Are there Connotative Names?

W. F. H. NICOLAISEN

THIS IS NOT THE first occasion on which I have alluded to the phenomenon to which I want to draw attention in the context of this *Festschrift*. The question which constitutes the title of this paper has haunted me ever since I attended a conference in Shetland in 1969, and whenever I have had an opportunity to air my views on the relationship between words and names, I have hinted at the problem without being able to support my hunch with convincing illustrations. A recent sabbatical in Scotland did, however, finally provide me with a chance to make a detailed study of the toponymic material which had first aroused my suspicion several years ago, and, although the details of my findings will be published as part of a completely different argument, i.e., as a contribution to the investigation of the earliest phases of Scandinavian settlement in Scotland,[1] it seems reasonable, indeed desirable, to incorporate the principal results of my work in this brief study dedicated to one of the foremost American name-scholars, since the general principles involved are not at all restricted to the naming processes of *Scotia Scandinavica*, but have much wider implications. Indeed, the topic is general enough to be discussed in terms of almost any of the Indo-European languages and in the context of most branches of what is frequently called "western culture." It is a fair assumption that the problem to be examined, as well as the conclusions drawn from that examination, are by no means intra-systemic to any given individual language or language family, but appear to be applicable wherever *homo nominans*, Man the Namer, is at work.

As the concepts which prompt the question "Are there connotative names? " may not be familiar to some readers, a brief review of relevant information is in order. Above all, it is necessary to reemphasize that this inquiry is primarily aimed at the communicative *function* of names, the tacit understanding being that, in addition to important differences in *meaning*, words and names normally also display a distinct contrast in *function*, i.e., words *connote* and names *denote*. When attempting to give this contrast a more precise focus, one unfortunately receives

[1] To be published in a forthcoming issue of *Northern Scotland*.

only limited help from current dictionaries which, for example, define the verb *connote* as "1. to suggest or convey (associations, overtones, etc.) in addition to the explicit, or denoted meaning, 2. to imply or involve as a result, accompaniment, etc.," or as "to signify secondarily: to imply as inherent attributes: to include," to quote just two well-known dictionaries, one from the United States and one from Britain.[2] For the verb *denote*, the same reference works have, on the one hand, "1. to be a sign of; indicate. . . 2. to signify or refer to explicitly; stand for; mean: said of words, signs, or symbols, and distinguished from CONNOTE. 3. *Logic* to be the name for (individuals of a class)," and, on the other, "to note or mark off: to indicate by a sign: to signify or mean: to indicate the objects comprehended as a class (*log.*)." Even in their imprecision, however—probably stemming from the imprecise use of these two terms in ordinary English—these two sets of definitions provide at least one helpful indication of contrast: Connotation is an inclusive, comprehending, embracing process, whereas denotation is an exclusive, isolating, individualizing one.[3]

This rather vague lexicographical harvest can be satisfactorily utilized for our purposes, however, when we remind ourselves that it was the nineteenth-century English thinker John Stuart Mill (1806-73) who first employed this terminology as an aid to onomastic investigation. In his principal philosophical work, *A System of Logic*, he treats matters of interest to the name scholar in Chapter II, entitled "Of Names," and although his notion of names also includes nouns and adjectives and is therefore not only much wider than, but also at considerable variance with, our current concept of these categories, he does provide us with a basic philosophical observation which may form an appropriate and adequate point of departure for our argumentation: "Proper names," he says (in the eighth edition of 1872, published one year before his death),[4] "are not connotative: they denote the individuals who are called by them; but they do not indicate or imply any attributes as belonging to those individuals. When we name a child by the name 'Paul', or a dog by the name Caesar, these names are simply marks used to enable those individuals to be made subjects of discourse. It may be said, indeed, that we must have had some reason for giving them those

2 *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 2nd college edition (New York and Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1970); *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, New Edition (Edinburgh: W & R Chambers Ltd., 1972).

3 See also W.F.H. Nicolaisen, "Words as Names," *Onoma*, 20 (1976), p. 143.

4 John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive*, Book I, *Of Names and Propositions*, in J.M. Robson, ed., *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol. VII (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 33.

names rather than any others; and this is true; but the name, once given, is independent of the reason. . . . Proper names are attached to the objects themselves, and are not dependent on the continuance of any attribute of the object," and, a little later in the same chapter, "A proper name is but an unmeaning mark which we connect in our minds with the idea of the object, in order that whenever the mark meets our eyes or occurs to our thoughts, we may think of that individual object."[5] In Mill's terms, therefore, our question should read: "Are there any connotative *proper names*?"[6] since, in continuation of classical terminology and in the shadow of the ambiguity of Latin *nomen*, that is the term he uses to refer to what, onomastically speaking, I am in the habit of calling simply *names*, in contrast to *words*. In that form, our question consequently also becomes ultimately a challenge to Mill and to those who have followed or developed his ideas in the last hundred years or so.

Readers familiar with my writings on this and related topics will recall that I have always been at great pains to make a clear distinction between the *function* of names and the *meaning* of names, while at the same time acknowledging a close relationship between the two. In view of that insistence, it seems to me that Mill, like so many others who have thought deeply and constructively about the attributes of names and the procedures of naming, falls into the fundamental error of confusing these two separate aspects. We have just reminded ourselves of his definition of a proper name as "but an unmeaning mark"—notice the little word *but*!—which, in my own terminological framework, says, quite correctly, that a (proper) name has no lexical meaning, or rather that whatever lexical meaning it may have had, or still retains, does not interfere with its denotative function. Word meaning may indeed, as we know, be present in current names and be accessible to the name giver and name user, but only rarely does it coincide with onomastic meaning, i.e., name meaning, in our culture. The latter is obviously perceived by Mill as a somewhat puzzling phenomenon which is liable to threaten his basic conception of a name as "unmeaning":

> When we predicate of anything its proper name, when we say, pointing to a man, this is Brown or Smith, or pointing to a city, that it is York, we do not, merely by so doing, convey to the hearer any information about them, except that those are their

---

5 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

6 A *connotative name* for Mill would be *man* or *white*.

> names. By enabling him to identify the individuals, we may connect them with information previously possessed by him; by saying, This is York, we may tell him that it contains the Minster. But this is in virtue of what he has previously heard concerning York; not by anything implied in the name.[7]

In my way of looking at these matters, Mill is, in his own conceptual environment, here trying to come to grips with what I have called onomastic meaning which seldom has anything to do with lexical meaning and cannot be recovered by etymological procedures. Mill's "information previously possessed by [the hearer]" I have termed "associations," and naming is therefore the process by which words become names through association, and knowing and using names involves a knowledge of the appropriate onomastic associations, the range of which may differ widely from name user to name user, depending on the scope of his individual name competence and onomastic idiolect.

If we are in a position to say, then, that lexically meaningless names function denotatively, whereas lexically meaningful words connote, the question before us can be paraphrased thus: "Is it possible for names to function connotatively, and if so, is it necessary for them to have lexical meaning in order to do so?" A summary of the Scottish evidence to which I alluded earlier may be helpful at this point.

From about A.D. 800 till the middle of the thirteenth century, certain parts of Scotland, especially the Northern and Western Isles, were under the domination of Scandinavians. When Scandinavian settlers first arrived in Shetland and Orkney, but also in such Hebridean islands as Lewis, Harris, and Skye, they were confronted with a virtually nameless landscape, not because these islands were without people, but rather because the contacts between the existing population (it would be rash to call it "indigenous") and the incomers were such that a continuity of names could not be expected, not unlike the situation in which the American Eastern Shore was first named by European settlers despite the presence of native Americans.[8] In order to function as a human society, these new settlers had to do a great deal of naming fast. It is more than likely, however, that confronted with that awesome and necessary task, they were inexperienced as namers, having come from landscapes saturated with names. Most of them had

[7] Mill, pp. 35-36.

[8] See, for example, Janet H. Gritzner, "Seventeenth Century Generic Place-Names: Culture and Process on the Eastern Shore," *Names*, 20:4 (December, 1972), 231-39.

probably never in their lives named a place of any consequence. As is to be expected under these circumstances, the rich surviving toponymic evidence of their naming activities therefore shows extensive congruity between the Scandinavian place-names of the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland, on the one hand, and the toponymy of the settlers' Norwegian homelands, on the other. Indeed, it is possible, because of this widespread agreement, to use place-name evidence both in tracing the chronological sequence of settlement and in establishing fairly precisely the areas of Norway from which the successive waves of emigrants to Scotland came in the ninth century, or soon after.

The assumption has so far always been made that this near identity of place-nomenclature is exclusively due to two sources available to the settlers for their naming needs: (1) The toponymic sector of the contemporary Norse vocabulary providing them with appropriate generics and specifics, and (2) the nostalgic and commemorative transfer of whole names from the Norwegian homeland to Scotland. The former, the forming of names from words, has obviously been the major process by which new names are created at all times in our cultures, depending on the extensive embeddedness of names in language and growing out of linguistic continuity, despite geographical separation. The latter, the transfer of unanalyzed names from one side of the North Sea to the other, argues for limited onomastic continuity under the same conditions and is particularly detectable in the existence of lexically empty or inappropriate names in colonial territory. It has always been thought sufficient to explain the fact, that the majority of Scandinavian place-names in *Scotia Scandinavica* has identical equivalents in Norway, in this twofold fashion. My contention is that this is not enough. This claim is based on the following observation: among the numerous identical equivalents are several which occur not just once or twice but frequently on both sides of the North Sea. From a substantial corpus of material, two striking instances of such parallel naming may serve as representative and illustrative examples.

The place name *Sandwick*, from Old Norse *vík* "sand bay," has risen to the status of village name in the island of Lewis, occurs as a farm and parish name in Orkney, and is also found several times in other parts of the Scottish north and west, as, for instance, in *Sandaig* in Skye and *Shandwick* in Ross-shire. In Norway, this name applies to more than 50 farms, and there must be many more natural features bearing it. In view of such common occurrence, it is just as difficult to imagine that each of these names was coined individually and spontaneously from productive wordstock without an onomastic matrix, as it is to explain all the

Scottish examples by commemorative transfer. Indeed, the frequency with which this name is found as a farm name or other kind of settlement name is persuasive evidence that the initial principle may be extended even further: Not only is *Sandvík* the correct name for a bay with a sandy bottom and/or a sandy beach, it is also the appropriate name for a farm, or other human settlement, situated, or built, near such a bay. Implicit in such a naming process is not the commemoration of any particular *Sandvík* in Norway, although that may have been at the back of the namers' minds in a few cases, but rather the analogous imitation of all of them. Once the associative choice "sand" had been made by the namers, the name was there to be used and did not have to be manufactured from available lexical material. *Sandvík*, and others like it, in this latent readiness, was only potentially denotative and had transparent lexical meaning, although it hovered on the threshold to onomastic meaning because of particular extra-linguistic associations; it was a connotative name existing on the associative level of meaning, a name instantly at hand when instantly required—an "instant name."

The other example, *Oronsay*, provides a different kind of evidence, leading, however, to very similar conclusions. *Oronsay* is probably the best known modern reflex of a name type which has received extensive comment from both experts and amateurs alike, mainly because it "fits" the islands which it designates, so well and without fail. The island of *Oronsay* itself is connected with the larger island of Colonsay at low tide but separated from it at high water, a fact which is perfectly described by the lexical meaning of its etymon, Old Norse *Ørfirisey* "tidal island." Apart from the Colonsay *Oronsay*, there are, in the Hebrides, 27 islands bearing the same name or a modern variant of it. Each one of these 28 islands is tidal, is, in Norse terms, an *Ørfiris-ey*. In addition, there are *Orfasay* off the south coast of Yell in Shetland, with the same characteristics, and the Orkney parish name *Orphir* which, though directly derived from the name of the old township in which the parish church stood, ultimately goes back to the name of a small "tidal island" in an adjacent bay. This make a total of 30 such names in Scotland, each of them appropriate; the same name also occurs in Iceland. In Norway, there are at least three farm names *Ørfirisey*, all in Nordlands Amt, and there are likely to be islands bearing this name as well; but whatever the situation in Norway may have been, it is difficult to deny that *Ørfirisey* is, in the context of Scandinavian place naming in the Scottish north and west, the connotative name *par excellence*. Certainly the association of "tidal" must have been overwhelming

compared with all other potential associations, many of them otherwise often found in island names, like size, shape, or color; it therefore produced an instancy of naming which would be difficult to match.

There are, of course, many more examples but these two groups of names must suffice as models in support of my claim that there is such a seemingly exotic onomastic beast as a "connotative name" which is available to would-be namers as a fully fledged name. Although the creation of names from lexical material by association must be regarded as the most prolific naming device, and although the unanalyzed cultural transfer of complete denotative names must have taken place from Norway to Scotland (only on a much smaller scale than from Europe to North America several centuries later), the denotative realization of connotative names probably played a much more important role in the naming of places than has so far been understood, or even suspected. Admittedly, some *Sandwicks* and *Oronsays* may indeed have been spontaneous creations from topographically suitable wordstock, others may even have been transferred from Norway in a nostalgic gesture of commemoration, but their impressive total can hardly be accounted for by these two potential naming processes. The employment of a third, and very handy, kind of onomastic raw material, a range of connotative names containing rather general generics, appears to have been especially productive in the fashioning of denotative toponymic labels; such as *Sandwick* and *Oronsay*, and the like. Existing indubitably at all times and under all naming conditions, this third major source is certainly more noticeable when incoming settlers are faced with a practically nameless landscape requiring a large number of names quickly, particularly if those settlers come from an area with a long cultural continuity, part of which would be a well-established, satisfactory place-nomenclature that has not called for extensive new naming for a while.

In other words, the early Scandinavian settlers in the Scottish north and west brought with them, and used, in addition to a *lexicon* reflecting the vocabulary of their homeland, an *onomasticon* which was the product of the *onomastic dialect* of that same homeland. The difficulties in distinguishing one from the other are still great, especially when names have retained accessible word meaning, but at least the recognition of connotative names as a potential source of readily available and appropriate material for the namer (mainly for the inexperienced one but not exclusively for him) should be an important step in the right direction. The notion of a personal *onomasticon* as distinct from, though linked with, a personal *lexicon*, not only goes far to meet Mill's

requirements concerning his curious "information previously heard" about such names as York, it also places each individual in the context of onomastic dialects which would by no means be confined to the identifiable and distinctive use of certain favorite generics or other suitable lexical material.[9] The idea of connotative, but potentially denotative, names can also be expected to throw new light on such rarely explored areas as *onomastic fields, name competence,* and *name acquisition*, fields of research to which I hope to devote some of my time and thinking in the next few years. In this respect, some of the more or less closed "systems" of personal names will perhaps be even more illuminating than place-nomenclatures.

In the meantime, as should be obvious by now, my own answer to the question whether it is possible for names to function connotatively is a resounding "yes," while the reply to its corollary, whether it is necessary for such connotative names to have lexical meaning, must surely be in the negative, despite the fact that such lexical meaning is usually accessible to the "early" users of a new nomenclature, especially because of the known associations on which its individual components are based. Despite John Stuart Mill's assertion to the contrary (see p. 41), connotative proper names do exist, as part of a socially, culturally, historically, and individually fashioned onomasticon. In fact, we should have to invent them if they did not.

State University of New York at Binghamton

9 The constructive notion of "favorite" place-name generics has been developed by Celia M. Millward, "Universals in Place-Name Generics," *Indiana Names*, 3 (1972), 49.