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SUBMISSIONS

Submissions are welcome as usual. However, while shorter varia will be considered for inclusion in Vol. 14, main articles will be held back and considered for inclusion in Vol. 15.

STREET NAMES AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY BETWEEN
MONTBLANC, FRANCE, AND DUMFRIES, SCOTLAND

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As a regular visitor to France, I have become fascinated by the way in which French street names celebrate national figures and events. There is invariably a rue Victor Hugo or a Place de la Révolution or a rue de la République, often all three, and there are also streets celebrating important national events such as the Fall of the Bastille and Victory in Europe. There does not seem to be the same emphasis on national figures and events in the UK, where one has the impression that most of the streets are named after topographic features or after local worthies.



In Dumfries, my one-time home in the UK, my regular journey to work took me along Edinburgh Street, Buccleuch Street (named after a local landowner), along the Whitesands to Bankend Road.



These names contrast markedly with those encountered on a regular walk in Montblanc, my home in France, where I go along Avenue de Stalingrad, rue Victor Hugo, rue de la République, to rue de Verdun.



Of course, there are Dumfries streets named after national figures and Montblanc streets named after local worthies but, overall, Montblanc street

names convey a socio-historic impression that is very different to the impression conveyed by Dumfries street names.



Before exploring this difference, I should acknowledge that I am less interested in street names in themselves than in what they tell us about the society which selected them. For the historian and the sociologist, they are rather like what barium meal is for the radiographer – a way of revealing the otherwise invisible.

Imagine two towns. In Town A most of the streets are named after topographical features (e.g. river, hill, bridge), saints and royal personages. In Town B most streets are named after individuals who have achieved local or national prominence in their own lives. On the basis of their street names, Town A reflects continuity and order; Town B reflects individualism and change. Imagine further, two Type B towns. In B₁ most of the individuals commemorated in street names are soldiers and politicians; in B₂ most are writers and artists. The former reflects and honours the world of action, the latter reflects and honours the world of ideas.

Of course, it is rarely as clear-cut as this. Street names in most towns reflect a mixture but the balance between the two provides clues to the social and political realities.

Viewed in this way, street names, along with other public monuments, are symbolic representations of a society and its collective memory. They can be read as texts of the ways in which a community remembers its past and projects its image in the present.

In the UK, the study of street names is a sub-branch of the study of names (onomastics) and examples, trends and themes can be found in Bertie Neethling's chapter in the *Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming* (Neethling 2016).¹ In France, the study of street names is a sub-branch of cultural history and is best exemplified in the work of Pierre Nora and his interdisciplinary colleagues at the Sorbonne (1986). The central concept in their work is the 'memory place' (*lieu de mémoire*), by which they mean 'any significant entity, whether material or non-material, which by dint of human will or the work of time, has become a significant element in the heritage of the community' (Nora 1986 I/II/III, 16).

Most street-name studies are restricted to single villages, towns or cities. The

1. Within onomastics, the study of street names is called *odonymics* (also *odonymy*), from Greek *ὁδός* ('*hodós*') 'a road, path, way'.

present study is one of a few based on the comparison of street names between two locations.

Azaryahu's pioneering 1992 study compared street names in two very different locations – East Berlin and Haifa. Through this comparison, he was able to show that in both cities, street names reflected and legitimated the prevailing political regimes. He also documented the renaming of streets following regime change, specifically the purging of streets named after Bismark in Berlin and Saladin in Haifa (Azaryahu 1992). The same author later extended his approach by comparing street names in the cities of Paris and Berlin, and East Berlin and West Berlin (1996).

Kooloos's study of street names in Noord-Brabant and Holland provides yet a further example of the comparative approach taken in the present study. He shows differences in the distributions of street names by broad themes (urban/rural, regional/national, historical/contemporary) between the two provinces and relates them to historical developments over the period 1858–1939 (Kooloos 2010).

This being an exploratory study, my *modus operandi* can best be described as opportunistic and pragmatic. The choice of the two locations stemmed from the fact that I had houses in both and regularly moved between them. Montblanc (in south central France) and Dumfries (in south-west Scotland), although different in size, are similar in historical development. Both grew from early ecclesiastical establishments, both remained small until they expanded in the nineteenth century and both experienced a further expansion following the Second World War.

Compiling a list of all streets in both locations was simple in the case of Dumfries. The Royal Geographical Society (7) provided a comprehensive and up-to-date listing of all streets, including those in the former suburb of Heathhall.² No equivalent listing existed for Montblanc, but its small size and clear boundaries made it possible to conduct a pedestrian survey.

Having compiled comprehensive listings of the 421 streets in Dumfries and the 98 streets in Montblanc, the second task was to distinguish between topographical and commemorative street names; and, within the former, to distinguish between those relating to the natural and the built landscapes. Commemorative street names were subclassified by the occupational background of the individual commemorated and by the geographical extent of their reputation. This was straightforward for prominent individuals but for those less well known it was necessary to consult local historical studies for both Dumfries (Urquhart 1981 and Dobson 2015) and Montblanc (Carayon 2015) and occasionally to ask local informants. Establishing reputational status inevitably

2. List of Dumfries streets: <<https://geographic.org>>.

involved a subjective judgement (e.g. Leonardo da Vinci and Shakespeare were deemed to have international significance, whereas George Brassens and J. M. Barrie were deemed to have national significance).

Table 1 compares the distribution of street names in both towns between three broad groupings: streets named after people/'worthies'; streets named after topographical features of the natural and built landscapes; and streets named after historical events.

Table 1

	Dumfries	Montblanc
	%	%
People/'Worthies'	21	65
Topographical features	74	21
Historical events	3	13
Other (unknown/unclassifiable)	2	1

It is immediately apparent that, while the majority of streets in Dumfries are named after topographical features (74%), the majority of those in Montblanc are named after people/'worthies' (65%). While this difference is relative rather than absolute, it is sufficiently great as to warrant further analysis.

Table 2 focuses on those streets named after topographical features and distinguishes between those relating to the natural landscape (e.g. hill, field, river, wood, oak tree) and those relating to the built environment (e.g. castle, bridge, well, school, market).

Table 2

	Dumfries	Montblanc
	%	%
Relating to natural landscape	66	37
Relating to the built landscape	32	61

Again, there is a clear difference between the street names of the two towns. In Montblanc, the majority of topographic-named streets are named for features of the built environment, e.g. Place de Rampe, Place du Château Vieux and rue de la Fontaine Vieille. In Dumfries, street names like Lochfield Road, Mossspark Crescent, Poplar Court and Rosevale Street exemplify the rural influence and overall, 47 streets contained the generics field/land/park. Further evidence of this is provided in the 42 streets in Dumfries named after trees (19 different

species). Thematic naming in the newer residential areas accounts for some of this popularity and there are clusters of adjacent streets with Birch, Rowan and Thorn in their names. But overall, these thematic clusters account for only around 25% of all tree-named streets.

From a historical perspective, the strong rural element in Dumfries street names probably derives from the way in which the town has expanded and engulfed numerous small hamlets. By contrast, Montblanc has remained a compact urban unit surrounded by vineyards. Instead of living in the midst of the fields, the owners have traditionally lived in the town and travelled to work in their vineyards.

Table 3 focuses on those streets named after people/‘worthies’ and subclassifies them by their occupational background.

Table 3

	Dumfries	Montblanc
	%	%
Politicians/Rulers/Military Leaders	16	35
Writers/Artists	20	40
Scientists	0	20
Public Service/ Business	57	2
Other	7	3

The differences between the two towns are again substantial. In Montblanc, there are twice as many streets named after those from a military/political background (e.g. rue Jules Jaurès, Avenue Eduard Herriot, rue de Maréchal Foch) than in Dumfries. Similarly, in Montblanc there are twice as many streets named after writers and artists (e.g. rue Saint-Exupéry, rue Jean-Jaques Rousseau, rue Georges Brassens) than in Dumfries. In Montblanc, there are also streets named after scientists (e.g. rue Nicolas Copernicus, rue Leonard de Vinci)³ whereas in Dumfries, not a single street is named after a scientist.

Overall, the difference is relative rather than absolute. In Dumfries, streets like Barrie Avenue, Burns Street and Shakespeare Street celebrate British writers just as streets like Victoria Avenue and Victoria Crescent and George Street and Gladstone Road celebrate British rulers and leaders. But collectively, these constitute a small proportion of the person-named streets. In Dumfries, such streets are much more likely to be named after local public officials, landowners and businessmen. Streets like Steel Avenue, Sharpe Crescent, Robertson

3. This latter could also of course be classified as an artist.

Avenue, Makbrar Crescent and Martin Avenue celebrate former town provosts and councilors. Streets like Johnstone Park, Goldie Crescent, Grant Court are named after local builders, landowners and entrepreneurs.

There is one further difference relating to person-named streets. In Montblanc, they invariably include the given name (e.g. rue Pierre-Paul Riquet, Plan Anatole France). In Dumfries, the person celebrated in the street name is identified only by the family name (e.g. Burns Street, Bruce Street). As a consequence, Montblanc street names have greater length and formality – an extreme case being Place Général De Lattre De Tassigny, Maréchal de France.



Dumfries and Montblanc are alike in one respect only: few of the streets (less than 4% in both places) are named after women. In Dumfries, the women celebrated in street names include Queen Victoria, Queen Elizabeth and Jean Armour (wife of poet and writer Robert Burns). In Montblanc, the women celebrated in street names include Saint Catherine, the writer Georg Sand and Marguerite of Navarre.

The impression that Montblanc streets celebrate national heroes while Dumfries streets celebrate local heroes is examined in Table 4. It subclassifies the people celebrated in street names by their local, regional, national or international significance/reputation.

Table 4

	Dumfries	Montblanc
	%	%
Local significance only	54	8
Regional significance	24	10
National significance	18	64
International significance	4	18

The difference between Montblanc and Dumfries is again substantial. In Dumfries three quarters (78%) of the people-named streets are named after figures with only local or regional significance. A few national figures are celebrated in some Dumfries streets (e.g. Queen Victoria, William Shakespeare) and there is even one street (Carnegie Street) named after an international

philanthropist, but these are vastly outnumbered by streets named after people whose names are unlikely to be known outside the town of Dumfries and south-west Scotland.

In Montblanc, the considerable majority of people-named streets (82%) celebrate figures of national and international significance (e.g. Louis Pasteur, Victor Hugo, Leonardo da Vinci, Nicolas Copernicus). This pan-European scope is also illustrated in the name of the main roundabout – Carrefour de l'Europe.

To summarise, in Dumfries street names are predominantly topographical in origin and they reflect the natural rather than the built landscape. Those streets that are named after people typically celebrate figures with local or regional significance, mainly from a background in business and public service. In Montblanc, street names predominately celebrate people. Most of these figures have achieved national and even international reputations in politics, warfare, the arts and science. Those street names that are topographical in origin reflect the built rather than the natural landscape.

It is tempting to extrapolate these findings and to suggest that Montblanc and Dumfries are microcosms of France and Scotland. France, having experienced more political turbulence than the UK, has a greater propensity to commemorate the republican nation-state and those military leaders and politicians who have fashioned and defended it over the years. French writers and thinkers have been more engaged with the national project than their counterparts in the UK and they have enjoyed greater prominence and celebrity. Britain, having avoided revolutionary upheavals (especially those of 1789 and 1848) commemorates its landowners and royal personages, and, having led the way in the industrial revolution and the development of the welfare state, has a greater propensity to celebrate its entrepreneurs and public servants.

But we should be cautious about such speculation on the basis of an exploratory comparison of street names in Montblanc and Dumfries. Montblanc may not be representative of France, just as Dumfries may not be representative of the UK. However, recent studies by Daniel Milo in France (1998) and Daniel Oto-Peralías in Scotland (2017), suggest that the differences reported for Montblanc and Dumfries are consistent with nationwide differences. In his study of 96 communes throughout France, Milo shows that the most common street name (by some considerable margin) commemorates the République and that the streets so named are in the most prominent locations (1998). The individuals most often commemorated are, in descending order, Victor Hugo, Léon Gambetta, Jean Jaurès, Louis Pasteur, Général Leclerc and Clémenceau. In Scotland, in a nation-wide sample, Oto-Peralías has shown that the most common street name is Main Street, followed by Station Road, High Street and Church Street. The individuals most often commemorated are, in descending

order, King (unspecified), George (unspecified), Queen (unspecified). In Britain, individual kings and queens may change but the institution of the monarchy remains. Street names reflect continuity. In France, having dispensed with kings and queens, as regimes change, so do the names of individuals associated with them. This fluidity is reflected in the commemorative street names. Street names mirror changes in the body politic.

This 'mirroring' occurs contemporaneously when individuals and events are commemorated in their own lifetimes or at the time of the event, but it also occurs retrospectively, and sometimes much later. This is particularly true of France, where many of the street names relating to the Revolution and the First Republic (1792–1804) actually date from the years of the Third Republic (1870–1940). This and similar time-lags can only be fully explored if the date of street baptism is known. Unfortunately, this information was not routinely available in the present study. Future studies should remedy this shortcoming.

More generally, it is hoped that the present study, albeit small-scale and exploratory, illustrates the potential of a comparative approach to street names.

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