NAMES, vol. 56, No. 1, March, 2008, 19–22

Ethnic Marked Names as a Reflection of United States Isolationist Attitudes in *Uncle $crooge* Comic Books

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This paper examines the ethnic-marked names created by Carl Barks, the writer/artist of one of the most popular Walt Disney comic book series of the 1950s and 1960s. My thesis is that, in the years following World War II, many Americans had isolationist feelings, and one of the reasons for the success of the *Uncle $crooge* comic books is that they fed into these feelings on almost a subconscious level.

Carl Barks, the creator of the popular *Uncle $crooge* comic books in the decades following World War II, invented clever names that allowed him to make fun of foreigners without being so obvious that readers would feel guilty about having isolationist feelings at a time when the United States was heavily engaged in helping European and Asian countries recover from the effects of World War II. While Barks's stories were about human characteristics and behavior, they were told through the 'persona' of ducks. In 1972 he admitted to reporter Paul Ciotti that there actually was no physical connection between his characters and real ducks.

> I always felt that the Ducks were human. In fact it just seemed to me that I was drawing humans, just with duck faces. When I wrote the story of Uncle Scrooge, the first one, I called him a poor old man, but I should've called him a poor old duck. (Ault, p. 32)

The *Uncle $crooge* comic series debuted in 1947 and was a staple of Walt Disney Comics for two decades. Even today the books are still in circulation and can be bought relatively cheaply on the collector's market. At the center of the *Uncle $crooge* comic stories is Scrooge McDuck, the richest, yet fanatically stingiest, tycoon of the Duck Universe. His life revolves around keeping his existing wealth safe while accumulating additional wealth. On the comic book covers, his first name of $crooge, which Barks borrowed from the money-pinching old miser in Charles Dicken's classic *A Christmas Carol*, is spelled with a signature dollar sign. His last name of McDuck suggests that Uncle Scrooge is of Scottish origin. According to the Scottish legends which Carl Barks made up and put in the stories, the clan McDuck can be traced

 DOI 10.1179/175622708X282901

back to AD 122. In the 1947 *Christmas on Bear Mountain*, Barks made it known that even back then some of the members of the clan were rich and stingy.

Making fun of a Scotsman allowed the release of anti-foreigner feelings, but at a safe, almost unnoticed level, because in reality most Americans have ambiguous feelings towards the Scots. Scotch whisky is considered high quality alcohol, and in the 1930s the 3-M company of Minnesota created one of the most successful American brand names of the century, Scotchtape®, to help sell its invention of adhesive sprayed on strips of cellophane. The product and its name became so popular that it is commonly used as a generic term for clear, sticky tape, regardless of who manufactures it. To most consumers the name and its distinctive plaid design connote both economy and efficiency, which is why in the 1970s the company went on to name other products, Scotchgard® and Scotchlite®, proving that the old *cliché* of the Scotsman with his 'short arms and deep pockets,' is not altogether negative.

In fact, the smiles brought to a generation of readers through the *$rooge McDuck* comic books, may have helped to change feelings from negative to positive. It is ironic that today the Scottish-sounding name of McDonald's Restaurants, a fast foods corporation founded by Ray Kroc in 1955, is known throughout the world as the symbol of American entrepreneurship and globalization.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the most negative American feelings towards things Scottish related to prejudices against the mountain folk of the Ozarks. These 'hillbillies' were Scottish-Irish immigrants who came through the Cumberland Pass, bringing along their clan hostilities and their whiskey distilling abilities. Bark capitalized on these stereotypes in his 1960 *Hound of Whiskervilles*, in which the McDucks face off against the Whiskervilles. According to clan McDuck history, the Whiskervilles were members of a Scottish lowlander clan who frightened the McDucks by disguising themselves as hounds, an allusion to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Throughout the books, Barks created distinctive and memorable names for the villains who challenge Uncle Scrooge. *Flintheart Glomgold*, sometimes considered to be Scrooge's evil twin, was a rival for the title of world's richest duck. Befitting his first name, he is a miserly billionaire who is dishonest, cold-hearted, and downright murderous. *Soapy Slick* is a pig-faced lender who gave loans with 50% interest to young Scrooge McDuck and then changed the fine print to increase the interest to 100%. *Sharky* is an evil lawyer who manipulates the law to strip Uncle Scrooge of his wealth. The *McVipers* are western outlaws who try to sabotage Scrooge's ambition to succeed in the cattle business. *Swindle McSue* is the merchant who tricked Captain Hugh McDuck (Scrooge's ancestor) into a contract to deliver some horseradish to Jamaica and then sank the ship. Scrooge's recurring nemeses are *Blackheart Beagle and the Beagle Boys* — a family of gangsters who, according to Thomas Andrae, was inspired by the Mafia and created as 'kind of a spoof on Capone's gang' (p. 209). Finally, the name of the sorceress *Magica deSpell* is a play on such Italian names as *De Niro* and *De Vito*.

Among the comic books where Scrooge McDuck comes in conflict with other 'foreigners' are his 1949 *Ancient Persia* and *Lost in the Andes*, 1950 *The Mines of King Solomon*, 1953 *Tralla La*, 1954 *Seven Cities of Cibola*, 1959 *Prize of Pizzaro*, and 1965 *North of the Yukon*. In his 1965 *Monkey Business*, Barks created *King*

Jambouk, as the leader of *Siambodia*, a name probably designed to make readers think of Cambodia and of the popular 1955 musical *Anna and the King of Siam*.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the United States and the Soviet Union were involved in a mutually destructive struggle between capitalism and communism. Barks' 1957 *A Cold Bargain* reflects these tensions. At an auction, Uncle Scrooge outbids an Eastern European merchant from a country named *Brutopia* to win a much sought after and rare element named *Bombastium*. Because of the volatile nature of Bombastium, Scrooge decides to travel to the South Pole to find a safe place to store the element while scientists try to figure out its use. The Brutopian merchant flies to Antarctica in hopes of stealing it from Scrooge.

As the story title suggests, Brutopia is a nation ruled by a hostile government; the 'happy people' of this cold country do not even get to eat ice cream. Obviously, Barks intended for his American readers to think of Russia and the Soviet Union and to come away with the idea that its leaders run a brutal regime. The Brutopian merchant was modeled on an Eastern European of bulky build with thick eyebrows and an aggressive disposition. This caricature of Nikita Krushchev elevated a seemingly lighthearted story into a visual satire.

In the 1949 *Lost in the Andes*, the ducks go to Latin America in search of square eggs. Barks was satirizing the effect of the American profit-oriented culture on traditional societies. For example, when Donald Duck flashes wads of cash offering to buy any square egg they can find, the natives crank out fakes using ice trays and a cement mixer from 'Ward and Roebuck' (a play on the two biggest marketers of the time: Montgomery Ward and Sears and Roebuck). While readers may laugh at this simple tale of a treasure hunt, the deeper implication is that a global capitalist market has led to the deterioration of traditional societies by forcing the natives to abandon their local culture to produce for the more profitable tourist trade.

In the 1954 *Tralla La*, the universe's richest duck suffers from an illness in which the prescribed remedy is for him to rest in an environment purged of all money, greed, and selfishness. Thus, Uncle Scrooge comes across the peaceful utopian kingdom of Tralla La, a play on the fictional Shangri-La, a synonym for a utopian place of peace and harmony situated at the foot of the Himalayan Mountains. Tralla La seems to Scrooge to be the ideal 'virgin' land to cure his strange illness, though not for long because he upsets the balance by accidentally dropping a bottle cap on the floor.

In conclusion, many of the Uncle Scrooge comic stories with their irony, satire, and cynicism run counter to the sugary Disney image that the studio puts out to the public. This meant that Barks had to be careful. As he told an interviewer quoted in Willits *et al*.,

> I was a little afraid to write any stories that might get the publishers in trouble with the government or tread on some politician's toes. And, you know, our foreign policy is 'Always Be Nice.' Anything that gets published under the Disney name in a foreign country is accepted as part of the American foreign policy . . . So I felt I'd better not kid about it. (p. 27)

The fact is that Barks did 'kid about it,' and, more importantly, he got away with it. Comic books, that were considered disposable children's entertainment, now stand as a legitimate literary medium reflecting a picture of their times. Today's graphic

novels are being praised for many of the qualities associated with real literature including richness of characterization, language, and plot. I am proposing that Carl Barks was ahead of his time in his creation of the *Uncle $crooge* comic books. Part of their success and enduring appeal comes from Barks's ability to communicate through creative naming, which is how he cleverly and effectively injected cultural and political themes into his comic stories.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Alleen and Don Nilsen for their comments and feedback on the paper and also the American Name Society for giving me the opportunity to present parts of the work in the 2007 meeting at Anaheim, CA.

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Tralla La, 1953
Chisel McSue and the Horse Radish Treasure, 1953
Seven Cities of Cibola, 1954
The Second Richest Duck, 1956
A Cold Bargain, 1957
Prize of Pizzaro, 1959
Hound of Whiskervilles, 1960
Boat Buster, 1961
The Many Faces of Magica deSpell, 1964
The Golden Helmet, 1964
Monkey Business, *1965*
North of the Yukon, 1965
Mystery of the Ghost Town Railroad, 1965.

Notes on Contributor

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