

Sven Steffens

## Urban popular place names past and present: the case of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean /Sint-Jans-Molenbeek<sup>1</sup>

Translation: Gabrielle Leyden

### Abstract

*Molenbeek-Saint-Jean/Sint-Jans-Molenbeek is a former village on the outskirts of Brussels that underwent a gradual process of urbanisation starting in 1800 that culminated in its becoming an integral part of the capital. In studying the names and nicknames that the residents give to the places where they live, this toponymic study shows us the borough's life: urbanisation, industrialisation, economic decline, migrations, and changes in language use. The entire history of a region unfolds before our eyes thanks to the perceptions and mentalities that these place names express, complete with the residents' ambitions and sources of pride, tensions between ethnic groups and social strata, and changes in social realities.*

One of the nineteen municipalities or boroughs of today's Brussels-Capital Region is *Molenbeek-Saint-Jean* (French name) or *Sint-Jans-Molenbeek* (Dutch name). Over the past two centuries this former village at Brussels' city gates has become a highly urbanised and densely populated borough in the north-western quadrant of Greater Brussels. However, besides these two official names it has many other, unofficial, ones, such as the dialectic *Muilebeik*<sup>2</sup>, which have very folksy origins and uses. The same phenomenon can be found for the names of certain streets. So, today's *rue de la Borne* or *Paalstraat* [Marker Street] used to go by the name of *Ijzermanstroetje* [Iron Man Alley]<sup>3</sup> in Molenbeek dialect. Similarly, certain buildings have popular names in addition to their official names that are consecrated by use within the administration. For example, the huge 1920s social housing development that was officially named *Cour Saint-Lazare* [Saint Lazarus Court] is also called *bloc Saint-Lazare* or, even shorter and in dialect, *den blok* [The Block].

Giving sites and structures names or nicknames in dialect or standard languages is a widespread, even commonplace, phenomenon, but interesting on several accounts. First of all, popular place names are profoundly human, sometimes picturesque and pithy, reflections of the state of mind of a given place's inhabitants. Next, naming a place means identifying and characterising it. So, these names help to orient and position the speaker not only geographically, but also according to her/

*Sven Steffens is a historian and since December 2004 the director of Molenbeek's municipal museum, Musée communal de Molenbeek-Saint-Jean/ Gemeentelijkmuseum van Sint-Jans-Molenbeek, which is a local history museum in formation. He presented his PhD thesis on the history of occupational training and socialisation in skilled manual trades in Belgium and Germany (late 18th to early 19th centuries) at Brussels Free University (ULB) in 2000. He is specialised in social history, especially the history of labour.*

<sup>1</sup> Revised and expanded version of the article "Les noms non officiels et populaires des quartiers, rues et lieux", in : *Les Cahiers de La Fonderie*, 33: *Molenbeek, une commune bruxelloise*, Dec. 2005, pp.118-123.

<sup>2</sup> The dialect names are transcribed using standard Dutch spelling rules. This choice obviously sacrifices some accuracy and nuances compared with the phonetic alphabet, but makes them easier to read for Dutch speakers..

<sup>3</sup> The author's or translator's translations of the dialect or Dutch terms are given between square brackets.

### Contacts :

Sven Steffens  
Musée communal de Molenbeek  
Rue Mommaerts, 2A, 1080 Bruxelles  
Tél. : 02/412.08.10 - Fax: 02/412.08.19  
ssteffens@molenbeek.irisnet.be

his social and cultural co-ordinates. Similarly, shared knowledge of popular names creates, expresses, and supports a feeling of belonging to a group. People recognise each other through the same names. Indeed, these names are felt to be more authentic because they are rooted in a common experience and a collective mentality. Consequently, knowing and analysing this “parallel” nomenclature enables one to allow more for a local population’s life experiences and mentality and thus to understand the people better.

Urban popular place names have triggered little interest among researchers, even though they are omnipresent. People stick readily to the official place names and, for example, to the ideological stakes that underpin their development (for studies of French cases, see Bouvier & Guillon, 2001). There is no getting around the fact that popular place names are mired in a reputation of “eccentric” and “highly colourful” terminology that is not averse to crude, even scatological, expressions. Nevertheless, in the working-class Marolles/Marollen neighbourhood, in central Brussels, the municipal authorities have in the past few years put up street name plates bearing the streets’ old names or popular nicknames alongside their current official names.

When it comes to the popular names in Molenbeek<sup>4</sup>-Saint-Jean/Sint-Jans-Molenbeek, Aimé Bernaerts and Roger Kervyn de Marcke ten Driessche (1951) above all, followed by Louis Quiévreux (1951 and 1969), Jean Francis (1975), and Antoon-Willem Maurissen (1980), can be applauded for having mentioned a few names – ten or so – and sometimes trying to give historical explanations for them. Their approaches are not systematic, however, and lack a certain amount of rigour. Pierre Van Nieuwenhuysen (1979), who is the only author of a scientific study of old and contemporary place names in Molenbeek, retained only some of the popular names cited previously by J. Francis. However, he did note the dialect pronunciation of some others.

In my work, I have taken note of and compared the names mentioned by the above-mentioned authors, plumbed various written sources, undertaken an empirical questionnaire-based study (without sampling) of knowledge and use of popular names linked to the borough, questioned a series of elderly contacts in the course of a myriad of meetings and encounters, and consulted the findings of two place name surveys that the Military Geographic Institute (today’s National Geographic Institute) conducted in 1954 and 1970. Given the historical approach, most of the names that were identified are in Flemish dialect and a large proportion of them date back to at least the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, the survey also uncovered some more recent and current names in French and Dutch, which shows that place name creativity is still alive and well and the need to name things “differently” subsists. More systematic place name collection on an even wider scale, backed up by an in-depth historical and sociolinguistic analysis of popular place names, nevertheless remains to be done.

In this work, the “official names” were considered to be those that were chosen and adopted by the political powers, used by the public administrations, and used on city maps and in other yearbooks and directories. Names that did not belong to this category were consequently considered to be popular names. It nevertheless bears

---

<sup>4</sup> To spare the English reader, the short form “Molenbeek” or abbreviation “MSJ/SJM” will be used hereafter instead of the name in full.

repeating that the official place names do rely in part on old folk place names (for example, *Beekkant* and *Osseghem*, which have become street and underground station names) and speakers flit between the toponymic registers according to the circumstances. So, one commonly hears people say that they live “on *Machtens*” or “on *Mettewie*”, that’s to say, on Edmond Machtens Boulevard or Louis Mettewie Boulevard.

One more specification: The adjective “popular” does not necessarily mean that the entire local population knows a name. Today in Molenbeek, knowledge (or ignorance) of a given place name often depends on the person’s age, geographic and social origins, mother tongue and lingua franca, neighbourhood of residence, length of residence in the borough, and so on. To simply things, we can say that toponymic practices are as diverse and multifaceted as the components of the constantly changing Molenbeek population.

### The borough's names

Before talking about the names of the borough *per se*, let us dwell an instant on the fact that despite its considerable size (more than 82,000 officially registered inhabitants in July 2007), making it larger than several mid-sized towns in the country, MSJ/SJM continued to be labelled a *commune* or *gemeente*.<sup>5</sup> Let us remember in this regard that the entity was given the status of a *commune* or *gemeente* in 1795. In the wake of industrialisation, the subsequent migratory flows, and urbanisation, the village became one of the suburbs of the then booming city of Brussels in the 19<sup>th</sup> century already. Moreover, the territory of Molenbeek has conserved its appearance of a suburban entity, located in the shadow of the city of Brussels, to the present day. Consequently, no one would even think of speaking of the *town* of “Saint John Molenbeek” in French, Dutch, or dialect. A singular find proves this fully: The municipal archives contain a letter dated 31 August 1910 that the Governor of Brabant Province sent to the mayor and deputy mayors asking them to give him the exact number of pupils “who attended the courses of your city’s Art Academy in the 1909 school year”. An anonymous hand, probably that of a civil servant, scratched out the word “*ville*” (city) and added “*commune*”. In the same vein, one hears people speak of the borough hall as *Maison communale*, *Hôtel communal*, or *Gemeentehuis*, but never *Hôtel de ville* or *Stadhuis* (town or city hall).

The borough’s official name, be it *Molenbeek-Saint-Jean* for French speakers or *Sint-Jans-Molenbeek* for Dutch speakers, is relatively long. The tendency, in private conversations, is to shorten it. Today’s speakers, whether French or Dutch speaking, frequently use *Molenbeek*, and most of the time pronounce it in Flemish fashion (“-beek” with a long “a”, closer to “bake” in English). In the case of non-Dutch speakers, one sometimes hears *Molenbek* (“-bek” with a short “e” as in “peck” in English), which is a more expressive pronunciation. The dialect forms *Muilebeik* and *Meulebeik* are still used by many adults of Belgian ancestry, especially those past

---

<sup>5</sup>“Municipality” or the smallest administrative unit in Belgium. The city of Brussels is actually a conglomeration of 19 separate municipalities, each with its own mayor, town hall, and town council. Still, in the case of Brussels, each of these municipalities can be considered a borough, with its own borough hall and council. (Translator’s note)

their forties. The shorter *Molen* (with the stress on the first syllable) and *Molem* (with the stress on the second syllable and the final “m” pronounced) are common among young speakers. One respondent even gave *Mol* as an option, but I never heard this term out in the field.

The abbreviated forms can give rise to neologisms such as *Molencity*, which was seen in the form of a tag on a façade on *rue Le Lorrain*, in the Maritime neighbourhood, in March 2005. Another current way to save time is to say *10/80* or write *1080*, that is, to use the postal code instead of the name.<sup>6</sup> As reprehensible as tags may be, it is striking to see the *1080*, *Molen* or *Molem* tags written in great numbers on the façades of houses in the eastern part of the borough. This is reminiscent of the practices of the *hip-hop* culture of disadvantaged youth in first the inner cities of North America, and then in European towns, that arose in the 1980s. Whether the name used is *Muilebeik* or *Molem*, each time it is an expression of identity that is based on the appropriation of space with the help of a name. Is this not also a sign of the young second-generation immigrants’ desire to assert their places in Belgian society? Having understood it this way, the “Cell against Social Exclusion”, CLES, which targets just such a population, has christened its evening computer science courses *molem.net*.

### The names of certain parts of the borough

The historical centre around Saint John the Baptist Church used to be called *het dorp* or *le village* [the village] (Maurissen, 1980). This was a clear reference to the borough’s village beginnings. The term appears to have fallen completely out of fashion. Similarly, the western part of the borough continued to be called “the country” (*le* [Molenbeek] *rural*) even during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as if referring to its agricultural character, which disappeared very gradually. Still, the Military Geographic Institute had observed as early as 1954 that many old place names of rural origin were already obsolete in Molenbeek. Today, the (official) names of certain streets, such as Laekenveld [Laeken Field] Street and Ostendael [East Dale] Street, keep some of the memories partly alive (Charruadas, 2005).

The former industrial neighbourhoods located between Charleroi Canal and the railroad line gave rise to a nickname in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “little Manchester”, for which several variants exist in French, namely, *le Manchester belge*, *le petit Manchester*, and *le petit Manchester belge*; [Belgian Manchester, Little Manchester, and Belgian Little Manchester, respectively]. Only one respondent gave the Dutch version, *klein Manchester*. When this nickname is used today, the intimation is a reference to the past, since the de-industrialisation of the past decades has led to the collapse of the area’s former local economic structure. The exact year that this nickname was coined is unknown (in the 1870s, according to Jean d’Osta, 1996). So, after this de-industrialisation, this nickname could have disappeared. The fact that it remained rooted in the collective memory despite everything is above all due to the study of and spotlights trained on Brussels’s industrial past via exhibitions and publications by the non-profit association *La Fonderie*, which was created in the borough in

<sup>6</sup> The tags *1030* in Schaerbeek and *1120* in Neder-over-Heembeek were also seen in the course of this research, albeit much less frequently.

1983 and has since become the Brussels Museum of Industry and Labour, now housed in the buildings of the former *Compagnie des Bronzes, Ransfort Street*. Even now, the reference to the first town in the history of industrialisation, Manchester, is considered to be a source of pride. Moreover, it is interesting to note that Molenbeek is not the only place in Belgium to have been given the Manchester adjective: This is also the case of Ghent, which is pompously referred to as *the Continent's Manchester*, and Roulers, which is known as the *Flemish Manchester*. Even better, dozens of industrial cities and towns, both large and small, in Europe and on other continents have been compared to Manchester and given comparable nicknames. Through this name, Molenbeek has thus participated in a certain global mythology of industrial capitalism.

What is the meaning of *Molenbeek-plage* (Molenbeek Beach) that was mentioned by several respondents, and where exactly is this part of the borough situated? Is there a link with the canal, which in bygone days was used for bathing, or more broadly with the so-called *Maritime* neighbourhood, which owes its name (which goes back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century) to Brussels's port facilities and the freight warehouse called *Tour et Taxis/Turm en Taxis* [Tower and Taxis]? In the absence of a "true" explanation for *Molenbeek Beach*, it is enlightening to ascertain that some names continue to be used although their primary meanings are not necessarily known. My respondents gave plausible explanations for the name, but these were actually divergent, personal interpretations that showed clearly how names are subject to re-interpretation, to wit: an ironical way of saying that, for lack of money, one is holidaying at home; an allusion to the former open-air swimming pool, the *Solarium*; a caustic allusion to a worksite that left a street buried in sand; and an allusion to the recent "Bruxelles-les-Bains" initiative, begun in 2003, which consists in turning the Brussels-City side of the Charleroi Canal into a sandy beach (albeit without bathing in the canal) during the summer holiday.

Many residents clearly see Molenbeek as being a dual entity. The railway tracks that divide the territory into two parts, with only two road crossings between them, namely, *chaussée de Gand/Steenweg op Gent* [Ghent Road] and *chaussée de Ninove/Steenweg op Ninova* [Ninova Road], is seen as a border. To the west we find a part located on slightly higher ground that was urbanised for the most part in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is primarily residential. The densely built-up historical nucleus and half-industrial, half-residential old districts of the village that sprang up in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century are in the eastern part. This eastern part, moreover, is the part to which the immigrant populations have flocked since the 1960s. This double (di)vision has given rise to "opposing" pairs of names, such as *vieux Molenbeek* and *nouveau Molenbeek* [Old and New Molenbeek], *le bas* and *le haut (de) Molenbeek* [downtown and uptown Molenbeek or lower and upper Molenbeek], and even *Molenbeek-bas* and *Molenbeek-haut* [lower and upper Molenbeek], to which we can add *oud* [old] and *laag* [lower] *Molenbeek* in Dutch. While these names come from an extreme oversimplification and positive appraisal of the western part of the borough to the detriment of its eastern part, we are forced to admit that the same type of perception, associating differences in elevation with socio-economic differences, is found elsewhere. One need only think of the duality between the "scruffy" *Marolles/*

---

<sup>7</sup> From the name of an old aristocratic family, *Tour et Tassis*, that founded the Belgian postal system. [Translator's note]

*Marollen* neighbourhood in Brussels's low-lying centre and the "beautiful quarters" of the high ground that surrounds the centre.

The presence of a large Moroccan community that gradually moved into the oldest parts of the borough starting in the 1960s is reflected in the names with which the native Belgians have dubbed Molenbeek, namely, (*Petit*) *Marrakech* [(Little) Marra-kech] and *le Maroc* [Morocco] among French speakers, *klein Marokko* [Little Morocco] and *Marokkenbeek* among Dutch speakers, even *Molenkech* (from the contraction of Molen(beek) and (Marra)kech) and *Casabeek* (from the contraction of Casa(blanca) and (Molen)beek). An ironic, even critical, connotation that in the mouths of some speakers takes on xenophobic undertones is clearly perceptible. Here, too, the case of Molenbeek is not unique. Wherever massive waves of foreigners flood into and establish themselves in an area, the native residents tend to name the places that they take over according to the immigrants' places of origin. Examples are *Borgerokko* to refer to the municipality of Borgerhout on the outskirts of Antwerp (see Bali, 1993) and *Matonge* (a neighbourhood in Ixelles/Elsene), in reference to the Congolese population that lives there (Matonge is a neighbourhood in Kinshasa). I shall come back to this when it comes to the nickname of an old Molenbeek cul-de-sac.

### Neighbourhoods, streets, cul-de-sacs, squares, and some other places

I expected to come across many (nick)names for Molenbeek's various neighbourhoods, but the harvest was rather meagre. Most of the informants and respondents, like the written sources that I consulted, provided common names created in reference to the official names of a monument (*Karreveld* neighbourhood named after a farm-castle), building (*Maritime* neighbourhood after the Tour et Taxis "maritime railroad station"), street (*Jubilee Boulevard* neighbourhood), park (*Scheutbos* neighbourhood), or old café (*Queue de vache* neighbourhood), to give only a few examples. On the other hand, some old neighbourhood names such as *Hamme*, *Lenebergveld*, and *Neep*, which were originally rural place names that can still be found in Houet and Cleeren's (1967) dictionary, did not surface during my own survey.

Not all of the names of a popular register have disappeared for all that. So, *'t Zwët Vaaiver* [Black Pond] (De Vriendt, 2004) for the *place des Étangs noirs/ Zwartevijverplein* neighbourhood; *de Lamme(n) Hoek* [Lazy Corner], also called *de Verloren Hoek* [Lost Corner] and its literal counterpart in French, *le Coin perdu*, for a neighbourhood located between Van Zande, Korenbeek, and Potaerdegat Streets and the upper part of *rue des Béguines/Begijnenstraat* and *in de Vink*<sup>8</sup> and the French form, *le Vink*, [several possible meanings: the chaffinch, a place for extracting peat, or a patronymic] for a small neighbourhood on *Van Kalck Street*. The *Lamme(n)* or *Verloren Hoek* and *Vink* neighbourhoods located in the western part of the borough are neighbourhoods that go back to the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which may explain why their names are in dialect.

---

<sup>8</sup> One seventy-year-old woman who filled out the questionnaire wrote it in the old style, that is, "Vinck".

Another case is the nickname *Chicago* given fairly recently to both the *Heyvaert* neighbourhood (named after Heyvaert Street), in an allusion to the shady car traders who are found there, and to the neighbourhoods between the canal and *place des Étangs noirs/Zwartevijverplein* in reference to the petty urban crime that goes on there. Yet it bears repeating that some neighbourhoods in the historical part of Molenbeek have long had rather unflattering reputations linked to their residents' poverty. This is the case of *rues Saint-Martin, Fin, Ransfort* and *de la Colonne* (in French)/*Sint-Maartens-, Fin-, Ransfort-* and *Kolomstraat* (in Dutch), as Pierre Plateau (1994) mentions in his childhood memories, as is indicated by the nickname *Vagabontestroet* [Vagabonds Street] for *rue Saint-Martin* [Saint Martin Street] given by a seventy-year-old informant and as proven by the nickname *de Marollen van Muilebeik* [Molenbeek's Marolles] for the whole neighbourhood that was attested by another informant talking about the 1950s.

The pickings were not as slim when it came to the old popular names of certain streets and cul-de-sacs. In part, these are simply dialect forms of an official name: *rue du Cheval noir/Zwartpaardstraat* [Black Horse Street] is called *Zwet-tepièrestroet*, *rue de l'Éléphant/Olifantstraat* [Elephant Street] is called *Uilefontestroet*, *rue de la Savonnerie/Zeepziederijstraat* [Soap Factory Street] is called *Ziep-* or *Zijpstroet* [Soap Street], *rue de la Colonne/Kolomstraat* [Column Street] is called *Kaloemmestroet*, and *rue Ransfort/Ransfortstraat* becomes *Ranfel-* or *Ransferstroet*. As for the main thoroughfares, for *chaussée de Gand/Steenweg op Gent* [Ghent Road] we have the dialect forms *de Stienweg* and *de Kassá* and a Gallicised form, *de Chosseïë*, attesting to the French language's influence on the popular dialect. It should also be noted that *de Stienweg* and *de Kassá* are polysemic, because they are known by some informants for *Jette, Ninova* and *Antwerp* Roads.

Other streets were given nicknames. So, *rue du Prado/Pradostraat* [Prado Street] was long designated by the pragmatic *Schoen-* or *Schoonstraat* [Shoe Street] because of the shoe shops that proliferated there. Somewhat unclear is the meaning of the name *Ijzermanstroetje* [Iron Man Alley] or *Aizermannekestroet* [Small Iron Man Alley] for *rue de la Borne/Paalstraat* [Marker Street]. This may have been an allusion to some metal markers or to a fountain shaped like a person, or it might have been named after a proprietor named Ijzerman(s), or, as one eighty-year-old informant asserted, because an ironmonger lived there. Finally, the name *Netstraat* [Net Street or Clean Street?] for *rue du Cinéma/Cinemastraat* [Cinema Street] that was reported by Bernaert and Kervyn de Marcke ten Driessche (1951) remains a total mystery, for no one seems to know it or be able to explain it any more *ex post*.

The various avenues of investigation used in this research uncovered popular nicknames for six of the fifty-five cul-de-sacs that existed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all of which have disappeared or been transformed since then. According to Bernaert and Kervyn de Marcke ten Driessche (1951), Ghijbsbrecht and Badaert cul-de-sacs (on *rue Fin/Finstraat*) and Haubrechts cul-de-sac (on *rue de l'Avenir/Toekomststraat* [Future Street]) were called "Poot<sup>9</sup> de Cola" [Colas Gate], *Woelepoot* [Walloons' Gate], and *Schijtpoot* [Gate Where One Shits], respectively. The word "porte" [gate or door] used here is a reference to the carriage entrance that as a rule gave entry to

---

<sup>9</sup> Our informants always pronounced "poot" with a long "u", never with a long "o" as would be usual in Dutch.

the cul-de-sac and was closed at night. The origin of the name *Poot de Cola* remains obscure, unless *Cola* is simply short for *Nicolas*. The nickname *Schijtpoot* may simply hark back to less than optimal conditions of health and hygiene that prevailed, along the lines of what Claire Billen and Jean-Michel Decroly (2003) suggest for *Pis-*, *Voeuil-*, and *Schaaistrotje* [Piss, Filth, and Shit Alleys] in Brussels. On the other hand, *Woelepoot* appears to allude to the group of Walloons who allegedly moved in there, in a mostly Flemish community, following the model of what Jean d'Osta (1979) reported for *impasse des Wallons* [Walloons' Cul-de-sac] and *place des Wallons* [Walloons' Square] in Brussels. According to this hypothesis, the same process would have been at work as the one that gave rise to the nicknames *Petit Marrakech* and *Marokkenbeek*, albeit on a different geographical scale.

Two other nicknames for cul-de-sacs were found in the legend of iconographic sources, namely, *Luizepoort*<sup>10</sup> [Lice Gate] (on *rue Fin/Finstraat*), and *Hachelpoort* (on *rue du Billard/Biljartstraat* [Billiard Street])<sup>11</sup>, but neither the latter's meaning nor the sense of the choice of the former were found. A sixth nickname was reported by two informants: that of *d'Horepout* [Whores' Gate] (officially *impasse D'Hon(d)t*, on *rue Vanderstraeten/Vanderstraetenstraat*). Finally, *impasse Meskens*, which although located on the territory of the neighbouring borough of Koekelberg gives onto Black Ponds Square, deserves to be mentioned here, for one informant who was unaware of its official name mentioned the nickname *Meskespout* [Little Knives Gate], explaining that this name alluded to the blades that the youths who frequented this cul-de-sac carried.

The names given to certain places express reasoning already encountered earlier, that is, either a generic and thus polysemic common name such as *de ploch* [square or place] for *place Communale/Gemeenteplein* [Town Square] and *Parvis Saint-Jean-Baptiste/Voorplein Sint-Jan-de-doper* [Saint John the Baptist Square] or *on de kerk* [in front of the church] for *Parvis Saint-Jean-Baptiste* and the nameless square before Saint Remy Church, or a more specific common name, such as *op de met* (*van Meulebeik*, as one informant added) [on the marketplace (of Molenbeek)] for the Town Square (*place Communale/Gemeenteplein*) where Molenbeek's main market has been held since the 19<sup>th</sup> century; *de Verkesmet* [Pig Market] for *place Wauters-Koeckx/Wauters-Koeckxplaats*<sup>12</sup> for which documents exist attesting that it hosted this market until 1914, or *de Pièremet* [Horse Market] for *place de la Duchesse de Brabant/Hertogin van Brabantplaats* [Duchess of Brabant Square] in reference to the horse market that was held there from the late 1880s on; or a nickname, such as *'t Leugenaarspleintje* or *Leugenoetpleintje* [Small Liars' Square] for a square without an official name at the intersection of *Menin*, *Ostende/Oostend*, *Courtrai/Kortrijk*, *Delaunoy*, *la Campine/Kempen* and *Groeninghe* Streets. The explanations for the origins of this last nickname vary from one source to the next. If we are to believe Louis Quiévreux (1951), the name is allegedly a humorous echo of the spontaneous, informal meetings of people from the area who gathered there to engage in rather absurd speculation about military events during World War I, while

<sup>10</sup> The spelling 'poort' is a normalisation that is clearly out of synch with the dialectic pronunciation.

<sup>11</sup> Since then renamed *rue Fernand Brunfaut/Fernand Brunfautstraat* (Fernand Brunfaut Street).

<sup>12</sup> Since then renamed *Place Voltaire/Voltaireplein* [Voltaire Square].

Pierre Platteau (1994) has his grandfather say in his autobiographical novel that it was an allusion to cheating card players. As for the informants who were asked about this nickname, one associated it with the idle gossip of the old biddies who congregate there, while the other ascribed it to no-shows at lovers' trysts. In a word, the nickname is subject to re-interpretation and is like a screen on which real or imaginary events are projected.

Similar names are found for many buildings or groups of buildings in Molenbeek: There are the generic common names such as *den blok* [the block], cited in the introduction for the massive block of low-income flats of the 1920s in *Louis De Gunst* and *Edmond Bonehill Streets*, and which is designated elsewhere by its official name *Cour Saint-Lazare* (Saint Lazarus Court). Now *den blok* is also used for other collective social housing developments, for it expresses with remarkable conciseness and expressiveness the dense, compact layout of this type of housing development compared with more individualised homes. Then there are the more specific common names such as *on de lanteire* [at the lantern] for a building on *rue de la Prospérité* [Prosperity Street] that an eighty-year-old informant who lived there remembered; *'t Citeike* [the little development or city] for *Cité Diongre* (the Diongre Development located on other side of *Joseph Diongre Street*) that was mentioned by a woman who lived in one of the tiny single-family homes making up this development; *de Puipel* or *de kleine Peupel* [the (little) people] for the former *Maison du Peuple* [workers' centre] of Molenbeek (adding the "little" may be a reference to the (large) *Maison du Peuple* of Central Brussels); and *het lattenwerk* [the lathing], designating a block of small rear-court houses on *rue de l'École/Schoolstraat* [School Street] during the interwar period that had small front yards and were separated from the street by wooden slats (childhood memory of an eighty-year-old Molenbeek woman quoted by De Pauw, 2002). There were outright nicknames, such as the caustic *Kartonnenblok* [cardboard block] for a low-income housing high rise with its flimsy plasterboard walls and ceilings that was erected in 1965–1967 in *Fernand Brunfaut Street* (Huberty, 2000; Boterdael, 2004); the various nicknames - *boîte à conserves* [the tin can] or *boîte à sardines* or *à pilchards* [tin of sardines, tin of pilchards] for some, *Marie Thumas* (in an allusion to a famous old Belgian brand of tinned vegetables) for others - given to a recent building on the corner of *chaussée de Gand/Steenweg op Gent* and *Quai des Charbonnages/Koolmijnenkaai* [Coalmine Quay] with a futuristic, convex façade of corrugated metal that effectively reminds one of a tin can; or a nickname stemming solely from the fun of playing on words, such as *Sint-Botsje* [Holy Goatee] arising out of the two meanings of the "Barbe" (Barbara and beard) in the name of the old school *Sint-Barbara/Sainte-Barbe* (Saint Barbara's on Isidore Teirlinck Street) that was reported by its old principal. Finally, there are the colonial references in *Matadi* and *in 't Congoske* [in little Congo] for a group of workers' houses in *Dilbeek Street*, although their origins remain obscure for the time being.

When it comes to microtoponymy, it should be noted that in the past many industrial firms were simply known as the "x" *fabriek* [factory], with the "x" being replaced by the products that they made: *bachefabriek* [tarpaulins factory], *bronsfabriek* [bronze (objects) factory] *chocolatefabriek* [chocolate factory], *kassoeltjesfabriek* [pot factory], *koekskesfabriek* [biscuit factory], *medolleskesfabriek* [medal factory], *oile-* or *uilefabriek* [oil factory], *sigarette-* or *tabakfabriek* [cigarettes or tobacco factory], *suiker-* or *soeikerfabriek* [sugar factory] and *vlekskesfabriek* [tin can factory]. *Le Pou-*

*dro* for an old trash incineration company that produced *poudrette* [ground-up trash used as fertilizer] (Vanden Bernden, 2004) belongs to this register. An old case that goes back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, *i.e.*, that of *het Meuleken* [the little mill] for the mill known as *Hozeikmolen* (Van Nieuwenhuysen, 1979), can also be included in this series. References to the company's name seem to be more rare. Examples are references to various tobacco companies: *bai Gosset* [at Gosset's], in *Saint-Michel* [in Saint-Michel], and *den Odon Warland* [the Odon Warland]. The only true nickname that this research unearthed was *het vlooiensbakske* [the little basket of fleas] for the older *Corso* cinema, in *chaussée de Gand/Steenweg op Gent*, that was mentioned by several elderly respondents.

Let us end with a place without an official name. J. Francis (1975) reports the wonderful nickname *Far-West* that the children living in the area before World War II gave to a dump located near the *Karrevelde* farm-castle, which moreover was known as *het steut* or *stet* [the dump] in dialect at the time. Here we have an example of the influence that North American literature and perhaps cinema had on the imaginations and vocabulary of Molenbeek children who were fascinated, as were so many others, by the adventure-filled tales of cowboys and Indians.

## Conclusions

What can we glean from this doubtless incomplete collection of popular names for Molenbeek and its various areas, neighbourhoods, streets, cul-de-sacs, squares, and so on?

First of all, we see the clear imprint and preponderance of names in Flemish dialect in the older names. Given the importance of dialects spoken in the lower classes, even in the city, until at least World War II, this finding is not at all surprising for a municipality belonging to Greater Brussels. We can nevertheless wonder if French nicknames did not circulate as well, at least in bourgeois circles. The example of (*petit*) *Manchester belge* [(Little) Belgian Manchester], with its connotation of industrial success, comes to mind in this regard.

Second, the great decline in the use of old dialect names, which are still known primarily by elderly people if they have not already been forgotten, could be the result of the departure of a part of the native Belgian population from the area and its replacement by new groups, whether of immigrant stock or not. At the same time, we can see in this the result of the generalisation of more prolonged schooling and the influence of the mass media, which promotes the use of standard languages to the detriment of the dialects of the old oral folk culture. In the same vein, we see a certain French "contamination" of the local dialect and Dutch, either through hybrid street names composed of a first part in French followed by "stroet" [street in dialect] – *Billardstroet*, *Colonnestroet*, and *Finstroet* – or of a Dutch determinant followed by a French noun – *de jubilé* for *boulevard du Jubilé/Jubelfeestlaan* [Jubilee Boulevard] and *de Saint-Remi* for the neighbourhood around Saint Remy Church – or through the half-dialect, half-French hybrid formula "*Meulebeik-Saint-Jean*" given by one respondent to the questionnaire; by the alternating use of street names in Dutch at times, in French at others, as in the novelised memories of Pierre Platteau, who was born in 1945; or by the emergence of a French name translating a dialect

name, as in the case of the *Koeieschiët* inn turned restaurant under the name *Queue de vache* [Cow's Tail] (and, following a change in ownership, *New Queue de Vache* [New Cow's Tail]).

Third, we have the directness, succinctness, and often pragmatic nature of the Flemish dialect names. The *Pièremet* [horse market] for *Place de la Duchesse de Brabant/Hertogin van Brabantplaats*, *Ziepstroet* [Soap Street] for *rue de la Savonnerie/Zeepziederijstraat*, and *de bronsfabriek* [bronze factory] for the former *Compagnie des Bronzes* all get right to the point and sum up the essentials. These names, as well as the polysemic nouns that can apply to different streets or businesses – *de kassâ* [road or chaussée], *koekskesfabriek* [the biscuit factory], for example –, attest to deep roots in the spatial territory and a strong attachment to an existence that belongs to one's close surroundings. This is confirmed, moreover, by such emotionally charged names as *de Meskespout* [Small Knives Gate] for the former *impasse Meskens* and *kartonnenblok* [cardboard block] for the social housing high rise in *Fernand Brunfaut Street*. In a nutshell, what we have here is a neighbourhood nomenclature first and foremost. From this point of view, it is normal that no single informant or respondent should know all of the names unearthed in the course of this research.

Fourth, the old and current toponymic legacies have not yet yielded up all their secrets. The meanings of some of the old names still escape us, and there are grounds for continuing and deepening the investigation.

Fifth, one of the major challenges facing society today, that is, integrating populations of foreign origin, and the tensions that accompany this challenge, is reflected in the nicknames that are given to Molenbeek's eastern half. At the same time, we see a certain claim-staking territorial identification on the part of Molenbeek's youth via the tags and graffiti that flourish in the area. Indeed, some of them are explicitly expressions of pride, such as the little inscription *Molem Olympic!! 1080* seen in *Vandermaelen Street*. The creation of the borough museum belongs precisely to this social and cultural context. So does my place-name research, which strives not just to take stock of a linguistic heritage, but also to connect the various components of the population through the borough's history.

Last, we see that urban popular place-naming is a multifaceted and moving phenomenon because of the demographic, sociological, and (multi-)cultural dynamics at work. It is certain that the systematic collection of place names on a wider scale that included comparison with other boroughs or municipalities would give more insights into the factors that determine the directions that this phenomenon takes and should be encouraged.

## Bibliography

- BALI, Fatima, *Mijn leven in Borgerokko*, Antwerp – Baarn: Hadewijch, 1994.
- BERNAERTS, Aimé, KERVYN DE MARCKE TEN DRIESSCHE, Roger, *Les noms de rues à Bruxelles. Leur histoire, leur signification, leur sort*, 2<sup>e</sup> Ed., Rev. & expanded, Brussels: De Visscher, 1951.
- BILLEN, Claire, DECROLY, Jean-Michel, *Petits coins dans la grande ville. Les toilettes publiques à Bruxelles du moyen âge à nos jours* (Historia Bruxellæ Collection), Brussels: Musée de la Ville de Bruxelles, 2003.
- BOTERDAEL, Jean, *Molenbeek-Saint-Jean* (Guides des communes de la Région bruxelloise Collection), Brussels: Guides CFC-Éditions, 2004.
- BOUVIER, Jean-Claude, GUILLON, Jean-Marie (Ed.), *La toponymie urbaine. Significations et enjeux*. Proceedings of a colloquium held in Aix-en-Provence, 11–12 December 1998, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001.
- CHARRUADAS, Paulo, “De la toponymie ancienne à l’odonymie actuelle. Un passé molenbeekois encore présent”, in *Les Cahiers de La Fonderie*, Issue 33: *Molenbeek, une commune bruxelloise*, déc. 2005, pp.114–117.
- DEKOSTER, J.A., *Het Brussels dialect. Kênde gaa ons moejertoe’l*, Brussels: Uitg. Trema, 1991.
- DE PAUW, Geert, *Een beeld van een buurt. Molenbeek-centrum door de ogen van zijn bewoners. Mille et une facettes d’un quartier. Molenbeek-centre vu par ses habitants*, Molenbeek: Legally liable publisher: Jean-Marie De Smet, 2002.
- DE RAADT, J.-T., *Les sobriquets des communes belges. (Blason populaire)*, Brussels: Constant Baune éd., 1903.
- DE VRIENDT, Sera, *Brussels* (Taal in stad en land Collection), Tiel: Lannoo, 2004.
- EICHLER, Ernst (Ed.), *Namenforschung. Ein internationales Handbuch zur Onomastik. Name studies. An international handbook of onomastics. Les noms propres. Manuel international d’onomastique* (Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft (...), Vol. 11), Berlin – New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995–1996, 3 vol.
- FRANCIS, Jean, *La chanson des rues de Molenbeek-Saint-Jean* (La chanson des rues Collection), Brussels: Louis Musin éd., 1975.
- HOUET et CLEEREN, *Dictionnaire moderne des communes belges, géographique, administratif, statistique. Modern woordenboek der Belgische gemeenten, aardrijkkundig, administratief, statistisch*, Bruxelles/Brussels: Druk. Dewarichet, 1967.
- HUBERTY, Colette, *Le Logement molenbeekois. Une histoire de société. 100 ans/Le Logement molenbeekois. Een geschiedenis van de samenleving. 100 jaar*, Brussels: Le Logement molenbeekois, [2000].
- LEMAIRE, Albert H.M.G., *Histoire de la commune de Molenbeek-Saint-Jean et de l’Institut des Clercs de Saint-Viateur*, Brussels: author’s own press, 1988.

- MAURISSEN, Antoon-Willem, *Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van Sint-Jans-Molenbeek*, Puurs: Drukkerij-uitgeverij Baeté, 1980.
- d'OSTA, Jean, *Les rues disparues de Bruxelles*, Brussels: Rossel, 1979.
- d'OSTA, Jean, *Dictionnaire historique des faubourgs de Bruxelles*, final edition, (unspecified location): Éd. Le Livre, 1996.
- PLATTEAU, Pierre, *School nummer 1*, Amsterdam – Antwerp: Uitg. Atlas, 1994.
- QUIÉVREUX, Louis, *Bruxelles notre capitale. Histoire, folklore, archéologie*, Brussels – Liège: Éd. PIM-Services, [1951].
- QUIÉVREUX, Louis, *Dictionnaire du dialecte bruxellois*, reprint of the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition [1969], Brussels: Éd. Libro-Sciences, 1991.
- RENTENAAR, Rob, *Groeten van elders. Plaatsnamen en familienamen als spiegel van onze cultuur*, Naarden: Strengholt, 1990.
- TOELEN, Toon, *De grote en de kleine geschiedenis van de Kassei. La grande et la petite histoire de la Chaussée*, Brussels: Archief en Museum van het Vlaams leven te Brussel, 2004.
- VANDEN BEMDEN, Albert, “Le parc aérostatique de Koekelberg, qui en réalité se trouvait sur le territoire de Molenbeek-Saint-Jean. Souvenirs d’enfance”, in: *Molenbecca. Cercle d’histoire locale – lokale heemkundige kring. Revue trimestrielle – driemaandelijks tijdschrift*, 5<sup>th</sup> year, Issue 17, Jan. 2005, pp.20–27.
- VAN NIEUWENHUYSEN, Pierre, *Bijdrage tot de toponymie van Sint-Jans-Molenbeek*, unpublished thesis for a licence, UCL, Germanic Philology, 1979, 2 vol.
- VERHAVERT, Cypriaan, “Straatnamen en volkstaal”, in IDEM, *Brusselsche typen*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Brussels: Office de Publicité – “tspaeverke”, undated. [1<sup>st</sup> edition printed in 1923], pp. 34–37.