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Fourth United Nations Conference on the  
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REPORTS BY DIVISIONS AND GOVERNMENTS ON THE SITUATION IN THEIR  
REGIONS AND COUNTRIES AND ON THE PROGRESS MADE IN THE  
STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES SINCE THE THIRD UNITED  
CONFERENCE ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Report of the United Kingdom Division of the United Nations  
Group of Experts on Geographical Names

Paper presented by the United Kingdom Division of the  
United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names

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Communication and personal contact in a Division so widely dispersed are extremely difficult. Every meeting concerned with mapping questions is used to discuss geographical names as one item on what are mostly crowded agendas. At annual meetings between Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom every effort is made to include the subject of geographical names, but so far there has been no occasion on which an opportunity has existed for detailed discussion of the work of the United Nations Group of Experts.

Still less has there been an opportunity for the whole Division to come together. Like most countries in the world, the members of the United Kingdom Division have been experiencing what the politicians call "financial restraint".

In the period since the Third United Nations Conference two meetings have been held between the United States and the United Kingdom, at both of which a representative from Canada was present. At the first of these meetings the principal topic was how to implement the decision to proceed with the adoption of Pinyin. Those who were present at the Athens Conference will recall the problems associated with the adoption of Pinyin which were outlined by the chairman of the United Kingdom Division. A working paper at this present Conference illustrates some of the questions involved. This highlights the gulf which often divides experts at our meetings when such matters are discussed. Many delegates speak and vote for the adoption of a system of romanization secure in the knowledge that they will remain more or less unaffected by the decision, and even in some cases certain that they will never be obliged to implement the decision themselves. For our part, action on converting names to Pinyin has occupied a large proportion of the total work carried out in the last three years.

In August 1979 the Conference of Commonwealth Survey Officers provided an opportunity to confer with representatives of many countries, including some not in the Commonwealth who attended as special representatives. During the Conference an arrangement was made to provide advice and assistance to the International Hydrographic Bureau in connection with charts of the Mediterranean area.

The preparation of a small school atlas wholly in the Welsh language is an interesting project. In many ways it is akin to the task confronting other countries when preparation of maps in their own language is contemplated. Over the past years we have heard on a number of occasions accounts of similar experiences. Experts will have some idea of just how difficult such a project is when they consider that the names of many countries of the world have never before been written in Welsh. Since the Welsh alphabet has a very limited range of vowels and consonants, it is not easy to write in Welsh geographical names employing vowels and consonants which do not occur in Welsh. The Welsh language requires that the name as written is pronounced as it would be were it a native Welsh name, and this is clearly impossible in many cases. Added to this is the question of which name of, say, a country should be used to provide the Welsh equivalent.

In the Republic of Ireland, the printing of a new series of maps at scales of 1:2500 and 1:5000 has begun. These map series are to be bi-lingual, with all administrative and many other names given in both their Irish and English forms. In most cases, the Irish name represents the original name. The English names represent four centuries of anglicization of Irish. Over this period, the conventions of spelling Irish names in English have undergone many changes.

The Place-Name Branch of the Ordnance Survey (Dublin) is today the authority responsible for research into place names. It is faced with the arduous task of establishing the original name in the Irish language. It is anticipated that it will be at least 2000 AD before this task is completed. The process is akin to that which has been taking place over many years in Norway and Sweden. Members of the Irish Place-Name Branch have spent some time in Sweden studying Swedish methods. Preparation of a national gazetteer of the Republic of Ireland, whether compiled manually or by automated methods, cannot be contemplated until the basic work on names is complete.

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