

The earliest journal on toponymy and its spin-off effects on place-name research

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The earliest journal on toponymy and its spin-off effects on place-name research

Abstract: Our study briefly outlines the history of the first toponomastic journal worldwide and the first journal devoted to Dutch toponymy, *Nomina Geographica Neerlandica*, which was launched in 1884. It presents the creation, objectives, editorial boards, evolutionary paths and inevitable end. The final part focuses on its decisive influence on the development of place-name research in the Netherlands and Belgium until 2011.

Keywords: Toponymy, place-name research, toponymic journal, *Nomina Geographica Neerlandica*.

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La première revue sur la toponymie et ses retombées sur la recherche des noms de lieux

Résumé : Notre étude esquisse brièvement l'histoire du premier journal de la toponomastique mondiale et du premier journal consacré à la toponymie néerlandaise *Nomina Geographica Neerlandica* qui date de 1884. Elle présente création, objectifs, comités de rédaction, pistes d'évolution et fin inéluctable. La dernière partie met l'accent sur son influence déterminante sur le développement des recherches toponymiques dans les Pays-Bas et en Belgique jusqu'à 2011.

Mots-clés : Toponymie, noms de lieux, journal toponymique, *Nomina Geographica Neerlandica*.

Die erste toponomastische Zeitschrift und ihre Auswirkungen auf die Ortsnamenforschung

Zusammenfassung: Der Artikel erinnert an die Geschichte der ersten toponomastischen Zeitschrift weltweit und der ersten Zeitschrift für niederländische Toponomastik *Nomina Geographica Neerlandica* aus dem Jahr 1884. Er beschreibt deren Gründung und Ziele, die Redaktionsausschüsse, die Entwicklungspfade und ihr unausweichliches Ende. Der letzte Teil beleuchtet ihren entscheidenden Einfluss auf die Entwicklung der Ortsnamenforschung in den Niederlanden und Belgien bis zum Jahr 2011.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Toponymie, Ortsnamenforschung, namenkundliche Zeitschrift, *Nomina Geographica Neerlandica*.

1. Introduction¹

When doing my research on onomastic resources and media (Shokhenmayer 2018), I came upon the oldest name-centred journal worldwide, which is worth being presented to shed light on its creation, impact and vicissitudes of onomastic life.

In 1884, 138 years ago, the first volume of the journal *Nomina Geographica Neerlandica* (see Figure 1) was published by the Royal Dutch Geographical Society (KNAG). It may be concluded that the series have been issued not only by linguists or onomasticians, but rather by geographers working in the grey zone where geography and toponymy share a border. It is therefore not surprising that the objective of the very first toponymic journal was a practical one, while its influence had important theoretical advances.

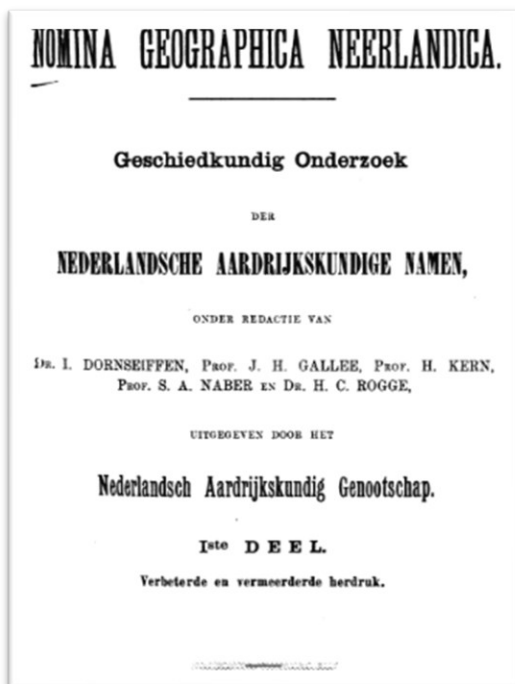


Figure 1: 1st volume of NGN. (Source: <https://books.google.de/books?id=5b8cAQAAMAAJ>, accessed 2023-12-07. *Nomina geographica Neerlandica: tijdschrift voor toponymie en taalgeografie*, Parts 1–4, digitized by the University of Minnesota, 3 March 2011.)

¹ Sincere thanks are due to Iain Kenneth Robinson for his linguistic assistance in the text.

2. Premises to create the journal

Prior to that, the written fixation of Dutch place names and their spelling had never been carried out and regulated by a central authority. Each municipality, each province, even each department proceeded its own way, and as a result it caused, of course, a toponymic chaos. Between 1858 and 1864, the Academy of Sciences had tried in vain to bring in some order ([Rentenaar 1970: 51–52](#)), and now the geographers, for whom the chaos was just very burdensome, found the solution.

They wanted first of all to determine what a correct name form is and then to regulate its orthography. The determination of the correct spelling was the most difficult task, which corresponded completely to the spirit of the 19th century. The science of that time believed to be able to discover the precise form by historic and linguistic research. In other words, it was believed that if one had researched the origin of a name, one would at the same time be able to determine its correct form.

In 1880 and again in 1883, the Dutch parliament discussed place-name spelling practice, with some members claiming the name versions as used in acts and laws² should be accepted as the official versions, and others claiming that it had never been the purpose of these acts and laws to define official spelling practice ([ibid.](#)). The Geographical Society had the funds to pay for work in the toponymic field and, under its aegis, prominent historians and linguists came together to form the editorial board of *Nomina Geographica Neerlandica*. For example, a classical philologist interested in geography became the first secretary of the new toponymic journal ([Blok 1969: 14](#)).

3. Objectives of the first toponymic journal

The aim was to collect the historical evidence of Dutch place names, to publish them, and at the same time to research on certain types of names. By doing so, the authors wanted the series edition to serve as an authority for the standardization of orthography.

The circumstances that led to the creation of the *Nomina Geographica Neerlandica* were decisive for its further history. This is the first popular journal dedicated to names to be edited by, and with major theoretical contributions from, the name-oriented intellectuals themselves. Unlike in the Academy of Sciences, they did not want to convince the government, but the ‘people’, by which they meant the educated bourgeoisie at that time ([Kouwenhoven 2002: 45](#)).

² Such as the Municipality act or the Election district act of January 26, 1878.

4. Editorial boards and team games

The first editorial board was composed of:

- the linguist Johan Hendrik Gallée (1847–1908), Professor of Gothic Language and Comparative Indo-Germanic Linguistics at Utrecht University;
- the linguist Hendrik Caspar Kern (1833–1917), Professor of Sanskrit at Leiden University;
- the secretary Samuel Adrianus Naber (1828–1913), Professor of Classical Philology at Amsterdam University;
- the historian Hendrik Cornelis Rogge (1831–1905), Professor of Church History and Librarian at Amsterdam University Library;
- the professional cartographer and geographer Dr. Isaac Dornseiffen (1818–1898).

Of course, this group would not be complete without Miss Ida Habermehl from Leiden University, who *inter alia*, to the end of her ‘ministry’ in 1938, composed the index of the first ten volumes.³

Such a composition should certainly be judged as favourable ‘team game’ for the place name research as the diachronic study is almost impossible without historical and geographical knowledge. So, the cooperation, as it was planned, could have been fruitful. However, it must be indeed admitted that, for example, in the editorial board around the 1930s, the linguistic authority of Moritz Schönfeld (1880–1958) and Jacob Wijbrand Muller (1858–1945) protected the geographers from many blunders and that, conversely, the competence of a geographer like Anton Albert Beekman (1854–1947) made the linguists to focus on the geographical conditions for the correct interpretation of toponyms.

The influence of historians has also proved its worth: for example, the Professor of History at Groningen University Izaak Hendrik Gosses (1873–1940) has enthusiastically participated in the editorial work behind the scenes. And later, the historian Bernard Slicher van Bath (1910–2004), best known internationally for his work *The Agrarian History of Western Europe, AD 500–1850* and regarded as the initiator of quantitative social history, perfectly cooperated with the linguist Wobbe de Vries (1863–1942).

But on the other hand, to be fair, it should be noted that the “good old liberal” individualism prevailed and sometimes everyone worked for himself in his own field without delving into the new findings of geography or language history respectively. A striking example of this is Geertje Karsten's interpretation of the name *Limmen*, which he thought to explain as a ‘lime tree’ and possibly as the name of an inn. The name of a small island of the Zuiderzee *Pampus*, already mentioned at the beginning of the 16th century, was interpreted by the

³ Online access to the journal: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000060407> (accessed 2023-12-07).

same author from ‘Pomphuis’, without asking himself whether there were already pumps at that time. Both interpretations were taken over by Schönfeld without further serious considerations (Blok 1969: 16).

5. Three-phase life of the journal

Being the first journal series in that domain, *Nomina Geographica Neerlandica* was published at irregular times, with an alarming long pause between the 5th and the 6th volumes. Therefore, the development of the edition can be divided into three phases. During the first one, from 1884 to 1901, 5 volumes were published. The first 5 volumes chiefly contain collections of historical materials.

The above-presented editorial committee was seriously striving to fulfil the original purpose, namely, to produce a collection of the historical records of the settlement names, and they succeeded in accomplishing this for the provinces of Friesland, Drente, Overijssel and Gelderland. Unfortunately, the quality of these works was very different. For instance, the collection for Drente was incomplete, while the dataset for Friesland was quite good and is currently being used. The collection for Overijssel (Gallée 1893: 321–368) was moderate, but the records for Gelderland can be viewed as quite unprofessional and amateur work with the most fantastic mistakes spread both abroad and in the Netherlands (Hessmann 1978: 104).

However, the journal never became the unifying force in Dutch onomastics, perhaps because there was not enough interest in the discipline. In the years around 1900, toponymy received only occasional attention from linguists.⁴ By the way, such a state of things can be explained by the fact that it was very difficult to provide a good collection of onomastic material in the period until 1901, since the most important prerequisite, documentary records, was still largely missing. Exceptions to the above were Groningen and Drente, for which some reliable registers were published in 1896–1899. The earlier-issued data for Holland and Zeeland, as well as for Gelderland were completely outdated and unreliable (Rentenaar 1995: 52).

Only in 1928, the 6th volume, giving more inquires, not excluding, however, materials, appeared under the responsibility of a completely renewed editorial board: the linguists M. Schönfeld, J.W. Muller and G.J. Boekenoogen, the historian I.H. Gosses and the geographer A.A. Beekman. Under this editorship of the *Grand Comité*, the language-based toponymic research grew to full maturity. Above all, we owe this blossoming to the members M. Schönfeld and J.W. Muller and the permanent collaborator W. de Vries. The careful literature reviews of Schönfeld, which testify to his great erudition, the precise and in-depth analysis of place names’ forms and toponymic elements of J.W. Muller and W. de Vries still represent a

⁴ For example: *De Zaaansche volkstaal* by Gerrit Jacob Boekenoogen, Gerrit Jacob Boekenoogen 1897, A.W. Sijthoff edition; *Friesche naamlijst* (Onomasticon Frisicum) Johan Winkler, Meijer & Schaafsma 1898, etc.

model for everybody who is really concerned with toponymy. They were the driving force behind the new journal, which began to appear more or less regularly again.

It is characteristic for the situation of name research in the Netherlands that only J.W. Muller was active at a university. The most important contributors to the journal, W. de Vries and P.L. Tack had no university position. However, it didn't disturb the Flemish specialist in Germanic literature from Ghent Petrus Ludovicus Tack (1870–1943) to produce a valuable series of papers from 1932 to 1938 on the toponymy of the island of Walcheren. The joy of the continuation of the journal lasted only for a short time, because a few years later the 'spectre' of spelling re-appeared. Neither the government nor the Geographical Society, the publisher of the journal, had yet managed to solve this problem.

The end of this 2nd phase occurred after the publication of the 10th volume in 1936 when the KNAG took matters in its own hand again and published an extended gazetteer, the *Lijst der Aardrijkskundige Namen van Nederland* with 40,000 entries (Beekman et al. 1936). As was the case with the previous list of the Academy, this list was not up to date anymore when published, because in 1934 Education minister Marchant introduced a new spelling for educational purposes. It led to such disputes in the society that Beekman, who was responsible for the publication, resigned from the editorial board and the other members followed him in 1937 (Ormeling 2010: 56).

After numerous intrigues and negotiations, a new editorial board was formed in 1938 with the economic geographer Willem Everhard Boerman (1888–1965), the dialect-geographer and historical linguist Gesinus Gerardus Kloeke (1887–1963), and the philologist and folklorist who specialized in Germanic studies Jan de Vries (1890–1964). None of them was a true onomatologist. Kloeke was hoping to transform *Nomina Geographica Neerlandica* into a linguistic-geographical journal and J. de Vries was too busy in other research areas to really care much about the journal. Thus, the third phase was characterized by changing editorship. The most important contribution published in the 11th volume (1938) was a continuation of the toponymic studies by W. de Vries.

After World War II, the management remained uncertain under a new editorial board of 8 members, of which only the spiritual father of Dutch dialect history Antonius Angelus Weijnen (1909–2008) and historical geographer Hendrik Jacob Moerman (1882–1954) had something important to publish (Faider-Feytmans 1949: 194). Contributions by Schoenfeld and posthumously by Muller kept the journal on the corresponding scientific level. With the 14th volume issued in 1954, the publication of *Nomina Geographica Neerlandica* was discontinued and thus the oldest journal dedicated to toponymy came to its end.

6. Output and spinoff effect of the journal

Since 1884, the earliest toponymic journal had achieved a lot of important things, but the most remarkable one is the fact that the study of place names had

become an independent branch of linguistics. Toponomastics, considered as a minor part either of geography/topography or of linguistics one hundred years ago, was no longer manageable within backward tradition. However, it is widely known that a new journal is needed for the fields that have recently experienced extraordinary growth. The very fact of launching a journal specialising in toponymy mirrors the expansion of the corresponding area. It became clear that the topic was of interest to an established community and had a wider appeal.

It should not remain unmentioned that the renewed and reborn post-war development in the Dutch place-name studies became possible in the first place thanks to the collective work done under *Nomina Geographica Neerlandica* before. This journal served an example for the Dutch-speaking neighbours in Belgium, where place-name research started later than in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, but it has been carried out more systematically⁵ and intensively.

An onomastic scholar of great merit, the Belgian historian and philologist Jan Lindemans (1888–1963) was inspired by the Dutch journal and became one of the founders of *Nomina Geographica Flandrica* in 1928 in Brussels. Moreover, it was the Belgian linguist Hendrik Jozef Van de Wijer (1883–1968) who first established a toponymical centre in Louvain, and who in 1925 was also responsible for the founding of the Institute of Flemish Toponymy. Later on, as onomastic research broadened its scope, this organisation changed its name to ‘Institut d’Onomastique/Instituut voor Naamkunde’. Its publications *Mededelingen van de Vereniging voor Naamkunde te Leuven* appear regularly, and since the 26th volume (1950) have been published in association with the ‘Commissie voor Naamkunde’ in Amsterdam (van Haeringen 1960: 93).

It remains the great merit of Jan de Vries that he, who was familiar with the organisation of name research in the Scandinavian countries,⁶ emphasised as early as 1938 that it was necessary to organise toponymic research in a permanent central office, so that the collection and utilisation of the material could no longer be carried out occasionally by amateurs, but continuously by experts. In the preface to the 11th volume of *Nomina Geographica Neerlandica* (1938), this demand was brought to public attention for the first time. It could only be realised after World War II, when the Academy of Sciences founded a Commission for the Study of Names and its office in 1948.

After long negotiations, this Commission and the Geographical Society came to a compromise that the publications of the Commission *Bijdragen en Mededelingen van de Naamkunde-Commissie* can be regarded as a continuation of the *Nomina Geographica Neerlandica*. They were published between 1949 and 1968. In its turn, the successor of those *Contributions and Communications of*

⁵ The monumental *Woordenboek der toponymie van Westelijk Vlaanderen* (18 volumes, Ghent-Bruges, 1914–1938) by K. de Flou has no counterpart in the North.

⁶ The very first section for name research was opened at University of Oslo (Norway) in 1921 and the very first academic department of onomastics in the world was set up at Uppsala University (Sweden) in 1928.

the *Onomastic Commission* is the well-known journal *Naamkunde* launched jointly by Instituut voor Naamkunde & Dialectologie (Belgium) and Meertens Instituut te Amsterdam (The Netherlands). Its edition was issued from 1969 to 2011 and it was the only toponymic journal in the Dutch-speaking regions.⁷ In other words, the consistency of the onomastic research was factually ensured from 1884 to 2011.

Chronologically, the next onomastic journal will be founded only 30 years later, namely in 1913, by the Swedish Professor Jöran Sahlgren (1884–1971) in Uppsala and it will be called *Namn och bygd* ('Names and Settlement'). Well, that's a story for another day.

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⁷ Journal website: https://poj.peeters-leuven.be/content.php?journal_code=NK&url=journal (accessed 2023-12-07).