

Onomastic Variety in the High Sierra*

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IN A SEARCH for a more extensive series of mountain names for a paper entitled "Mountain Nomenclature in the United States" (read at the Ninth International Onomastic Congress in September 1969, but still unpublished), I came across a fascinating and model study by Francis P. Farquhar: "Place Names of the High Sierra," published in three parts in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*, volumes XI and XII for the years 1920 to 1927.¹ Supplementing it with various collections of tales about the Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada, and with Erwin Gudde's more up-to-date *California Place Names*,² one comes up with a variety of accounts of aboriginal names, of systematic modern naming, and of place-name legends both authentic and romantically reworked.

Farquhar's study measures up to the four tests of a good place-name dictionary: geographical accuracy, historical knowledge and its cautious application,³ linguistic concern,⁴ and sympathy to the folktale where it exists. It is the ideal essay because it forms the basis for new work. There should, indeed, be a full-scale comparison of the place-names with the many collections of Miwok and Yurok texts which have been made since that time,⁵ and with the popular legends which have been prettified by the white man, to show the process by which legends are converted from

* This article is a special tribute to a great linguist and onomastician, Elliott Dobbie. Though one associates him more with Morningside Heights than with the High Sierra, those who knew him know that there was no place or language by which he was not fascinated.

¹ XI (1920-23), 380-407; XII (1924-27), 47-64, 126-147. They were collected with additions in a book (San Francisco: The Sierra Club, 1926) which I have been unable to see. References to Farquhar and Gudde are given only in special cases, since the names appear in both in alphabetical order.

² University of California Press, 1962.

³ The best evidence of this caution is the list of 60 place-names which are a puzzle, listed in XII, 48 — a treasure hoard for the speculative and the searching mind. Many of these were explained later by Farquhar and by Gudde.

⁴ Not, of course, with the care shown by the model Indian studies of Franz Boas, *Geographical Names of the Kwakiutl Indians* (New York, 1934) and John P. Harrington, *The Ethnography of the Tewa Indians*, 29th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology (Washington, 1916), pp. 29-636. But the etymologies are sober and critically handled.

⁵ For bibliography see Raffaele Pettazzoni, *Miti e leggende*, III (Torino, 1953), pp. 186-187; and Charles Haywood, *A Bibliography of North American Folklore and Folksong* (New York, 1951), pp. 1033-34, 1042-43.

their original tone and meaning. This brief paper can only scratch the surface of the ore to be found in Yosemite and the Sierra; perhaps this prospector will encourage a further rush for the gold that is there.

On the whole the naming in this mountainous country is recent; it owes much to systematic exploration by Joseph Le Conte of Berkeley and to John Muir of Wisconsin. Reversing the usual proportions, the names now resting there are predominantly personal; about 320 come from persons and about 120 from descriptive features. (In South Dakota I found on a recent search that elevation names run in the opposite ratio: about 430 descriptive against 120 personal names.) Only 31 on my count are Indian, and some of these are translations from the Indian rather than the original name.

Among these names there is much fancy and humor, much romance and legend. One spectacular group is a tribute to nineteenth-century scientific advance in biology and geology: the Evolution Peaks, named by Theodore Solomons in 1895, and comprising Darwin, Wallace, Huxley, Haeckel, Spencer, and Fiske. Solomons was probably following the lead of Clarence King in 1864 when, referring to his treasured copy of John Tyndall's *Glaciers of the Alps* (1860), he named the 14,536 ft. peak which he and others had ascended Mount Tyndall.⁶ Since the time of Solomons, Lamarck and Mendel have been added to the range; and Dana and Lyell to peaks outside it. This, like the Presidential Range of New England, is an unusually systematic naming pattern; it reminds us of the praiseworthy naming of the streets of Stockholm by categories, so that one can easily locate a district by the street-name. The late Gösta Langenfelt, a fellow onomastician, made a life-work of such applied toponymy.

Many of the Sierra names have stories which, like that of the Evolution Peaks, are not fabulous. Our interest in folk etymologies and eponymous legends should not let us forget that von Sydow's "memorats" were eyewitness accounts in origin, with a large element of truth. Folklore is not necessarily false lore. The linguist or historian or geographer should, like the folklorist, attend to these stories whether they are true or false, though of course he should not himself falsify them, any more than he should reject them because of his special interest. Americans, somewhat deprived of the "chimerat" or *Märchen*, should not neglect the lowly *sage* or *memorat*. Truth is often quite as interesting as fiction. An excellent example is Sardine Lake. According to Chase, "It bears the inscrutable designation of Sardine Lake. I hailed Bodie with an inquiry as to the reason for the name, and received his illuminating reply in one word, 'Canned.' I learned later that years ago an ill-fated mule bearing a cargo of the delicacy con-

⁶ William H. Brewer, "The Naming of Mount Tyndall," *Sierra Club Bulletin*, XII (1924-27), 443-444.

signed to a merchant in some mining camp of the Walker River region had fallen off the trail, and after a series of spectacular revolutions had vanished in the icy waters.”⁷

Battle Creek in the Sierra records “a famous battle between a burro and a mountain lion,” in which the burro was badly clawed but victorious, and the lion was drowned in the creek. The story was well-attested, yet one wonders whether the existence of a Battle Creek in Michigan, named after an obscure Indian battle of 1824, had anything to do with reinforcing the name or making it seem appropriate. According to James Clay (as cited by Farquhar, XI, 387), Cartridge Creek is a jesting commemoration of a man who had a good shot at a deer, but succumbed to buck fever and pumped out all his cartridges. Farquhar’s Clouds Rest was named from a vista of clouds before a snowstorm, but his Cloudy Canyon is an error for Cloud Canyon or Cloud Creek, as he was informed later by Judge Wallace, the namer (XII, 47). The creek is “crystal clear” and the *-y* suffix is wholly misleading. The place was named after the Cloud Mine, which Wallace discovered and claimed, a mine in the clouds which proved too high to be workable.

So far we have had essentially true stories. But if we turn to the region of Half Dome we find a proliferation of fancy and legend. In 1911 Bunnell, reporting on earlier explorations, said, “The names ‘North Dome,’ ‘South Dome,’ and ‘Half Dome’ were given by us during our long stay in the [Yosemite] valley from their localities and peculiar configuration.” There has been some shifting of names, and Half Dome or Cleft Rock, is now often “South Dome,” while Bunnell’s South Dome is now often Sentinel Dome (XI, 401). Two legends about Half Dome are widely different in episode and tone, though they seem to have a structural kernel in common – the eternal pursuit of female by male.

One, recounted by Bertha Smith in 1904, is in popular form, without indication of informant or time of collection. (Here – and elsewhere – I summarize, now and again interspersing quotations.) Tu-tock-ah-nu-lah, the Rock Chief, had his watch-tower on the Northern Wall of the Ah-wah-nee-valley. “In the spring he besought the Great Spirit to send rain that the wild corn might hang heavy with tasseling grain, the berries cluster thick on the branches of the manzanite, and the fish abound in the waters of the river. In the summer he fattened the bear and deer, and in the autumn he wandered through the mountains driving them from their haunts that the hunter might not return empty-handed from the chase. The smoke of his pipe spread like a soft haze through the air, sheltering the women from the sun when they went forth to gather acorns and wood for winter.” One day at dawn our hero Tu heard a dovelike voice calling

⁷ Farquhar, *op. cit.*, XII, 131.

his name, but the nymph of the voice fled when she was approached. In the evening he saw her on her throne and "knew that she was Tis-sa-ack, the Goddess of the Valley, who shared with him the loving care of the Ah-wah-nee-chees." (One wonders why two fertility figures had not got together by this time.) From that time his passion grew, and made him forget his people. Tis-sa-ack, sad at his neglect of the aborigines, prayed to the Great Spirit, who sent a storm and lightning which cleft the rock where she sat; the rain rushed to form Wai-ack or Mirror Lake. Now the valley bloomed once more, and the chief of the tribe ordered a feast for her. "But Tis-sa-ack was gone. She had sacrificed her love, her life, for the children of Ah-wah-nee," and "she left them the lake, the river and a fragment of her throne." Now still her spirit hovers at dusk "where at the Half Dome the sun slips over the western wall of the valley." Down from her wings floated the feathers which became white violets. Tu despaired, and "carved with his hunting-knife the outlines of his face upon the wall of his fortress, which the white man has named El Capitan." One passion led to another. This time he was drawn by a subtle fragrance sent by E-ee-he-no, who lived among the water-lilies "in the lake which the Three Brothers hold in the hollow of their hands," and he was drowned there.⁸

How much of this is a local Indian legend and how much romantic maidenly fiction we do not know. The Miwok of the region tell a quite different story, according to E. W. Gifford, a serious authority on Miwok anthropology and folk narrative,⁹ even though his account appears in a semi-popular book.¹⁰ "Half Dome lived with her husband, Washington Tower, on the bank of the Merced river. One day she quarreled with her husband, and taking with her a basket of seeds and her baby in its cradle, she ran away to the east. As she fled up through the mountains she formed the upper part of the Merced river and Yosemite valley." From the seeds in the basket came the flora of the valley. Washington Tower ran after her and beat her with a white oak club. In tears, Half Dome threw the basket to become North Dome, and the arched cradle, abandoned, became the Royal Arches. She was transformed into the peak which bears her name and which is marked by dark streaks - her tear-stains. Washington

⁸ Bertha H. Smith, *Yosemite Legends* (San Francisco, 1904), pp. 47-54. Her other legends are about Yosemite "Large Grizzly Bear," Pohono "Spirit of the Evil Wind," Hum-moo "The Lost Arrow," Py-we-ack "The White Water," and Kom-po pai-ses "Leaping Frog Rocks." A slightly less rhapsodical version of the legend, going back to an Indian informant "Tota," is found in J. M. Hutchings, *In the Heart of The Sierras* (Oakland, California, 1886), pp. 387-390.

⁹ Cf. note 5.

¹⁰ Edward W. Gifford and Gwendoline H. Block, *California Indian Nights Entertainments* (Glendale, California, 1930), pp. 263-264. Gifford's Miwok stories are about Half Dome, El Capitan, and Yosemite Falls.

Tower turned into a great shaft of granite. Apparently the satirically treated Washington Tower is identical with To-to-kon-oo-lah (a name derived from To-to-kon, the sandhill crane), and hence with the hero of Bertha Smith's story, though I might be surer of all this if I were to visit the Yosemite valley and could identify the spots personally, and had time for some further burrowing in the recorded legends and the linguistic milieu. Farquhar does not list the name Washington Tower. If it is, as it would seem, the same as El Capitan, the Miwok have a different story for that feature. Once it was a small rock, and Bear and her cubs lay down on it and went to sleep. When they awoke they found it had grown so tall overnight that they could not descend. "In fact, it had scraped past Moon." The animals on earth, Mouse, Rat, Raccoon, Grizzly Bear, and Mountain Lion all tried to leap or climb to the summit for the rescue, and finally Measuring Worm, step by step, made it. But it took him a whole winter, and when he got there he found that Bear and the children had starved to death. He brought their bones back to earth for cremation. A fine story of the conquering of the mighty by the minute, like Aesop's Mouse and Lion or the Jewish legend of the gnat who slew Titus or Nimrod, by creeping up and destroying the tyrants' noses. It is not the Smith story, however.

The Mirror Lake of the Smith story is a prosaic displacement of Wai-ack or "Water Rock," just as Half Dome is a replacement for Ti-sa-ack. Bunnell presumably named the Lake which, though it is not particularly like Lake Tahoe or the thousand other sylvan mirrors, did have fine early morning reflections. Another name, Lost Arrow, is not a displacement, but a proper translation of the Pohonochee scout's name Hummo, which also involved the romantic legend of a misunderstood message (the arrow), and the death of lovers, reminiscent of the stories of Theseus and Tristan, with their black and white sails.¹¹

Moro Rock in Sequoia National Park tempted men at the end of the last century to recall the Moros of the Philippines or the Morro Castle of Cuba, but the name in California was bestowed some time in the sixties because of a famous blue roan mustang, the *moro*, owned by a Mr. Swanson of Three Rivers. Sure evidence of the value, among other efforts, of checking the date of naming a natural feature.

The Three Brothers, said Hutchings,¹² is a commonplace name bestowed by "some lackadaisical person" on the feature with the Indian name of Eleacha, after a local food plant. Why the brothers are more commonplace than a food plant is not certain. We have encountered the

¹¹ Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-30. See Thompson Motif Z 140.1 Color of flag (sails) on ship as message of good or bad news; Helaine Newstead in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. Roger S. Loomis (Oxford, 1959), p. 129.

¹² Farquhar, *op. cit.*, XII, 138.

three peaks in the Smith story of Half Dome, where they surround the lake where Tu-tock-ah-nu-lah was drowned, victim of the vampire E-ee-he-no. The Brothers were originally Kom-po-pai-ses, the Leaping Frog Rocks, according to many authorities. But Bertha Smith has her tale, a vanishing American tale directed against the white conquerors, who killed the noble chief Ten-ie-ya's three sons, which the mountains commemorate.¹³ One wonders how the name could be a prosaic invention of the white man and also the center of a tale directed against his ruthless progress into the Indian's territory. Pompososus is apparently a folk-etymological rendering for Kom-po-pai-ses, the Leaping Frog Rock. The Whitney Survey of 1868 observes dryly that it has never caught the Indians at the familiar game of Leap Frog. Bunnell says the term means "mountains playing leap-frog," but adds, somewhat mysteriously, "a literal translation is not desirable."¹⁴ Perhaps this is innocent confusion, but it seems dangerous silence to a generation brought up on Havelock Ellis and his prolific modern imitators.

Our next story similarly illustrates the white man's squeamishness in the presence of culture shock. It is attested by Gremke, Farquhar, and Gudde. According to Gremke (as quoted by Gudde and Farquhar), Tunemah Trail acquired its name in a peculiar manner. "The shepherders frequenting that part of the country employed Chinese cooks. Owing to the roughness of the path they gave vent to their disgust by numerous Chinese imprecations. Gradually the most prominent settled itself onto the trail and it became known as 'Tunemah'." For this name, which has been extended to a lake, a pass, and a peak, Farquhar gives no clear translation. Suspecting the Gremke story to be folklore only, I called a friend, a Chinese expert. His own dialect, Mandarin, has an equivalent form. But the laborers were Cantonese, and so is the expression, /'tIUne'ma:/, "to have intercourse with mother."¹⁵

Farquhar's list of 60 puzzling names on which he seeks help look enticing to the folklorist: Inconsolable Range, Music Peak, Poopenaut Valley, Scaffold Meadow, Shuteye Peak, and Farewell Gap, to name but a few. Some find later explanations by Gudde and by Farquhar himself. Scaffold Meadow does not refer to a gallows, as it might be expected to do in the state which has produced a Hangtown Creek and Hangtown oysters (sheep's testicles), the latter served in the best hotels of San Francisco

¹³ Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-64.

¹⁴ Farquhar, *op. cit.*, XII, 138.

¹⁵ Gudde, *California Place Names*, p. 330; Farquhar in *Sierra Club Bulletin*, XII, 139. In one of his more recent works, *History of the Sierra Nevada* (University of California Press and Sierra Club, 1965), p. 236, Farquhar has the following note (18): "'Tunemah' is a Chinese word of the vilest significance, given because of the expletive of a Chinese cook as he rode along it [the trail]." This does not bring us much closer to specifics.

today. The meadow contained a scaffold built by sheepmen to protect their supplies from bears and other predators. Nor are Shuteye Peak and Pass places where explorers took a nap, but rather memorials to Old Shuteye, a halfblind Indian through whose rancheria the trail passed. Farewell Gap and Inconsolable Range have no entry in Gudde; they would seem to mirror, like Desolation Lake, the nostalgias, frustrations, and despairs of early explorers. One hesitates to deal with Poopenaut Valley, which for a moment looks as Indian as it can be, but which might well reflect the broad humor of men tough enough to plow through these mountains for the first time. Strong as they were, one expects they were often "pooped out" at the end of a day. Or the valley, which we have not seen, might deserve the verb if it dwindled at one end, as with Lake Peter, the facetious coinage of Judge Wallace and Joe Palmer in 1877. "On one occasion when following a dim trail up the canyon above Wet Meadow it gave out, and Palmer named a little body of water they discovered, Lake Peter, because the trail petered out at that point."¹⁶ Perhaps my guess about Poopenaut should not be taken too seriously; the Indian etymon may lie open to someone who knows the language of the district better than Farquhar or I.

Also among Farquhar's puzzles is Music Peak, which conjures up visions of natural Aeolian harps or a singing river on its sides or at its base. It turns out to be simply a misspelling, really named after Charles or Henry Musick, who were associated with a milling company at nearby Shaver. Similarly, Breeze Lake is not so called from its winds but from one William Breeze; Sing Peak not from another Aeolian harp but from a Chinese cook who worked for the namer; and Pleasant Valley is not charmingly descriptive but from a dairyman, James Cage Pleasant, killed on the spot by the Indians. June Lake remains a puzzle: does it refer to the time of the year or to its namer's daughter or wife, the sources of innumerable American place-names? Rush Creek likewise, which might owe its name to the famous Revolutionary War physician or to some of his many sons, namesakes, or relatives – or it might be merely a rapid stream. One cannot solve the problem in one's study.

Homers Nose has nothing to do with the primal poet. In Gudde, E. B. Homer tells the story: "As my father and the two government surveyors were looking at the mountain Mr. Powell laughingly remarked, 'Homer, that south projection looks like your nose.' 'All right,' said Mr. Orth, 'I am marking it on my map as Homers Nose' and so it was named." A final ambiguity is Mount Gabb, and its story justifies my belief that place-naming often involves more than one consideration. A name in short may be reinforced, a blend of *etyma*, or more properly "a compound

¹⁶ Farquhar, *op. cit.*, XII, 63.

etymology," like *business* from Old English *besignis* and Old French *besognes*, "occupations,"; or *defy* from Latin *dis* + *fidāre* and *dēfæcāre*; or *hired man* from Old English *hyrian* "to hire" and *hired* "member of a household"; or *straight* from Latin *strictum* and Old English *streht*.¹⁷ Mount Gabb was named after William More Gabb of Philadelphia, who joined the Whitney Survey in 1861 and died in 1878. He lived up to his name. On one occasion the serious Dr. Cooper "announced that he had discovered a new species of the old brachiopod genus, *Lingula*; and that in honor of his friend William More Gabb he had bestowed upon it the name of *Lingula gabii*." Clearly the name may have a double purpose, a simultaneous dual etymology – in short, and not to be loquacious, it may be a pun.

California, it will be remembered, is the heaven of the realtor, and the realtors have modelled their fancies on the poets who beautify the natural features. Upgrading or "swank naming," is a well-known process. We all remember how Minnesota progressed from "muddy water" to "cloudy water" to "the land of the sky-blue water," or Mississippi from "big river" to "the Father of Waters."¹⁸ Less well-known is the transformation of the Pawnee Ki raru river in Nebraska, which meant "turbid river" or "manure river," from the buffalo dung it contained. This is now Republican River.¹⁹ It is not our task here to say what justice there is in the transformation, or whether beauty is the result. But there is nevertheless beautification in California. The lovely Bridalveil Falls, a descriptive name which fits the object, was in Indian a prosaic tribal name Pohono, meaning a "puffing wind" or, in one discredited etymology, an "evil wind."²⁰ Cathedral Peak led John Muir to this fine prose: "No wonder the hills and groves were God's first temples, and the more they are cut down and hewn into cathedrals and churches, the farther and dimmer seems the Lord himself. The same may be said of stone temples. Yonder, to the eastward of our camp grove, stands one of Nature's cathedrals, hewn from the living rock, almost conventional in form, about two thousand feet high, nobly adorned with spires and pinnacles, thrilling under floods of sunshine as if alive like a grovetemple, and well-named 'Cathedral'."²¹ As we have seen, El Capitan is a noble renaming of a word for the sandhill crane.

¹⁷ George H. McKnight, "Some Compound Etymologies," *Journal of English and German Philology*, XII (1913), 110–117. The editor suggests to me that *dēficere*, "to break loose, to become faithless, to rebel, to defect," is a better companion etymon than *dēfæcāre*, suggested by McKnight. And so it is, though the *NED* supports McKnight's view under *defy* v² "digest, dissolve."

¹⁸ George R. Stewart, *Names on the Land* (New York, 1945), pp. 278–279.

¹⁹ John Thomas Link, *The Toponymy of Nebraska* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1932), pp. 80–81.

²⁰ See the story in Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–18.

²¹ Farquhar, *op. cit.*, XI, 386.

Another cheerful name is the Happy Isles, so named by W. E. Dennison because "no one can visit them without for the while forgetting the grinding strife of *his* world and being happy."²² Happy Gap is more prosaic; it is on the "Jackass Route" and "those who succeed in getting a pack-train to this point at once perceive the appropriateness of the name." The Happy Isles have a ring as of the Greek Elysium, and they recall the few literary allusions of the kind in the Sierras. The geologist apparently once in a while read *belles-lettres*. On Disappearing Creek (recall Lake Peter and Poopenaut?) lies a water channel called The Enchanted Gorge, and our evolutionist Theodore Solomons named the peaks on either side Scylla and Charybdis. Homers Nose, we have seen, has nothing to do with Homer. But there are a Doré Pass and a Doré Creek at the bottom of Lundy Canyon, a scarp or wall a thousand feet high with cliffs which reflect Gustave Doré's famous pictures of Dante's Hell. This is an exaltation of the common pioneer awareness of the infernal, which here is manifest in Hell-for-Sure Pass, Desolation Lake, the Devils Bathtub, the Devils Crags and the Devils Postpile or Woodpile, the last "a splendid specimen of columnar basalt" in which "the shepherd recognizes the handiwork of his Satanic majesty." A subtler reference to the demonic (and the daemonic) is a peak called Seven Gables near Mount Goddard. With this Puritan name we may balance such names as Kings River, originally Rio de los Santos Reyes, named perhaps because discovered on Epiphany by good Catholic Spaniards honoring the Magi, or the Merced River, Grove, Lake, Peak, and Pass, deriving from El Rio de Nuestra Señora de la Merced (1806), from the Blessed Virgin as in the full names of Guadalupe (a Mexican shrine) or Los Angeles, which has like Merced lost the element which described her. Moses Mountain is one more of Farquhar's puzzles; we presume it alludes in some fashion to Mount Sinai or Mount Horeb or Mount Nebo, for Moses was, as the prophet of Jahweh the thundering skygod, in every way a mountain man. The Royal Arches, which turned up in Bertha Smith's Half Dome story, were rocks once called Scho-ko-ni after the arched shade of an Indian cradle. Their present name is from a degree in Freemasonry, conferred under the eye of God which always is looking down from the rafters of the lodge.

There are many other charming names in Farquhar, a Dinkey Creek named after a dog, a J-O Pass from the initials of its Portuguese namer's long sought brother,²³ spectacularly descriptive names like the Hermit, the Minarets, Fin Dome, Sharktooth Peak, Sentinel Dome, the profiled crag which gave the name to the Lake of the Lone Indian, Picket Guard Peak, Scepter Pass, and the Videttes, East and West. Vividly descriptive

²² *Ibid.*, XI, 402.

²³ For another explanation see Gudde, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

too is the name of the range, the Sierra Nevada, the snowy sawtooth range. One of the great parks of the region, Sequoia, owes its immediate reference to a descriptive association, the giant redwoods of the California coast. But the tree itself was probably named after that famous Indian hero who assumed the massive task of inventing an alphabet and contributing to the education of his people.²⁴ Less sublime but quite as beautiful are Mariposa Peak, Grove, and County, named by the Spaniard Moraga in 1806 from the mass of butterflies found in the region. To give this paper a touch of the "relevant," we should note that the naming of counties has not been neglected by the free souls of Telegraph street in Berkeley. There one may buy a poster which, in obvious emulation of Mariposa, shows a blissful scene and a caption, "You are now entering Marijuana County." It brings butterflies to my stomach.

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²⁴ The equation is not certain, and there has been much controversy about the naming of the tree. See Farquhar, *Yosemite, the Big Trees and the High Sierra* (University of California Press, 1948), pp. 8-9.

PACIFIC STUDIES

The Pacific Scientific Information Center, Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Box 6037, Honolulu, Hawaii 96818, announces the publication of *Guide to Place Names in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands*. Compiled by E. H. Bryan, Jr., 1971. Pp. 406, with 114 maps. Price \$5 postpaid.

In preparation is a guide to place-names in the Hawaiian Islands, the first part of a projected larger work on the place-names in Polynesia.