

## Reviews

William D. Overman, *Ohio Town Names*. Akron, 1958. Pp. 155. \$ 4.00.

When I was working on *Names on the Land*, I would have welcomed such a book as this, and would have used it thankfully, as I used similar books, such as Massengill's *Texas Towns*. Some years have passed, however, since then; the American Name Society has been founded, and has been carrying on its work for some time. One function of that society should certainly be to attempt by all means to raise the standard of onomastic scholarship in this country.

Instead, therefore, of congratulating Mr. Overman for the considerable positive achievement in his book, I find myself faced with the less agreeable task of pointing out its shortcomings. I do so with the particular hope that this long review may possibly serve as some standard of reference for other workers. In this field of study we must not be content with having done as well as we have done, but must attempt something better.

For the achievement of my end I find it convenient to break the review into separate sections. As I progress through them, I shall point out Mr. Overman's achievements, as well as his shortcomings.

*Completeness.* Except by his title, Mr. Overman does not define his field. He has entries for about 1200 names. This would seem to be sufficient, but actually there are some puzzling omissions. There is no entry for such a goodsized town as Cambridge. Other names that sound interesting receive no attention, e. g., Chuckery, Chilo, Getaway, Mogadore, Scio, Tranquility. Other entries consist of gossipy guidebook information, with nothing about the name at all, or nothing significant. Thus, New Rumley is allotted nine lines, because it is the birthplace of General Custer, but we are told nothing about the name. The Indian name Maumee is also so slighted, as is the interesting Venedocia. In similar case are Alcony, Arcanum, Louden, Maria Stein, Marengo, Mingo, Omal, Otway.

*Accuracy.* Mr. Overman may be commended for considerable attention to accuracy. Although the general reviewer is at a disadvantage in approaching such a local book as this, I feel that the

author has worked hard to ascertain his facts. Some vaguenesses about names have been permitted, e. g., "the Adams brothers," (p. 1) and "a soldier, Colonel Loveland," (p. 78). In such cases, identification by first name or by initials is preferable, especially since it increases our confidence in the research.

*Citation of sources.* References to the sources of information are to be considered essential in a work of reference of this sort. Otherwise we have no way to check against mere speculation on the part of the author, and scholars lack a firm point from which to advance toward further study. Mr. Overman was careful to cite his sources. They are given, I should estimate, in about 90 % of the cases, and most of the others are so general as not to require citation. An occasional entry, such as Ludlow Falls, lacks a reference where one seems to be needed.

*Linguistic competency.* Since place names are primarily linguistic phenomena, the worker in that field should either himself know the languages with which he is forced to deal, or should have his work checked by those who do know the languages. In this comparatively small book, the author has needed to give the meanings of words in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, Algonquian, and Iroquoian. Apparently he has merely taken the word of whatever authority he happened to be using at the time, and the result has been the blind leading the blind. Thus Auglaize is given with its proper meaning, "at the lick," but with no explanation that it is a French phrase, and with the implication that it is of Indian origin. Of Arcadia, we can certainly not agree that "in Greek, it means a region inhabited by rural people." The language is not given in which Urbana is said to mean "refinement;" in Latin, it might, indeed, mean "refined." In his treatment of Indian names, Mr. Overman leaves something to be desired. (Unfortunately, the same may be said in greater or less degree for practically all general works on American place names, including, I am afraid, my own.) Mr. Overman appears to have no knowledge of any Indian language, and to lack the ability to make independent judgments of his own. Where he has been able to use the work of August C. Mahr, he has at least an authority on which to rest. For other names, he reverts to an "others say" or "it is said" technique (Conneaut, Moxahala Park). For Gahanna he writes, "an Indian word according to early guide books meaning 'three united in one'." Since this is the name of a creek, we might at

least suspect that it preserves the Algonquian "hanna," appearing in the names of several streams in Pennsylvania, and itself meaning "stream."

This problem of Indian names seems to me the most difficult one now facing us. The worker must first collect the early forms of the name, so that its proper spelling can be approximated. He should then from historical and geographical evidence do his best to determine to what language the word is to be referred. With this spade-work accomplished, he could probably be able to get expert advice from one of the many scholars now industriously studying the Indian languages.

*Historical competency.* Localism is likely to be a bane of much of our place name study. I myself may be adversely criticized for having tried to cover too much and thus having spread my efforts too thinly, but the opposite error is apparent in many works devoted to the place names of a single state or a fraction thereof. It is well to bury the nose in county histories, but a worker should also remember that one of our place names may be derived from Herodotus or may echo some name ten thousand miles away. Of Catawba Mr. Overman's entry is "is said to be an Indian work meaning 'cut off'." But should not one be broadly enough based in the American background to realize that Catawba is the name of a tribe in South Carolina? Unless the town was named for the grape, the name is as much a transfer name in Ohio as is Toledo. Similarly Carthagena "is said to be that of 'the leader of a colored tribe which settled in this area'." That it may have been, I cannot refute. In view of the number of Spanish and Latin American names in Ohio, however, this other possibility should certainly have been mentioned. Gore is mentioned as if unique in Ohio; actually, it is a widely spread surveyor's term. A vigorous checking against some standard reference work is always advisable before a work is released to print. The existence in Ohio of Belfast, Colerain, Londonderry, and Antrim would seem to indicate a strong Scotch-Irish influence. Mr. Overman, however, suggests this only in connection with Caledonia, which is more properly Scottish than Scotch-Irish. Similarly, one might point out that Lebanon is a biblical mountain, (not a city), that Palmyra is not mentioned in the Bible under that name, and that Columbus never sailed from Lisbon on any voyage worthy of commemoration.

*Onomastic process.* Few students of names (either American or European) seem to have given much consideration to the actual processes by which names arise, and are shifted later. Actually, not much is available in print on the subject, and a preparation of a handbook might be a worthy project for the American Name Society. With more awareness of these processes, Mr. Overman might have done better with such names as Carthagera and Catwaba. He would also have been more aware of the fact that streams are likely to be named before the towns that bear the same name.

*Firm judgment.* Although others may differ from me on this matter, I consider that the scholar's business is not only to collect and present opinions, but also to judge and come to a decision among the opinions. Occasionally, indeed, the evidence will be so even that no decision is possible; but such a case will not occur often. Mr. Overman generally makes the decision, but sometimes does not. Under Logan, for instance, he gives three opinions, not distinguishing among them except to discriminate against the last by writing "although the source for this statement is not revealed nor can it be verified." Actually, the same applies to the other two, opinions, one of which Mr. Overman has introduced with the words, "one writer says," and the other, by "it is said."

*Pronunciation.* Except for Gallipolis, I do not believe that Mr. Overman anywhere comments upon pronunciation. Now, obviously, there is no need to use space to tell us how to pronounce Columbus, or Centerville. But one would appreciate information as to usage regarding the final *i* of Cincinnati. What about the *g* in Carthagera? One would also appreciate information on Ai, Rehoboth, and most of the less common Indian names. In some instances, information on the pronunciation is not only generally useful, but is also essential for determining the proper derivation. An example here is Pitchin. One can hardly accept Mr. Overman's derivation, unless the name is actually pronounced Pitch-in.

*Discrimination among authorities.* No work can be much better than the authorities upon which it is based. Mr. Overman has drawn his information, sometimes directly from individuals (apparently both by interview and by letter), sometimes some earlier works on place names, sometimes directly from historical works. On the whole, Mr. Overman has been less discriminating than might have been wished. Thus, for instance, he sometimes cites Henry Gannett,

although the work thus signed has been about as thoroughly discredited as a work can be.

*Clear style.* In a work of this kind, clarity of style rather than elaboration and fine prose is to be expected. Mr. Overman's style is generally clear. One sentence, however, forced me to do a double take, when I read that Ai was "the city destroyed by Joshua because of the existence of many saloons there."

The inclusion of much matter extraneous to the names is to be questioned. The places are, we might say, overlocated. In most instances, the county would be enough, but we are also given the highways on which the place is located, and sometimes other information. Other guidebook notes are also inserted, as has already been indicated in the extreme case of New Rumley. Such material not only clutters the page with information that seems extraneous in a volume entitled "Ohio Town Names," but also needlessly increases the expense of publication, and so is in general not to be recommended.

This review has been drawn out to considerable length in the hope that the comments here offered may be of some interest to those who are at present working upon handbooks similar to this present one. This review may be of use in pointing out some of the difficulties and the danger spots in the compilation of American place name dictionaries. Its general admonition is, I suppose, that the scholar of place names should be at all points fully aware that to be a good student of names he should be well founded linguistically, historically, and geographically as well as one possessing the special knowledge of his particular locale.

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*The Origins of Unusual Place-Names.* By Armond and Winifred Moyer. Keystone Publishing Associates, Emmaus, Pennsylvania. 1958.

Mr. and Mrs. Moyer have been collecting unusual place-names since the early thirties, and this little book is the first published result of their hobby. Set up in dictionary style, its entries run from ACCIDENT, Md. to YOUNG AMERICA, Ind. The criterion for inclusion seems to have been merely that a name seemed "unusual"

to the authors; although MOUNT PLEASANT, Penn. hardly qualifies, its original designation as HELLTOWN might have been a good choice for the main entry.

The struggles of local committees on name selection with the Post Office department in Washington are reflected in entries at EFFORT, Penn., DIFFICULT, Tenn., CHOICE, Texas, and PECULIAR, Mo. (PECULIAR, Wisc., now discontinued as a post office, has a similar heritage, but is not mentioned.) Occasionally, a name explained in its geographic context produces an anticlimax: HOP BOTTOM, Penn. is an area drained by a stream with wild hops growing on its banks. Family names of early settlers account for HURT, Va., DULL CENTER, Wyo., CRISP, Mo., COUCH, Mo., STARTUP, Wash., WALTZ, Mich., and SPEED, Ind.

The re-naming of TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES, New Mexico as a publicity stunt is well told; there is interesting historical and linguistic sense in the explanations for TEN SLEEP, Wyo., and for ORDINARY, Va., which dates back to an 18th century usage of *ordinary* to designate a hostelry less elegant than an *inn* or a *tavern*.

But the book has a value as entertainment only, and despite the diligence that went into its making, it cannot be reckoned as a serious contribution to the study of place-names. This is made clear by a statement on page 94: "We have never expressed doubt concerning the origin of any place name . . ."; though variant explanations are sometimes given, there is no attempt at critical evaluation. One might also ask if there is really much point in an entry such as the one at PLANT, Ark.: "Sources contacted say it has no significance," or in similar dead-ends at RADIANT, Va., SOLO, Mo., TOAST, N. C., TEA, S. Dak., and STAB, Ky. At POLO, Ill., one reads: "Marco Polo, Venetian traveler and author (1252-1324)." and can only wonder if he is really alleged to have reached Ogle County, Ill.

In the Acknowledgments, the authors say — and rightly, for a book of this size and scope — that a bibliography would be out of the question. The *AAA Tour Books*, the *American Guide Series*, and the United States *Postal Guide* are listed as useful sources; but there is nothing either here or, unfortunately, in the text that indicates any awareness of some of the readable and scholarly works on place-names that have been published to date. Not even so popular a book as Georte R. Stewart's *Names on the Land* is cited.

Occasionally, the prose style leaves something to be desired; entries switch from florid to telegraphic style, and there are a few lapses in syntax. Some points of fact: ETHER (page 45) can hardly properly be called a "drug", and the Smithsonian is officially an Institution, not an Institute (p. 83). SIX MILE RUN, Penn. is said to be "Taken from the name of the creek nearby which flows (runs) for a distance of six miles"; this is perhaps more aptly explained by stating that *run* is an extremely common generic term for a small stream in the Midland speech area. It has also been my experience that many of the bodies of water that are named for a certain number of miles are indicating their distance from a town or other landmark rather than their length. Early settlers would be more likely to remember how far out from town a stream crossed the trail than to pace off its length and name it accordingly. (This, however, is a point that would have to be proved for each instance of an X-mile name.)

At the end of the book is a list of names Mr. and Mrs. Moyer hope to track down for their next book; we wish them well, and respectfully suggest that they might find in the Seely and Sealock *Bibliography of Place Name Literature* and the supplements to it that have been published in *Names*, part of the way to more reliable and even more fascinating information. No one can deny that much on-the-spot research on local names is still needed; the Moyers have undeniably gone to some trouble to gather their explanations, and one can only regret that they have not been even a little critical in accepting them as fact. Perhaps it would be feasible — it would certainly be fun, anyway — to publish parallel accounts in their next book: the fanciful story, where there is one, and the true story. This would be much in the spirit of the etymologist who delights in folk etymologies but is always careful to distinguish them from the genuine article.

The authors have obviously enjoyed doing this book, and these suggestions are offered not to discourage them, but in the sincere hope that many readers who share their enthusiasm for interesting and unusual names may find their next volume more rewarding.

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