

# Toponymy 101

# D: The geographical and...

## or, Placenames Don't Lie

In this article I continue the theme of how placenames play a role in our day-to-day lives. Naturally, they play an indispensable role on maps, because without them, maps would be of little or no use. But of course, they must be accurately named and located. Care must be taken when providing maps for the military, because when British forces went to France in WWI, the maps they were carrying had discrepant names. Soldiers had much trouble aligning the English exonyms appearing on their maps with the French endonyms they saw on road signs etc.<sup>1</sup> This fiasco led the Admiralty to form the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN) in 1919.

At the most basic level, toponyms are markers of geographic features—this is generally achieved by the generic element. However, this can also be achieved through the specific element, and thus toponyms can provide geographers (and geologists) with information about environmental changes. A toponym often contains an internal clue to the former state of the feature. Some examples of placenames in New York are useful to illustrate:

- *Fresh Kills* from Dutch *kille* 'riverbed/water channel'
- *Gramercy* from Dutch *krom-marisje* 'crooked marsh'
- *Greenwich (Village)* from Dutch *groenwyc* 'verdant district'
- *Wall Street* from Dutch *wal* 'wharf/dock'
- *Bushwick* from Dutch *boschwyck* 'forest district'



Another nice example from North America is that of *Salinas* (California). John Steinbeck, who was a native of Salinas, reports: "The place that was to become Salinas was a series of tule-grown swamps, which toward the end of the summer dried and left a white deposit of alkali. It was this appearance of salt that gave the place

its name.' (Steinbeck 1955: 58)

The capital of The Netherlands, Amsterdam, provides another good example. Its name derives from *Amstelredamme*, which indicates the city's origin as a *dam* of the river *Amstel*. One of Amsterdam's outer suburbs, *Koog aan de Zaan*, means 'Koog on the Zaan (River)' (a *koog* being an area of marshy land outside the dyke). There is no *koog* there any longer, since it is reclaimed dry land.

An example from the opposite side of the globe is the Fijian island *Tavua*, literally 'place of fire'.



In 1998 it was discovered that this island was an active volcano some 3000 years ago. Even though Fiji was first settled by the Lapita people some 3500 years ago, there is no Fijian oral tradition of volcanoes, nor does any Fijian language have a word for 'volcano'. (Neither did English, for that matter—we borrowed the word from Italian.) Whatever knowledge the first Fijians had of volcanoes in Vanuatu or the Solomons, where they came from, must have been lost over the generations, and the word for 'volcano' with it. However, most intriguingly, there are two mountains named *Tavuyaga* /tah-vu-'yahng-uh/ in Fiji: the name is derived from *tavu* 'burn', so it can be analysed as meaning 'burning place', hence 'volcano'. Again, the question arises: 'Could these have been active volcanoes within the last 3000 years, when Fiji was occupied?' The study of placenames certainly admits this possibility, but received geological knowledge has always denied it—until recently. If geographers had seriously looked at the study of toponymy, they would have long since discovered the error of their ways regarding Fiji's geographic and geological history. The moral of the story is 'placenames don't lie!'

## ...economic significance of toponyms

An example from our own backyard is Sydney's *Garden Island*. If you look at a modern map of Port Jackson, you will see that it isn't an island at all. But as the photo below shows, it used to be. So that's how Sydney's naval base got its name.



*Garden Island, Sydney (c. 1929)*

Sometimes, however, when humans alter the physical geography of a place or region, the placename is also changed. Such a case is the *Zuiderzee* 'Southern Sea', which was a shallow bay of the North Sea that formed a deep recess into the northwest of The Netherlands. Its name originates in the northern Dutch province of Friesland, which lies to its north (cf. the *North Sea*). In 1927 work began on enclosing the bay by constructing a 32 km long dyke or causeway (the *Afsluitdijk* 'Closure Dyke') between the southern tip of Friesland and the



*Part of the Afsluitdijk between Friesland and North Holland, The Netherlands. The IJsselmeer to the right, the North Sea to the left.*

*(Photo: Jan Tent)*

northern tip of North Holland. In 1932 work was completed closing off the *Zuiderzee* from the North Sea. The *IJssel River* (a tributary of the Rhine) emptied into the newly formed lake, thereby transforming it into an artificial freshwater lake, and subsequently obtained the name *IJsselmeer* (*Lake IJssel*).

When you look at a general reference map, or more specifically, compare a political map with a physical map or topographical map of a certain region, you will quickly see a strong correlation between the distribution of toponyms and toponym types, and that of the topographic features. For example, grassland and desert regions will have fewer toponyms overall, but certainly also fewer hydrographic and vegetation feature names. Therefore, looking at toponyms collectively is also a good indicator of a region's topography or physical geography.

### 'Money makes the world go around...'

Toponyms also have an important impact upon matters economic. They are important to brand names, produce, marketing, real estate, and tourism. In recent years, French producers of wines and cheeses have fought to maintain exclusive rights over the use of their brand names based on local placenames. Australian and New Zealand vintners and caseiculturists (cheesemakers) have followed suit. (But more on this topic in a forthcoming 'Toponymy 101' instalment.)

One economic success story concerning a locally produced product is that of the Chinese gooseberry.<sup>2</sup> In 1962, New Zealand growers began calling it *kiwifruit* to create more market appeal. It was a very clever tactic given the word *kiwi* is a colloquial reference New Zealanders and *Kiwiland* to the country itself. *Kiwifruit* has since become the common world-wide name for the fruit.

### *Location, location, location!*

This is the oft-quoted catchcry of the real estate agent or property investor. Property values are strongly influenced by location—but also, by association, the name of the location.<sup>3</sup> Some nice empirical data to support this is provided by Cameron Dark in his *Placenames Australia* article (September 2015) on toponyms and their effect on Sydney property prices.

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The region name *Sunshine Coast* was launched in 1958 by the Real Estate Institute of Queensland to replace *Near North Coast*, which was not considered distinct enough and which had 'no significance for southerners'. *Sunshine Coast* was officially adopted in 1966, signifying brightness and warmth, and providing a complementary attraction to the *Gold Coast*. Other commercially attractive toponyms coined in the region include: *Pacific Paradise* (named by P.P. Development Pty Ltd in 1959), and *Sunshine Beach* (coined and marketed after WWII by real estate developer T.M. Burke. It was previously known as *Golden Beach*, but was rarely visited until after the renaming).

The relationship between higher property values and toponyms can also work in reverse, the toponym of a location with high property values becoming a marketable asset itself. A nice example is that of the NSW Central Coast beach *Copacabana Beach*, so named by real estate developers Willmore & Randell, copying the name of the famous beach in Rio de Janeiro.

A recent notable example in Sydney is the naming of the new inner-Sydney suburb now known as *Barangaroo*. The NSW Government called for suggestions to name an urban renewal site at Darling Harbour East. One suggestion was *The Hungry Mile*, which was the colloquial name given by harbour-side workers to a stretch of Hickson Road during the Great Depression. Workers would walk from wharf to wharf in search of a job, often failing to find one. This name was ruled out.<sup>4</sup> Instead, *Barangaroo* was chosen to honour the wife of Bennelong, after whom *Bennelong Point* (the site of the Opera House) is named. These two names make for a nice symmetry of names on either side of the Harbour Bridge.

The naming and renaming of places to increase the marketability of real estate developments or holiday resorts is a common practice. So, it comes as no surprise that a number of resort islands in Fiji, especially those off the western coast of the main island of Viti Levu, have been given over to the tourist trade and developers, and have regrettably had their traditional Fijian names replaced by banal introduced names such as *Beachcomber Island*, *Castaway Island*, *Bounty Island*, *Musket Cove Island* and *Treasure Island*, with the sole purpose of attracting

tourists from Australia and New Zealand, along with their dollars.

### One man's Toorak is not that of another

The Melbourne suburb of Toorak is known as a very salubrious and upmarket area. So when European settlers in Fiji arrived at what is now known as Suva in the late 19th century, they named one of its suburbs after this Melbourne suburb. However, Toorak in Suva is certainly not a salubrious or upmarket area: in fact, it is quite the reverse. So that attempt of settlers in Suva to emulate Melbourne's famous suburb has backfired somewhat.

Since the grisly discovery of eight bodies in barrels in a disused bank building in Snowtown (SA) in 1999, property prices have slumped, making it extremely difficult to sell property there. There was talk of changing its name to Rosetown, but to no avail. In the words of the local electrician, Alan Large: 'We're Snowtown people, we just carry on.' The notoriety of the murders was such that it led to a short-term economic boom from tourists visiting Snowtown, but it also created a lasting stigma.



On a slightly different tack, though still to do with the status of a placename, is an example I remember my father telling me about. In the 1950s he worked as a manager at the IBM typewriter plant in Amsterdam, and some of his colleagues lived in Diemen, a neighbouring town, though still within the Amsterdam metropolitan area. It had the reputation of being a lower socio-economic area. Diemen is pronounced /'dee-muhn/, but many of those who lived there preferred to pronounce it with a pseudo-French pronunciation viz. /'dee-mō/ in an attempt to make the place sound more up-market. Naturally that



# ...Geography and Economics

was laughed at. This small anecdote and all the above just go to illustrate that ‘The name does matter!’

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> **Endonym** ‘a locally used placename, or a placename in one of the languages occurring in the area where the placename is located’, e.g. *Wien*; **exonym** ‘a name used by speakers of other languages instead of a native name’, e.g. *Vienna*. In other words, exonyms differ in their forms from the name used in the official language or languages of the area where the geographical feature is situated.

<sup>2</sup> See: ‘The two-way relationship between a brand and its place of origin’ <<http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/the-two-way-relationship-between-a-brand-and-its-place-of-origin/>>; Mateo, Cristina & Gildo Seisdedos (2010). ‘Different branding strategies from the use of the territory of origin by commercial brands: the brand-territory matrix’ <<http://bestplaceinstytut.org/www/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/BrandterritoryMatrix.pdf>>

<sup>3</sup> See: ‘What’s in a name?’ <<http://www.yourinvestmentpropertymag.com.au/buying-property/whats-in-a-name-119835.aspx>>; ‘Property in USA’ <<http://www.property4peanuts.com/property-in-usa-news-572.html>>; ‘Crescent address adds 40% to prime London home value’

<<http://www.opp-connect.com/02/05/2014/crescent-address-adds-40-to-prime-london-home-value/>>; ‘Rude street names lead to cut in house prices’ <<http://www.scotsman.com/news/odd/rude-street-names-lead-to-cut-in-house-prices-1-3317869>>

<sup>4</sup> See: ‘Hungry Mile gets minor role’ <<http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/hungry-mile-gets-minor-role/2006/09/11/1157826874231.html>>

<sup>5</sup> See: ‘Snowtown living with a death penalty’ <<http://www.theage.com.au/national/snowtown-living-with-a-death-penalty-20110506-1ec90.html#ixzz30ilajpw>>

## References

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**Jan Tent**

[In our next issue, Jan will continue his series of Toponymy 101 with ‘How placenames define our world’]

## Placenames Puzzle Number 60

### Oxymorons

*An oxymoron is a figure of speech that juxtaposes elements which seem contradictory: bitter sweet, cheerful pessimist, and civil war. The following clues reveal ‘awfully good’ examples of oxymoronic placenames. For example:*

*(NSW) the town can’t make up its mind whether it is sick or not ... Crookwell.*

- (NSW) a vale with a lofty view of itself
- (NSW) a rather deflated small valley or watercourse
- (QLD) a level knoll
- (NSW) a creek that believes its one-mile length is not enough
- (NSW, SA, TAS) an elongated dot
- (any State) a waterless watercourse
- (QLD) an inland body of water consisting of woodland
- (NSW) a marsh that believes it’s as big and as watery as a large sea
- (WA) a hummock that has visions of being an alp

- (VIC) a pass or opening that also has designs on being an alp
- (NSW) a nature reserve that thinks it’s a marine body measured in lots of 4,840 square yards
- (NSW) a cistern holding a small ocean
- (QLD) a small ocean that has aspirations of being a mound
- (TAS) a hillock that doesn’t know whether it wants to be a much larger one or simply a dale
- (NSW) a road junction that’s not satisfied with being a right angle
- (NSW) an inland body of water that wishes it were a flat landscape instead
- (NT, TAS) a vale that has sights on being convex
- (NT, SA, QLD, TAS) a cove with the same aspirations as 17
- (QLD) a pit that doesn’t want to be hollow but level
- (Australian Antarctic Territory) land surrounded by water that just wants to be an inland water feature

[Compiled by: **Jan Tent**]

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|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Valley Heights  | 6. Dry River / Creek | 11. Sea Acres Nature Resv. | 16. Lake Plain  |
| 2. Flat Gully      | 7. Forest Lake       | 12. Sea Tank               | 17. Valley Hill |
| 3. Flat Hill       | 8. Ocean Swamp       | 13. Sea Hill               | 18. Bay Hill    |
| 4. Long Mile Creek | 9. Mount Hill        | 14. Mountain Vale Hill     | 19. Flat Hole   |
| 5. Long Point      | 10. Mount Gap        | 15. Round Corner           | 20. Lake Island |