



PLACING NAMES

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time capsules, capable of preserving a kind of memory. If Juliet were to ask, ‘what’s in a place name?’, we could reply: ‘a description of the place itself’. *Cambridge*: a bridge over the river Cam. *Oxford*: the place where oxen ford.

But language and landscape evolve at a different speeds. In *A System of Logic* (1843), John Stuart Mill wonders what would happen if the River Dart ran dry, replaced by desert sands. Would the name ‘Dartmouth’ still function? Yes, he says, for names are both connotative and denotative. While ‘Dartmouth’ would no longer connote ‘the mouth of the river Dart’, it could still successfully denote the same area of land. In a recent article for *Essays in Criticism*, I argue that something has been left out of Mill’s equation. If some toponyms function as phonetic photographs, linguistic representations of historical perception, what happens when those names are forcibly overwritten through occupation or regime change? Whose memories are lost?

My article, ‘Heaney, Joyce: Namings and Nation’, examines how the poet Seamus Heaney invests place names with archaeological significance. In *Wintering Out* (1972), he imagines that etymologies (like landscapes) contain fossilized histories of past inhabitants. I am interested in how this imagery supports certain political and national agendas, echoing late nineteenth-century debates about a ‘de-Anglicised’ Ireland. Heaney insists that his method derives from techniques found in the work of James Joyce. I tease out how this influence surfaces and why the author of *Ulysses* changes how we read Heaney’s early poetry.

Crossing a bridge over the river Charles on a recent visit to Cambridge, Massachusetts, I paused for a moment ... before hurrying off to a lecture hall, where a conference awaited.

Hunter Dukes

Junior Research Fellow
Peterhouse

I’ve been preoccupied with place names for the last few years, prompted by my move to Cambridge. I grew up in Massachusetts, near places called ‘Bourne’ and ‘Milton,’ ‘Newton’ and ‘Newmarket.’ You can imagine my surprise, when — exploring East Anglia by bicycle — I discovered that all of these towns were just a few miles from the Faculty of English. It is an uncanny experience to find the familiar amidst the strange. By moving abroad, I was also, in some sense, returning home.

Of course, these correspondences are not born of whimsical coincidence: they are traces of North America’s colonial past. We might think about toponyms as linguistic

