

Toponyms and the Fabric of Provincial History: A Review Article

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And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bare Enoch; and he builded a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch.

(GENESIS 4, 17)

Place names, as is obvious in this early passage from the Bible, have long been of interest to mankind. Without question, their existence predates recorded history, from the time that man first started to communicate with fellow man; from the moment that someone said, "I live by the Red River," or "I dwell by the Oxen's Ford." For place names exist in all parts of the world and are recorded in all languages. For centuries they have been the subject of scholarly investigation (see, for example, the opening paragraphs of John Stowe's *Survey of London*, 1598); have stimulated the organization of learned societies and the publication of learned journals; and have given birth to such hard academic terms as "toponym," "toponymy," and toponymic," or "toponymical."

In British Columbia place names present a demanding challenge — by no means as yet fully answered. Indians, of many tribes, speaking many dialects, have had their dwellings here for thousands of years. They named places but they kept no written records. Within each of these names is embedded some myth or legend, or some fragment of history but their origins have all too often been lost in the passage of time or obscured by linguistic difficulties. Then, some mere two hundred years ago, came the white explorers — Spanish, English, Scottish, French — first by sea and then by land. They traded, they charted, and they named — bays, inlets, promontories, islands, mountains, forts and trading posts, and villages that sometimes grew to towns and cities. And at times they even left records which gave the reason for a name, the date of the naming, and the namer. Such records bring warmth to the student of toponomy — and warmth he needs, for within the confines of this vast land are to be found some 35,000 place names and attached to each some remnant of the past.

It is obvious that no complete study of this province's place names will be made for years to come — if ever. But an impressive cornerstone has been laid by Captain Walbran, and additional foundation materials have been added by Dr. and Mrs. Akrigg, by Mrs. Middleton,* and by a small band of scholars who have published occasional articles or local histories.

British Columbia Coast Names, 1592-1906 by John T. Walbran stands by itself — a living testimony to the experience, industry, scholarship, and knowledge of an extraordinary man. Born in Yorkshire in 1848 and educated in the Ripon Grammar School, he early elected for life at sea and quickly became a master mariner. Arriving on the B.C. coast in the late 1880's, he entered the employment of the Federal Department of Marine and Fisheries and commanded the Canadian Government Steamship *Quadra* from 1891 to 1908. In this small coastal vessel he travelled the intricate waters that lap these western shores and he got to know every buoy, lighthouse, inlet, island, promontory, village and hamlet within the vast compass of his jurisdiction. His knowledge of tides and currents, of reefs and shoals, and of many another hidden hazard was intense and profound. But he also had an avocation, a hobby — the study of the names of places, especially those that he encountered in his daily rounds of duty. He wished to know their origins, the historical circumstances surrounding the naming, the biographical facts of those who did the naming, or after whom places were named, and the meanings of the many Indian or Spanish names that constantly came to his attention. A dedicated and an indefatigable hunter, he pursued knowledge in many ways. He talked with Indians in their villages, with fishermen and missionaries, with traders and with sailors; he prodded the memories of scores of businessmen and politicians; he carried on a voluminous correspondence with people in many parts of the world; he read biographies and biographical dictionaries, histories and naval records, and pertinent documents from the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company. Few sources were left untouched, for he, without academic training, was a true scholar — brilliant and disciplined.

By 1906 he had decided that a cut-off date was essential, and during the

*AKRIGG, G. P. V. and HELEN B. AKRIGG, *1001 British Columbia Place Names*. Vancouver, Discovery Press, 1969 (2nd ed., 1970).

MIDDLETON, LYNN, *Place Names of the Pacific Northwest Coast*. Victoria, Eldee Publishing Co., 1969.

WALBRAN, JOHN T., *British Columbia Coast Names, 1592-1906*. Vancouver, Vancouver Public Library, 1971. (A facsimile reprint of the original work published in Ottawa, the Government Printing Bureau, 1909. The facsimile is preceded by a foreword by M. P. Jordan and an introduction by G. P. V. Akrigg.)

next three years he devoted himself to the preparation of his materials for the press. In 1909 the Government Printing Bureau in Ottawa released the work for public sale. It was a volume of impressive proportions — some 546 pages in all — and it listed over twelve hundred names, including eight pages of “addenda et corrigenda,” the results of last moment labours. The work was illustrated with portraits of famous naval men and views of isolated and exotic places and jacketed on the back cover was a superb and highly detailed map of the B.C. coast (“compiled under the direction of James White, F.R.G.S., Chief Geographer, Dept. of Interior”) on which were entered nearly all of the place names in the text.

An indication of the vastness of Walbran’s work is embedded in its full title: *British Columbia Coast Names, 1592-1906, To which Are Added a Few Names in Adjacent United States Territory: Their Origin and History. With Map and Illustrations.* Clearly Walbran had no intention of writing a directory or handbook. He loved the sea and its ships; he dwells lovingly on such details as tonnage, rigging, and armament (“The *Discovery*, ship rigged, was 340 tons burthen, copper fastened, sheathed with plank and coppered. Mounted ten four-pounders and ten swivels, with one hundred and thirty-four of a crew all told.”); he writes hundreds of capsule biographies (some six pages on Vancouver, four on Cook, two on Baker, two and a half on Rainier, one on Sir John Franklin); he describes events, large and small — sea disasters, naval battles, murders and massacres; he gives, whenever possible, the reason for the naming of a place, who did the naming and when; he usually locates each entry with considerable care (for example, the first two entries: “Actaeon sound, Drury inlet, Q.C. Sd.” and “Active pass, between Mayne and Galiano islands.”); he provides the reader with a host of cross-references; and he commonly cites the sources used in the compiling of an entry. And at times he was his own best source, for he named many a place himself (Ripon Point, after the town where he went to school; Cape Anne, after his wife; Florence Island and Ethel Island, after two daughters; Greaves Island, after Richard Greaves of Ripon, his wife’s grandfather; Horsfall Island, after the Rev. Thomas Horsfall, his own grandfather; Ethel Cove, after the daughter of Sir Henri Joly de Lotbinière, the lieutenant-governor of the province; Raley Point, after the well-loved missionary, the Rev. George Henry Raley), and he himself was honoured by having places named after him by others (Walbran Island, Walbran Rock, and Walbran Point).

In short, he was a maker of history, as well as an historian, a condition that brings depth and vitality to his work, and makes it, perhaps, unique

among histories of place names. Certainly, all other works on the place names of this province must forever stand in his shadow; he is — and will remain — without peer.

Dr. G. P. V. Akrigg, co-author of *1001 British Columbia Place Names*, has provided an excellent introduction to this facsimile reprint of Walbran's work. He rapidly sketches the Captain's career, warmly praises his enthusiasm, industry, and scholarship, finds pleasure in his occasional irrelevancies, and stresses "his tremendous sense of history." But he also finds faults and limitations: the work will remain valuable as a directory of place-name origins, but "time has left it out of date." Then there are "occasional strange omissions (where are Annacis Island and Blubber Bay? Nahwitti and Sechelt?)." And finally, "To a marked extent Walbran's *British Columbia Coast Names* is a Victoria book, the product of the cosy little society that existed there around the turn of the century." Some of this criticism is valid. There are some strange omissions, and some seven decades have seen the birth of new coastal names, such as Darby Channel, Ceepeecee, or Ioco. But the work has not been replaced by a successor and, taken as a whole, is not really out of date. Nor is it, I believe, the product of a cosy little society. Cosy? Snug, comfortable, sheltered, and thus warm? These words do not describe the daily life of Walbran nor of Walbran's friends and informants. They were, for the most part, men and women of action — pioneers, explorers, navigators, surveyors, hydrographers, missionaries, fur traders and factors — not people of the tea table, the boudoir, or the drawing room. No! Walbran's book is well muscled, and the breath that emanates from it is the breath of the sea and the mountains, of rivers and inlets, of rocks and shoals — not the perfumed breath of a warm and a sheltered society.

So I say again, with emphasis, it is a great and a most readable book, and much credit must be given to Mr. Jordan and the Vancouver Public Library for undertaking its republication.

Second in interest and significance is *1001 British Columbia Names* by G. P. V. Akrigg and Helen B. Akrigg. Beautifully designed and printed by the Morriss Printing Company Ltd. of Victoria, and dedicated to the memory of Mrs. Akrigg's father, "Ernest C. Manning, 1890-1941, after whom Manning Park was named," this work first appeared in September 1969. Its success was immediate. A second printing was called for in December, and a second edition with some revisions appeared in February 1970. Reasons for the work's unquestionable popularity need not be sought for; they are obvious. Since 1958 (the year that saw the publication of two beautiful and significant volumes, *British Columbia: A Cen-*

tenial Anthology, edited by R. E. Watters, and Dr. Margaret Ormsby's *British Columbia: A History*) we, the people of this province, have lived in an atmosphere of recurring centennial celebrations and have had our sense of history keenly sharpened. We have developed, in consequence, a deeper appreciation of the importance of the place names that are securely woven into the overall tapestry of history. Until the appearance of *1001 British Columbia Place Names* no published work had attempted any coverage of place names throughout the province as a whole. This volume does: it ranges widely and has richly informative and well-written entries on such places as Barkerville, Mount Begbie, Birkenhead River, Fort Steele, John Dean Park, Kalamalka Lake, Kamloops, Oliver, Revelstoke, Princeton, Penticton, Vernon, and Fernie, with its caustic editorial note on that rich coal area: "Such is the beginning of the Crowsnest coal industry, a story which will apparently end with the Japanese getting the coal, the Americans getting the profit, and the Canadians getting the devastated landscape left by strip-mining."

But for coastal names the work does not replace Walbran. True, it adds some names not found in the Captain's book, but for every added name a dozen or more are left out: no Beechey Head, no Eden Point, an Elk River in the eastern part of the province (with a confusing comment on stag, wapiti, and elk), but not the famous Elk River on Vancouver Island, no Gurd Island, no Trollope Point, and no Wrottelsley Mountain.

But perhaps I should not find fault because of these and many other omissions. They are to be expected, for the compilers have limited themselves to one thousand and one place names. But why? Did they consciously wish for a catchy title, or did they succumb to an evil spell cast upon them by the ghost of Scheherazade? I know not the answer, but the result is evident: useful within its limitations, the book is not a general reference work. The curious reader may well be enriched by some of the information but he will also meet with constant frustration. For example, I checked twenty-one names, blindly chosen; fourteen were not in the text. There was no Knouff, no Peterhope, no Deadman River (or Creek), no Hyas, no Pinaus, no Glimpse, no Hagensborg, no Tatla, no Topley (or Topley Landing), no Telkwa, no Deka, no Sulphurous, no Tunkwa, and — alas — no Tintagel.

Further frustrations arise from the deathly brevity of many too many entries. And here I shall let Dr. Akrigg speak for himself. In his introduction to Walbran he writes: "... how much more interesting and readable Walbran is than a modern compiler of reference works with his dessicated [*sic*] entries. One can readily imagine what the latter would do with the

naming of Marchant Rock: '*Marchant Rk*: for G. Marchant, early stmsph. capt.' Walbran tells the story properly." It happens there is no Marchant Rk. in the Akriggs book but examples of desiccated entries are all too easy to find. For example, the entry for Bennett Lake: "After James Gordon Bennett (1841-1918), proprietor of the *New York Herald*, famous in the history of American journalism." But where is the story? Why was Bennett's name attached to this northern lake and its village? Why no mention of the surge of gold seekers who pushed through Bennett during the Klondike days? And what of this complete entry for Galena Bay? "Galena is the lead sulphite ore in which lead is principally found." Or for Needles? "Originally 'The Needles.' The name comes from the long thin sand spits reaching into the lake here." But what is the lake and where is "here"? True, there is a grid reference — B-10 — but the grid (like nearly all grids on the book's map) is not blessed by many names and the reference is of little use. Out of desiccation again comes frustration.

Finally there is the failure to cite particular sources or to name authorities for the vast majority of the individual entries. Walbran, as I have already stated, provides the curious reader with a multitude of references or sign posts to further information. Not so the Akriggs. In their "Preface" they carefully acknowledge their general reference works and sources (Walbran's work, two works by Henry B. Wagner on Spanish explorations and cartography, Denys Nelson's "unpublished study of the place names of the Lower Fraser Valley," incidental works by A. G. Harvey, articles in the *B.C. Historical Quarterly*, and local histories) and they further state that they, themselves, have unearthed information: "First-hand research has seen us calling on benign old pioneers in their little homes, on crossroads stores, and even on an ancient Indian lying on his bed in a shanty on a reserve." But where in the text are these rich sources cited? Upon what authority does this or that entry rest? With rare exceptions, there is no answer. Perhaps some old benign pioneer provided this entry: "GUN CREEK . . . Also GUN LAKE. A gun was lost when a packhorse got drowned in the creek." Or some crossroads store this: "LAIDLAW . . . After Walter Forbes Laidlaw who once kept a small store here." Or the ancient Indian one or two of these: "SHALATH . . . The Indian name for Seton Lake." "INCOMAPPLEUX RIVER . . . From the Indian word meaning 'fish'." "PENNASK LAKE . . . From an Indian word meaning 'snowshoe,' having reference to the shape of the lake." "KLEENA KLEENE . . . This is said to mean 'the river of turns.'

It is worth noting that 'kleena' is an Indian word for oolachan grease." "PROPHET RIVER . . . A translation of the Indian name."

Yet, in spite of these criticisms, I must again emphasize the overall value of the work because of its broad scope. My hope is that this learned husband-and-wife team will still pursue, with unflagging energy, this "hobby which matches in fascination any other kind of collecting." And this they have promised to do, for the last page of the second edition bears its own caption: "*L'Envoi . . . A Continuing Project.*" By the removal of some dead wood, by the enlargement of entries that are all too brief, by the citation of sources or authorities when such citation might be useful, and by removal of the artificial limitation imposed by the magic "1001" they may well produce a great work on the place names of this province — a work that with each entry will stir the imagination and enrich the mind of the reader.

Of *Place Names of the Pacific Northwest Coast* I could say little, or much. I prefer to say little. Compiled by Mrs. Lynn Middleton, a true native of the province who has cruised its coastal waters by sailboat and by power, she obviously knows the coast, and loves what she knows. But love alone is not enough.

In some two hundred and twenty-six pages she records somewhat more than fourteen hundred entries (against Walbran's slightly more than twelve hundred entries in five hundred and forty-six pages), and she achieves this total not only by adding American names (chiefly from Washington but some from Oregon) but also by the inclusion of local place names that have come into being in recent years. In this way she has updated Walbran, but she has also dropped many names recorded by her distinguished forerunner.

In two pages entitled "Acknowledgements" she gives a most unsatisfactory bibliography of sources (no places of publication, generally no publishers, and no dates), and frankly says: "I have quoted freely from many volumes and without mention in the text, as I feel this procedure can become a distraction in the continuity of the stories told herein." All well and good. But the result is that hundreds of entries are simply shortened Walbran — word for word. As the *New Yorker* might say, it is a volume packed with many strange coincidences.

Moreover, in her attempts to condense Walbran she at times gets strangely confused. Her entry on Granville Channel is a classic example of a misreading of a text and her entry on Destruction Island is inaccurate and slovenly.

Many of the entries are too brief to be informative (for example, the

entry for Vancouver and Vancouver Island is less than a page, and that for Victoria is less than a quarter of a page) and when Mrs. Middleton does expand the expansion is all too often a digression that has little to do with the name of a place. Under the entry for Douglas Channel, for example, she gives up the best part of two pages to quote from Douglas's inaugural speech before the Legislature in 1856 but says little about Douglas himself. And having closed the quotation she drifts into this foggy passage: "The following is a quote from 'The Makers of Canada' Volume XX, by R. H. Coates and R. E. Gosnell lends a slightly bizarre aspect when comparing our present budget. With this exordium the legislature proceeded to its duties."

This disaster may be the result of sloppy proofreading but it is evident elsewhere that Mrs. Middleton is not a disciplined writer. The opening lines of her foreword — "Always in the heart of man springs Desire" — are sufficient proof of my point:

It is only fitting that the intent of this bibliography is, and has been since its conception dedicated to our contemporary maritime explorers, for this West Coast was discovered, named and colonized by just such a uniformity of peoples, certainly more dauntless and courageous, but nevertheless, all with a common temperament, a distinctive love of the sea, and ships, be they large or small, power or sail.

Finally, the book itself, in spite of a good jacket, is not physically attractive. The entries are crowded into two columns to the page, the reproductions of a large number of photographs and some engravings are, with few exceptions, mediocre, and the two maps (actually reproductions of two indexes to Canadian Hydrographic charts) used for end papers are so small and cluttered that they are well nigh useless.

So the summary is this: the good Captain Walbran still stands alone on his bridge — the writer of a monumental work, the true begetter of the study of place names in this province. The Akriggs, by their broader approach, have made a valuable and a unique contribution to the toponomy of this, our land. And Mrs. Middleton, with enthusiasm and undoubted love for her subject, has provided some information not to be found in the pages of her distinguished predecessor nor within the volume by her scholarly contemporaries.