Marking Time—Marking Space

W.F.H. Nicolaisen
University of Aberdeen, Scotland

At a time when we witness the transition from one millennium to another, it is inevitable that our awareness of things temporal should be heightened. Here I respond to this special awareness by exploring some of the ways in which we arbitrarily interrupt the continuum of both time and space through processes such as periodization and the naming of locations, either in connection with events that happen in time and space or, in the case of spatial divisions, through communicating the notions of here, there, and somewhere else with the aid of individualizing names. Marking time and space are revealed as acts essential for human survival.

Presumably I was not the only one who, near the end of December 1999, which took us to the end of the second millennium, had become acutely, and somewhat uncomfortably, aware of that odd and elusive phenomenon which we call time. In a sense, it is, of course, contradictory to speak of the beginnings or ends of specific periods of time, be they months or millennia, for time is continuous and any attempt at dividing it into measurable chunks can therefore only be arbitrary. In order to find language appropriate to the notion of uninterruptable continuity, poets and others of an imaginative disposition have frequently compared it to a river on the banks of which we sit observing its steady flow. What is fundamentally wrong with this attractive picture is that the River Time does not flow past but right through us, and apprentice time-watchers soon discover that time does not exist without them.

Nevertheless, we do have quite a sizable vocabulary for distinctive portions of time and would find it difficult to orient ourselves in this world of ours without having available to us an agreed-upon system of such concepts and a corresponding stock of words which enables us to talk about them. Many of these concepts derive from the cycles of the sun (day, year) or the moon (month), and if one adds to these influences

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the ubiquitous structuring force of the decimal system, units like the decade, the century, and the millennium take on special significance, particularly when linked to such events in the Christian calendar as the Nativity and Easter which have had such a dominating impact on our society and culture.

It is worth remembering that it is only as a by-product of a sixth-century search for calculating the Easter tables that the date of the Nativity was also determined, though not necessarily accurately. This provided, at the time, an appropriate starting point for our era but if one uses other significant events as one's temporal points of departure, like the Creation of the World (Jewish), the Prophet's flight from Mecca to Medina (Muslim), the Olympiads (Greek), the foundation of Rome (Roman), or one of several other epoch-making, era-initiating occurrences, one would, of course, not be celebrating the beginning of the year 2000, nor the date on which it begins but some other number, greater or smaller, and some other date.

But there we were in December 1999, and for the last few months before then, our media—at least in Britain—had been telling us about all kinds of happenings and projects, grand or small, serious or silly, which were being planned to draw attention to special occasions in commemoration of something that will affect us all if we like it or not. Marking time, in either meaning of that phrase, is a common human habit whether in our personal or family lives, in the calendars of our communities, societies, or nations, or in the daily routines of our existences. From the cradle to the grave—beginning and ending again—our lives are embedded in, and punctuated by, repeated, regular attempts at marking time.

I have discussed elsewhere (Nicolaisen 2000) how in this process of punctuation and commemoration or celebration the past manages to infiltrate, invade, or, like a stealthy burglar, enter our present, and how the chronicling and annotation of past events has the habit of laying on many days in our calendars a cumulative burden of pastnesses which they find impossible to shed. In the history of Scotland, for example, February 2 is not only designated Candlemas, the celebration of the purification of the Virgin, and the first of the Scottish quarter days, but is also a day traditionally significant in forecasting the weather for the rest of the winter (like the North American Groundhog Day); in addition, it commemorates King James I's marriage to Lady Jane Beaufort in 1424, the Battle of Inverlochy in 1645, and the beginning of

Socialist Sunday Schools in Glasgow in 1896. Related to it is Fastern's E'en (Shrove Tuesday) or Bannock Nicht which is determined as the first Tuesday after the Candlemas new moon. It would probably not be difficult to add other events with more regional or personal connotations (my mother's birthday, for instance) to this list but it is only right to point out that the likelihood of there being anyone who is aware of all the significant connections day by day is very small. Nevertheless, the thought that the calendar we live by is as much a liturgist of the past as a guide to the present is quite a daunting one (see also Murison 1982).

Perhaps our appreciation of the datable chronology of a country's history, like Scotland's, is greater when it comes to our awareness of annual or periodical rather than daily references: 1266 *Treaty of Perth,* 1297 *Battle of Stirling Bridge,* 1314 *Battle of Bannockburn,* 1320 *Declaration of Arbroath,* 1411 *Founding of the first Scottish university at St. Andrews,* 1523 *Battle of Flodden,* 1603 *Union of the Crowns,* 1645 *Battle of Inverlochy,* 1746 *Battle of Culloden,* 1988 *Air Disaster over Lockerbie.* It goes without saying that it would not be difficult to construct a similar corpus of annals for the United States or Canada, or any other country, for that matter.

At that extraordinary point in the dying year, 1999, the battered century, and the crumbling millennium, our preoccupation with such themes was undoubtedly more intense, but our visions are also more imaginative and our horizons wider. Commemoration of what is past and celebration of what is to come are the keynotes of the thoughts we think and of the songs we sing, and, as is only to be expected, these are largely couched in language that mourns time passing and greets with expectation—too much so, the apprehensive cynics say—time approaching. On the stroke of midnight, December 31, the past and the future, as they are wont to do, embraced briefly in an insubstantial, unstable present, and the brand-new, trumpeted futures began to become old pasts.

Before we succumb to the overwhelming, seductive concerns of our temporal existence, however, let us remind ourselves that much of what we are doing is not only being directed towards capturing elusive time but that we have also, earthbound as we are, in new fashions but in habitual manners, been marking the inescapable presence of space and the localizations of our lives. It did not come as a surprise that—and I am mainly referring to Britain again—several of these markers that had been recently created contained the term "millennium," thus injecting

a symbolic temporal event into our spatial land- and cityscapes: there were the Millennium Dome and the Millennium Wheel in London, the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff, and millennium plans for Aberdeen Beach, to mention just a few examples. Existing space had been borrowed—one is tempted to say kidnapped—to serve as the location for millennium revelries in many Scottish cities and towns; the Millennium Island Race circled Britain in relays, and even the Panama Canal played its part in a millennial handover to its new authorities. Perhaps the most spectacular event of all was the turning of the great Pyramids and the surrounding desert into a laser-lit stage, not to mark the beginning of our own third millennium, however, but the advent of the seventh, according to the Egyptian chronology of recorded civilization.

Allusions, in the naming of places, to particular points in time are, of course, not new. Correspondents of mine have, over the years, written to me from such addresses as *Calea 13 Septembre* (Bucharest, Romania), *Prospect Oktrjabrja 14* (Moscow, Russia), and *Strasse des 17. Juni* (Berlin, Germany), all of them referring to dates with special significance in the political history of the respective countries. I also recall reading a few years ago that there are native American tribes in the northwest of the United States who give names only to locations at which events of importance to the tribal history have taken place so that their maps of place are just as much maps of time, providing cartographic underpinnings to a narrative of the tribe.

Come to think of it, the corpus of annals referred to earlier is as much an inventory of marked space as of marked time so that 1266, 1297, 1314, 1320, and so on, are paralleled by Perth, Stirling Bridge, Bannockburn, Arbroath, and other places, respectively.

Above all, however, by naming places we mark them for what they are—spatial phenomena. The division of space, the singling out of individual spatial entities is as arbitrary as the periodization of time, for one of the chief characteristics shared by both time and space is continuity and nothing like the kind of patterned order with the help of which we purposefully construct our lives. Thus, by making space manageable through naming we initiate a process which not only identifies individual features but also turns a chaotic and therefore possibly threatening wilderness into a structured and therefore potentially welcoming habitat. A landscape without names, though describable, is essentially unthinkable and beyond our control. It is names that create landscapes.

In the context of the Scottish northeast (where I live), for instance, by calling a hill (or cluster of eminences) Bennachie, a site at the mouth of a river Aberdeen, a coastal feature the Bullers o' Buchan, a farm Myreside, a castle Pitfichie, a monastery Deer, a field Auchmedden, a street Union Terrace, or a house Dunroamin', we not only distinguish these features from each other and from all those that are not Bennachie, Aberdeen, the Bullers o' Buchan, Myreside, Pitfichie, Deer, Auchmedden, Union Terrace or Dunroamin' but, perhaps more importantly, make them available for orientation and accessible for communication, defining them, setting them boundaries, providing them with proprietorial rights, giving them aesthetic dimensions, endowing them with sacred qualities, anchoring them in the maps of our minds—in fact, creating them for our dominion, our stewardship, our delight, and, in the case of cultic spaces, our worship.

There is more to it than that, however. Recently, I had occasion to note the names of farms in the area between the River Dee and the River Don, a short distance west of Aberdeen. The resulting list made revealing reading: Holmhead, Haughhead, Lochhead, Boghead, Greystones, Burnhead, Muirton, Hillhead, Whiteknowes, Broadbog, Heathcote, Neuk, Moss-side, Woodhill, Broomhill, Redstone, Denhead, Broomfold, Backhill, Whiteley, Braehead, Broadmyre, Woodside, Lochton, Blackmoss, Todholes, Northbrae, Broomfield, Woodhead, Nethermuir, Braeside, Stonyfield, and others. Even the most cursory look at elements like *bog* (in the sense of 'marsh'), *stones, muir, heath, moss, broom, myre, wood,* cannot but notice the stress on the less-than-attractive nature of the terrain, when it comes to prospective agricultural usage, coupled with the realization of how daunting a prospect and how back-breaking a task it must have been to prepare the land, often over many generations, for profitable farming. Furthermore, the frequent references to locations at the "head" or "side" of these natural features give a hint of farms and other habitations on the very edge of the unprofitable or maybe even inhospitable, of culture pushing its limits ever closer to uninviting and resentful nature. Especially the word *side* is the easily recognizable code that placenames have of indicating life at the margins, but the term *head,* too, meaning '(upper) end', may have similar connotations.

What stands out in this kind of emphatic naming is a powerful feeling of place, a strong sense of where one happens to be, and

particularly of the experience of being perpetually challenged by one's location. These names are persuasive, and sometimes bitter, statements of what it is like to lead lives on the edge. No wonder one of the farms in the vicinity is called Scrapehard. As a toponymic inventory, this list is a centuries-long cry of despair, almost comically mixed with a smidgen of that inverted pride that keeps people going when things get really bad.

Perhaps, for me at least, the most fascinating, as well as the most practical, application of named sites in the marking of space is contained in early charter records of so-called "perambulations," the walking of the boundaries of properties in order to solve disputed ownership. This process is thought to have "developed out of the practice of the granter of lands personally pointing at the boundaries of the lands granted, in the presence of witnesses" (Walker 1988, 266).

For us, such perambulations now exist only as written descriptions but these foreground real walking by real people in real terrain (and can therefore be repeated, as local historians interested in such matters have proved). About 1446, for example, the *marches of Birness* (Bischop Brynnes) in Aberdeenshire include in their detailed description a sequence of named sites such as *Girgisfurde* (Greigsford), the *kyrk of Ellon, Ardygrane* (Ardgrain), *Tuledesk* (Tillydesk), *Pittolly* (Piltochie?), the *Stokynstane,* the *Blakloch,* the *Hartuellys,* the *Karlynden,* the *burn of Cortycrum* (Cortiecram), the *hed of Ald Malynis* (Auldmaling, Mellan Burn), *Ardgrantane* (Ardganty), *Carnamuk, Tornawys, Insnochley,* the *Saintmanyis burn* (St. Monan's Burn), and the *burne of Brynnes* (Birness) (Aberdeen Register I, 247-48).

In northwest England, the grant of lands at Souterscales in Ingleton by the abbey of Furness, as described in a confirmatory charter dated 1250-1251, refers to names like *Inge[l]burg* (Inglesborough), *Spechscaflade, Morebech, Witfalles, Ellerbech, Quernside, Pikedhow, Cravenhalswath, Kyrkestaines, Rarun, Mosdalebech, Ermitehus, La[n]ghals, Seleseth* (Selside), before returning to the beginning (Higham 1998, 178).

These are only two examples out of a large array. As many of the names cited refer to minor features, a considerable number of them have not survived, due to changing habitational patterns, attitudes and usage, although the features themselves are sometimes still recognizable. The meticulous study, perhaps accompanied by a modern re-walking, of the

bounds not only opens our eyes to the characteristics of past landscapes, it also brings to life medieval attempts at marking space for proprietary and legal purposes. Many of the named features are part of the natural terrain—heads of streams, the streams themselves, prominent stones, fords, springs, mosses, etc.—and are thus unnaturally employed in the managing superimposition of artificial spatial divisions in the interest of human concerns. Rarely is the marking of space more recognizable in its intent than in such records of perambulations.

Viewed from a wider perspective, marking space through naming[1] is thus, like marking time, essentially an act which facilitates our survival in a life of manifold opportunities and challenges and of intermittent diversions and disorientations. Just as the past is as much a place as a time, so the present is the narrowest of thresholds, both dividing and connecting, and the future, too, will have pronounced spatial qualities. Under such conditions, we would be lost without the benefit of names even though most of us are much more comfortable in the world as space than in the world as time; therefore it does not take much to convince us that we are here or there, and not somewhere else, that is, that we are individually who we are not only because we have been named but also because we are, at any given time in our lives, unmistakably located, placed, sited, more often than not in a marked space confirmed by a name.

Notes

This article is based on a paper read at the 1999 annual meeting of the American Name Society in Chicago, December 27-30. Some of its aspects have also been alluded to previously in a monthly series of articles of mine in *Leopard,* a regional magazine in northeast Scotland.

1. There are, of course, also non-toponymic modes of marking space: the sad placing of flowers at the site of a killing or of a fatal traffic accident; the intriguing commemorative symbol stones of the Picts; the quaint but earnest warning "Here be Dragons" on ancient maps; the tidy-minded exclusivity of the prohibition "Keep off the Grass" in well-groomed parks; the menacing assertion of territorial domination of the wall-disfiguring slogan "Tong rules O.K." in the graffiti culture of Glasgow's gangland rivalry; the stereotypical message on a holiday postcard "X marks our hotel window. Wish you were here;" the laconic single-letter signs H for "hospital," P for "parking," or I for "information" to guide the traveler, and so on.

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