

In Memoriam: Alan Rayburn (1932–2019)

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In 2001, NAMES featured an article by longtime ANS member Alan Rayburn. In it, he reflects upon his life and career. The scholar's personal account begins with a childhood memory. As a young boy, his passion for names was first awakened by the names *Ceylon* and *Kandy*. It was a fascination that would last a lifetime. As a young graduate student of Geography, he stumbled upon a card catalog containing a long list of Kentucky place names. According to him, it was this discovery that led to his decision to “pursue the study of place names, if not for a career, at least as an avocation” (Rayburn 2001, 283).

In 1957, at the age of 25, his life took another fortuitous turn. He was offered a position in the Geographical Branch of the Federal Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, where he was to work on an ambitious project: the creation of a new atlas for Canada. A short time later, Alan's life took yet another unexpected positive turn, when he met a young Irishwoman, a Miss Mary Teresa Fox. In 1959, the two exchanged their wedding vows in County Armagh of Northern Ireland. Their marriage would last nearly six decades and would be blessed with three sons: Kevin, Sean, and Garth. Just as Alan's life as a new husband and father flourished, so too did his career.

In 1967, he was named Canada's first official toponymic researcher. He soon after became one of the first members of the Ontario Geographic Names Board as well as the Toponymic Division of the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographic Names, which later became the Names Board of Canada. Within these positions, Alan made significant and long-lasting contributions to standardizing and recording place names in Canada. Alongside this impressive governmental service, Alan also contributed significantly to establishing scholarly onomastic research in North America. From 1974 to 1979, he served as the Secretary-Treasurer of the Canadian Society for the Study of Names (CSSN). After this term ended, he was elected CSSN President and served in this capacity until 1983.

The passionate toponymist's contributions were also felt south of the border. His impressive knowledge of and appreciation for North American place names soon earned him a space on the Executive Council of the American Name Society. It did not take long before he moved from voting Board member to ANS Vice President (1982 to 1984). As Ashley (2002) observed, a year after this

term ended, Alan became one of the first Canadian scholars who, like Sheila Embleton (1997-1998) and Andre Lapierre (1991) after him, served as President for both the ANS and the CSSN. This double presidency clearly reflects the startling breadth of Alan's scholarship.

Throughout his career, he remained a pioneer in cross-cultural toponymy. This transnational approach can be seen in several of his most seminal publications for NAMES. Two excellent examples include his 1982 article "American Influences on Canadian Toponymy" and his 1999 investigation "The Transfer of Scottish Placenames to Canada" (Rayburn 1982, 1999). Although published over a decade ago, these works, like many of his writings, continue to find readers today. Alan's record of scholarship was not only distinguished by the quality of his work but also by the sheer quantity. Over more than a half a century of research, he amassed a truly impressive publication record, publishing over 100 articles and more than 8 books during his career. Four of his most popular reference books were *Naming Canada: Stories about Place Names from Canadian Geographic* (1994) University of Toronto Press [ISBN: 0802069908]; *Place Names of Ontario* (1997) University of Toronto Press [ISBN: 0802072070]; *Dictionary of Canadian Place Names* (1999) Oxford University Press [ISBN: 0195414705]; *Place Names of Canada* (2009) Oxford University Press [ISBN: 0195431537]. As Dr. Michael McGoff, Senior Vice Provost of New York's Binghamton University and Former ANS Treasurer, described in a recent e-interview, Alan's scholarship only partly explains how and why he ultimately rose to become an international leader in onomastics. The other secret to his success was his wining personality:

Alan Rayburn was a wonderful colleague. He was knowledgeable, thoughtful, creative, and kind. A soft-spoken man, he always listened intently and was generous with his time, especially to younger students of names. I would often sit near Alan at ANS meetings to benefit from his expertise. He was so knowledgeable about so many things. His doctorate in geography was his academic background, but Alan loved language and history and, importantly, was very appreciative and respectful of other cultures. He and I took quite a few toponymic tours together, but the most memorable one for me was a trip on a tall ship on the Chesapeake from Baltimore to Annapolis at a COGNA (Council of Geographic Names Authorities) annual meeting. We learned so much on that trip and just to be near Alan provided countless facts about geography, toponymics and history. Alan was an excellent friend, a thorough researcher and a world class scholar.¹

Michael's fond memories of this gentle scholar were by no means unusual. A remarkably similar account was related by Dr. Edward Callary. During an e-interview conducted just a few days after news of Alan's passing, the now retired Linguistics Professor of Northern Illinois University shared the following recollection:

As I recall, the first time I met Alan Rayburn was at an ANS meeting in Chicago; it must have been 1985 when Alan made his presidential address on the 49th parallel. With great trepidation, I introduced myself and to my everlasting good fortune this

led to a decades long professional relationship that has substantially influenced my career.²

Of course, what neither men knew at the time was the fact that that meeting would become a remarkable moment in ANS history. It was during that encounter that the former ANS President met, welcomed, and inspired a young man who would later also go on to become ANS President himself (1990). As the comments provided below illustrate, Professor Callary was not the only future ANS leader who would take inspiration from Alan's natural warmth and amiability. Indeed, the scene described by the then decidedly young and painfully shy Edward Callary was one that would be repeated over and over again. As the memories below demonstrate, Alan influenced many young scholars who would later go on to make their own impressive mark upon onomastics and the ANS.

Dr. Grant Smith, Professor of English at Eastern Washington University in Washington state, and Former ANS President (1999-2000): Alan was one of the most likable people I've ever met. [...] I have a cherished memory of his meeting me at the Montreal airport and driving me up to Quebec for my first CSSN meeting in May of 1989. We talked a lot, and I learned much about Canada just by riding in the car with him. It was great intellectual fun and helped to cement my interest in toponymy.³

Dr. Christine DeVine, President of Ursuline College in Ohio, NAMES Book Review Editor, and Former ANS President (2003-2004): He was an impressive scholar and a most gracious colleague. When I was an inexperienced fledgling member of ANS in the late 1990s, he made a point of welcoming me to the society and sharing his wide-ranging insights with me. It was because of him and colleagues like him that I became active as a member.⁴

Dr. Don and Alleen Nilsen, Co-Founders of the International Society for Humor Studies, and Former ANS Presidents (2007-2008): Alan Rayburn was a major influence on the two of us between 2007 and 2011 when we were serving as members of the American Name Society Executive Council and Co-Presidents of ANS. During this time, we had many insightful interactions with Alan [...] Alan was one of our favorite colleagues in the ANS—always pleasant, always entertaining, and always fun to be around. We'll miss him.⁵

Importantly, as the above ANS leaders remind, the reason behind Alan's incredible impact was not only his impressive scholarship. It was his kindness, his sincerity, his generosity of spirit that served as a powerful inspiration. Therein lies one of the most important lessons of Alan Rayburn. Like the great scholar and civil rights activist Maya Angelou summarized, at the end of the day, the secret to living well is not so much making a living but having a life (Quote *Ambition n.d.*). And Alan Rayburn had a remarkably good life, one that was as rewarding as it was giving.

At the age of 86, the life of this gentle scholar came to an end. On September 19, 2019, Alan Rayburn died peacefully in his sleep. On the 26th of September

2019, a funeral mass was celebrated in his honor at St. Martin de Porres RC Church. Alan was laid to rest in St. Patrick's cemetery in Ontario, Canada. He was survived by his sons, a grandson, and his beloved wife of more than sixty years. The American Name Society expresses its profound gratitude to Alan Rayburn. May the legacy of his scholarship, service, and kindness continue to educate and inspire generations of scholars for many more generations to come.

Notes

1. Michael McGoff, email message to author, September 24, 2019.
2. Edward Callary, email message to author, September 24, 2019.
3. Grant Smith, email message to author, September 24, 2019.
4. Christine DeVinne, email message to author, September 23, 2019.
5. Don Nilsen and Alleen Nilsen, email message to author, September 24, 2019.

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