



Book Review

A History of English Placenames and Where They Came From. BY JOHN MOSS. Barnslet, United Kingdom: Pen and Sword. 2020. Pp. xix + 388. \$49.95 (Hardback). ISBN 13: 978-1526722843.

Having examined British surnames and their origins in his previous *Great British Family Names and Their History* (2019), Moss continues his output of publicly accessible books combining onomastics and micro-historical case studies with *A History of English Placenames and Where They Came From*. Its aims—to provide an introduction to the diverse history of place names in Britain, to collect the most interesting examples, and to explore their etymological origins within an accessible format—are admirable.

After a brief foreword outlining Moss' personal engagement with the topic and his approach to data collection, the book begins with two useful reference resources. The first, a glossary familiarizing the reader with the complex world of early medieval landholding terminology, is a necessity in understanding the origins of many British place names. Ever the bane of the undergraduate, this terminology is famously complex; Moss' glossary has use far beyond place name studies and is a valuable tool for all those interested in early medieval history. The second, an alphabetized list of place name elements grouped by language, is accompanied by a set of proposed translations of their meanings. Moss notes that this is far from exhaustive but succinctly familiarizes the audience with the most common examples found throughout England.

Moss then progresses to a history of migration into England in Antiquity and the early medieval period; familiarizing his audience with the linguistic evolution of the country, and its impact on onomastics, is a necessity. This chapter is undoubtedly his weakest. It is dotted with historical inaccuracies; King Ethelred (elsewhere in this book referred to as Aethelred) did not “ascend the English throne in April 1016” (11); he did so in 978 and again in 1014 (Keynes 2009). The Vikings first arrived in England (if the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is to be believed) in 787 or perhaps 789 (Whitelock 1961, 35), not in 793 with the famous raid on Lindisfarne (10). Cnut ascended the English throne in 1016 (Lawson 2013), not in 1015 (11). The chapter, and indeed the book as a whole, hints consistently towards an outdated historiography; references to the occupants of pre-

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Conquest England as “Saxon” and references to the language of Old English as “Anglo-Saxon” are both key examples. While Moss’ book is not specifically a work of strict history, and he might be forgiven these inaccuracies, a precise historical background is still necessary to familiarize his audience with the historical and linguistic contexts in which the majority of English place names are spawned.

Moss’ book then progresses through the geography of England, moving through the major areas of the country as self-contained chapters: the North-East, the North-West, the West Midlands, the East Midlands, East Anglia, the Home Counties, Greater London, the South-East, the South-West, and finally the isles of Man, Wight, Scilly, and the Channel Islands. This comprises the great bulk of the book; some 2,000 place names are examined throughout the work, selected primarily on the grounds of personal interest. Each name is accompanied by a brief outline of the history of the settlement, alongside an exploration of the origins and etymology of its name. Each entry is brief, of necessity, and the book is best seen not as an in-depth exploration of any specific place name. Instead, the reader benefits from the sheer number of place names compiled in one location and is capable of moving around the English countryside and examining the variation of naming practices across space. This is primarily a history of British place-naming, in a holistic sense, rather than of individual place names.

The major criticism of *A History of English Placenames* is similar to that of his last book, *Great British Family Names and Their History* (2019), the assumption of simplicity and universal agreement in providing translations (Alphey 2022). Moss certainly goes some way to acknowledge this in his foreword, but this book may have benefited from a more explicit engagement with the ambiguity of various name forms. We might quibble, for example, with Moss’ translation of the Old English place name element *-wic*, which occurs relatively frequently in England. This, Moss suggests rather definitively, denotes a “farm, dairy or industrial settlement” (5). In reality, *-wic* might denote a remarkably wide range of meanings: farm, street, salt-works, proto-urbanized trade towns known in Latin as *emporia* ‘ports’ (Ekwall 1964). Indeed, in Ekwall’s view, “it is impossible to distinguish neatly between the various senses” (1960, 515). When Moss discounts the ambiguity and uncertainty in deciphering place name meanings in favour of simplicity and certainty, he sacrifices one of the great pleasures in their study.

Perhaps the genesis of this issue, curiously absent from Moss’ bibliography, is a number of important foundational texts on British place name studies; the vast majority of toponymic dictionaries cited by Moss are published after the year 2000. It is worth drawing the reader’s attention to one particular absent source. The University of Nottingham’s Key to English Place-Names, a publicly available online database of 14,000 place names in England accompanied by etymological evidence, is perhaps the best resource in the field at present and cites a huge scope of previous interpretations and translations (<http://kepn.nottingham.ac.uk/>).

Moss closes the introduction of his book with a sage observation: “while much of the material that I have included may be available elsewhere, in this book I have attempted to produce a valuable, concise and eminently readable reference document” (viii). In this he certainly succeeds. *A History of English Placenames and Where They Came From* is not an attempt to reinvent the study of place names nor to contribute novel translations. Instead, it provides a public-facing introduction to the study of England through its place names and a useful synthesis of previous scholarship. Its scale is impressive, its tone lively, and those looking for an introduction to place name studies could do worse.

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