

Necrology: W. F. H. (Bill) Nicolaisen (1927–2016)

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The study of names and the study of folklore lost a leading scholar on February 15, 2016. Wilhelm Fritz Hermann (Bill) Nicolaisen published over 700 journal articles, essays, and reviews in these two fields and was highly regarded as a major contributor to the scholarship in each of the disciplines for over half a century. Nicolaisen's first publications appeared in the 1950s following the award of his Doktor Philosophie degree, *magna cum laude*, in English, Comparative Linguistics, and German from Universität Tübingen. His clear and incisive scholarly contributions continued until just a few years ago when he published his last onomastic offering.

In an article published in this journal in September 1999, which he entitled “An Onomastic Autobiography, or, in the Beginning Was the Name,” Bill chronicled his long relationship with names and naming:

On Monday, June 13, 1927, at a quarter to two in the afternoon, Frau Paula Elisabeth Nicolaisen, herself twenty-three years old and only in the seventh month of her first pregnancy, gave birth to a son, weighing just over five pounds, to whom she and her husband, Andreas Wilhelm Albert Nicolaisen, gave the three names Wilhelm Fritz Hermann. (Nicolaisen, 1999: 179)

His narrative outlines the history of his “triad of names” as anchoring him firmly in his family history and “even in a little bit of German history,” making him the onomastic descendant of his “closest male ancestors:” his father and his two grandfathers. His father, Andreas Wilhelm Albert, bestowed on him the middle of his three forenames, “the other two of which were never used.” He was also his “two grandfather’s grandson, not just genetically, but onomastically,” having also received the names of his paternal grandfather, Fritz Nicolaisen, and his maternal grandfather, Hermann Kähler, as well. He added that: “One does not have to be a name scholar to recognize that a tripartite combination like *Wilhelm Fritz Hermann* was a little old-fashioned even in 1927” (Nicolaisen, 1999: 180). Bill completed his onomastic autobiography with:

I have often wondered if I have any identity at all since I am so many names to so many people. Let me try to list these allonyms: *Bill, Bill Nicolaisen, Uncle Bill, Willi, der kleine Willi, Onkel Willi, Willi Nicolaisen, Wilhelm, Wilhelm Nicolaisen, W. F. H. Nicolaisen, Nicolaisen, Nico, Nicola, Guardian, Dr Nicolaisen, Willie Nick, Professor Nicolaisen, Professor, Dad, Daddy, Opa*, and, of course, good old birth-certificate *Wilhelm Fritz Hermann Nicolaisen*. What a bewildering array! And how important the socioonomastic aspects are of this list, like register and usage! I respond to all these names in their appropriate situations, and each



FIGURE 1 Professor Nicolaisen conducting onomastic fieldwork (in the late 1950s).

one of them presents or reflects a different side of me to the world, and to myself, I presume.
(Nicolaisen, 1999: 185)

Professor Nicolaisen's extensive association with the significance of names was also expressed through a long and celebrated career in academia, which also began early in his life. His father was a professor of agriculture, his mother a university librarian. His earliest studies were in Die Volksschulen in der Freimfelder and he later continued his studies at the University of Kiel; King's College, Newcastle upon Tyne; Universität Tübingen; and the University of Glasgow. His dissertation was entitled "Die morphologisch und semasiologische Struktur der Gewässernamen der britischen Inseln" and was followed by "Studies in Scottish Hydronymy." (Figure 1) His seminal book *Scottish*

Place-Names: Their Study and Significance, which he published in 1976 and revised in 2001, has been called the only comprehensive and systematic study of Scottish place-names. The book was awarded the prestigious Chicago Folklore Prize for outstanding contribution to folklore studies, demonstrating the depth of his expertise in both of his chosen areas of scholarship.

Professor Nicolaisen exhibited his generous nature when confronted with the superficial in name studies. The listings of interesting or unusual names and etymologies reflecting the “meaning” of a name were acceptable, but hardly sufficient. In his earliest offering to the readers of this journal he posited “at least three levels of meanings” in the process of the semantic change involved “when words become names by association:”

- a) the lexical level, i.e. the dictionary meaning of the word or words comprising the name;
- b) the associative level, i.e. the reason or reasons why the particular lexical (or onomastic) items were used in the naming process — incidentally, this is also the level on which connotative names operate;
- c) the onomastic level, i.e. the meaning of a denotative name as a name or its application based on lexical and associative semantic elements, but usually no longer dependent on them. (Nicolaisen, 1974: 104)

He frequently reminded scholars that “as part of the final stages of this process the end-product, the name, frequently loses its lexical meaning” and becomes semantically opaque, “operating on the onomastic level alone” (Nicolaisen, 1974: 104). His meticulous approach is evident throughout his considerable scholarly work and exemplifies his impressive and enduring contributions to the study of toponyms. He states:

In fact, it is probable that the multilayered sequence of names on a contemporary map results from periods of bilingualism embedded in socio-cultural contact. Otherwise, each new dominant language would, in isolation, have had to create from scratch a new onomastic system, naming each geographical feature afresh, whether natural or man-made, from its own lexical resources.

It is especially significant that names can have onomastical meaning even when they have ceased to have any lexical meaning. Instant lexical meaninglessness, as well as instant morphological opacity, usually results from onomastic transfer, thus creating the possibility for etymological re-interpretation and morphological re-analysis. This is a process which may be repeated several times, so that, from the second linguistic contact situation on, the transferred name is semantically and morphologically opaque even in the donor language. (Nicolaisen, 1975: 167)

I was a graduate student of Professor Nicolaisen’s, having first met him when I walked into his course on the *History of the English Language* over 45 years ago. From that first day he captivated me with his remarkable knowledge of the language that I had to that point, more or less, taken for granted. From that day forward he became an increasingly important part of my life. He was a kind, considerate, thoughtful friend and mentor. He mourned with me when my father died, he listened sympathetically when I had not met an agreed-upon deadline, and he guided me with a caring, though firm, hand through the completion and defense of my dissertation. In a 1999 *festschrift* of *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* that I prepared in his honor, there were so many scholars who wanted to

celebrate his huge impact on name studies that I was forced to turn away papers. In that *estschrift* I called him a *teacher, scholar, mentor, and friend*. He served in these capacities to many people and he inspired generations of onomastic and folklore scholars.

During his lifelong love affair with knowledge, Bill taught in Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, and the US. He also served as head of the Scottish Place-Name Survey at the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh. In 1966, Nicolaisen joined Ohio State University as a visiting professor of English and Folklore. In 1969 he was hired as an Associate Professor by the English Department at Binghamton University (State University of New York, SUNY), where he taught until his retirement at 65 in 1992. During his tenure at Binghamton he advanced to SUNY's highest honor, Distinguished Professor. As one of the faculty at Binghamton who was held in the greatest regard, Bill was often called upon to use his considerable leadership and organizational skills to guide important projects. Perhaps most notably to the university, Bill guided the more than year-long project to establish a school of engineering. He was often recognized for his ability to lead and inspire. He served as President of several professional organizations: our own American Name Society (1977); the New York Folklore Society (1983); the Middle Atlantic Folklife Association (1987–1989); the Society for Names Studies in Britain and Ireland (1993–1996); the International Council of Onomastic Sciences (1993–1996); the Scottish Medievalists (1994–1997); and the Folklore Society (1999–2002). Professor Nicolaisen also served as Vice President of the Canadian Society for the Study of Names (1982–1985) and the International Society for Folk-Narrative Research (1979–1984). His many accomplishments were also recognized in his having been named an Honorary Vice President of the New York Folklore Society and an Honorary President of the Scottish Place-Name Society.

Upon leaving Binghamton, Bill retired to his beloved Aberdeen, Scotland, where he spent most of the rest of his life and where, in 2006, he was awarded a doctoral degree *honoris causa* by the University of Aberdeen. Bill is survived by his wife of almost 60 years, May (Marshall); his four daughters, Fiona, Kirsten, Moira, and Birgit; nine grandchildren; and countless students and colleagues who loved him as well. His works continue to live in the pages of this journal, and in the many citations his scholarship continues to receive. His legacy continues in the hearts of his family, his colleagues, and his students. Some of the many contributions of W. F. H. Nicolaisen to scholarship include the following:

- 1961. "Field-Work in Place-Name Research." *Studia Hibernica* 1: 74–88.
- 1970a. (with M. Gelling and M. Richards). *The Names of Towns and Cities in Britain*. London: B. T. Batsford.
- 1970b. "Gaelic Place-Names in Southern Scotland." *Studia Celtica* 5: 15–35.
- 1972. "Onomastics — An Independent Discipline?" *Indiana Names* 3: 33–47.
- 1973a. "Folklore and Geography: Towards an Atlas of American Folk Culture." *New York Folklore Quarterly* 29: 3–20.
- 1973b. "Place-Names in Traditional Ballads." *Folklore* 84: 299–312.
- 1974. "Names as Verbal Icons." *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 22: 104–110.
- 1975. "Place Names in Bilingual Communities." *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 23: 167–174.
- 1976a. *Scottish Place-Names: Their Study and Significance*. London: B. T. Batsford.
- 1976b. "Folk and Habitat." *Studia Fennica* 20: 324–330.

- 1978a. "Are There Connotative Names?" *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 26: 40-47.
- 1978b. "The Folk and the Region." *New York Folklore* 2: 143-149.
- 1978c. "How Incremental is Incremental Repetition?" In *Ballads and Ballad Research*. Ed. Patricia Congroy, 122-133. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
1979. "Field-Collecting in Onomastics." *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 27: 162-178.
- 1980a. "Variant, Dialect and Region: An Exploration in the Geography of Tradition." *New York Folklore* 6: 137-149.
- 1980b. "What is Your Name? The Question of Identity in Some of the Waverley Novels." *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 28: 255-266.
1983. "Folklore and ... What?" *New York Folklore* 9: 89-98.
- 1984a. "Names and Narratives." *Journal of American Folklore* 97: 259-272.
- 1984b. "What Crisis in Onomastics?" *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 32: 14-25.
- 1984c. "Maps of Space — Maps of Time." *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 32: 358-366.
1985. "Burnside of Duntrune: An Essay in Praise of Ordinairiness." *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 33: 29-38.
1987. "The Linguistic Structure of Legends." In *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend*, Vol. II. Ed. G. Bennett, P. Smith, and J. D. A. Widdowson. 61-67. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
1988. "The Toponymy of Remembered Childhood." *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 36: 133-142.
1989. "Kurt Ranke and Einfache Formen." *Folklore* 100: 113-119.
- 1990a. "Why Tell Stories?" *Fabula* 13: 5-10.
- 1990b. "Placenames and Politics." *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 38: 193-208.
- 1990c. "Maps of Fiction: The Cartography of the Landscape of the Mind." *Onomastica Canadiana* 72: 57-68.
- 1991a. "Name that Past: Placenames in Autobiographical Writings." *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 39: 239-248.
- 1991b. "The Past as Place: Names, Stories, and the Remembered Self." *Folklore* 102: 3-15.
1992. "Humour in Traditional Ballads." *Folklore* 103: 27-39.
1992. "Contemporary Legends in der englischsprachigen Presse: Moderne Sagen als Zeitungsnachricht." In *Erzählkulturen im medienwandel*. Ed. Christoph Schmitt. 71-91. Athens, GA, Waxmann.
1993. "Scottish Place Names as Evidence for Language Change." *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 41: 306-313.
- 1994a. "The Teller and the Tale: Storytelling on Beech Mountain." In *Jack in Two Worlds*. Ed. W. McCarthy. 123-149. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- 1994b. "The Proverbial Scot." *Proverbium* 11: 197-206.
1999. "An Onomastic Autobiography, or, In the Beginning Was the Name." *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 47: 179-190.
2000. "Marking Time — Marking Space." *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 48: 275-282.
2003. "Presidential Preferences." *Folklore* 114: 1-12.

2005. “Manly Characters in Contemporary Legends.” In *Manly Traditions*. Ed. Simon J. Bronner. 247–260. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
2008. “Time and Place.” In *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*. Ed. Donald Haase. 976. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
2011. *In the Beginning was the Name*. Edinburgh, UK, Scottish Place Name Society.
2013. *The Ballad and the Folklorist* (ed. with James Moreira). St. John’s, New Foundland and Labrador, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

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