Notes and Queries

A RECENT FIND in a used book store reminded us abruptly of our past preoccupation on these pages with names-in-the-news items, with name-changes, and with the work of contemporary authors, even when the discussion concerned old names. To be sure, we are much interested in hearing of and reporting the doings of *ANS* members which seem to be of general interest; but this dusty treasure from an old book store, the work of an Englishman who died fifty years before the *ANS* was founded, may have its place here too. For some, it will revive memories; for others, it may be – as it was to us – an introduction to a man who, according to the article in Supplement Two of the *Dictionary of National Biography* at "Taylor, Isaac" was the first to apply the German principles of place-name research – "scientific philology" as *DNB* calls it – to English studies.

Isaac Taylor, Canon of York, was the fourth of his line to bear that name. There is no time here to detail the doings of the entire family; suffice it to say that the Adamses are probably the closest thing to an American parallel. The father of Canon Isaac was known as an artist, author, and inventor. His books included a *History of the Transmission of Books to Modern Times* and a *Physical Theory of Another Life*, which went into a sixth edition in 1866. On the more practical side, we have his inventions: a beer tap patented in 1824 and still said to be widely used, and a copper engraving machine, which was financially disastrous for him but was later turned to a handsome profit by a syndicate who used it to engrave patterns on copper cylinders and print up yards and yards of Manchester calico. Elizabeth Taylor, wife of Isaac III, was the daughter of James Medland of Newington, and had been a correspondent of Isaac's sister Jane. One almost feels the presence of Miss Austen's ghost as *DNB* relates the story of their marriage and describes the rambling old-fashioned farmhouse in Stanford Rivers, Essex, where they lived. It had a large garden, a fine library, a workshop, and – above all – plenty of room to raise the eight daughters and three sons that were born to them.

The eldest son and the second of these children was "our" Isaac Taylor, whose *Words and Places*, published in 1864, was not only

adopted forthwith as a textbook for the higher examination for Women at Cambridge, but is also the oldest English book on names listed in the select bibliography of Eilert Ekwall's *Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, fourth edition, 1960. Taylor received his A. B. at Cambridge in 1853, and was "19th wrangler" of his class. (This term is so admirably defined in the old *Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia*, whose editor William Dwight Whitney drew on Taylor for authority on names, that we will not pursue the matter further here.) He taught briefly at Cheam and then, in 1857, took Anglican orders. During his years at St. Matthias in Bethnal Green, he saw his flock through a frightful epidemic of cholera and grew quite famous for a sermon called "The Burden of the Poor" which was a plea for charities an behalf of London's East End, complete with accounts of the Spitalfield silk weavers and child labor. So moving was the tale that it brought in subscriptions of over 4000 pounds.

After an attack of typhoid in 1875, Isaac Taylor IV was forced to lead a less strenuous life and the Earl of Brownlow presented him to the living at Settrington in the East Riding of Yorkshire, where he spent the last twenty-six years of his life. The year before he left London he had published his thoughts on Etruscan, which was not, he said, an Aryan (i. e., IE) language, but Altaic or agglutinative. We may know in a few years if he was right. He calmly took all philology for his province, though he is never known to have stated this. His writings on the alphabet and its development disclose what he calls the "law of least effort" which has the effect of simplyfying the orthographic symbols most frequently used. Today's linguists will recognize in this at least a foreshadowing of what is now generally known as Zipf's law on the principle of least effort in language. Isaac Taylor knew no fear. He took on the Titan Max Müller, challenging the theory that the Indo-European homeland was somewhere in central Asia. Contemporary opinion agrees with Taylor, but not all of his notions have found abdiding acceptance. Despite his careful studies of Etruscan, now generally held to be the principal source of the runic alphabet, Taylor stated, and von Friesen promulgated – via the 1929 *Britannica* – the theory that runes were of Greek origin.

But let us return to Taylor the onomatologist. *Words and Places*, published when he was just 35 years old, was a considerable success which he allowed to mellow through several editions for some thirty

years. *Names and Their Histories*, published in 1896, is the "prize" that has brought forth this spate of Tayloriana here. According to *DNB* it was intended originally to be a revision of *Words and Places* but became, as the title page says, "...a Handbook of Historical Geography and Topographical Nomenclature" because the author was then too ill to carry out his more ambitious plan. Taylor's own words in the Preface, however, say that the success of *Words and Places* encouraged him to "undertake another work on the same subject, but written on a different plan and with a different intention." (We make no attempt to settle this; let us get on with the story.)

Unlike the majority of contemporary linguists and philologers who try to stick so scrupulously to fact that they sometimes grow very dull, Canon Taylor was not afraid of value judgements. He writes with real feeling about the aesthetics of names; he deplores pretense and inappropriateness. Like his worthy and intrepid contemporary Walter William Skeat, he frequently declares one form "better" than another, and there is no nonsense about it.

But enough and too much on the periphery of Isaac Taylor, unless, of course, you feel it would be enriching to know that his aunts Jane and Ann wrote "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" – which was one of their *Rhymes for the Nursery*. Isaac ought now to be allowed to speak for himself, and here are, accordingly, a few of our own favorite passages from *Names and Their Histories*.

"It may be regretted that the name of the Sea of Cortez no longer attaches to the Gulf of California, although we are not altogether without a geographical memorial of the bold adventurer, since Malinche, a conspicuous peak in Mexico, was so named by the Spaniards from the resemblance of the outline to the profile of Malinche, the devoted mistress of Cortez, who rendered him such invaluable services as an interpreter. (p. 20).

"The constant repetition in the United States of these Presidential names, though tiresome and perplexing, is not without significance, but the same cannot be said of other classes of names which abound in that land of incongruities, where we find, as Emerson complains in his *English Traits*, that 'the country is whitewashed all over by unmeaning names, the cast-off clothes of the country from which its emigrants came.' ...Even worse are the odious hybrids, barbarously compounded, such as Minneapolis, Indianapolis,

or the eleven places unhappily called Jonesville, names even more offensive than those of places which, as Emerson says, have been 'named at a pinch from a psalm tune,' or, as in Australia, from the nickname of a prize-fighter. Worst of all is the procedure adopted in the new State of Washington, where the counties were named by shaking the letters of the Alphabet in a bag and then emptying them, a few at a time, upon the floor, a process which has yielded such hideous monstrosities as Wankikum, Klickitat, and Snohomish. Compared with these we may regard as rational and inoffensive some of the 'cast-off clothes' of the Old World... (p. 24.)

"English, like German names, are essentially prosaic. It has been well remarked that the local names in Ireland and England accurately reflect the character of the Celtic and Teutonic races. In one case the names are fossil poetry, in the other they are fossil history. Nothing can be more poetical than many Irish names, replete with legend and allusions to the beauty of Nature. (p. 28.)

"*Abbotsford* was a fancy name invented by Sir Walter Scott for his house on the Tweed, on the supposition that the abbots of Melrose used here to cross the river. (p. 37.)

"*Eschscholtz*, one of the Marshall Islands, is named after a Dorpat naturalist who accompanied the Kotzebue expedition in 1825, and after whom a gaudy genus of Californian flowers has also been named. (p. 120.)

"*Luncheon Cove*, Dusky Bay, New Zealand, is where Cook and Forster lunched on crabs, on April 13, 1773. (p. 179.)

"*Yampee Point*, on the coast of Tasmanland, Australia, is a curious instance of how a waterless spot may receive a name meaning water. Here Stokes found a native dying of thirst, who was only able to ejaculate *yampee*! *yampee*! 'water! water!' (p. 298.)

"The names of imaginary saints have sometimes beene volved out of place names. Thus Saint-Plovoir in Belgium is from *simplex-via*, which became Semplovei, Semplovoir, and finally Saint Plovoir, while Saint Fontaine is from *Terra de centum fontanis*." (p. 338.)

We've done no checking, but we suspect he might be outrageously wrong on some items, notably the counties of Washington, which wear a valid Indian look to our amateurish eyes. Here, perhaps, is grist for someone's mill; but let it be noted that his bibliography, however brief, indicates that he took much of this from available American sources and also gives the lie to the old cliché

that European scholars never pay any attention to what is published in America.

Like Homer, Isaac Taylor nods occasionally. In the Prologue, he talks about Europa and the bull and involves them with the naming of the Bosphorus; in the Glossary proper, the entry at Bosphorus gives the credit to Io in accord with the more common tradition. May we suggest an evening with Isaac Taylor in case approaching winter should find the cockles of your heart in need of warming? No, our copy is *not* for sale. Not for love nor money; go to a used book store and seek your own, and should it be your good fortune to find another old-time onomatologist as it was ours in finding Isaac Taylor, Canon of York, please share him with us, won't you?

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