

Beginnings: Place Names of Saltspring Island

Wrap your mouth around these words: tsoo-EN, whuh-NEN-uts, w huh-ESS-whun, whuh-MET-uts-un. They are just a few of the sixty odd place names ^{to which we still have access} used by Salishan speakers to map this island. See if, while sitting in the ferry line-up at Long Harbour, the name sts-AW-t might evoke the feel of the place differently, might loosen the structures of the everyday world.

These names indicate a world infinitely rich, below our world of surfaces, layers in a cultural midden. Hidden in that language is the silence of waves, cedar and raven which is inaccessible to our print conditioned thought. There may be ways of catching glimpses; studying the language, sitting with the elders and working with them for some transmission. Perhaps we could approach the situation intuitively using the vehicles of trance or dream of silence, listening for the songs of the local mountains, the creatures, the waters.

In many ways our task seems similar to that of the monastic scholars of the British Isles who sought, some with tolerance and compassion, to reconcile the mythos of the Celts with that of the Christ. We embody an alien mode of being to the earlier inhabitants of North America; are still, to them, invaders. Inhabitants have ever been loathe to reveal their mysteries to the stranger and the mysteries are likely self-secret in any case, accessible only to those born into them.

It seems, try as we may, impossible to avoid a romantic and sentimental ethnocentrism in our groping towards contact with the earlier culture and the land which they inhabited. ~~At least~~, by learning even a few of the names by which the natives knew this land, we may ^{at least} be reminded of the claim with which they held it and of ~~some~~ ^{some} of their basic relationships with it, which indeed may be salutary to us in view of our ongoing ecological crisis.

To begin with, native place names do not seem to have commemorated the existence of particular individuals as were occasioned by the "discoveries" of so much of this coast and the founding of many of the towns. ^{Sometimes} ~~Occasionally~~ this graffiti-like tendency was overpowered, as in the name of this island, Saltspring, when a natural feature impinged with a certain singularity. With so much of the island "named after" the constellation of Admiral Baynes (Ganges, his flagship; Fulford, his captain; Burgoyne, his commander; Southey, his secretary; Keppel, a friend; Bruce, his predecessor) it is refreshing to find agreement with the native predilection for naming places according to some intrinsic factor.

The Saanich and Cowichan peoples knew the area from Ganges Harbour to St. Mary's Lake as "salty place", These two groups shared Saltspring Island, at any rate on ~~both~~ the southern and eastern shores. Fulford Harbour, Ganges Harbour, Beaver Point, Long Harbour and Prevost Island all were used by both people as resource areas and hence there is a duplication of names. ~~The people~~ In this case, the Saanichiton people, speaking the Saanich dialect of Straits Salish referred to the Ganges area as tLay-thing, while it was known to the

Cowichan as wh-TLAY-thum. They were Helkomelem speakers, the language found from Mill Bay through Nanoose Bay and from Yale to the mouth of the Fraser. The sounds of many of these names are similar but whenever possible I will give them both, in their anglicized form, with the accent falling on the capitalized letters.

As mentioned above, parts of the island were shared, the Cowichan using sites such as Fulford Harbour as they passed through the islands on their way to sturgeon and sockeye fishing at Point Roberts. To both groups, Fulford was known by its topography; the names whuh-NEN-uts (cw.) and whuh-NEN-uch (sn.) suggesting a place "flat on one side, channel on the other." Here was an ideal place for collecting beach foods such as clam.

The names of several sites refer directly to the type of resource to be obtained at that place. Long Harbour was known as sts-AW-t (cw.) or THAW-t (sn.), meaning, simply, "halibut". It strikes me as significant that this site is not referred to as perhaps "place of halibut" but rather implies an actual identification of the resource with the place. Prevost Island, on the other hand, was known to both Saanich and Cowichan as whuh-ESS-whum, "place having hair seals". Similarly, Burgoyne Bay was known as wh-AWK-wum by the Cowichan, "place having sawbill ducks." Here, the ^{birds} ducks were trapped with duck nets, nets strung

At wh-AWK-wum, a site used exclusively by the Cowichan, the common merganser was trapped in large numbers with duck nets, ordinary gill-fishing nets which were strung across the width of the mouth of the bay of twenty to thirty foot douglas fir poles. Burgoyne Bay was also utilized for the fishing of ling cod, porpoise, ground fish, seals,

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and all beach foods, such as clams, chitons, and native oysters. Some people have also named Baynes Peak after the bay as wh-AWK-wum mountain or sawbill duck mountain, but this seems to be more of a ~~folk~~ term than an actual native place name.

We ~~seem to be~~^{are} lucky when we can determine the derivation of some of these names. Indeed, only a small proportion of the ninety odd archeological sites identified on Saltspring can still be named. It is sad to think of the loss occasioned by the displacement of cultural groups, of the loss of the body of knowledge and wisdom that occurs with the genocide, whether conscious or not, that follows upon invasion, migration, or resource exploitation. Though the native names for Russell Island, thum-AY-kwus; for Beaver Point, schus-NAW-ung; and Ganges Harbour, shee-YAW-wht, are remembered, the derivations have dimmed beyond recovery, or have been hidden from or neglected by the ethnologist.

Sometimes, we are fortunate to receive not only name and derivation but a background tale to connect us with the submerged world of the native. Such is the case with Mt. Maxwell, known to the Cowichan as whuh-MET-uts-un, "bending over place." Originating in topography, the name reaches into the distant past of the earth. It is told that before humans walked the earth, while the earth was still being transformed, a supernatural being named smock-wuts lived near Point Roberts. This monster hurled a series of huge boulders, one of which flew across the Strait of Georgia, bouncing first at Active Pass, thus making a break in the island chain.

It bounced and passed over Mount Maxwell, who bent so as not to be hit in the head, then landed directly on Octopus Point near Maple Bay, forming a cave there-after known as "place having a wide-open mouth". To the Cowichan travelling through Sansum Narrows on their way to Burgoyne Bay this place was a source of great fear, lest they be swallowed up. Looking at a map, you will see that these sites are indeed located in a direct line.

Mount Maxwell was utilized as a source of deer, elk and black bear as presumably were the other mountains, such^{as} Mount Tuam. In Tuam we find a rare occasion where there is a continuity of name. This is a good example also, of the problems encountered in the area of native place names. Various folklorists have perpetrated inaccuracies with flights of fancy or misinformation. In this case, some have suggested a connection with Fire Gods or Thunder Gods, or even whiskey drinking pioneers. Originally anglicized by James Douglas in 1854 as Chuan (and briefly ascribed to the island as a whole), it is known in Cowichan as tsoo-EN, meaning simply "land comes down to water". Very prosaic, the meaning fits precisely into the native economy of naming places in accordance with resource or topography.

It is in this manner that the native people approached the land, with an appreciation of what the land presented to them. It is impossible to detect any semblance ^{suggestion of} ~~of~~ our sense of discovery. Rather, the people and the land have always been there, together.

We can see how both sets of names reflect the purposes, even the world view of the respective namers, embodying cosmology and economy. Like layers in a midden on the shore, place-names give witness to the preciousness and transiency of life and point to our activity of making meaning of our world, of creating a place for the People.

-LAWRANCE-