

Place Names of the Northern Peninsula: A New Edition, E.R. Seary

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Place Names of the Northern Peninsula: A New Edition. E.R. Seary; edited by Robert Hollett and William J. Kirwin. St. John's, Institute for Social and Economic Research, paper, 2000, ISBN 0-919666-74-4.

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EDGAR RONALD SEARY (1908-1984) was an extremely well-travelled academic by the time he became head of Memorial University's English Department in 1954, a position he would hold for 16 years. Born in England, he had lectured in Germany, lived and worked as an academic in South Africa, and chaired the College of Arts and Science in Baghdad.¹ Perhaps this background honed the keen sense of curiosity in place names and family names that would lead to the research for which he is now so well remembered -- the toponymy and family names of Newfoundland, which has a longer history of sustained contact with Europe than any other part of Canada. In consequence it has acquired a richer, more multi-layered texture of place names than most parts of the country. Yet Seary was also fascinated with maps of Newfoundland, as the editors of this volume explain in their foreword. The result was pioneering research leading to several influential publications, including *Place Names of the Avalon Peninsula of the Island of Newfoundland* (1971) and *Family Names of the Island of Newfoundland* (1976). A number of manuscripts were written and even printed for limited circulation, but never properly published. *Place Names of the Northern Peninsula: A New Edition* is just such a work -- two works, in fact, that have never before been published except as manuscripts circulating within the restricted confines of Memorial University and the few colleagues and associates fortunate enough to receive a copy.² The publication of *Place Names of the Northern Peninsula* by the Institute of Economic and Social Research is therefore much to be welcomed, for it makes an invaluable reference work by a master of toponymy available for the first time to a broad audience.

One can be forgiven, of course, for asking -- as did Shakespeare through the character Juliet -- "what's in a name?" But Juliet's question was a rhetorical one, for she knew full well that a very great deal could rest on a name. So, too, with place names. The publisher of another book that explores the same theme as Seary but in a different part of North America, suggested that "geographical place names ... form layers covering the landscape. The original layer, made up of aboriginal names, is widespread. A second layer is provided by the earliest European explorers ..." Yet another layer was introduced by those who eventually came and settled a region.³ This pattern of toponymic layering can be a valuable tool in analyzing a region's history. Although scholars traditionally rely on the manuscript and archaeological record to investigate the past, place names can provide vital clues about people who might otherwise have left little or no written or material record of their presence. For instance, there is surprisingly little evidence in the surviving documentary record of Portuguese participation in the early sixteenth-century European fishery at Newfoundland. This has led Dr. Darlene Abreu-Ferreira to conclude that Portuguese involvement in that fishery has been overstated.⁴ Yet Newfoundland's toponymic legacy indicates that a significant number of place names are Portuguese in origin, a fact that obliges us to assume that Portuguese involvement in the early European fishery was more substantial than Abreu-Ferreira maintains.⁵ There can certainly be no question about the Basque or French presence in Newfoundland, for here the documentary evidence is overwhelming, yet had there been any doubt, the abundance of Basque and French place names in Newfoundland would dispel any uncertainty, a point made quite forcefully by Selma Barkham in her little gem, *The Basque Coast of Newfoundland*.⁶

The lion's share of attention to Newfoundland's toponymy has been given to the Avalon Peninsula, for it was there that Europeans fished, fought, and settled most intensively during the more than 500 years following John Cabot's rediscovery of the "New Founde Lande" in 1497. Yet it is appropriate that when E.R. Seary turned his attention to other parts of Newfoundland, it would be to the Northern Peninsula (which he defines as extending from Bonne Bay north and around the tip of the peninsula, then south to the bottom of White Bay). This part of the island of Newfoundland has a longer

Aboriginal and European history than any other. It is here that the earliest known inhabitants of the island of Newfoundland -- the Maritime Archaic Indians -- lived and died; it was here that the first Europeans to visit Newfoundland -- the medieval Norse -- touched its shores; it was here, or at least in this area, that the earliest recorded voyages by European fishermen were destined. The Avalon Peninsula may have been fished and settled more intensively, but the Northern Peninsula has a much older history. And yet one curious yet telling fact stands out. Notwithstanding the Aboriginal inhabitancy of the Northern Peninsula, Native words and names are conspicuously missing from Seary's *Place Names*. There are occasional references *to* an Aboriginal presence (Indian Lookout, Indian Path) but none derived *from* that presence.⁷ In this significant way, Newfoundland departs from the toponymic layering in other parts of North America. The reasons are not difficult to ascertain. In contrast to other areas, the island of Newfoundland saw very little collaboration between Europeans and Aborigines. No economic partnership developed based on the exchange of furs, as occurred elsewhere.⁸ Nor was an effort made by missionaries to spread Christianity among them until fairly recently. As a result, Aboriginal words were not added to the local lexicon. Instead, about 95 percent of the place names of the Northern Peninsula are English or French in origin. The rest come from other European languages. A few have Basque origins, but in contrast to the Avalon Peninsula, none appear to be Portuguese in origin. In *this* part of Newfoundland, at least, Abreu-Ferreira would be correct. Thus, toponymy reflects a pattern of exploitation and human settlement which was predominantly French and English in character, and which ignored or was indifferent to the original inhabitants of the region.

Seary analyzes not only the history of place names but also discusses those who froze those names in perpetuity by recording them on maps. He places considerable importance on the work of these early map-makers, for his book opens with an account of the history of the mapping of Newfoundland names, though not before he gives credit to Henry Harrisse (1829-1910) and George Robert Farrar Prowse (1860-1946) for pioneering that history. Both were experts in the study of maps ("cartologists", to use a word coined by Prowse's father, D.W. Prowse, and embraced by Seary) and both were among the first to use maps to study the origin and nature of place names.⁹ Seary notes that, according to Prowse (G.R.F., not D.W.), very few manuscript maps drawn before the mid-eighteenth century -- an estimated one percent -- survived. This, of course, assumes two things. One, that map-making was an essential activity of the Europeans who visited Newfoundland regularly during the 250 years that followed 1500, and two, that maps were needed for the thousands who came to Newfoundland every year. I am not convinced that this was so. Fishermen relied not on scientific navigation or charts to find their way to the same place year after year, but on a body of knowledge and experience that they acquired and accumulated over many years. Each ship's master would have served out an apprenticeship under the command of his predecessor, perhaps his father or an older brother or cousin, learning the fundamentals of ship-handling, making landfall, and then following the coast until the destination was finally reached. These methods did not require maps, and if fewer maps were needed, then fewer maps were made.

Still, maps *were* drawn, if not to guide fishermen then to record explorations, establish boundaries of national or imperial jurisdiction, and to assert sovereignty. From Cartier to Cook, maps helped define who controlled a region. Seary therefore devotes considerable effort to the task of identifying each and every map that has survived, giving attention to Cartier, to Cook, to Michael Lane who succeeded Cook on the Admiralty's hydrographic survey of Newfoundland, and a host of others. In more than 50 pages of appendix, Seary lists and identifies, as completely as he could, every significant map relating to Newfoundland drawn between 1500 and the middle of the twentieth century. This section of the book alone is an invaluable reference for students, although it should be used with caution. Seary was not himself an historian, and relied heavily on the "received wisdom" of others. Thus, one is compelled to ask whether he is correct in concluding that the profusion of Portuguese place names on the Avalon Peninsula reflects the impact of Portuguese explorers. Surely the impact of explorers was ephemeral compared to that of the fishermen who returned every year, and for whom the ability to find their way about depended on their knowledge of coastal topography, a topography to which they must

have attached names? Certainly Cartier, who explored for the French, introduced few place names to Newfoundland that stuck. Those that did, tended already to exist, having been introduced by the anonymous fishermen who littered many stretches of the Newfoundland coast with place names long before Cartier arrived to record them. It seems unlikely that the Portuguese experience would have been any different.

Elsewhere, Seary credits place names in western Newfoundland to James Cook. This is undoubtedly true for some, but certainly not all. The names in the Bay of Islands that he attributes to Cook, such as Guernsey, Tweed, and Pearl Islands, as well as the Humber River (not to mention the Thames and Medway Rivers, two names that never caught on), were used three years before Cook arrived in the area. They appear on charts of the Bay of Islands drawn by Joseph Gilbert, Master of HMS *Guernsey* which, with several other warships, visited the area in 1764.¹⁰ Seary was actually aware of these charts, for they are included in an appendix, though he accepts R.A. Skelton's assumption that the charts were drawn by Michael Lane, who was then a schoolteacher to the midshipmen in the *Guernsey*, rather than by Gilbert.¹¹ To be fair, Seary made the best use of the historical research then available to him. Yet much additional research has been done since then, so that it is regrettable that Hollett and Kirwin did not include supplemental material directing readers to relevant additions to the literature, additions by which Seary's interpretations and conclusions could be tested or qualified.¹²

As well as discussing the maps that played such a key role in researching the place names of the Northern Peninsula, Seary also explains the methods he employs to define and analyse the place names by location, origins, and characteristics. Several pages of his introduction are given to an explanation of the structure of place names. Thus, we learn that there are single element (The Arches) and multi-element names in which each word in the name will have its own meaning (Anchor Cove). Words within multi-element names in turn can be generic ('Cove' in Anchor Cove) or specific, describing a size, a shape or formation, a quality, vegetation, and so on. Such detailed analysis may seem little more than a form of linguistic hairsplitting. How many readers will care that "The commonest method of forming multiple-element names is by the simple combination SPECIFIC + GENERIC (as Adamson Point, Bare Island), which occurs in some 1,090 names..."?¹³ Perhaps specialists in linguistics or semiotics who share Seary's passion may appreciate such points.

I suspect that these distinctions will matter most to scholars, who will find rich food for thought in Seary's analysis, and conceivably some provocation to counter-arguments, but that most readers will skip by this section in order to move on to the meat of the book, namely the place names themselves. These are arranged alphabetically, and offer suggestions as to origins, meaning, and significance. Here, too, Seary's attention to analysis may frustrate the lay reader. He provides far more information than most people will want, including map locations, definitions, and abbreviated references to every chart mentioned in the appendix where the particular place name appears. But for those who are patient, and thorough, this information will permit one to understand not only the origins of most place names, but also their individual histories, transformations, and evolutions.

Yet here, too, some caution should be exercised. Seary tries very hard -- too hard, perhaps -- to venture suggestions concerning the origins or history of place names. He seems determined to avoid concluding, as in some instances he must, that the source of a name cannot be identified. This determination leads occasionally (*very* occasionally) to dubious suggestions, as when he repeats Harold Horwood's fanciful assertion that Black Joke Cove in the Straits of Belle Isle was named for the *Black Joke*, a supposed pirate ship. There is not a shred of proof that such a pirate ever cruised the area. At other times, Seary misses obvious attributions that he might have recognized had he possessed a greater familiarity with local history. Might not Bird Cove, for instance, be associated with T.S. Bird, a merchant of Sturminster Newton, who was commercially active in the region late in the eighteenth century? Is it enough to say that James Cook employed such names as Keppel, Hawke, Howe and Saunders on the

Northern Peninsula simply to honour those admirals? Is it not more likely that Cook used those names because every one of those men held powerful positions within the Board of Admiralty? In an age of patronage, it made sense for Cook to use the names of his superiors as a form of flattery that might reap dividends in terms of his career. Finally, is it enough to identify “Estaing” as the name of an eighteenth-century French aristocrat and politician, when in fact he was also an influential French admiral, one of the favourites of the Duc de Choiseul (the French Minister of Marine), in the early 1760s? Closer attention to the historical, international, and commercial context, if not by Seary when the book was first written, then by the editors of this edition, would surely have enriched many of the toponymic suggestions presented here.

These, however, are mild criticisms of a reference work that, overall, will be a welcome addition to the bookshelves of students and specialists alike of Newfoundland studies. It makes the work more widely accessible than has ever been the case. Perhaps even more important, it reinforces our awareness of, and our appreciation for, the painstaking work of a remarkable scholar.

Notes

¹“Seary, Edgar Ronald”, *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, vol. 5, ed. Cyril Poole (St. John's, 1994), 127-128.

²*Toponymy of the Island of Newfoundland; Check-List No. 1 Sources I Maps* (Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1959) and *Toponymy of the Island of Newfoundland; Check-List No. 2 Names I The Northern Peninsula* (Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1960).

³Publisher's catalogue description of *Place Names in the Midwestern United States*, ed. Edward Callary (Studies in Onomastics, No. 01, 2000).

⁴Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, “Portugal's Cod Fishery in the 16th Century: Myths and Misconceptions”, in James E. Candow and Carol Corbin, eds., *How Deep Is The Ocean? Historical Essays on Canada's Atlantic Fishery* (Sydney, NS, 1997), 31-44, and “Terra Nova through the Iberian Looking Glass: The Portuguese-Newfoundland Cod Fishery in the Sixteenth Century”, *Canadian Historical Review* 79 (1): (1998), 100-115.

⁵See, for instance, John Mannion and Selma Barkham, “The 16th Century Fishery”, Plate XXII in R.C. Harris (ed.) and G. Matthews (cartographer), *The Historical Atlas of Canada*, vol. 1: *From the Beginning to 1800* (Toronto, 1988).

⁶Selma Barkham, *The Basque Coast of Newfoundland* (Plum Point, Newfoundland, 1989).

⁷But see Charles A. Martijn and Louis-Jacques Dorais, “Eighteenth-Century Innu (Montagnais) and Inuit Toponyms in the Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland”, *Newfoundland Studies* 17 (2) (2001), 319-330.

⁸A point discussed by Ralph Pastore in “Fishermen, Furriers and Beothuks: the economy of extinction”, *Man in the Northeast* 33 (1987), 47-62.

⁹As Seary explained, “Prowse coined ‘cartology’ to meet the need for a word to denote the study (as opposed to the making) of maps”. Seary then added in seeming disappointment that “Necessary as it is, the word has not yet been received by the lexicographers”. Seary, *Place Names*, 39 n.1.

¹⁰Olaf Janzen, “Showing the Flag: Hugh Palliser in Western Newfoundland, 1764”, *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du Nord* 3 (3) (1993), 3-14.

¹¹Seary, *Place Names*, 219-220.

¹²A supplemental bibliography would certainly have been welcome. For instance, the bibliography provided in this publication does not include anything by James K. Hiller, whose publications on the diplomacy of the French Shore would add valuable context to Seary's work, or by John Mannion whose article on the commercial development of western Newfoundland gives insight into both settlement and toponymy. See James K. Hiller, “The Newfoundland Fisheries Issue in Anglo-French Treaties, 1713-1904”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 24 (1) (1996), 1-23; James K. Hiller, “Utrecht Revisited: The Origins of French Fishing Rights in Newfoundland Waters”, *Newfoundland Studies* 7 (1) (1991), 23-39; John Mannion, “Settlers and Traders in Western Newfoundland”, in J. Mannion, ed., *The*

Peopling of Newfoundland: Essays in Historical Geography (St. John's, 1977), 234-275. For a discussion of French hydrography that would help balance the anglocentric perspective of Seary's sources, readers could be directed to the chapter on "French Charting of the East Coast of Canada" by James S. Pritchard in Derek Howse, ed., *Five Hundred Years of Nautical Science, 1400-1900* (London, 1981), 119-129 or to the paper by Ken Banks, "'Lente et assez fâcheuse traversée': Navigation and the Transatlantic French Empire, 1713-1763", in A.J.B. Johnston, ed., *Proceedings of the Twentieth Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society, Cleveland, May 1994* (Cleveland, 1996), 80-94.

¹³Seary, *Place Names*, p. 33.