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Notes on the Systematic Study

OF

OUR ENGLISH PLACE-NAMES.

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I HAD the honour, some years ago, of reading in this room before the Society of Antiquaries, a paper on the Settlement of the Saxons in Essex and Sussex, in which I dwelt on the great value of the study of Place-names for our early history, and urged "the practical impossibility of accomplishing any scientific work in this department of research until the place-names of England have been classified and traced to their origin."* I ventured then to express the hope that we might see "this urgent work undertaken, county by county, on much the same lines as those adopted by the Government in France. It seems to me," I added, "to be eminently a subject for discussion at the Annual Congress of Archæological Societies." Consequently, when Mr. Nevill suggested that the time had now come for the Congress to take up some fresh work, I brought forward this subject, and it received at once the Committee's approval. Since then the British Museum has rendered a great service to antiquaries by the publication of an index to the place-names contained in

* This paper has since been printed in my *Commune of London and Other Studies* (Archibald Constable and Co.).

its rolls and charters, for which it is claimed that one of its "chief points of interest and value lies in the evolution of modern place-names from the early forms found in the oldest documents." Here, then, we have the first step that has been taken in this country towards such an undertaking as I hope to see carried out.

There are two grounds on which the present time is peculiarly suitable for putting it in hand. The first is the great increase, of late, in the available material, owing to the publication of records by Government, by societies, and even by individuals; the other is the change that, in this generation, is passing over the face of the country. I am confirmed by the Deputy Keeper of the Records in the belief that the new edition of the Ordnance Survey omits ancient place-names that were still to be found in its predecessor. Railways alone have done much in shifting the balance of population, in reducing the importance of old villages, and causing new ones to spring up; and agricultural depression is affecting the map as surely as the conversion of arable into pasture in the agricultural revolution of the 16th Century; the great towns, again, are rapidly absorbing and effacing villages of which the names may be found even in Domesday Book. As an expert on this subject observed to me last week, antiquaries two generations hence may be seeking the origin of a district's name, which was really given by a speculative builder who called it after one of his daughters. Some changes in nomenclature are due to a subtler cause; the too ingenious antiquary has much, I fear, to answer for. In Worcestershire, Ab (or Hab) Lench kept the name it possessed in Domesday down to the other day, but has now become Abbot's Lench, having never, to my knowledge, had anything to do with an Abbot. In Northamptonshire, the "Holewelle" of Domesday remained undisturbed till, promoted to an ecclesiastical district, it became Holy Well. In Essex, our Society, last year, visited Stow Maries, which is known to have derived its name from the family of Marice or Morice, and discovered it beginning

to blossom out into Stowe St. Mary, the change, which began on the Church bills, having already reached the sign posts. As ecclesiastically-minded ladies would say, the new names are much "nicer," but they breathe the spirit, I venture to think, of Church restoration at its worst.

Now these examples have a real moral, a lesson that we need to bear in mind. The influence on our place-names of folk-etymology has been far greater, probably, than is supposed. If such changes as these I have glanced at are possible even at the present day, what could not be effected when all spelling was uncertain, and when maps were as yet unknown? for folk-etymology has been always with us, and the too ingenious antiquary is no modern phenomenon. Even Henry of Huntingdon could hardly mention a place without proceeding to explain the meaning of its name; and Robert of Gloucester explained that Colchester derived its name from King Coel. Colchester proved itself worthy of the tale, and showed not only his statue and his sword but even his "kitchen" and his "pump." It is now proposing to place his Arms on its new Town Hall, having, I observe, obtained them for the purpose from "Heralds' College, London."

It is on account of the influence of this folk-etymology that I dispute the claim of the philologist to explain place-names by his laws. His laws fail from the same cause as the laws of political economy; they ignore the human element. I have observed that if you tell a philologist what a place-name originally was, and what it is now, he will produce a law with a long name which accounts for the change to perfection, but if he is not supplied with that preliminary information, his laws are by no means a sure guide to the modern forms of an ancient name. Let me cite, from a single county, two instances as a test. The name of Chaddesley Corbett, Worcestershire, suggests that there must have been some other Chaddesley in the county from which it had to be distinguished. And research will show that in the 12th Century there actually was such a place, which appears as "Chaddesleia." But this latter

place has now become "Chaceley," while the other remains "Chaddesley." So, again, the "Biselege" of Domesday has become "Bisley," in Gloucestershire, while in Worcestershire, some ten miles off, it has become "Bushley," a fact which, even now, proves confusing to students. It is obvious that no philological "law" can account for name-developments so different as these.

Cognate to the process of folk-etymology is that marked tendency of our people to introduce the syllable "ing" into place-names which did not contain it. In the Paper to which I have alluded I dwelt on the enormous importance attached by such scholars as Kemble, Stubbs, Green, and Canon Taylor, to the existence of *ing* in place-names as evidence of clan-settlement, and I pointed out that, even apart from other possible criticisms, the scientific study of our place-names would prove that in many cases the *ing* was a mere corruption. A curious instance came before me only the other day. The City of Hereford appears in Domesday as "Hereford port," but a Worcestershire Hereford, by the addition of "tun," becomes Herefordtun, and in Domesday "Herferthun," and finally by a process of corruption "Harvington." Nothing at first sight could be less likely than the true derivation of the name, and Kemble accepted its present form as proof that the place was the home of the Harvings, or as he termed them the Horfingas. By a no less strange corruption the "Widemondefort" of Domesday, the "Withermundeford" of charters, became our Essex Wormingford. The name, of course, was claimed by Kemble as evidence of its settlement by a Worming clan, but we have got beyond the clan now; we have discovered the totem, and we run him for all he's worth. The Wormings, therefore, are claimed as totemists, sons of the Worm, and as you must never eat your totem, we discover that this interesting clan cannot have lived on a diet of worms. You may think that I am jesting, but Mr. Grant Allen, under the auspices of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, included Wormingford among the place-names leading to "the almost

resistible inference that at some earlier period the Anglo-Saxons had been totemists."*

I have tried to bring home to you, by actual instances, the strange theories, historical and other, to which students have been led by the change and corruption in place-names; and in the Paper to which I have referred I have shown how, largely through the influence of Kemble, their erroneous derivation has affected our views on our early history. In doing this, it has been my object to plead for their systematic treatment in the belief that such treatment will not only save us from much error but will enable students to arrive at conclusions of great importance. They can hardly be expected at present to work out for themselves the history of every name with which they are called upon to deal. So brilliant a scholar as Professor Maitland has observed, for instance, in his great work on *Domesday Book and Beyond*, that Amport, Hants, derives its suffix from having been at some early date a port or market town. Now it can be shown that this place was in Domesday simply Anne, and derived its suffix "port" from the Norman family of de Port, which then held it, and which was itself named from Port-en-Bessin. There are many other interesting cases of English names incorporating those of foreign families or individuals. If our place-names had received scientific treatment as in France, scholars would have ready to their hands the whole material in a trustworthy form instead of being driven, as now, to guesswork, or to virtually prohibitive toil.

The mere collection of local names on a scale as exhaustive as possible, will prove that some of the oldest are now among the least known. Manors of great antiquity have often vanished from the map, while the names of others may only be preserved by a farm, by a wood, or by a lane. The ancient names of our Hundreds, often now obsolete, call for special attention, representing as they sometimes do, the meeting place of primitive settlers. And, to turn to a later time, the coming

* *Anglo-Saxon Britain*, p. 81.

of alien lords is recalled by the names of the castles they erected at "Montacute" and at "Pleshy," at "Richmond" and at "Belvoir."

As to the method of the treatment to be adopted, I do not propose to deal with it in detail, but rather to elicit from this Congress an expression of opinion that the work ought to be taken in hand. Should it be pleased to refer the subject to a Special Committee, the whole matter could be carefully considered and a scheme of work drawn up for uniform adoption throughout the country. For that such work should be uniform. I need scarcely say, is essential.

I referred at the outset to the lines adopted by the Government in France as a guide to ourselves in the matter. French scholars are justly proud of the *Dictionnaire Topographique de la France comprenant les noms de lieu anciens et modernes*. This great undertaking is printed at the national expense, and describes itself as "published by order of the Minister of Public Instruction and under the direction of the Historical Works Commission." But the system is strictly a local one in practice, inasmuch as it is carried out department by department. Moreover, the assistance of a local society, if one exists, is secured, and the volume produced under its auspices by some qualified Scholar. In this series an introduction to the volume deals with the geography, geology, history, and ancient divisions, ecclesiastical and administrative divisions, and so forth of the department. But the body of the work consists of its place-names in alphabetical order. Hamlets, manors, fiefs, farms, streams, hills, and similar objects are included, but not mere field-names.* The essential feature, however, is that the date and the authority for each form of the name cited is given, as is done with all words in our New English Dictionary. Alphabetical lists are given, for reference, of all the sources of information employed,

* Genuinely ancient field-names are often of great interest, but the modern ones, of little or no value, now swamp them.

printed and manuscript, and formidable lists they are. A "table des formes anciennes," that is, the Latinised forms, for cross reference, completes the volume.

We should, I think, certainly retain the above essential feature in any scheme we may adopt, but should add, when well established, those peculiar local pronunciations which are now rapidly being lost. And I would make the further suggestion that certain selected sources of information* should be systematically read for the purpose by volunteer helpers, as has been done to supply the material for the New English Dictionary. Those who are willing so to assist should inform their local society, and might perhaps enlist others. We are so rich in mediæval records that we should not only illustrate the origin and history of existing names, but bring, I believe, to light many that are now forgotten. Lastly, I desire to make it clear that the scheme I suggest will not comprise philological speculation. It aims only at collecting the evidence in a trustworthy and scientific form, a process which, in many cases, will suffice to guide us to the origin of a name.

My own work has lain so largely among records of the 12th and 11th centuries that the need of the work I am advocating is continually brought home to me. The Deputy Keeper of the Records, to whom I spoke lately on the subject, told me that he thought the idea excellent, and I think we might fairly reckon on the approval of the Public Record Office, which is doing so much itself, by its noble series of Calendars, to illustrate our local history and identify our ancient place-names. In the striking words of Professor Maitland: "The map of England is the most wonderful of all palimpsests, could we but decipher it," and it is because I agree with him that much of our history that is still dark is written in the names that our remote forefathers gave to their English homes that I ask you, as a Congress, to express the

* Some printed works are not trustworthy for the purpose.

opinion that the scientific treatment of our place-names on a uniform system throughout the country is a task that ought to be taken in hand, and that is likely to prove of high value for the knowledge of our early history.

