Looking north up Sechelt Inlet from Halfway Beach with Halfway Islet in the middle.

The Stories Behind 5,200 BC Place Names

A new reference book full of gems—and some eccentricities—takes up where a century-old classic left off

By Stephanie Gould

On British Columbia's fecund coast, where thousands of places and geographical features, from Junk Ledge to Skookum Island, have been charted and named within living memory, it's easy to get hooked on toponymy. By all accounts, magazine editor and recreational kayaker Andrew Scott got hooked while writing *The Encyclopedia of Raincoast Place Names: A Complete Reference to Coastal British Columbia.* The project so absorbed him that he completed it in time for the 100th anniversary of John T Walbran's classic *British Columbia Place Names 1592-1906.*

At first glance, researching a 664-page book on the origin and history of 5,200 of BC's 9,000 official coast names may seem an eccentric project, to say nothing of its ambitiousness. But Scott was bitten by these stories long before Howard White, of Harbour Publishing, asked him to write this reference work three years ago. Stories about place names and their origins can be found in the Sechelt writer's books and articles going back a few years.

If the new encyclopedia stands up well against the achievements of John T Walbran—who has been called "the old sea captain with yarns"—it has a chance of becoming a classic of coastal literature. So I can't help wondering whether an "avid kayaker with yarns" can capture the popular imagination in quite the same way.

Walbran's fascination with local history and toponymy began long before he wrote

his indispensable guide a century ago. Evidently, it crept up on him while he traversed the Pacific coast in command of the Canadian government steamship *Quadra.* Imagine Captain Walbran before a live audience in his hometown of Victoria at the end of his long career at sea.

All of this is recounted by Philip Akrigg in a 1971 Vancouver Public Library reprinting of Walbran's book. In the introduction, Akrigg celebrated the captain who obsessively collected the stories behind 1,500 coastal names and couldn't resist telling them in generous detail in the book that has come to be known simply as "Walbran."

In his foreword to *The Encyclopedia of Raincoast Place Names,* White tells us Andrew Scott is a no-less-gifted storyteller. He also lets it drop that Scott is a philatelist, which explains his not-infrequent references to postal history.

This kind of slight eccentricity won't harm the new book's reputation, as White, a veteran publisher, knows. It's all part of following in Walbran's wake, for it's unlikely the old salt and his guide will soon disappear from bookshelves or from memory.

Confronted with this compliment, Scott said in an interview: "After a while, you develop an eye for what's going to make an item come to life. You include the telling little anecdote—like Walbran, who was pretty good on them, although his tended to be a little longer."

Indeed, most of the 4,000 entries in *Raincoast Place Names* are packed with little-known facts and anecdotes connected to places from Juan de Fuca Strait to Dixon Entrance. These include the origins of everything from the oldest surviving European name—that of the San Christoval Range on the west coast of Moresby Island, bestowed in 1774—to a few, such as Salish Sea, that have not been officially adopted (though Washington State has given "Salish Sea" the nod).

The book has much in common with Harbour's *Encyclopedia of British Columbia,* to which Scott contributed. It has the same glossy cover and mix of historical and contemporary photographs, maps and illustrations. However, this book is about the provenance of names, not the places themselves, and hence looks at history through a particular lens.

The focus is on maritime history, which favours the people of the naming centre, Victoria, home of the province's marine surveyors and now the BC Geographical Names Office.

In the backdrop is a narrative as dramatic as the maze of fjords, islands, inlets, straits and sounds that Captain George Vancouver described as an "intricate inhospitable labyrinth." This larger story behind coastal toponymy is told in Scott's introduction, which covers the lengthy period of exploration, colonization, surveying and mapping that began in 1774 and lasted until about 1950.

And then, in a series of lighter magazine-like features on salient topics, he writes of some of the thornier issues, larger trends and changing attitudes, offering insight into what will likely happen in the future, especially as First Nations treaties are settled.

"I see myself as a reporter here," said Scott. "But there's plenty of primary research. Quite a bit of information is new and fresh and of use to the professional researcher, as well as the general public."

The research meant compiling and collating material from many sources.

In addition to searching through old newspapers and the Internet, he spent two months in the Geographical Names Office reading through files, correspondence and official documents.

And he's come up with some gems.

One is from a memo dated 1944. Today, new place names must come from the public. In the past, however, surveyors were not above naming places after family

members, friends or colleagues. For example, Logan Inlet is named after Sir William Edmund Logan, founder of the Geographical Survey of Canada (1798-1875). And Cundall Bay is named after Walbran's grandfather's English village.

Perhaps not surprisingly, people of low status—and women—aren't well represented. Scott relates the amusing story of three low-ranking hydrographic office employees, all women, whose first, second and last names were proposed for coastal features. Somehow, their male colleagues has been persuaded to put the names forward.

"Too many names of your office staff and of the ship's crew have been used without reasonable discretion," wrote the chief of the hydrographic service from Ottawa.

The Victoria employees withdrew the women's names and found replacements, though only after "much grumbling," Scott reports.

Many of the more unusual names commemorating women, artists, scientists and lesser-known characters are fleshed out equally well. This work owes much to the contributions and influence of the hydrographers who came along after Walbran's day.

Between 1920 and 1946, a regional hydrographer by the name of Henri Parizeau took a passionate interest in pioneers in the belief that "place names should reflect local history and not be imported from other countries and cultures," writes Scott.

It is primarily this period, and the work of Parizeau, that provided Scott with ample new material for this book.

"It's not until the 20th century that we start naming places after our own history and heritage," Scott told me.

"Walbran's account hasn't been updated for a hundred years, though there have been partial takes on it. I shudder to think what's been thrown out."

This hundred-year gap could give him some trouble between editions. Only recently has historical research on so-called ordinary people been seriously pursued.

As Scott points out, there are significant gaps, and archival records often contain small inaccuracies. Perhaps if enough families come forward with information, this "housework" could be one of this book's contributions.

Scholars may be ill pleased by Scott's love of the yarn, and some may disapprove of the fact that he's included telling tidbits in some of these naming histories.

Perhaps Harbour's use of "Raincoast" in the title, and Scott's Sunshine Coast bias (this name, though unofficial, is included), will also irritate the critics.

But then, being displeased is what keeps the critics in business.

Scott is unapologetic, and so he should be.

Names with "lots of twists and turns" and tensions are his favourites.

In this fascinating and complicated place, I suspect lots of folks who love to ply the coast by car, boat and easy chair won't take issue.

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