

NICKNAMING IN THE POPULAR NOMENCLATURE OF ENGLISH PLACES*

It is the purpose of this paper to draw attention to a neglected subject, the use in recent centuries of unofficial alternatives for English place-names. There are several varieties, including secondary forms of official names (shortenings with or without suffixation such as Rick and Ricky for Rickmansworth Herts.) and alternative dialectal developments in the phonology (Brummagem for Birmingham), but the most notable type, and the one with which this paper is principally concerned, is the place-nickname involving either a completely new name or the addition to the official name of a characterising epithet.

The practice of re-naming places is as old as place-naming itself. Alternative descriptive names can be found in England from the Anglo-Saxon period onwards, whether by means of complete or partial substitution of name elements or by means of adding affixes to existing names, but it is perhaps not generally appreciated that such popular re-naming continued unabated into modern times. For whereas many of the medieval alternatives gained sufficiently wide currency to become adopted as the official name forms (Cold Ashby Northants., Stocking Pelham Herts., Sturton le Steeple Notts., and so forth), the great majority of post-medieval coinages remained purely local and unofficial in use and are now largely forgotten. Fortunately for us, the zealous recording activities of generations of antiquarians have preserved many of these otherwise irrecoverable oral naming traditions. The best and one of the earliest collections of popular names of counties, towns, and villages is to be found in Thomas Fuller's posthumous Worthies of England (1662), whose invaluable notes often provide unique sources of information, much of it gleaned at first hand, as in the following example. 'Bean-belly Leicestershire,' wrote Fuller, 'was so called from the great plenty of grain growing therein. Yea, those in the neighbouring Counties used to say merrily, "Shake a Leicestershire yeoman by the collar, and you shall hear the beans rattle in his belly"; but those yeomen smile at what is said to rattle in their bellies whilst they know good silver ringeth in their pockets.'

Among unofficial as well as official place-names, one of the largest groups is formed by descriptions of geographical features, natural or man-made. Both types often use the same prefixes, notably those descriptive of size and shape, e.g. Long Stow, the popular name for the Cambridge village, and Long Marston (Herts.). Historically the trend has been for the apt among geographically-derived popular place-names to be winnowed from local usage as official names - with two important exceptions: the many among them that were derogatory, born of the often fierce rivalries between nearby towns and villages, and the self-deprecating, used by local people in times of frustration. Thus we find Brentford (Middx.), noted for miry roads leading to the Thames, as Dirty Brentford. The Devil's Throat (Cromer Bay Norf.) is one of many nicknames for coastal places coined by mariners to describe navigational hazards. On land as by sea the factor of access was important in the origin of geographic popular names, particularly in areas where it was difficult, as in the Fens. In dry weather, for example, Wroot-out-of-England (Lincs.) showed the reason for its popular name, the surrounding marshes being impassable at such times and a boat the usual means of travel. Porlock (Som.), on the far side of Exmoor, like many remote places was called The end of the world. Man-made local features, too, gave rise to numerous nicknames: after 1811, when

the Thames lock was built, Teddington (Middx.) became the up-river tidal limit, and was known as Tide-end-town. Staveley (Derbys.), surrounded by railway lines, was Spike Island. Some places were not so much remote as hard to find, earning a reputation thereby for 'moving about'; such was Dodging Exhall (Warw.), so dispersed that there were never more than two or three cottages together in any part of it.

An important group of place-nicknames originated from local products, the names often long surviving the extinction of the industry. Tring (Herts.) was called Little Manchester from the mills set up there in the nineteenth century but now long closed. Toynton (Lincs.), a medieval centre for pottery and brick-making, is still known as Potter Toynton. Melton Mowbray is noted for the product that gave it the name Pork-pie-town, and Wellingborough (Northants.) for the traditional town dish commemorated in its popular name, Ock-an'-Dough: potatoes and chopped meat (the 'Ock') baked in a pastry-lined pan (the 'Dough').

A reputation for wealth - or the lack of it - or an excess of civic pride produced many nicknames, which logically enough, as with others of a carping nature, have little counterpart in official naming. The pride that so often accompanies riches is a common cause of envy among neighbours, and the epithet 'proud' is frequently used sneeringly of such places, as for example in Proud Painswick (Gloucs.) which refers to Painswick's many clothiers grown rich in the Cotswold wool trade, and their elegant town houses. Proud Peterborough, the seat of a bishop, is of ancient repute for self-esteem and a surfeit of clerics. Proud Preston (Lancs.) was once the capital of the medieval Duchy of Lancaster, and in 1727 Defoe (*Tour*, III, 221) could write of it: 'The Town is full of Gentlemen, Attorneys, Proctors, and Notaries The people are gay here, though not perhaps the richer for that; but it has on this Account obtained the name of proud Preston.' Strutting Stroud (Gloucs.) was another Cotswold village supposed to think highly of itself. At the other extreme, the chronicle of human woes, at places down on their luck or where getting a living was always particularly hard, earned names such as Beggarly Broom (Warw.), and Hungry Hardwick (Cambs.); two adjoining Hertfordshire parishes, Starve-guts Stevenage and Knaw-bones Knebworth, were notorious because the parsimony of their eighteenth-century overseers of the poor caused the deaths by starvation of several families.

Traditional local customs, some of them very old and many seasonal, are responsible for another category of locative nicknames. Earls Barton (Northants.) was called Leeks Barton or Leeks Town because the custom there was to eat leek pasties and not pancakes on Shrove Tuesday. Bread-and-cheese-land was the Kent village of Biddenden, after the bequest by the 'Biddenden Maids' (who were Siamese twins) of a liberal parish charity distributed as bread and cheese to the poor. The medieval goose fair held at Guston (Kent) is supposed to have given the local name Goose-town. Leagrave (Beds.) on the River Lea, is still known as The Blockers' Seaside, traditionally the place where the Luton straw-hat makers, too poor to afford a trip to the sea, took their families for Whitsun picnics. Painswick (Gloucs.), one of whose nicknames we have already met, was also known as Puppy-dog Painswick, from the custom of eating 'Puppy-dog Pies' there on 'Clipping Sunday', September 19th. These were plum or meat pies with a small china dog baked inside recalling the local tale that once the church clipping ceremonies drew such a crowd of strangers to Painswick that the landlord of the inn,

desperate to feed them, served pies made of puppies. Wokingham (Berks.) is popularly known as Lousetown because in times past, it is said, whenever a new mayor was to be elected the aldermen sat around a table in the Town Hall, placed a louse in the centre, and chose the man to whom it crawled.

Nicknames were also derived from local views of historic events in the form of odd or remarkable local happenings. These could be pridetworthy, as with Jeering Coxall (Coggeshall Essex), an epithet dating from the brave conduct of the inhabitants in defying the Catholic authorities during the Marian burnings of Protestants for religious beliefs. Fuller wrote of Coggeshall: 'No Town in England, of its bigness, afforded more martyrs in the reign of Queen Mary, who did not jeer or jest with the fire.' The summit of Black Hill (Chesh.) is locally known as Soldiers Lump because in 1841 excavators found the timbers which had supported a theodolite used there by military surveyors in 1748. More commonplace incidents which have given rise to place-nicknames are equally revealing of local history. Since the beginning of this century Macclesfield (Ches.) has been called Treacle town or Stickytown because a large cask of treacle once rolled off a cart and burst as it hit the ground in Beech Lane. The poorer townsfolk were quick to scoop up the syrup in cups, kettles, buckets, and even tin baths, and, it is said, lived on treacle for weeks thereafter.

Another large group of names refers to peculiar characteristics of inhabitants, not all of which single out the pejorative elements so often associated with popular toponymy. 'Merry' places appear to have had well-earned local reputations for jollity or musicality: Merry Wakefield (Yorks.) possibly refers to the descendants of those ancient jollifications alluded to in Wakefield's likely etymological meaning, 'open land on which annual festivals are held'. Another is Merry Chidlow (Childwall, Lancs.); as the local rhyme puts it 'Chidlow for ringing and singing besides'. Piping Pebworth and Dancing Marston (Gloucs.) were well known for the skill of their Morris dancers and players on pipe and tabor. The traditional hospitality of the town of Crowland (Lincs.) and its erstwhile abbey is remembered in the appellation Courteous Croyland, a nickname which is popularly supposed to have been coined by none other than Abbot Thurketyl (d. 975) who rebuilt Crowland (Croyland) Abbey after its destruction by the Danes.

Most popular place-names that are derived from characteristics of their inhabitants, however, refer to supposed local traits resented or derided by communities nearby - and are witness, moreover, to their having been the latter's inventions. Towns, where competition was always sharpest, were noted for driving hard bargains, as with Canny Newcastle (Northumb.). 'Drunken' places, as might be expected, were usually famed for the potency of local brews. Among these was Drunken Bidford (Warw.), with two teams of drinking men, the 'Toppers' and the 'Sippers', who challenged teams from other places. One from Stratford-on-Avon, which, it is claimed, included Shakespeare, drank out a challenge with the 'Sippers' at the Falcoln Inn at Bidford. Shakespeare slept off this revelry under the 'Shakespeare Crab' tree on the Stratford road, and according to the tale made the nicknames of the local villages into this rhyme:

Piping Pebworth, Dancing Marston,
Haunted Hillborough, and Hungry Grafton;
With Dodging Exhall, Papist Wixford,
Beggarly Broom, and Drunken Bidford.

Such folk rhymes, passed down locally from one generation to another, have been instrumental in preserving many popular place-names gone out of use as part of England's oral tradition.

Concerning some places nothing worse could be held to scorn than lethargic people and a lack of happenings, hence Yawning Yettington (Warw.), Sleepy Ingham (Norf.), and Sleepy Clun (Salop.). Wychwood-Always-Late (Oxon.) had no clocks, and people there knew the time only once a week when the local carrier returned from market. Other places were known for being noisy, such as Bragging Brixham (Devon) and Whispering Walserswig (Walberswick, Suff.), whose people had voices loud enough to be heard 'over t' Sowle' (Southwold). The inhabitants of Tawny Tibberton were thought to have dark complexions, while the name Wharling Carleton (Carleton Curlieu, Leics.) made fun of the distinctive local speech with its prominent 'r' sounds. Merely tiresome were such as Surly Wye (Kent) and Downright Dunstable (Beds.), where lived the stubborn and opinionated. This last achieved the not uncommon distinction of apt place-nicknames in becoming not only proverbial but literary. Documented by the 16th century, noticed by Fuller and other antiquarians, Downright Dunstable was used by Scott (one of the foremost collectors of popular place-names) in Redgauntlet (1824, ch. 24).

On the darkest side of social criticism expressed as popular toponymy were the accusations levelled at certain places for improbity. Cunning Kimpton (Herts.) alias Thieving Kimpton was so called because the people left their doors open for strays whenever droves of sheep or cattle were taken through the village to avoid toll gates; on the parish boundary with St Paul's Walden is Thieving Grove Wood, shown on the Tithe Award, 1840. Peeping Pillarton (Warw.) was noted for its sneaky ways with outsiders. Wantage (Berks.) became Black Wantage after the opening of the Wiltshire and Berkshire Canal gave rogues and villains a quick escape from the law in London (much like the M1 does today). Soldiers and sailors embarking for foreign wars had harsh descriptions for Kentish towns: Starv'em Stroud, Rob'em Rochester, and Cheat'em Chatham. This liking for alliteration in inventing uncomplementary nicknames for places is notable in all parts of the country. Names were often made to question the morality of towns and villages, as in Naughty Ashford (Kent), Lusty Tarrington (Heref.), and Sinful Sunderland (Durham), also called Devil's Town by Newcastle people, who made a gibing popular rhyme about it. In Hampshire there were Bad Botley, Shocking Shedfield, Wicked Wickham, and Worse Waltham. For Reading (Berks.) there was the inevitable pun: Scarlet Town, beyond redemption.

In popular toponymy the nadir of reputation, however, was to be dubbed a place of fools, and it was by such perverse acclaim that at least one town or village was designated in each county. In Wiltshire it was Silly Cannings (All and Bishops Cannings) where the men supposedly dragged the village ponds by moonlight for cheeses, a custom said to have given rise to the folk nickname, 'Wiltshire Moonrakers'. In popular naming 'silly' usually meant stupid: it was claimed that at Silly Haddenham (Bucks.) ponds were thatched to keep the ducks dry; that at Silly Houghton (Houghton Regis, Beds.) people held white cats out of windows to see if it were snowing; that at Silly Combe (Oxon.) manure was packed around the church tower to make it grow. At Foolish Piddenhoe (Sussex) the people are said to shoe magpies, hang their fields out to dry, and go digging for moonshine, daylight, or smoke. The epithet 'foolish', however, was sometimes used

interchangeably with 'wise' to denote a place of exceptional canniness, as, for example, Foolish or Wise Gotham (Notts.), where eccentric behaviour was reputedly adopted to mask a serious purpose, to discourage King John from building a castle there.

In conclusion, so brief a discussion of place-nicknames can aspire to no more than a passing view of some of the major aspects of what belongs to an even broader subject, that of popular or unofficial naming generally. Although only to a limited extent capable of adding to linguistic knowledge through classic forms of onomastic research, popular names have much of value to offer the discipline of Name Studies, which has left this material so largely to the historian, the economist, the geographer, the folklorist, and the creator of literature. Cross-subject study should be made of the relationships between official and popular names in their common and disparate origins and their often similar and cyclical histories, including the utilitarian process of adopting popular for official names and the abandoning of discarded official names to merely local tradition, whose far side is on the limbo edge of things forgotten. The point is of particular significance in the present time of rapid change when wholesale destruction of the field systems set up with the enclosure acts of the past two centuries or so is sweeping away the basis for all but a handful of unofficial as well as official names. Research should be done, too, into cross-disciplinary relationships between both official and popular place-names and other branches of the Humanities with which popular names appear to have particularly close and direct links. Indeed, the very existence of unofficial names - apart from their ubiquity - postulates that, at any time and for whatever causes, official names do not encompass the full extent of what is, after all, the human need and activity of naming, the shortfall of which is left to be completed - or complemented - by the creation of so-called popular names. In his paper 'The Survival of British Toponymy' (NOMINA IV, 1980) Colin Smith observed '... it may not suffice, in linguistic studies, to be too rigorously scientific and insufficiently humane, by which I mean that a place has to be left for human error, foible, and misunderstanding'. I suggest that a place must be left as well for other inevitable human factors: curiosity and imagination, which are at the very fount of popular naming.

NOTE

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