More on the Name California

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IN THE JUNE, 1954, issue of *Names* the Editor gives as his opinion "controversies are extremely interesting and fruitful if fought in the spirit of scholarship and chivalry." (p. 151). In the same issue, in his excellent article, "The Name California," he takes issue with my *Names on the Land* at several points. Therefore I hasten to enter the lists, hoping only that I may attain his ideal of "scholarship and chivalry."

To begin with, I mention minor matters. There are two confusing typographical errors. Calaforninu (p. 131) should be Calafornina. The Greek word for bird (p. 124) should be spelled with a *nu,* not with an *upsilon.*

I might offer some suggestions about the farther background of the name. I have much sympathy with Reed's theory that Montalvo may just have "made up" the name. Gudde seems to approve, since he adds his own comment that Montalvo may "have taken a fancy to the prefix *cal.*" (p. 132) In *Names on the Land* (p. 15) I expressed a similar opinion. Yet there I was thinking in terms of a book limited strictly to the study of place names. When considering names as a whole, we must, I believe, go somewhat farther. There must be some sort of reason, some psychological background, even for a man's preferring one prefix to another. At this late date, we can probably not establish a definite reason, but our own inability to determine one should not lead us to the assumption that none existed.

It would be unfortunate, I think, if the connection of California with *caliph* should come to be generally held, merely by default of anyone's pointing out other possibilities. For this reason, the existence of Californo and Californina in Sicily seems to me interesting, even though the possibility of connection is slight. But Spain itself shows many examples of the names of places begin-

ning with *Cal-* and even *Cala-*, including such important towns as Calatayud and Calahorra. We even find Calaf and Calafell, two towns in the province of Barcelona. An inhabitant of the former is called a Calafino. At the other end, we have a Spanish town called Forneo, and many of them called Forno. It would seem, therefore, that Montalvo had plenty of suggestions besides *caliph,* and closer at hand.

As for my *Names on the Land,* that book is somewhat curiously presented in that issue of *Names.* On p. 150 an editorial refers to it as "classic," but the same editor in this present article declares that it is, at least in one passage, "extremely subjective," that it employs "poetic license" and fails to present "a valid theory." Gudde does not seem to take very seriously my account of California (*Names on the Land,* pp. 14–15). He has paid no attention to some of the evidence presented there, even though it would have been of use to him. I suppose that, as others have been, he was misled by the style in which the book is written. Because of the readable and sometimes dramatic way in which the material is presented, some scholars merely have assumed that the book cannot also be accurate in details.

Let us take as an example a paragraph on p. 14, which Gudde should, I think, have used for his own purposes:

"One of the captains, about the year 1530, sent back a report of what he had heard from some Indians. There was an island off that coast, they said, and many of them had been to it. (Here perhaps they wet their lips lecherously.) This island was inhabited wholly by women, except when men were brought to it to do what must be done if any land is to be peopled; it was, these Indians asserted, very rich in pearls and gold, and was without Christian faith."

This passage is based upon a section in Oviedo's *Historia natural and general de las Indias* (III, xxxiii, 36) which is in turn based largely upon Cortéz's own dispatch to the king, written on October 15, 1524. In the passage, the only imaginative suggestion is that included within the parentheses, and the reader is given plain warning of the fact by means of the parentheses and the "perhaps." To prove my point, I quote from Oviedo:

llevó relacion de los señores de Ciguatan, que se afirmaban mucho aver una isla toda poblada de mugeres, sin varón alguno, é que en ciertos tiempos passan

de la tierra firma hombres, con los quales se juntan, é las quedan preñados... É decian questa isla está diez leguas de aquella provincia, é que muchos dellos han ydo allá é la han visto, é ques muy rica de perlas é oro; pero destas mugeres no dá fíe algun chripstiano.

Here we have actual mention of "the gold and the women" which Gudde (p. 131) seems to think is lacking. In the passage, we have in fact, not less than four points to suggest comparison with the fictional California. The report mentions 1) an island, 2) rich in gold, 3) rich in pearls, and 4) Amazonian. Moreover, this island was located off the west coast of Mexico, where the tip of the California peninsula is actually located. We have thus an almost perfect case for someone to suggest that this must be California. Personally I doubt that anyone seriously thought so, except perhaps some of the most ignorant and foolish of the Spaniards, who would at the same time have been the least likely to have read the romance. In spite of the many stories about Amazons, I question whether hard-headed men like Cortéz and his captains as late as 1524 put much faith in such tales. There had been much crying of "Amazon! Amazon!" since 1492 and nothing to show for it. Cortéz and his captains, moreover, certainly would have had the minimal literary sophistication required to realize that *Las Sergas* was fictional. So I think that the use of California almost certainly was someone's joke. We may compare President Roosevelt's reference to Shangri-la at the time of the Doolittle raid.

This, it seems to me personally, is all that we need to have to account for the application of the name. It does not, however, rule out the possibility that there might have been still something else that is not mentioned in the above-quoted passage. There is the possibility that this supposed island or some place near it may have had a native name sounding enough like California to make a further suggestion. Such possibilities as those suggested by "the Vallejos, Alvarado and others," and by E. D. Guilbert (for all of these see H. H. Bancroft, *History of California,* Vol. 1, p. 66 n. 4) cannot be altogether ruled out—at least, not until they have been scrutinized by an expert on the native languages of Sinaloa and Lower California.

In this connection I should mention something on which no investigator of the name seems previously to have commented.

There are, scattered across Latin America, all the way from Mexico to Argentina, no fewer than twenty-two places named California. Most of these, perhaps all of them, may have been named subsequently to the peninsula. Some of them are connected with goldmines, and so may have been named, with direct reference, after 1849. On the other hand, it would be a large assumption, statistically, to take them all as having been secondarily named. I should think that some of them must have been named directly from the romance, in some cases doubtless with the aid of a similar already existing Indian place name.

But to proceed with my theory that the name was applied to a reported Amazonian island rich in pearls and gold, the next questions must be "When?" and "By whom?" As to the time, I see no reason why the name should not have been applied before any Spaniards had actually visited the peninsula, that is, at about the time (1524) that the report was made. There are numerous examples of names floating about before any Europeans had actually visited the places later so called—Brazil, for example. Some of these places such as the Straits of Anian, did not even exist.

As to who applied it, I have attributed the action to Cortéz. Possibly I have done so too literally, for in all ages jokes and bright sayings have been assigned to kings and presidents rather than to the page-boy or poor relation who actually produced the *mot.* But at least I had historical evidence for attributing the application of California to Cortéz. That evidence comes from Herrera. And who was Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas? 1) He was born in 1559, and so was old enough to have talked with men who had been in Mexico as early as 1540 or earlier and to have received oral tradition before it became very stale. 2) He was official historiographer of Castille and the Indies under Philip II and his two successors, the author of the tremendous *Historia general de los hechos de los Castellanos en las islas y terra firme del Mar Océano.* 3) In preparing this work he had access to many documents no longer available to scholars; as an example, he was able to write a good account of the Ponce discovery of Florida from a source that is now unknown. 4) He had (and this is perhaps most important of all to us) special interest in names. Although I have read only a small part of his history, I have been struck by how

much information on names is given in it. Herrera not only tells about individual names, but even comments on what might be called the theory of naming i.e., how the names were given.

This, then, is the man who states flatly about California that Cortéz "put this name upon it." The actual wording and the manner of making the statement are of interest. First, Herrera by using the circumlocution (le poner este nombre) instead of the normal expression (le nombrar) seems to me to suggest that he himself knew California to be a name already fashioned before it was applied to the New World locale; so he writes that Cortéz "put this name upon it," (i.e. put this established name upon it) rather than "named it" (i.e., made up a name for it). This is not a matter on which to insist, but the wording seems curious. We should remember that Herrera and the people for whom he was writing were probably familiar with *Las Sergas.*

Second, we can only assume that the learned historian of the Indies knew Cortéz's letter of May 14, 1535, in which the new discovery is called Santa Cruz. Yet Herrera still says that Cortéz placed the name California there.

Third, it should be noticed that Herrera goes the whole way, attributing the application of the name to Cortéz without any "probably" or "it is said." In other words, Herrera considers the matter an established fact. Moreover, he makes the statement without any particular reason to do so. He does not make it to bolster up a theory or to eulogize a hero, but merely as a passing note, a detail of interest in itself. Now a writer is unlikely to make such a parenthetical statement unless he feels himself on sure ground. Of course, Herrera could have been in error as many a historian has been, but we have no privilege of assuming that he was in error, just to get rid of his bothersome testimony, especially when he was what he was and may well have had sources of information that we lack.

Let us now consider my attempt to reconcile the testimony of Herrera that Cortéz applied the name California with the fact that Cortéz in 1535 called it Santa Cruz. That is what I tried to do in *Names on the Land.* As I stated there, I still think, that is, that Cortéz might well have felt it silly, or at least beneath his dignity, to report to the King that he had discovered California.

Would a present-day Antarctic explorer want to report that he had discovered Shangri-la? Yet the description of the island as preserved in Oviedo's work is so close to that of the fictional California as to suggest an immediate humorous identification.

As for a place having two names—one official and one unofficial—there is nothing unusual in that. Not infrequently, moreover, the unofficial name triumphs. As examples, I can cite the many double namings given by the Portola expedition in California (See, *Names on the Land,* p. 158). The victory of California over Santa Cruz I consider to be such an example.

Rather than let this rest wholly at the controversial level, I should like to consider the whole matter as a possible illustration of what seems to me a kind of fallacy of place name study. I might call it, "Ad antiquitatem, ad simplicitatem," that is, that the older names are, the simpler they seem to be. I write "seem," not "are."

I can demonstrate my meaning. When we are in the historical period we find many examples of name-giving that are essentially incredible but so well authenticated that we merely have to accept them. But when we have no historical record, we almost necessarily become timid. For instance, we have actual record of many names being "manufactured" from component syllables and even letters. For all we know, this may have happened in earlier times too; the Greeks may have done it. But, for earlier times, scholars seem to assume that only the most obvious descriptive terms can be accepted. Even incident names are scarcely allowed, and Wolf River is always explained with the stupid *cliché*: "There were lots of wolves there."

Thus we tend to think of our ancestors as duller than they were. Why should we not expect a touch of humor in place-naming from the ancient Greeks, who produced Aristophanes, and also from the sixteenth-century Spaniards, among whom was Cervantes?

I stand on the account of California presented in *Names on the Land.* All I would change now would be the date. There I was content with the round number, "about 1530," but I would now say "probably 1524." This date refers actually to the report about the Amazonian island, but I am ready also to think that this is the most likely time for the name to have been applied to it by Cortéz.