Oregon: A Rejoinder

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PROF. GEORGE R. STEWART has drawn "the ancient sword," as he describes it, to smite those who question his etymology of *Oregon* (*Names*, September, 1967, pp. 166–72). His weapon more nearly resembles a meat-ax, and with it he lashes about, lopping off heads with reckless abandon. This seems to be a novel way to settle a question which calls for evidence rather than invective. Since I was honored as the chief object of his wrath, it is incumbent upon me to reply.

Professor Stewart is displeased with those who pay no attention to his writing. But his displeasure with those who ignore him is mild compared with that reserved for those who have noted his opinions and refused to endorse them. He accuses me of a "violent reaction" to his now 24-year old guess about the origin of the name Oregon. The violence is all on the part of Professor Stewart. I merely said that his view was "without foundation," a phrase which troubles Professor Stewart greatly. It simply means that I do not believe that his view is supported by the evidence. I launched no novel view of my own, but held that the view set forth by Vernon F. Snow (*Oregon Historical Quarterly*, LX, December, 1959) had "most to recommend it." Snow's evidence, supporting the conclusion that the name Oregon comes from a Cree word for a bark dish, seemed far more convincing to me than Stewart's claim that it arose from misapplication of a map-maker's error. I submit that such a dissent hardly warrants the kind of rage which Professor Stewart exhibits. Professor Stewart makes no effort to refute Snow's evidence (beyond citing Clark, of which more below), but responds instead with personal abuse. The *ad hominem* attack is the stock in trade of those who are bereft of substantial arguments. Dr. Stewart accuses me of assuming a god-like stance, when this seems to be an apt description of his own behavior. How else can one describe a person

who assumes that it is virtually immoral for anyone to disagree with him, and who reverses the customary rules of inquiry by arguing that he does not have to prove that he is right, but that others must prove that he is wrong? (*op. cit.*, p. 172, lines 5–7). *He* has found the irrefutable truth, and *it* must be the point of departure from which all future investigation must flow. Accordingly he complains that his view of Oregon was relegated to the addenda of my *Indian Place-Names in Illinois*. I was dealing with some three hundred names, and was under severe space limitations imposed by my editors, so that it was not possible to review in print everyone's opinion about each name. Moreover, I felt it a writer's duty to present his own view. When someone called Stewart's article to my attention, I was convinced of the wisdom of the advice that Fannie Eckstorm received from Dr. Ganong: "... it is just as important to expose old error as to expound new truth ... for, on the one hand errors ... have a wonderful vitality, and, on the other, if ignored, they are sure, sooner or later to be dug out and triumphantly displayed ... as the real truth overlooked by the investigator!" (Eckstorm, *Indian Place-Names of the Penobscot Valley and Maine Coast*, [Orono, 1941], p. xiii).

Guest editor Dr. Kenny's introduction to the special Indian names issue of *Names* speaks of the "tenderfoot" who "twists the facts in order to maintain preconceived notions [and] insists too stubbornly on the correctness of his etymologies." It would appear that this fault is not confined to tenderfeet at all.

Dr. Stewart is deeply upset that his wisdom should be questioned by one whom he does not consider to be his peer. My qualifications are called into question, while at the same time I am lectured about professional courtesy, for failing to use the obsequious phrase "in my opinion." That trite formula appears to me to be a matter of style more than courtesy, and two of my respected mentors advised against such formulas. More importantly, I presented no new opinion of my own on Oregon, but merely accepted, tentatively, that of Vernon F. Snow, which Stewart refuses to examine.

Biographical and bibliographical background, and the color of my hair, are raised as tests of my competence. To take the last first, it is without joy that I report that the color of my hair (rapidly graying) meets the test. Of the other elements by which my expertise is to be judged, I am confident that Dr. Stewart knows

little. If he had examined my bibliography with care, he would have discovered that I have publicly disagreed with him not once, but twice (*Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Spring, 1965, p. 182, note 6). However, it seems to me that Dr. Stewart really misses the relevant question, which is, whose view is supported by the best evidence?

I defer without hesitation to Dr. Stewart's national reputation and his notable accomplishments. I especially commend him for writing an eminently readable and widely read book on American names. I fail, however, to find anything in his career or writings which entitles him to speak with authority in the specialized area of Indian names.

But let us proceed to the source of the dispute. Dr. Stewart is convinced that the names of Oregon and Wisconsin both stem from a map-maker's error. It is an educated guess, and I am well aware, because I have made such guesses myself, that they are sometimes the only explanations that can be given for many names. It should not be necessary to add that these should be tentative assumptions, subject to revision when more evidence is in. Elliott in the 1920s (cited by Stewart) recognized that there were Algonquian terms resembling Oregon, but was rather indefinite in his conclusions about the name as applied to the Columbia River. He leaned toward the view that the name evolved from a French-Canadian corruption of *hurricane*. Vernon P. Snow has offered substantial evidence that the Cree name for a bark dish was the origin of the name given to the Columbia River by Rogers and Carver, and provides an impressive bibliography. Stewart refuses to accord these views the consideration which be demands for his own. He prefers to stand on his statement of a quarter of a century ago that "the actual form Ouaricon is really sufficient evidence on which to rest the case." That is his privilege, but he should not complain if he stands alone.

Dr. Stewart assures us that Snow has been refuted by Malcolm H. Clark. Clark is aware of the mention of *ouragon* as a bark dish by several of the Jesuit fathers. (e.g., *Jesuit Relations*, LXV, 43, 47, etc.) He avows, however, that the term was mentioned only among the Montagnais. He then proceeds to disqualify himself utterly from serious consideration with the following remark: "No vocabulary, either Chippewa or southern Algonquian, that I have been able to find, lists the word." (*Oregon Historical Quarterly*, June, 1960, p. 218). In refutation of Mr. Clark, I submit the following:

Powhatan:	*outacan* — a dish (Strachey, *Virginia Britannia*, [London: 1845], p. 186.)
Algonquin:	*oulagan* — cup made of bark (Lahontan, *New Voyages*, [Chicago: 1905], II, 737.)
Potawatomi:	*onâgin* — plate (Gailland, "English-Potawatomi Dictionary, ms., ca. 1870.)
Cree:	*orâgan* or *oyâgan* — plate, vase (Baraga, *Otchipwe Language*, [Montreal: 1878] I, 300.)
Chippewa:	*onâgan* — dish (*Ibid.*, II, 74.)
L. Superior Chippewa:	*ouragon* — bark dish (Raudot memoir, 1710, in Kinietz, *Indians of Western Great Lakes* [Ann Arbor: 1965], p. 375.)

The Ontonagan River in northern Michigan drew its name from this word, as Verwyst pointed out. (*Collections State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, XII [1892], 390ff.) Clark, while denying Algonquian origin to the term *ouragon* and its variants, mentioned that Rogers had a grant on the "Ontonawyon" (Ontonagan) or "Dish" River (Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 218).

To return to Dr. Stewart's case, we must deal with the question of whether Rogers, who is the first person known to have used the name Ouragon (spelled variously) for a "great river of the West," really got it from a map-maker's mistaken notion of the name of the Wisconsin River. Rogers left no doubt about the location of *his* river, in relation to the Wisconsin. He made it clear that it began to the west of the source of the Mississippi, and that it connected with the Pacific Ocean (Elliott, 1921, pp. 101–2). Such a river could not be confused with the Wisconsin. This is brushed aside by Stewart with the statement that Rogers probably never saw the map in question. "More likely," Stewart remarks, "he had merely heard that on 'some old map' there was a river of that name flowing toward the West, and in some way this name had become connected in his mind with the often-told legend of 'The River of the West'." Again, this is mere conjecture on Stewart's part, and must be weighed against the substantial evidence produced by Snow. His case is too flimsy to warrant defense with so much heat. The question has been raised as to why Rogers (or Carver) did not name the tribe from which they learned of a river to the west "called by the Indians Ouragon." They could hardly have anticipated that this question would some day be of interest to scholars. Moreover, this

word, in various dialectical forms, was in general use among all the Algonquian tribes with which they had contact.

Finally, why should a term casually used by Rogers in communications with his superiors in London, which slept in the archives there until recently, and which was used shortly after by Carver (*Travels*, 1768), have survived into the nineteenth century? The viability of the name suggests that it was widely used in native speech, and carried westward by traders.

The etymology of Oregon may not yet be conclusively proved. I know of no one who has searched for it in the Chinook jargon. The views of Elliott cannot be entirely rejected, though I consider them more dubious than Snow's conclusion. Stewart's thesis, and several others which cannot be mentioned here for lack of space, must be considered as more conjectural.

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