

TOPONYMIC STUDIES IN GREAT BRITAIN (20TH–21ST CENTURIES):  
EVOLUTION, METHODS, AND COMPARISON WITH UZBEK TOPONYMS

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**Abstract.** *This thesis traces the evolution of toponymic studies in Great Britain from the early 20th century to the present, highlighting a progression from philological antiquarianism to an interdisciplinary field integrating linguistics, geography, folklore, and critical theory. The establishment of the English Place-Name Society (EPNS) in 1920 revolutionized the discipline through systematic county surveys, emphasizing etymological analysis of linguistic layers (Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Norse, Norman) and landscape correlations. Key scholars such as Eilert Ekwall (river names), Margaret Gelling (environmental descriptors), John Field (field names), and W.F.H. Nicolaisen (folklore influences) illuminated place names as historical and cultural artifacts. Late-20th- and 21st-century developments, including Berg and Vuolteenaho's *Critical Toponymies* (2009) and cognitive linguistic approaches, explore naming as a mechanism of power, identity, and spatial cognition in urban and modern contexts.*

*In comparative perspective, the thesis juxtaposes these advancements with the sacred toponymy of Bukharan ziyoratgohlar—Uzbekistan's Sufi pilgrimage sites—where names encode spiritual hagiography, locative descriptors, and cultural resilience against Soviet-era suppression. Both traditions underscore toponymy as a repository of memory and heritage: Britain's empirical preservation via EPNS parallels Bukhara's devotional continuity in fostering communal identity and tourism. Ultimately, this analysis advocates for global onomastic collaboration to safeguard intangible cultural landscapes amid modernization.*

**Keywords:** *Toponymy; Place names; English Place-Name Society; Etymology; Critical toponymy; Cognitive linguistics; Bukharan ziyoratgohlar; Cultural heritage; Linguistic stratification; Sacred geography*

Toponymy, the scientific study of place names, provides valuable insights into history, culture, identity, and language. In Great Britain, the development of toponymic research throughout the 20th and 21st centuries reflects a gradual shift from purely linguistic methods to a much wider interdisciplinary



approach. During this period, scholars investigated place names not only as linguistic forms but also as cultural symbols, historical documents, and markers of human–environment interaction. This expanded review presents the major stages of British toponymic research, the contributions of key scholars, and the modern directions shaping the discipline today. It then compares these developments with the sacred place names of the Bukharan ziyoratgohlar (pilgrimage sites) in Uzbekistan, showing how two different regions use naming practices to preserve memory, belief, and cultural heritage.

#### Evolution of British Toponymy (20th Century)

The early 20th century marked a scientific turning point for British toponymy. Before this, place-name studies were mostly carried out by antiquarians—enthusiasts who collected historical forms but lacked systematic linguistic analysis. The founding of the English Place-Name Society (EPNS) in 1920 changed this situation. The Society aimed to produce a complete, scholarly survey of all English place names, county by county. This project established consistent methods and encouraged cooperation between historians, linguists, and geographers.

The EPNS approach included:

- ✓ examining earliest recorded spellings in medieval charters,
- ✓ comparing Old English, Old Norse, Celt, and Norman French forms,
- ✓ analysing local dialects,
- ✓ understanding geographical context and landscape features,
- ✓ tracing settlement patterns over centuries.

This combination allowed researchers to reconstruct the origins and meanings of names with high accuracy. It also revealed how deeply layered the English linguistic landscape is.

#### Key figures in British toponymy

Several scholars played central roles in shaping modern toponymy. Ekwall's *English River-Names* (1928) remains one of the most influential studies in British toponymy. He showed that many river names pre-date Anglo-Saxon settlement and originate from ancient Celtic languages. For example, Avon simply means “river.” This helped scholars understand that linguistic continuity exists even when populations change.

Margaret Gelling focused on the relationship between place names and the physical landscape. Her research demonstrated that Old English place names often describe the environment with great precision. Terms like *lēah* (“clearing”), *wīc* (“farm”), and *dūn* (“hill”) show how early settlers observed and categorized their surroundings. Her later work with Ann Cole connected these



terms to actual landscape features, reinforcing the importance of geography in naming.

John Field pioneered the study of field-names, smaller and often informal land names used locally. His work revealed details about agricultural practices, rural economy, and social relations. Field-names preserve everyday history, such as Long Meadow, Sheep Down, or Mill Close, showing how ordinary life shaped the linguistic landscape.

W.F.H. Nicolaisen expanded toponymy by focusing on folklore, oral traditions, and the stories behind unofficial names. He showed that naming is not only a formal process but also a cultural act influenced by beliefs, legends, and communal identity. Names like Devil's Dyke or Giant's Causeway illustrate how mythical narratives become fixed in geography. By the late 20th century, the field began adopting broader theoretical perspectives.

### Critical Toponymy

The publication of *Critical Toponymies* by Berg and Vuolteenaho (2009) marked an important shift. Researchers began examining names as instruments of power. For instance, renaming streets, towns, or public spaces often reflects political change or ideological agendas. This approach highlights how place names influence social memory and collective identity.

Richard Coates and other scholars focus on how modern cities name new districts, commercial centres, and transportation systems. Naming in urban contexts is often influenced by marketing, tourism, and economic interests. Metropolitan toponymy therefore provides insight into contemporary cultural values.

### Cognitive Approaches

Recent studies apply cognitive linguistics to understand how humans conceptualize space. Scholars analyze:

- metaphors in place names,
- mental mapping and perception,
- symbolic motivations for naming.

This approach is useful for studying metaphoric names like “Devil's Bridge” or “Stony Ridge,” which reflect mental associations rather than straightforward descriptions. In Great Britain, EPNS has protected thousands of historical names from being lost due to modernization. In Bukhara, sacred names persisted even during Soviet restrictions, when religious practices were discouraged. Today, these names support spiritual tourism and cultural revival.

### Conclusion

Toponymic studies in Great Britain have transformed significantly over the last century. From early philological methods to the inclusion of critical,



cognitive, and digital approaches, British toponymy now offers a rich interdisciplinary perspective. When compared with the sacred place names of Bukharan ziyoratgohlar, it becomes clear that place names in both contexts serve as powerful tools for understanding cultural history, identity, and the spiritual landscape. The comparison highlights that while linguistic origins differ, the cultural functions of toponymy are universal. Both British and Uzbek traditions demonstrate that place names are not just labels—they are repositories of memory and heritage that deserve careful preservation.

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