). Miller is aware of this problem, of course, but it is often difficult to separate the likely fact from the probable fancy. For this reason especially, the book is as misleading as it is useful.

Edward Callary