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NATURAL SELECTION, ONOMASTICS, AND POPULATION CONTROL:

THE SHUFFLEBOTTOM HYPOTHESIS

In 1939, Abraham Flexner argued so persuasively in "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge"¹ that most of us assumed that defences of theoretical and pure research were no longer necessary. In the last few years, however, there have been a number of signs in Canada that we may once again have to explain to governments and the public the importance of theoretical work. Although the Federal Government has not yet announced a science policy for Canada, there are many signs that we are likely to be faced with demands for "mission-oriented" research. Volume I of the *Report of the Senate Special Committee on Science Policy*² under the chairmanship of the Honourable Maurice Lamontagne, P.C., *The Role of the Federal Government in Support of Research in Canadian Universities* by John B. Macdonald, *et al.*,³ and *Towards a National Science Policy for Canada* by the Science Council of Canada⁴ all say enough about mission-oriented research to make some of us uneasy.⁵

Since *science* in these federal documents nearly always includes the humanities and the social sciences, and since a national policy would undoubtedly be applied to them, I thought that it might be worth publishing an account of some purely theoretical research in the humanities which does in fact—unexpectedly—lead to a small part of the solution of a very major problem. Most of Flexner's examples were drawn from the natural sciences, and they were of course not Canadian.

I began to be interested in certain English surnames some years ago while working as a student in the British Museum. A fellow student remarked casually to me one day that no philologist could explain the origin of her name—Bogg. I found this rather surprising, and periodically, while I was waiting for books to be delivered, I examined the various reference books around the Main Reading Room. In the pursuit of the origin of the name, I discovered a number of things. No Bogg had ever written a book, held a commission in the Royal Navy, the Army, or the Royal Air Force, graduated from Oxford

or Cambridge, held a British patent, composed any music (at least, had any music published), appeared in any of the main *Who's Who's* or directories, and so on. The existence of Boggs was undeniable, but they certainly were not distinguished. As I pursued the topic, however, I realized that the number of people with that name appeared to be getting fewer as time went on. Consequently, I extended my investigation to the whole range of traditional English names that seemed to me to suffer from something of the lack of distinction of the Boggs. Some of the names, in fact, were quite plainly ludicrous. There are attested surnames of Addlehead, Allcock, Ape, Ass, Baa, Backoff, Backup, Bandy, Bedbug, Bitch, Bosh, Boughtwhore, Crude, Cutmutton, Dregs, Evil, Fagg, Grammar, Gumboil, Harlot, Headache, Hogsflesh, Hogsmouth, Honeybum, Pickup, Popoff, Ramsbottom, Rosebottom, Rump, Seafart, Sheepshanks, Shufflebottom, Suckbitch, Titter, Tittle, Toad, Topless, Tosh, and so on. These and many others are to be found in Richard Stephen Charnock, *Ludus Patronymicus* (London, Trubner, 1868.) Gradually I came to think of all these names, and others like them, as members of the Shufflebottom family, and the more I investigated them, the more it seemed to me that such names were dying out—that they were far less frequent now than they were 100 years ago. Consequently, I set out to find out why. It is hard to think of a less mission-oriented piece of research. At best, I hoped to make a minor contribution to the science of onomastics; at worst, to find for myself some explanation of the disappearance of good old English onomenes.⁶

Taking *Shufflebottom* as the type name, I discovered that there is not a single Shufflebottom in the telephone directory of our national capital.⁷ There is not one in our most densely populated province.⁸ There is none, for example, in Edmonton,⁹ Regina,¹⁰ Halifax,¹¹ Quebec,¹² Winnipeg,¹³ Victoria,¹⁴ Saint John,¹⁵ Toronto,¹⁶ Montreal,¹⁷ and Vancouver¹⁸—as befits our largest cities—do each have *one* Shufflebotham, but that is hardly the same thing.

At first, I assumed that increasingly people were becoming sensitive about names that sounded faintly ludicrous, and that with increased mobility freeing them from the impossibility of losing one's name in a small society, they were simply changing their names when they moved to a new location. For many years now, however, accurate records have been kept of legal changes of name, and it has become more and more difficult to change one's name illegally. A most careful examination of such records indicates that virtually no traditional English names have been changed legally to more orthodox names. One can find innumerable examples of non-English names—often no doubt difficult to pronounce in English-speaking communities—being changed.

But nowhere have I been able to find a single Shufflebottom who has become a Smith.

Having discovered that the names were not disappearing because of legal name-changing, I decided to test some other hypotheses, unlikely as they seemed. Could it be, for example, that the mortality rates among the Shufflebottoms have been higher than among the Smiths? Extensive investigation reveals no statistically significant difference between the mortality of those with such names and those with more common names.

Another possibility was that the Shufflebottoms are less fertile. An extensive, although not exhaustive, study produced no evidence that the marriages of the Shufflebottoms are any less productive than those of the norm. Like marriages in general, they average 2.8 children. It is true that they average fewer children per marriage than people of the same name 100 years ago, but that is true of all families, and there is no difference in the decline for the Shufflebottoms and for other groups.

Other hypotheses tested were as follows:

- a) Holders of such very traditional English names are naturally more patriotic than holders of other names; therefore they join the Services in wartime in greater proportion and suffer proportionately higher fatal casualties. Examination of the Army list destroyed this hypothesis.
- b) Holders of such very traditional names, embittered by the derision they receive from their compatriots, emigrate to non-English-speaking countries in higher proportions than those with other names. Once in the non-English-speaking country, they change their names to more easily pronounced forms. Although it was not possible to test this hypothesis for all non-English-speaking countries, careful investigation of Brazil, where there was extensive English immigration in the nineteenth century, failed to produce any evidence to uphold the hypothesis. In fact, there are more Shufflebottoms in the present Sao Paulo telephone directory than in that of Toronto.
- c) The holders of such names, having suffered from derision from early childhood, become anti-social; consequently, a higher proportion of them than of the rest of the population embarks on a life of crime. Quite apart from the number that would be executed, the long periods of incarceration of the others unquestionably lowered their birth rates. It is virtually impossible to obtain full details of prison records in either Canada or Great Britain, and consequently it was not possible to test this hypothesis completely. Nevertheless, a sample study of newspaper reports of convictions did not support the hypothesis. (The newspaper reports are not entirely accurate because they do not report

all sentences, and the sentence is not necessarily the time actually served in prison.)

d) The holders of such names, having suffered scorn and derision from childhood, become particularly sensitive to the needs of the individual and therefore enter various religious orders in higher proportions than the rest of the country. There was no evidence for this hypothesis at all. In fact, virtually no Shufflebottoms were found in the priesthood, and no one had ever heard of one who had distinguished himself in the Church. Not only was there no cardinal; there was not even a bishop . . . not even a minor canon.

With all of these hypotheses shattered, I was tempted to fantasy. Was there, I wondered, a secret society dedicated to wiping out the holders of these most traditional of English names—names untouched by Norman aristocracy, Scots, Irish, Welsh, Manx, and Cornish gaelicisms, French, German, Jewish, Ukrainian, Italian immigration? Even such fantasy, however, failed me. Obviously, if that were true, the earlier investigation of death rates would have produced some evidence for it.

Just as I was on the point of abandoning the problem, I saw the solution and proved once again the value of interdisciplinary approaches. It was while reading Peter Medawar on the genetics of sickle-cell malaria¹⁹ that I saw how the evolutionary hypothesis of natural selection solved the problem: if a girl's name is Shufflebottom, she will marry anyone to get rid of the hated name;²⁰ if a man's name is Shufflebottom, no girl will marry him to become Mrs. Shufflebottom. Natural selection in the onomastic process explains where all the Shufflebottoms have gone.

As so often, purely disinterested theoretical research may turn out to have surprisingly useful and practical applications. An admittedly small weapon in the war on continued population growth may well be the planned campaign of derision of names borne by large numbers of people. There is no doubt that if we can make the Smiths ashamed of being Smiths, the theory of natural selection in the onomastic process may well contribute its mite to a better world.

NOTES

1. Abraham Flexner, "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge", *Harper's*, 179: 144-52, October 1939.
2. Maurice Lamontagne, P.C., *A Science Policy for Canada: Report of the Senate Special Committee on Science Policy, Volume I: A Critical Review Past and Present*, Ottawa, The Queen's Printer, 1970.
3. John B. Macdonald, L. P. Dugal, J. Stefan Dupre, J. B. Marshall, J. Gordon

- Parr, Ernest Sirluck, and Erich Vogt, *Special Study No. 7: The Role of the Federal Government in Support of Research in Canadian Universities*, prepared for the Science Council of Canada and The Canada Council, with a Minority Report by L. P. Dugal, Ottawa, The Queen's Printer, 1969.
4. Science Council of Canada, *Report No. 4: Towards a National Science Policy for Canada*, Ottawa, The Queen's Printer, 1968.
 5. See also Science Council of Canada, *Report No. 5: University Research and the Federal Government*, Ottawa, The Queen's Printer, 1969, and the preposterous *University 2000* by the first President of the University of Prince Edward Island, Prince of Wales College, Charlottetown, 1969. It is not surprising that the latter was the final Samuel N. Robertson Memorial Lecture. There will be no more in the series.
 6. I'm not sure if this word has been used before, but it seems to me appropriate that we should have a proper technical term to fit in with the phoneme, morpheme, sememe, taxeme, etc., series. The *onomorphs* are, of course, the various types of name: Christian, given, nick-, and sur-.
 7. Telephone Directory, Ottawa-Hull, December 1970, p. 435, col. d.
 8. Telephone Directory, Prince Edward Island, March 1971.
 9. Telephone Directory, Edmonton, March 7, 1971, p. 381, col. a, but see other names on p. 381.
 10. Telephone Directory, Regina, 1970, p. 164, col. b.
 11. Telephone Directory, Halifax-Dartmouth & County, June 21, 1970, p. 246, col. c.
 12. Telephone Directory, Québec et les environs, juillet 1970, p. 389, col. c.
 13. Telephone Directory, Winnipeg, June 21, 1970, p. 423, col. b.
 14. Telephone Directory, Victoria, December 6, 1970, p. 177, col. c.
 15. Telephone Directory, Saint John (includes Brown's Flat, Grand Bay, Hampstead, Hampton, Maces Bay, Norton, Rothesay, St. Martins, Springfield, Summerville, Welsford, Westfield), August 1970, p. 122, col. b.
 16. Telephone Directory, Toronto, March, 1971, p. 1338, col. d.
 17. Telephone Directory, Montreal, August, 1970, p. 1553, col. d.
 18. Telephone Directory, Vancouver, July 1, 1970, p. 604, col. b.
 19. Peter Brian Medawar, *The Future of Man*, BBC Reith Lectures, 1959. (Published in 1961 by Basic Books).
 20. At the risk of indelicacy, I point out that the common name for Shufflebottom is /drae ga:s/