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LITERARY REFERENCES TO BRITISH COUNTY NAMES

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Recent changes in the medieval names of British counties (or "shires") provide a fascinating topic for study.

At the American Name Society's annual meeting in San Francisco late in December, 1979, I reported on the changes effected in England and Wales. That paper, with modifications, will be published in 1981 in the Connecticut Onomastic Review. I now raise the question, What may we expect to encounter, in the light of the past, in references to British county names in literature? As my listeners at Brockport have not all had the opportunity to learn about the historical background of the changes, some repetition of the earlier paper seems desirable.

Let us look first at England and Wales, combined administratively as a single unit...

Even as early as the Sixteenth Century, this predominantly agricultural kingdom was experiencing considerable industrial and commercial development. Hence continual tinkering with the structure of government was attempted to enable the authorities at each level to cope with ever-growing, ever-shifting social and economic

needs. The tremendous expansion in population, with new distribution patterns, necessitated ever-more-frequent piecemeal modernization in the Nineteenth Century. The last substantial adjustment was made in 1933.

But the local government reorganization in 1974 was on a much grander scale. While attempting to preserve and increase grass-roots democracy, it proposed to save a great deal of money in administrative costs. It reduced the number of councils by eliminating hundreds of boroughs, urban districts, rural districts, and what-not. Public services in 1974 amounted to £5,000,000,000 annually, and employed 2,000,000 people! Big business, indeed—and hence expensive.

Faster and more efficient action would be achieved by the clear definition of the functions of each authority in handling the hundreds of responsibilities of modern government for public services, such as education, care of the poor, public health, public libraries, area planning, parks, police and fire protection, water supply and sewage, road construction and maintenance, harbors, canals, and docks, and bridges.

The county name changes occurred after these preliminaries:

- 1967 Reports by Maud and Mallaby Committees.
- 1969 Reports by Redcliffe-Maud Commission.
- 1971 Government White Papers. Document on Wales.
- 1972 Baines Committee Report.
- Local Government Act of Parliament.

Following the election of councilmen at the county and lower levels, the new structure came into operation on 1 April 1974.

Even though long, thorough studies had been completed, with hearings everywhere, public protest, chiefly sentimental in favor of tradition, was vociferous as soon as the new plan went into effect. But wisely, provision for periodic review, with earlier adjustment possible, had been built into the plan. So far (as of April 1981 as this volume goes to press) the names have stuck.

The actual number of counties, curiously enough, remains at 53. Old counties vanished, however, and new counties came into being. Most of the boundaries were redrawn, so that care must be exercised in assuming that place-names, when a county keeps its former name, continue to lie within it.

The importance of the changes will be understood if one realizes that maps the world over showing the United Kingdom became outdated in 1974, and that comparative statistics in education and economics and other fields became invalid insofar as they related to counties.

So immense was metropolitan London that Parliament could not tackle its local problems, and left unchanged the City and the boroughs—boroughs having been abolished everywhere else.

Likewise, the problem of regionalism—the need for a level of administration between the central government and the counties—remained unsolved, although in Scotland (as will be seen presently) a solution was found with consequent major changes in the county system.

What exactly were the changes in England counties? Seven medieval names vanished completely: Cumberland, Huntingdonshire, the Isle of Ely, Monmouthshire, wee Rutlandshire (with a population under 30,000; compare Lancashire, with more than 5,000,000), Shropshire, and Westmorland. Six new "metropolitan counties" were created: Greater Manchester, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, Tyne and Wear, West Midlands, and West Yorkshire. Fourteen new county names were born in England, but of these, five are but fresh divisions of two former counties: East Sussex, West Sussex, North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, and West Yorkshire.

The nine names which are onomastically truly "new" are as follows:

1. AVON, named for the Bristol Avon River.
2. CLEVELAND, named for a district in Yorkshire.
3. CUMBRIA, named for an ancient kingdom.

4. GREATER MANCHESTER, named for the Midlands city.
5. HUMBERSIDE, named for the estuary of the Trent and Ouse Rivers flowing into the North Sea.
6. MERSEYSIDE, named for a river flowing into the Irish Sea.
7. SALOP, a folk-name applied to the town of Shrewsbury, later to the county of Shropshire.
8. TYNE AND WEAR, named for two rivers flowing into the North Sea.
9. WEST MIDLANDS, named for part of the central region commonly known as "The Midlands."

Three of the new names cited above relate to literary matters directly. To the British, but even more to Americans, AVON seems an unhappy choice, for one thinks immediately of Shakespeare's Stratford-on-Avon, and there is actually a third river of the same name in England. CUMBRIA (an ancient Latin word derived from the Gaelic) was used poetically by Wordsworth. And SALOP, which to some seems horrible—although I myself do not find it uneuphonious (cf. "shallop"), and admire the preservation of quaint antiquities—makes The Shropshire Lad of A. E. Housman (my Latin professor at the University of Cambridge) passé as a title.

As for Wales, twelve counties became eight, so the names are all new. Some of the former names were at least partly of Welsh origin, but the new names go back still farther: five are derived from the designations of kingdoms or smaller political entities: GLWYD, DYFED,

GWENT, GWYNNED, and POWYS. GLAMORGAN alone survives, truncated. With the pronunciation and geographical location indicated, the new names are as follows:

1. CLWYD (pron. klood, oo as in food), NE.
2. DYFED (pron. duh-fed, uh as in huh, e as in bed), W.
3. GWENT, SE.
4. GWYNNED (pron. gwin-ed, i as in win, e as in bed), NW.
5. MID GLAMORGAN, S.
6. POWYS (pron. po'-is, o as in so, i as in this), C.
7. SOUTH GLAMORGAN, S.
8. WEST GLAMORGAN, S.

Of these eight, DYFED, GWENT, GWYNNED, and POWYS are mentioned in The Mabinogion (more correctly, The Mabinogion), a collection of four folk poems esteemed by the Cymri as their greatest piece of ancient literature.

Let me here interpose the onomatologist's frequent complaint: That opportunities for creativity are often missed. A city name to form GREATER MANCHESTER? Compass directions to compound GLAMORGAN, SUSSEX, and YORKSHIRE? Hardly imaginative appellations!

We come now to the situation in Scotland, that proudly separate quirky nation within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. By the Local Government (Scotland) Act of Parliament in 1973, effective 1 May 1975, counties were abolished. But the official document states that "county names can still be used —for example, for postal purposes."

—A plain instance of eating your haggis and having it too. For the former counties, no longer administrative units, have been transmogrified into "districts," named either by their old county designations or by other place-names. "Regions" were established grouping these districts, and some of these take former county names. Administratively, the new system succeeded in doing what the other nation to the south has not yet achieved—i.e. providing a badly needed layer of authority between the central government and the local government.

So there are now nine regions; three island groups, and "a mighty lot of districts" (as one commentator puts it)—fifty-two:

Happily, none of the old Scots county names has disappeared. Let us rejoice that The Heart of Midlothian, Ayrshire, and other place-names of literary importance will not need footnoting for future generations!

After a good deal of background preparation, with literary comments introduced here and there, it is time to return to the question proposed at the beginning of this paper: What may we expect to encounter, in the light of the past, in references to British county names in literature?

Looking backward, I have been astonished to find

that county names were very rarely mentioned in the works of the standard British poets, playwrights, and novelists for whom computer concordances exist. Browning, Collins, and Shaw never referred to them. Arnold, Byron, and Shelley did so only once. Milton twice used a single name. Shakespeare used only two—and if you are surprised, remember that in his day a royal or noble title did not necessarily pertain to what in our time would be termed a "county." Wordsworth used twelve—including CUMBRIA (see above).

For most authors of the past, concordances—whether or not constructed with the help of the computer—simply do not exist. And living authors who are still writing cannot of course be tested by the use of concordances.

It may well be that someone else will recall that somewhere the author of a play, a short story, a novel, a poem, a letter, a biography, a diary, or whatever does refer repeatedly to a county name. You would think that a regional novelist might make a better showing, but Hardy doesn't.

Is the matter important? Hardly, but it arouses my curiosity. In a modern suspense story, a character gives an unexpected humorous importance of sorts to county names, one of those he mentions having gone with the wind (Carmarthenshire in Wales):

"I'm a great believer in names," Hubert said portentously. "You may wonder why I named my boy Leicestershire. 'Smatter of fact I said Worcestershire, but Dora howled like a wolf at bay. I knew a talentless man named Bill Hunter. Next thing was he called himself William Carmarthen-shire Hunter and people fell over themselves offering him executive jobs. Another man called Harry Rogers took the hint and blossomed forth as Harold Lancashire Rogers and now he runs a Rolls. If you have a county in your name, you can't do wrong. The boy'll live to bless me!"

-- Kenneth Giles: A Provenance of Death.
New York: cl966.

Already the new names are appearing. I've found only one example, in another suspense story. After commenting on the effects of name-changing on Scottish politics—Laborites in the cities, Conservatives in rural areas—the author writes of "the huge, amorphous region of Strathclyde, which covered half of Scotland," and goes on for a page which will interest you if you are beginning to warm to my topic; I refer you to Dominic Devine's Sunk without Trace (New York, 1979, Page 166).

The new names exist, and their very novelty will attract writers occasionally. The old names, some of them, have gone... The map of Great Britain is not the same...

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NOTES

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