Naming (and claiming) vertical territories

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> Perhaps the most important decision a route developer makes is what to name their creation. A great name can put a climb on the map. A boring name can help it fade into obscurity.
>
> Corrigan, 2016

North American climber Corrigan's tongue in cheek article suggests a series of do's and don'ts to consider when naming climbs, for example, do include puns, clever references to the character of the climb and nonsensical and vulgar names. He advises avoiding names that describe obvious features, such as aretes, grooves, corners and chimneys, on the grounds that these are boring and over-used. Corrigan is undoubtedly alluding to the vast number of climbs with names such as *Chimney Route* or *Terrace Crack*, a common trend in the UK in the first half of the twentieth century. What is notable is that he sees the naming of climbs, and consequently perhaps, the climbing itself, as a creative practice, unlike Dave Gregory who bemoans the need to 'rack the brain for subtle similes or atrocious puns' instead saying, 'the topology did it for you' (2002, 2008: 76). And yet, towards the end of his article, Gregory admits to the evocative beauty of his favourite route name: *Dream of White Horses* (ibid.: 81).

In 'The Way of the Dervish' (2010), climber Stevie Haston asks:

> Are route names important? … I chose 'Comes the Dervish'. It became the name of a symbolic route of a thousand shades of mauve and purple. A slab that had been chipped for me by an unknown Welsh Powder Monkey [quarryman], slippery stone, turned into a test for chalk-covered fingers. Mostly it was mine, *'all mine my precious'*, but of course you can share it. Routes are funny little things, mere pathways up bits of stone, but sometimes they have a story. We often burden them with significance, and mystery and an aura totally beyond their span.

Haston discusses the range of associations that might be construed from a route: the colour of the rock; the manmade (quarried) and 'slippery' nature of slate indicating potential difficulty for the climber and the industrial history ('chipped by an unknown Welsh Powder

Monkey'). He suggests that route names tell stories and that can gain mythological status. Finally, he alludes to conflicting senses of individual ownership and shared community implied by a first ascent. Any of these associations might feature in the name given to the climb, for example 'Powder Monkey', or 'Slippery Slab', and yet Haston chose *Comes the Dervish*. This is a highly evocative name for a climb, suggesting movement, the swirling dance of the dervish and the spiritual transcendence aspired to through the dance. Comparing photographs of climbers on the crux of this climb, the overlap, with images of dervish dancers reveals a shared connection through the shape of the body in both. But the name is more likely to be intended to evoke the heightened mental state of the climber. The range of legible references available in this name highlight the objective problems of trying to analyse the meanings behind names given to climbs. A few climbers have explained their naming choices: legendary mountaineer Chris Bonnington explained that he chose the name *Bloody Slab* because it was incredibly hard to climb' (BBC News article online, 2014) and Johnny Dawes explained that his iconic route *Indian Face* was named after the shape of the face of an 'Indian brave' that appears on the crag when it is covered in snow (in Samet, 2007). Some names chronicle an event, for example the leader suffered anaphylactic shock during the first ascent, resulting in a climb called *Ephinephrine* (Stabley, 2006). These 'back stories', where they are available, provide a fascinating insight into historical and creative moments of ascent, revealing an area of climbing culture that merits further attention[1].

Naming provides a frame of reference against which to map human experience; 'naming is…the way we image (and imagine) communal history and identity' (Lippard, 1997: 46). Naming makes the unknown familiar: to name is to tame, to lay claim. Lippard makes a distinction between indigenous naming as practical, and 'western' naming as conquering or colonising (1997: p46), and Haston appears to recognise this dichotomy (although more as an acquisitional than a colonising activity) in his comment

that *Comes the Dervish* is his, but is also for sharing.   Thus, the process of naming is both an aid to understanding and a sign of ownership: epistemological and acquisitional. It is simplistic to portray these two purposes as binary opposites; naming provides knowledge and understanding that must be acquired before it can be put to practical use. It is perhaps the motivation behind the naming and use of knowledge that raises ethical issues. Bruce Chatwin observes that aboriginals in Australia understand the process of naming as life giving; the Ancients sang the world into being by naming it (1987: 73). Like Lippard, he contrasts the notion of naming as life-giving with naming as acquisitional, prompting me to ask the question: do names breathe life into rock surfaces or do they proclaim conquest of the vertical landscape?

My aim is to scrutinise the practice of route naming in order to better understand the purposefulness of the action (expression of freedom/conquering spirit/aesthetic expression/political statement) and the spatial experience/expression of the participant. First ascentionsists (FAs) pioneer new pathways up rock faces, name and claim them (as events, artistic expressions, guidance to future climbers). These names are recorded in guidebooks and pass into the oral (conversational), visual (photographs and films), experiential (repeats of the climbs) and written (guidebook descriptions, books and articles) discourse of rock climbing. The names given to routes and the subsequent discourse surrounding them provides an opportunity to examine the ascription of meaning and the expression of power and aesthetic sensibility in this ascent-orientated practice. Thus, it will be possible to consider how vertical space is turned into a field of phenomenological experience, how it is mapped and measured and how it is converted into an aesthetic and cultural product.

Drawing on my background in dance and performance and my passion for rock climbing, I have examined the interface between climbing bodies and rock faces by developing a method to analyse route names at four climbing crags in North Wales (see below for detail of the crags). I draw upon my own experience of climbing some of the routes and research into the experience of others with reference to articles and posts on UKClimbing.com. An

explanation of relevant climbing terminology leads to an outline of the methodology I developed to undertake the analysis. Three specific rock climbs are then discussed in order to examine the patterns, issues, and conclusions arising from the analysis.

Explanation of terminology

Styles of climbing

Rock climbing styles have specific sets of rules (Tejada Flores, 1978, 2000) according to the 'game' being played, and range from bouldering (low-level climbing with no equipment except a landing mat) to super-alpinism (high altitude mountaineering in which a battery of equipment might be employed such as ladders, fixed ropes, and oxygen). Tejada-Flores (ibid.) points out that bouldering is bound by many more rules than high altitude mountaineering as the objective dangers are much fewer. Climbing is an activity in which danger and risk are rigorously managed; pleasure is gained from the climber's ability to overcome fear in order to move on rock, therefore the activity must be just risky enough to provide a rush of adrenaline, but not so risky that death is probable. The routes considered in my analysis fall somewhere between bouldering and super-alpinism. On three of the crags analyzed, the climbs are traditional routes, in which the climber places protection (such as nuts which are wedged into cracks, slings hooked around spikes or modern camming devices which open out in parallel cracks) in/on the rock in case he/she falls; this protection is removed by the following climber. A few of the routes on the fourth crag, slate, have some bolts drilled into the rock where natural protection is unavailable. The traditional UK ethic of leaving the rock as you found it is prevalent throughout the sample I have considered. This desire to leave no 'footprint' on the rock is admirable, but there is ample evidence on the more popular climbs that the passage of bodies of hundreds of climbers over the years have left their marks: shadowy handprints left by frantic chalky palms fumbling for holds across bare sheets of rock, homely worn number 4 nut slots, nubbins of rock polished to a high gloss by teetering feet and the occasional weather-rusted abandoned piece of

protection, simultaneously tempting and suspect for the desperate climber seeking something to clip their rope to.

Leading and following/seconding

Rock climbing with ropes requires at least two climbers. One climber leads, trailing the rope behind them, belayed from below by the second climber who is attached to the other end of the rope via a belay device that provides mechanical advantage in holding the weight of a falling or resting leader.

First ascents and Guidebooks

The purest version of a first ascent is that in which a climber walks up to a crag and leads a route placing protection without falling or resting. Crucially relevant for this essay, once the climb is completed, the first ascensionist has the right to name and grade the difficulty of the climb, initially recorded in logbooks kept at significant locations in North Wales, such as the Pen-y-Gwryd and Pen-y-Pass hotels and in later years, Pete's Eats café (Hankinson, 1977, 2004). These logbooks were subsequently developed into the climbing guidebooks climbers use today. Modern guidebooks include photographs of climbers , written descriptions of the climbs, access information and topographical diagrams and maps. They also include the grade of the climb and often operate a star system which indicates the perceived quality of the route. In addition, information is usually supplied about climbing history in the area, conservation issues, such as bird bans (often crags are made inaccessible to climbers during nesting seasons) geology and local information, such as places to eat and sleep and occasionally, creative and poetic writing (see Dixon's Cloggy guidebook, 2004) .

Approach

I analyzed a selection of 145 climbs across four crags in North Wales: Clogwyn D'ur Arddu (31 routes), Dinorwig Quarries (66 routes), Dinas Cromlech (20 routes) and Bwlch y Moch (28 routes) at Tremadog, detailed in the *North Wales Rock* (2006) guide, providing a limited but focused and varied sample of the most popular climbs in a range of grades at each crag.

Clogwyn D'ur Arddu on Snowdon is the most remote of the crags involving a fairly long 'walk-in'; it can also be reached by expensive trip on the Snowdon mountain railway, alighting at Clogwyn Station. *North Wales Rock* describes it as 'awe-inspiring…it has a sombre yet spiritual ambience', 'the dark shadow-cast form of the cliff' is 'immense and brooding' (2006: 104) and Geoffrey Sutton refers to it as 'perhaps all in all the greatest cliff in Britain' (in Dixon, 2004: 119). New route activity on 'Cloggy', as it is fondly referred to, was highest in the 1980s, although the first recorded ascent, *Eastern Terrace,* was made in 1798 by two clergymen searching for plants. Nick Dixon calls it 'the cathedral of British Climbing…the great teeth of The Far East and The West curving into a huge syncline to frame the Central rectangle of the Great Wall' (2004: 14). His language is typical of the creative connections made by climbers across landscape, geology, spiritualism and architecture.

Dinas Cromlech, 'perched on the steep slopes of Esgair Felen' is a 'dramatic crag…[which] stands guard over the Llanberis Pass, a proud, turreted fortress' (Panton et al. 2006: 48). Again, the guidebook compiler uses architectural references to describe the cliff, ascribing to it the human quality of pride. This is echoed by Iwan Arfon Jones who describes it as a 'grim medieval castle' (2009: 118). It presents a seriousness of position, leaning over the road that snakes through the Llanberis Pass and accessed via a very steep, unstable scree slope.

The Dinorwig slate quarries, which ceased commercial activity in 1969, offer a very different arena for climbing. Around 170 years of quarrying industry that provided the world with roofing material, has created on the mountain Elidir Fawr a maze of 'dank cavernous pits, granular spoil heaps and aimless grey communities left high and dry by the loss of a way of life' (Jones et al., 1992:9). Since the closure, a hydroelectric power station has been created, hollowed out of the inside of the mountain, and the whole area has become a 'giant adventure playground' (ibid. 1992 :10) for climbers. The routes on slate are short and very different in character as Haston attests: 'the very medium implies distrust; brittle and incredibly lacking in friction, this stone cannot be trusted.' (2010, online).

The Bwlch y Moch section of Tremadog is a highly popular roadside crag. The rock dries quickly, there is a convenient café in which to rest or shelter from the rain, the start of any climb is no more than ten-minutes walk away and the cliff has been owned by the British Mountaineering Council (BMC) since 1979. A huge variety of climbing is available on slabs, overhangs, walls, cracks and grooves, often all on the same route. Long describes the development of climbing at Tremadog cliffs as a drama in 7 acts, making a metaphorical connection between climbing and performance (2010: 20-21). In the 1940s and 1950s, climbers revealed the rock by 'gardening' whilst climbing to remove vegetation, although the lower parts of the crags are still obscured by trees (Long, 2010: 23).

Method of analysis

I recorded the names of the routes and the first ascension (FA) team, date of FA and grade of climb. This process led me to initially identify 15 types of names that I then distilled to three main categories: extrinsic; intrinsic and discursive:

1. Descriptive of rock architecture/environmental features - Extrinsic
2. Descriptive of feeling of the climb/ physical experience reference – often poetic - Intrinsic
3. Intertextual reference (for example, film, name of song, name of band etc.) Discursive
4. Macho reference/sexual innuendo/misogynist – Discursive/Intrinsic
5. Death/danger reference – Discursive/intrinsic
6. Bodily functions – Discursive/Intrinsic
7. Nature/Seasons etc - Discursive
8. Groups of themed names - Discursive
9. Play on words - Discursive
10. Named after people/characters - Discursive
11. Welsh names - Discursive
12. Unspecific - Unclassifiable
13. Animals/Birds - Discursive
14. Dance – Discursive/Intrinsic
15. Food - Discursive

Extrinsic names describe visual aspects of the route, for example, its position on the crag or mountain or a salient feature, such as a corner or a crack,

critiqued by Corrigan (2016) as being an outdated approach to naming. Intrinsic names describe the subjective experience of climbing the route. Discursive names make cultural references, for example to films, songs, people and nature. They might also follow a naming theme already present at a crag. Some names display two or more categories, for example, Comes the Dervish, discussed earlier, discursively refers to the dance of the dervish to express the intrinsic feeling of doing the climb. Others, such as Cenotaph Corner, use an extrinsic feature (corner) and add a cultural (discursive) reference that in turn follows a naming trend at that crag. Further research was undertaken using other guidebooks, interviews, magazine articles, books and internet sources. The analysis was tabulated to provide numerical data, for example, how many names out of the total routes at each crag fell into each category, revealing patterns in the naming of climbs. Using this methodology, it was possible to determine what the most common criteria are for naming climbs, if the character and architecture of the rock at a particular crag produces a pattern of naming and how the physical and mental experiences of climbing the route might be embedded in the name.

Extrinsic Names

The highest number of extrinsic names are found at Cloggy and Dinas Cromlech; the lowest in the Slate quarries. They describe the character of the rock in four distinct ways: names that use a metaphor to describe features of the rock, for example *Sabre Cut*, where it appears as if the rock has been slashed by the cut of a knife; *Cenotaph Corner* describes a physical feature; names that indicate the position of the route on the crag such as *West Buttress*, and those that indicate a pathway on the rock, for example *Spiral Stairs*. Names that indicate the position of the climb on the crag might refer to a compass point (*Eastern Terrace*) or be orientated in relation to the body of the climber as they gaze up from below the crag (*Left Wall* and *Right Wall*). Bwlch y Moch has a high proportion of navigational names that often serve as directions, or maps for subsequent climbers, perhaps because the climbs are close together and distinguishing between them is more complex. Some names combine two features: cracks are 'Curving', next to a 'Pedestal', or adorned with 'Cobweb[s]'. *Red and Yellow and Pink and Green, Orange and*

Purple and Blue and *Fool's Gold* describe the distinctive colours of slate rather than generic architectural structures (arêtes, walls, cracks, etc.). *Looning the tube* refers to an old metal spike on the route that is lassoed to provide protection and *Heading the Shot* refers to the shot holes created by the quarrymen's blasting. In summary, extrinsic names can feature direct, metaphorical, locational and navigational descriptions of the character of climbs.

Intrinsic names

These describe the experience of the route from the climber's perspective. The majority of these are at Bwlch y Moch and the Slate Quarries. At Bwlch y Moch, names in this category often refer to action, for example, *Leg slip* and *First Slip* refer to the slippery quality of rock experienced by Joe Brown during the first ascent and serve as a warning to subsequent climbers (1967: 199). *Snake, Vector* and *Weaver* describe the spatial trajectory of the climber on the rock, first seen as a line on a rock face, recorded on photograph in a guidebook, re-traced and experienced by climbers' bodies, who may in turn be observed, photographed and/or filmed by others, physicalizing the abstract line on the rock.   *Grim Wall* combines extrinsic and intrinsic information: the aspect of the wall – shady – is seen before climbing and then experienced as a coolness whilst climbing.

The character of slate as a medium on which to climb produces delicate and gymnastic movement: the holds are often very small, and far apart, and the rock is extremely friable; the delicate holds feel like they will shatter with the slightest pressure of your fingertips. It is therefore not surprising that many of the names of the climbs on Slate refer to the mental state induced by, experienced during and required for the climb, such as *Mental Lentils* and *Psychotherapy*, suggesting that a high degree of mental control is needed to counteract the fear experienced in a very exposed and dangerous position. The climb, *Scare City* - which is also a pun on the scarcity of holds and protection – is described in the guidebook as 'a truly bold and nerve-wracking lead' and instructs the climber to 'creep up the wall above with spaced gear and much trepidation' (2006: 162). Likewise, but perhaps signaling not quite

so much terror, *Tentative Decisions* is a climb about which it is difficult to be confident, described as 'a well-named route requiring commitment above gear' (2006: 175).

Discursive names

Many of the climbs at Cromlech, Slate and Bwlch y Moch were established in the post 1960s era, as postmodernist sensibilities were developing, and a hippy generation were freely associating across a range of activities. The development of mass media undoubtedly contributed to the references to popular culture in the names of climbs on Slate during the 1980s, that range between 1980s and 1960s Beat Generation culture and associated influences. For example, legendary climber Johnny Dawes' *Dawes of Perception* plays on his own name and Aldous Huxley's 1953 work, simultaneously revealing his literary interests. Route names that follow a particular theme are popular at Bwlch y Moch (*Cream, Bananas, Strawberries, Christmas Curry* and *The Plum*) and at Dinorwig Slate, (Sade songs) providing evidence of playful discourse within the climbing community. Eponymous route names, such as *Pigott's Climb* and *Longland's Climb*, are evident only at Cloggy (in this sample) and reflect the naming practices of an earlier generation of climbers from the 1920s and 1930s. These names appear to trumpet the personal conquest of vertical territories typical of the colonizing spirit of the historic context in which they were created.

Three Climbs

I proceed to discuss three climbs I have climbed myself, reflecting upon my intrinsic experience of climbing the routes in relation to the names they have been given with reference, where available, to the experience of others.

One Step in the Clouds – **Bwlch y Moch**

This highly popular classic easy climb was first ascended in 1958 by CT Jones, R Moseley. I have climbed it four times (2007, 2011 and twice in 2013) with different partners. The first pitch is enclosed in vegetation and requires

squeezing between a tree and the rock, avoiding the bees that are permanent

residents in the tree. The relevance of the intrinsic name that poetically links

action – 'one step' with the exposed feeling of the action: 'in the clouds'

becomes clear when climbing the second or third pitch[2] of the climb

(depending on which guide book you use). The climber tiptoes delicately up a

hanging slab with nothing but air below, creating the sense of being above a

void, whilst literally being in that position. The reference to 'clouds' expresses

a sensation of being close to nature when climbing (at least another thirteen

climbs in the UK refer to clouds), and of floating in the sky. The easily

accessible nature of Bwlch y Moch precludes the need for names which

signpost the climb and indeed, the trees at the base of the crag hide the lower

parts of all the climbs making identification of routes difficult. These factors

perhaps gave rise to a naming practice that reflects the poetic intensity of the

experience. Of the twenty-eight climbs at this crag, eleven describe the

experience of climbing the route. Examples include the *The Grasper*, which

describes a desperate character of movement and *Valor*, perhaps referring to

a psychological quality of courage, or bravery in overcoming fear experienced

and/or required for the route.

Cenotaph Corner – Dinas Cromlech

First climbed in 1952 by J Brown and D Belshaw, this name is both extrinsic

and discursive. The 'corner' describes very literally the open book character

of the rock architecture; the climber ascends inside the corner, or up the spine

of the 'book'. Cromlech, which means burial chamber in welsh, coupled with

its serious aspect, doubtless contributed to the emergence of a death theme

in the discursive creation of route names (*Resurrection, Cemetery Gates* and *Ivy Sepulchre Crack*). I led Cenotaph Corner on 6th September 2012, seconded by my friend Ben Ram. For many years I had gazed longingly at the Cromlech from the road below, and at this iconic climb in particular and imagined myself climbing it.   My description of the experience afterwards was 'Great, … Climbed in 20 minutes - 30 minutes to set up the belay to amusement of all' (UKC logbook). I remember that in my nervousness I put so much gear (to protect in case of a fall) in the bottom half of the climb that I had nothing left to protect the crux (difficult section) at the top. Noticing an ancient rusty peg, no doubt hammered into the rock in desperation by some previous climber, I gratefully clipped it whilst simultaneously doubting is trustworthiness. I remember being surprised at the top that I hadn't fallen off. Ben commented: 'Kate seemed to breeze up this in no time at all', underlining the difference between my anxious and effortful experience of the route and Ben's perception of ease from below. There were two other climbers either side of me, climbing routes on the left and right 'pages' of the open book, contributing to a sense of collective exploratory endeavour. We traced the history of this crag with our fingers, exploring the journeys taken by past climbing bodies. Each ascent adds collective experiential weight to the looming presence of the crag and builds its reputation in the imaginations of future climbers. It was a perfect day: my imaginative climbing and re-climbing of the route enmeshed with the actual experience, shared with all those who had already 'summited' Cenotaph Corner,

Curving Crack **– Clogwyn D'ur Arddu**

First climbed in 1932 by M Linnell, CF Kirkus, AW Bridge, AB Hargreaves, this is considered an 'easy' climb, with the caveat that when it was first climbed it was much nearer the top end of climbing difficulty, therefore it packs a punch. The name (extrinsic) describes the pathway – a huge curving crack that can be seen as you approach the crag. Cloggy, as this crag is affectionately known, is the largest and most distant of my selection, and has the highest percentage of extrinsically categorized climbs, suggesting that names are used to 'signpost' the location of the routes. My partner, Simon Edwards and I climbed this in October 2011. He led the first pitch, and I took over on the second. I have a horror of enclosed spaces and avoid climbing chimneys. This one is hidden, appearing only when a corner is turned on the second pitch. Squeezed by a rising, hanging gap in the cliff, nothing but air below, my body – now a human chock stone - squirmed upwards, skin expanding and spreading to gain purchase against rock. My experience appears to have been shared by climber Denise Shortall who reported: 'I was jammed so tight that movement seemed impossible…my eyelashes were the only parts of me which were free to move' (in Dixon, 2004:133). An apparently innocuous route name harboring a horrific (to me) human sized chimney, disguised as a crack. The lack of intrinsic information in the name renders the climb more mysterious, to be discovered by the adventurous climber (although I would have been warned if I had paid heed to the descriptions in guidebook before setting off).

Conclusions

I have identified three types of route names from the sample analyzed: extrinsic, intrinsic and discursive. Analysis of a wider sample would establish

whether this typology applies in climbing areas beyond North Wales. Extrinsic naming uses direct, metaphorical, locational and/or navigational descriptions of routes on rock. The research reveals that there seems to be a correlation between the position and size of the crag and the naming strategy employed. For example, route names on the large mountain crag, Cloggy, often identify the position of the climb on the crag and may feature superlatives, such as 'great'. In contrast, where the crag is more complex, and routes cross each other, the pathway might be referenced in the name. Intrinsic naming reveals the experience of the climb; bold routes might require 'valor' and delicate routes seem to give rise to poetic or metaphorical names such as *One Step in the Clouds*. Discursive names often reveal the culture of the era in which the ascent was completed. Slate has given rise to many route names that imply a psychological state, probably due to a combination of the bold character of the climbing and the reportedly hedonistic climbing culture of the 1980s. Many route names combine more than one category of description providing a richer set of information about the climb. None of the routes in this research feature first ascents by women. Further research is required to understand and compare naming strategies of the very few women first ascensionists, and indeed, to investigate why so few women name and claim vertical territories.

In conclusion, route names to do appear to 'tell a story' (Sbarra 2011, online), whether that be about the position of the route, the experience of climbing it, warnings about dangers to be encountered enroute, the era in which it was climbed, and/or the personal life of the first ascensionist. Some names are prosaic, others poetic, others still, downright vulgar. Whatever their style, they are simultaneously creative expressions and historical records of the efforts and experiences of individuals and their climbing partners of moving in vertical territories that contribute to the social and cultural discourse of climbing. Naming a route is a creative act that often (but not always) reflects the quality of the climbing experience on the day of the first ascent.

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[1] The Clogwyn D'ur Arddu guidebook unusually devotes its second half to chronicles of the major historic ascents (Dixon, 2004).

[2] Pitches are stages into which the climb is split, like chapters in a book.