NAMES, Vol. 62 No. 3, September 2014, 183–86

Reviews

Good Poems, American Places. Selected and introduced by GARRISON KEILLOR. Pp. xxviii + 484. New York: Penguin. 2011. ISBN: 978-0-14-312076-6

Garrison Keillor's poetry collection *Good Poems, American Places* is about as varied and eclectic a collection of poetry dealing with the themes of America as you could hope to get. Its 444 pages of poems contain everything from Emily Dickinson's room to the vastness of the Rocky Mountains. (The remaining forty pages feature short biographies of each poet and indexes of titles and authors.) The poems themselves are varied in structure; some cover the better part of two pages, while others are only a few lines. Some pay attention to rhyme and meter; most do not. The sheer number of poets whose work is included is impressive: 169 poets have their works featured here. Many of them will be unfamiliar to a reader who has not studied American poetry in depth; others, like Emerson and Whitman, could hardly be omitted from a book of poems dealing with America. Most of the poets contribute two or three works, but some lend six or seven. (Mr Keillor must be particularly fond of Maxine Kumin, as she features nine.) Mr Keillor himself contributes a nine-page introduction, which, after looking at a cover that seems to evoke the 1950s, struck me as unabashedly liberal in its social viewpoints. I was subsequently informed that readers more familiar with his *Prairie Home Companion* radio show would not be nearly as surprised at this as I was.

Mr Keillor's political viewpoints do not extend to all the poems he chooses, however. (If anything, it would have determined which poems were left out of the anthology.) The poems he includes are from and about people of all walks of life from every corner of the country. Variety is celebrated, both in the landscape and in the people that inhabit it and write about it. As might be surmised from the title, the focus of the collection is on places. Not on specific states or cities, but on more general themes, such as "the road," "the city," and "out West." Occasionally the poems are grouped according to a feeling, such as "rapture." Very few of the categories have much, if anything, to do with names. To find names at all, we must delve into the poems themselves.

As is the case with most collections of poetry, some poems will speak to you and some will seem like a waste of ink and paper. This is by design. Individual readers' enjoyment varies greatly from poem to poem, and, by including a great variety, the compiler can be fairly certain that something in the collection will speak to every reader. If a poem is not reaching you, you can turn the page and find something completely different.

What will be most interesting to readers of *Names* is the way that proper names are used within the poems. Unlike in regular conversation, where "Mary says hi" means a great deal because of the conversants' shared understanding and knowledge of Mary, in these poems, personal names carry almost no information at all. *Steve* seems just a blank a slate as *Larry*, *Eric*, or *Joe*. With so little space for characterization in poems, personal names carry almost as little information as "the man" or "the woman." Details, if any, must be inferred from the often very limited context given by the lines surrounding the name. At most, a name communicates an ethnic heritage, but, just because someone is called *José*, it does not necessarily follow that he speaks Spanish. In fact, the person you usually get to know best in a poem is most often named "I."

The names that carry the most communicative weight in these poems are not personal names but placenames. *New York City* carries with it all the buildings, parks, subways, and yellow

 DOI 10.1179/0027773814Z.00000000088

cabs of this country's greatest metropolis — and every one of the eight and a half million people living there. *Wyoming* is not just a square on a map, but the name itself carries with it vistas of wide, open skies, untouched grassland, and snowy mountains. The name of a state or city carries with it *everything in* that state or city, and all of those features and pieces of knowledge that the reader and the poet share about, say, Oklahoma or Nevada or Vermont become part of the poem. *California* means "redwoods," "beaches," "congested L.A. highways," "the Golden Gate Bridge," and "oranges" all at the same time — and it includes a thousand other meanings alongside them. Even *Roswell* has its connotations, and these are not lost on the poet or the reader. If poetry is about achieving the perfect economy of words, then those poets who have discovered how to use place names well have a very effective tool to use in their works.

My favorite poems in this collection are the ones that give readers a sense of the place that has just been named. For instance, in Harvey Shapiro's "New York Notes" (and notice how much information you already have floating around in your head just from the title), the first stanza relates with the perfect wry humor of every New Yorker how the poet should have walked to avoid a traffic jam. Without missing a beat, the cabbie replies, "I should have been a doctor." A similarly witty scene unfolds at Atlantic Avenue Station in the second stanza, after which Shapiro observes, "I am home among my people."

Not every poem achieves this synergy between the name and description of a place, but then, not every poem is trying to. Some are illustrating hope in the face of tragedy. Some are wistful recollections of moments long past. Some are blazing with hope, while the wisdom of others is tempered with experience. All of them have been selected by Mr Keillor to illustrate a particular facet of life in America. And once you have read this book, the name *America* will include within it all of these poems.

The title says it all, though "good" is in the eye of the beholder.

Independent Scholar Daniel Friend

Wordsmiths and Warriors: The English-Language Tourist's Guide to Great Britain. By David and Hilary Crystal. Pp. 424. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 2013. $34.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-966812-0

David and Hilary Crystal spent a year of their lives traveling by car, ferry, and foot across thousands of miles of Great Britain's shores, isles, inlands, rivers, bays, mountains, villages, and cities on a linguistic pilgrimage to visit the sites, ancient to modern, most endemic to the birth and ongoing development of the English language. Then they compiled a book recounting their explorations of these places. The Crystals' tour encompasses a wide swath of Great Britain, from southeast Kent to the Scottish lowlands and from western Wales to the East Anglian coastal region. En route, they provide interesting facts about the origins of numerous words and names with connections to the topology, history, and peoples of Britain. Their quite readable and equally browsable *Wordsmiths and Warriors: The English-Language Tourist's Guide to Great Britain* was published by Oxford University Press in 2013. Their previous collaboration was *Words on Words: Quotations on Language and Languages* published in 2000.

The Crystals arrange and recount their travels both spatially and chronologically in a book comprised of fifty-seven short, sequential chapters. Included in the book's back matter are a Regional Grouping, an Index of Places, and an Index of Names. Their instructive guide offers simultaneously a geographic (by region) and an historic (by era) view of advancements and changes in the English language, beginning at the beginnings and continuing through the time of the book's publication. Color photographs taken by Hilary Crystal help the reader to visualize the stories David Crystal — a noted scholar on language — recounts about the people, places, and events that shaped and continue to shape the English language. Clear and practical

directions appear at the ends of chapters to allow readers to retrace the Crystals' journeys either as head trips or in their own travels across Great Britain. Some destinations associated with iconic British wordsmiths will be familiar to readers, such as ventures to Canterbury, the destination for Geoffrey Chaucer's religious pilgrims, and to the site of the original Globe Theatre in London, a structure once located just south of the Thames that housed productions by William Shakespeare during the Elizabethan Era. Other sites and language changers may be less familiar, including Chichester, where William Bullokar wrote and published the first English grammar in 1586, and Black Notley, home to John Ray, a noted seventeenth-century botanist and collector of English proverbs.

As the title of this book announces, wordsmiths and warriors alike impacted the development of the English language. Thus Scottish poet Robert Burns and Irish novelist James Joyce share linguistic eminence with Anglo-Saxon warrior Ealdorman Byrhtnoth, defender against Viking hordes, and church reformer John Wycliffe, Bible translator. Many of the wordsmiths and warriors mentioned in the Crystals' travelogue left their imprint on the British Isles either as the significantly named (their names appear in the chronicles of history) or as significant namers (they named places or places were named after them). Some wordsmiths were poets like Robert Burns who infused the English language with his Scotts dialect in phrases like *cutty sark*, a short skirt, now better known as a brand of Scotch whiskey. Other wordsmiths were compilers of glossaries and dictionaries and encyclopedias and chronicles.

There is sufficient focus on names and naming practices to make this volume of interest to both professional and amateur onomasticians. As David Crystal observes in his Introduction, even "a curious name or spelling" can elicit the question "What happened here?" Of his own onomastic curiosity, Crystal observes, "I have often found myself in a place where the name rings a linguistic bell. Sometimes the bell rings loud and clear: so-and-so was born here, or died here, or lived here, or worked here. Sometimes it is muffled" (2013: 1). Not only does Crystal broadcast the "loud and clear," but he brings clarity to the "muffled" in his role as tour guide of the geographic history of the English language. Additionally, onomasticians will be pleased to discover the prominent role of place names and personal names in advancing and expanding the English language.

The Crystals' tour of the English language begins with the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons at a place called *Heopwinesfleot*, translated into modern English as the "the stream where hips grow" (2013: 5), now called Pegwell Bay. Here warriors Hengist and Horsa, purportedly the first Anglo-Saxon adventurers and thus accidental wordsmiths, are presumed to have landed ca. 449. After traversing Great Britain up and down and side to side, the Crystals' tour ends at University College, London, where surveys of English language usage in the twenty-first century are conducted by contemporary scholars, not for the purpose of prescribing how English-language speakers should speak but to record how the British citizenry actually use their language, the origins of which trace back to Hengist and Horsa in or around Pegwell Bay in the fifth century.

The second stop on the Crystals' linguistic fieldtrip is Caistor St Edmund, site of the earliest known English word. Carved into a deer bone housed within a fragment of an urn unearthed by a furrowing rabbit in a field, the relic was discovered by a farmer in 1932. Unfortunately, the rabbit did not receive credit for its significant archeological find. English-language scholars determined the runic letters spelled the name *Raihan* but were uncertain as to whether the name referred to the rune-cutter or to the roe. Appropriately, the Crystals' next venture is to Undley Common in Suffolk, site of the first recorded English sentence found engraved upon an ancient piece of metal. Written in the Anglo-Frisian alphabet, the sentence's most probable translation is "this howling she-wolf is a reward to my kinsman" (2013: 23). The word *Undley* of Undley Common is itself unusual. David Crystal points out that *Undela* is an Anglo-Saxon name, but *un-dael* is Old English for 'undivided' (2013: 24); thus the place name could be interpreted as either 'Undela's Island' or 'Undivided Island'. More such interesting facts, linguistic curiosities, and unusual names abound in this volume.

Readers inclined to privilege those chapters devoted to sites associated with well-known language innovators like Geoffrey Chaucer (Talbot Yard, London), William Caxton (Tothill Street, London), William Shakespeare (Stratford-upon-Avon), King James (Hampton Court Palace), and Samuel Johnson (Lichfield, Staffordshire) would be remiss to read them at the exclusion of chapters on less acknowledged individuals and their localities. As the Crystals' extensive travels validate, numerous wordsmiths and warriors contributed to the style and substance of the English language. One example is the fifteenth-century prioress, Juliana Berners (St Albans), associated with *The Book of St Albans*, a miscellany of writings about heraldry and folklore. Scholars credit Berners with expanding the English language through her lists of collective nouns. Along with the expected *flock of sheep* and *herd of cows* are others that are "really quite naughty: *a damning of jurors*, *a prudence of vicars*, *a superfluity of nuns*, and *a nonpatience of wives*" (2013: 164).

Certainly, readers may comfortably armchair travel through the history of the English language and enjoy vicariously the places and personages the Crystals name, but browsing through *Wordsmiths and Warriors* may compel readers to get out of their armchairs and onto the internet in search of passage to Great Britain. One of the strengths of the Crystals' book is that it offers specific information for locating all fifty-seven sites should readers choose to follow in their footsteps and begin their own expeditions into significant places in the development of the English language.

Louisiana Tech University Dorothy Dodge Robbins