SCOTTISH PLACE-NAMES AND THEIR SOURCES

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Scotland has place-names from many different sources. Some, especially several river names, originate from so far back in the past that one can only speculate as to their origins; but most of them mirror the country's population over the last two millennia. The majority are from Gaelic or English/Scots, but other waves of inhabitants have also left their mark. Early inhabitants of southern Scotland spoke a language related to modern Welsh. The Picts in the north have left only a meagre linguistic trace. In some areas, notably in the Northern and Western Isles and along the adjoining seaboard, Scandinavian influences have left a strong legacy.

At the time of the Roman invasions of Britain, most people in what is now southern Scotland spoke a Celtic language related to Welsh, variously known as Cumbric, Brittonic, Brythonic and British. Welsh and Gaelic are examples of the two divisions of the Celtic family of languages: P-Celtic and Q-Celtic, from the different initial sounds in certain words—as in the word for 'head': in Welsh *pen,* in Gaelic *ceann*; as in Scottish place-names Pencaitland and Penpont; and in Kintail, Kincraig, Kinlochbervie and Kinlochmoidart. P-Celtic at the present time consists of Welsh, the Breton of north-west France, and Cornish, recently revived after a long gap. Q-Celtic consists of Irish, Scottish and Manx Gaelic. The last native speaker of Manx died in 1974, but Manx, too, is enjoying a revival.

The Picts, powerful north of the Firth of Forth in the middle of the first millennium, have left little trace of their language, but from the meagre evidence available, modern scholarship suggests that it was a P-Celtic language, akin to its neighbour Cumbric, possibly with other elements. It survives in personal names and place-names, notably those beginning with Pit-.

Some time in the early centuries of the Christian era—no one knows quite when—the Scots arrived from Ireland, from what is now County Antrim, bringing with them their Gaelic language. From the fifth century their powerful kingdom of Dalriada developed and this language flourished. It was helped, of course, by the spread of the Gaelic Church and St Columba's settlement in Iona. By the early eleventh century the Gaelic

kingdom had gained power over the Picts in the north-east, the Britons in the south-west and the Angles in the south-east. Their Gaelic language flourished but its prestige was not to last.

The last-mentioned, the Angles, form the first strand in the other major aspect of Scotland's linguistic history: various forms of English. They arrived some time in the seventh century, speaking a variety of Northern Old English. There is very little written evidence of their language. The eighth-century runic inscription in Ruthwell Church near Dumfries, known as The Dream of the Rood, is often regarded as the earliest piece of writing in Scots. The best evidence, however, is in place-names. These give an indication of the extent of their influence in roughly what is now the Lothians in south-eastern Scotland.

By the end of the eleventh century, other English influences came to bear. During the reign of Malcolm III and his English second wife, Queen Margaret, and during those of their sons, Anglo-Norman landlords and monasteries from north-eastern England were given grants of land in Scotland. Their own language was Norman-French, but they brought with them large numbers of followers from what is now Yorkshire, which had been part of the Danelaw. They therefore spoke a Scandinavian-influenced form of northern English. It is now thought that the strong Norse element in Scots comes mainly from this north-eastern English, rather than from direct Norse influence. Norse place-names, however, have different origins, as we shall see.

These languages belong to two different families of Indo-European languages: Celtic and Germanic. Gaelic and Cumbric are Celtic languages; Scots, English and Norse are Germanic. The different structures of these languages lead to frequent mispronunciation of Scottish place-names: in the Celtic languages, the naming or generic element comes first, the describing or qualifying element second—a structure dating from the sixth century— whereas in the Germanic family, the naming occurs the other way round. Place-names naturally put the stress on the describing element, thus Gaelic *Beinn an Eòin* (literally 'mountain of the bird') would become in English, '**Bird** Mountain'; likewise *Beinn Dhearg* would become '**Red** Hill'. Frequently, Celtic names (in origin) are thus pronounced with the wrong stress; for example **Cairn**gorm, instead of Cairn**gorm**, **Avie**more, instead of Avie**more,** and **Aber**deen, instead of Aber**deen**. The great majority of names in the Highlands are of Gaelic origin and follow this pattern, but sometimes people fail to spot the exceptions, many from Norse, and will use

pronunciations such as **Mallaig** and Assynt, instead of **Mallaig** and **Assynt**; and there are some Gaelic names where the describing element comes first, such as *Garbh Bheinn* (meaning 'rough mountain') in Ardgour near Fort William.

Some names with noticeably Scots or English elements have an unusual structure, with the generic element first, such as Water of Leith (rather than 'Leith Water'), Bridge of Weir and Bridge of Earn. Most of these names are in areas where Gaelic would have been an influence in a bilingual situation in an earlier time, leaving its structure in the incoming language. This is not the case with Shetland and Orkney and the Scandinavian parts of Caithness, where they are likely to have been coined by Scottish settlers accustomed to this type of name. Numerous examples include Loch of Stenness in Orkney and Loch of Strom in Shetland.

Confusion is often caused by the early recording of names by people who had no knowledge of the underlying language of these names, leading to frequent misspellings and gross mispronunciations. Many early mapmakers and other recorders of information were English or Scots speakers with little or no knowledge of Gaelic. They wrote names down as they heard them and thus you find anglicised spellings, such as Balmore for Gaelic *Bail(e) Mòr* ('big town or village') and Ben Lee for *Beinn Liath* ('grey hill'). Sometimes an 's' is added to a plural, though no Gaelic plural ends in 's', as in The Trossachs for Gaelic *Na Troiseachan* ('the cross hills'); the name is found in the title of the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park (*Parc Naiseanta Loch Laomainn is na Troiseachean*). Lawers in Perthshire has three divisions: Labhar Shios (East Lawers), Labhar Shuas (West Lawers), and Labhar na Craoibhe (Lawers of the tree), presumably leading to the plural form in English.

Over large parts of Scotland, Gaelic names predominate and there is a scattering even in the south-east, where Gaelic was probably never the language of the entire population. Many of them appear on modern maps in an anglicised form, as already noted. A common element in Scottish (and Irish) place-names is bal- from Gaelic *baile*, often translated as 'village', but it can refer to 'anything from a scatter of houses on a hillside to Tokyo'. In anglicised form, it appears as bal-, balla- or bally- (although the last is more common in Ireland). Ballachulish, Gaelic *Bail' a'Chaolais,* is 'village on the narrows', an apt name for its position at the narrow mouth of Loch Leven as it enters Loch Linnhe on the west coast. On the outskirts of Edinburgh is the village of Balerno (*Baile Airneach*, 'village/farm of the sloe tree').

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Another element is *achadh* meaning 'field', often appearing as ach- or auch- and also as auchen- or auchin- representing the Gaelic definite article in the genitive (in other words, 'of the field'); some of these might mean 'little field'. Lowland examples include Auchinleck in Ayrshire, home of James Boswell, meaning 'field of the slab' and near Edinburgh is Auchindinny from an Old Gaelic word meaning 'height'. Ach- names are plentiful throughout the Highlands, though less so in the Islands. My family came from a district of Wester Ross known as Coigach, meaning 'an old land division into fifths', popularly thought to refer to five ach- names in the area: Achduart, Achabhraighe, Acheninver, Achnahaird and Achlochan. The name of the main village of the area, Achiltibuie, by which it is now generally known, is popularly thought to mean 'field of the yellow-haired lad', but there are other theories.

An interesting element is kil-, usually from Gaelic *cill-* meaning 'church'; it is the genitive or locative case of *ceall,* originally referring to a monk's cell, from Latin *cella.* Many instances of these commemorate saints. There are numerous Kilbrides in the west of Scotland, from Ayrshire to South Uist, from several saints known as Bride or Bridget, including the sixth-century Irish St Bridget of Kildare. Kilmartin in Argyll, in an area of great archaeological interest, probably takes its name from St Martin of Tours. Kilmalcom in Renfrewshire may commemorate St Columba, or some other saint named Colum.

The growing popularity of hillwalking and mountaineering has aroused interest in mountain and hill names, the great majority of which are from Gaelic. This large number of terms for different types of hill reflects the mountainous character of the Highlands. A few examples follow: *Beinn* (ben) meaning 'a mountain' or 'hill', as in Beinn Eighe; 'file hill' in Torridon; Beinn Fhada 'long hill' (sometimes spelt Ben Attow) in Kintail. 'Ben' is now commonly used in Scots, as in 'land of bens and glens'. 'The Ben' often refers to Ben Nevis, Britain's highest mountain (from Gaelic *Beinn Nibheis,* possibly meaning 'cloudy hill'). *Càrn* (a cairn) means 'heap of stones', or 'a hill', often of this shape. An example is Càrn Gorm (Cairngorm) meaning 'blue hill', which gives its name to one of the best-known groups of hills, the Cairngorms. In Gaelic the range is known as the *Monadh Ruadh,* 'the red hills', contrasting with the *Monadh Liath,* 'the grey hills' to the west. *Monadh* can mean 'a hill', 'a range' or 'a moor'. *Creag* (craig) means 'a rock' or 'a hill', as in Creag Liath and Creag Mhòr. *Meall* means 'a lump', 'heap' or 'a rounded hill', as in Meall nan Tàrmachan meaning 'hill of the ptarmigans', and Meall Odhar meaning 'dun-coloured hill'. *Sgùr, sgòr* and

stùc, all of Norse origin, usually refer to sharp peaks, as in Sgurr of Eigg, the smallish but spectacular hill on the island of Eigg.

Some of these names now refer to a village or settlement, rather than to the feature referred to, as in *cnoc* (knock) meaning 'hill' or 'hillock'. Numerous 'knocks' are indeed hills, but Knockan (from *cnocan*, 'little hill') in Sutherland is a tiny village and Knockandhu (from *cnocan dubh*, 'little black hill') in Moray has a well-known distillery on the banks of the River Spey. Knockhill is a good example of a name formed after the original language has died out, as later users are no longer aware of the original meaning. *Tulach*, meaning 'a smallish hill', occurs in Tulloch, a tiny settlement on the West Highland Railway, and in Tilliecoultry, perhaps meaning 'hill of the backland', a former mill town below the Ochil Hills.

Other land features of course abound: loch, 'a lake', glen (Gaelic, *gleann,* 'narrow, upper valley'), strath (Gaelic, *srath*, 'broad, lower valley'), all of which, like ben, are used in Scots as generics for these features, as indeed was knock, especially latterly in poetry. The many Lowland examples therefore do not necessarily mean that Gaelic was still spoken at the time the name was formed.

North of the Forth there is a stratum of Pictish names, which preceded the Gaelic in that area. As already noted, its clearest marker is in names beginning with pit- and their extent coincides closely with the area of the richly carved Pictish stones. This element is from Pictish, *pett*, 'a piece or portion'; in this case, of land. Although the meaning is different, it behaves in place-names rather as Gaelic *baile* and indeed in modern Gaelic most of these names are prefixed by *baile* and the second element is frequently Gaelic, as in Pitlochry, Baile Chloichrigh, meaning 'stony' and Pitmedden meaning 'middle'. It is now thought that the Pictish element was borrowed into Gaelic and used to coin such names.

The other P-Celtic language, the language of the Britons, now usually known as Cumbric, has left its mark in southern Scotland—that is, south of the Forth-Clyde valleys—again signalled by certain elements, such as pen-, already mentioned. Penpont has a Latin-based second element (meaning 'bridge'), relic of the Roman influence on the language of the Britons. Another element is caer- meaning 'fort' or 'fortified farm'. There are two such in the Pentland hills near Edinburgh, both with fort remains: Carketton, probably from a personal name, and Carnethy, which may mean 'a heap of stones'. Caerlaverock, a spectacular castle near Dumfries, probably derives

from a personal name, but it may be influenced by Scots laverock meaning 'lark'. Some elements are shared with the Pictish area: *aber*, meaning 'river mouth', as in Aberdeen and Aberlady; and *pert* meaning 'wood', as in Perth.

South of the Forth-Clyde line, there are many more English/Scots names, alongside the underlying Cumbric layer; but Gaelic names are to be found throughout Scotland. Edinburgh, for example, has the Calton Hill from Gaelic *calltainn*, meaning 'hazel'; and in Midlothian there is Garvald, from Gaelic *garbh allt*, meaning 'rough stream', which is another example of a name with the describing element first. From the early Middle Ages, however, most of the names in this area have been of English/Scots origin. These include an Old English layer, stemming from the Angles who arrived in Scotland in the seventh century. It is marked by various elements. The name -ham meaning 'homestead' or 'group of such' gives us, for example, Midlem, 'middle village' and Oxnam, 'village of the oxen', both of which are in Roxburghshire. It is sometimes combined with Old English genitive plural -ingas, as in Whittinghame in East Lothian, meaning 'village of Hwita's people', Tyninghame, 'village of the people by the River Tyne', and Coldingham, 'village of the people at Colud'. *Bottle*, meaning 'house' or 'homestead' is found in Newbattle and Morebattle.

The name -tun meaning 'homestead' or 'village' remained productive, as -ton, right into the modern period, developing in some cases into 'toun' or 'town'. Like *baile* in Gaelic it can refer to a settlement of almost any size, but most older place-names refer to a farm. (The Scots term 'fermtoun', meaning 'a farmhouse and surrounding buildings', was used until recent times when the concept was swept away by factory farming.) It sometimes combines with OE -ing, meaning 'associated with', as in Edrington (farm associated with the river Adder) and Edington, which is based on a personal name. Not all -ington names are of this category; Newington, a district of Edinburgh, comes much later.

Scandinavian names in Scotland originate from three broad sources. In the Northern and Western Isles they date from the Norse occupations of the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, and later in Orkney, Shetland and part of Caithness, where the modern dialects still retain strong Norse features. The Norse elements appear in many different forms, which in the west are influenced by Gaelic. A good example is *bólstaðr* meaning 'farm(stead)', which appears in Shetland and Orkney as -bister, as in Isbister, Kirkabister and Sandbister; in Caithness as -bster or -pster, as in Lybster, Scrabster and Achkeepster; in the Outer Isles, -bost, as in Shawbost, Lewis, Seilebost and

Horgabost on the Isle of Harris, and Carbost on Skye; and as -boll or -pool as in Eriboll in Sutherland and Ullapool in Wester Ross.

Another example is -dalr meaning 'valley', found throughout the area of Norse influence from Shetland, as in Southdale, to Kintyre, as in Carradale. The numerous -dale names in the south of Scotland are from OE dale and it might be thought that Flowerdale House, home of the Mackenzies of Gairloch in Wester Ross is the result of southern influence. It is certainly a fairly modern name, given by the ninth laird to his new mansion in 1738. (It replaced an earlier house nearby known as the Stankhouse or Moat House, itself on the site of the fifteenth-century Tigh Dige.) However, the name may well have been influenced by local occurrences of Old Norse -dalr, such as Kerrysdale, 'copse valley' and Slattadale, 'even valley'.

In the south-west, Norse influence is from northern England and from Ireland, and in the south-east most probably from the Scandinavian-influenced English, which arrived in the eleventh century, although some names probably derive from Scandinavian settlers in the area. Thus kirk- meaning 'church' may come directly from ON *kirkja*, especially in Shetland and Orkney, as in Kirkwall ('church field'), the main town in Orkney; but the great majority are Scots: several Kirkbrides (alongside Gaelic-origin Kilbride), and Kirkpatrick in the south-west (alongside Kilpatrick near the Clyde).

There are many -fell- names from Old Norse *fell* or *fjall*, meaning 'a rough hill', particularly numerous in the south-west (as in north-west England), but further north you find Goat Fell, the highest mountain on the island of Arran, and the Campsie Fells, a Lowland range north of Glasgow. In Orkney and Shetland it appears as -field or -fjold and in the Hebrides as -val or -al. The small island of Rum has Hallival, Askival, Ainshval, and Ruinsival, which are all part of the Rum Cuillin ridge, as well as Orval further west.

The interpretation of place-names begins with linguistic elucidation, but it does not of course end there. Cultural and topographical factors have to be taken into account. In some cases the connections remain clear enough, as in the case of the many Ben Mores, referring to the biggest hill in an area (although some of them are not that high if judged in a wider context), but most frequently these belong to a much earlier age and may never be found. In some cases, however, historical sources may clarify the connections.

There are interesting examples among the quite numerous foreign names which have entered our stock of place-names. There are several places in various parts of Scotland called Waterloo and it seems reasonable to assume some connection with the battle in 1815, but why? A village of this name near Perth is said to have been named for a row of houses originally built for veterans of the French Wars. Edinburgh has several such names: Portobello—a coastal district to the east and formerly a popular holiday destination—takes its name from a house said to have been built by a sailor who was at the capture of Puerto Bello in Panama by Admiral Vernon in 1739, but there is no evidence for this. Nearby is Joppa, named after the Middle-Eastern town of Jaffa (now Yafo and linked to Tel Aviv), but again the reason for its naming is unclear. Patna in Ayrshire is named after the Indian town where a local mine-owner had made a fortune. There are also several Egypts, some of which may have referred to encampments of gypsies who were often called Egyptians into the nineteenth century.

Many place-names contain personal names and in some cases the origin is clearer than in others. Port Ellen on the island of Islay is named after the wife of a nineteenth-century owner; nearby Port Charlotte is named after his mother. Fort William was named after William III in 1690. Fort Augustus in Inverness-shire was named by General Wade in 1730 after William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland. As these were not popular characters in the Highlands, it is hardly surprising that the names were not translated into Gaelic; to this day Fort William is known as An Gearasdan, 'the garrison', and Fort Augustus by its older name of Cill Chuimein, 'Church of St Cummin'.

Older examples include many from Old Norse, for example, Swanston, near Edinburgh is 'Sveinn's farm' (nothing to do with swans). Corstorphine, now a suburb of Edinburgh, comes from Gaelic *crois* meaning 'cross' and *Torfin*, is a Gaelicised version of the Norse name *Þorfinnr*. Street names have sometimes been changed as part of a process of anglicisation, for example the change of Baxter Wynd, a street in St Andrews, to Baker Lane. Recently this caused considerable indignation among Scots-language activists until it was pointed out that the change took place in the nineteenth century; it is now also labelled 'formerly Baxter Wynd'.

With growing respect and support for Gaelic, road signs in the Highlands and Islands are increasingly given in bilingual form. In some places in the Islands, English signs have been replaced by monolingual Gaelic ones, with disastrous results for some poor tourists! In some cases the

connection is clear enough, as in Tarbert and Gaelic *An Tairbeart*, but some names are very different and in some cases there is no linguistic connection. Brodick, the main town on the island of Arran in the Firth of Clyde is from Norse meaning 'broad bay', but the Gaelic name is Traigh a' Chaistil, 'the castle shore'; Applecross in Wester Ross is probably from Pictish, meaning 'estuary or confluence of the Crossan' (the local river); in Gaelic it is A' Chomraich, 'the sanctuary' (of St Malrubha, who built a monastery here in the sixth century).

Another cause for confusion comes from two Older Scots spellings which died out in the sixteenth century. Yogh ȝ was often used in words of Gaelic or French origin and was pronounced more or less as -y-. Early printing presses did not have this letter and used -z- instead. Dalziel in Lanarkshire is still pronounced dee-el; it is a common surname, although some of its bearers have a more modern spelling, including the recently-retired politician, Tam Dalyell. Lenzie, a town near Glasgow, however, is pronounced with the modern -z-. Quh- was the forerunner of the modern -wh-spelling (pronounced hw- in Scotland, although this pronunciation is dying out in the younger generation). Thus Balquhidder, in the Trossachs, should be pronounced bal**wh**ider, although you will often hear bal**kwid**er nowadays.

This rich linguistic tapestry has been the subject of much research, notably in the University of Edinburgh, where there has been a place-name survey since the 1950s. In recent years without full-time staff, it has become part of the School of Scottish Studies (now the Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies). There are opportunities for anyone interested to take part in the collection of information, especially since the setting up in 1995 of the Scottish Place-Name Society (Comann Ainmean-Àite na h-Alba), a voluntary organisation which coordinates the work of different groups and individuals, from academics to interested laymen. It has a website (www.st-andrews.ac.uk/institutes/sassi/spns), and a twice-yearly Newsletter, *Scottish Place-name News*, which gives information on activities and publications and invites contributions from the general public. The Ordnance Survey has published pamphlets for the elucidation of its maps, with Gaelic and Welsh place-name terms from the 1930s, adding Norse elements in the 1950s, and just recently it has added Scots terms in a new publication entirely on the web (www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk). It is assisted by the Gaelic Names Liaison Committee.

Earlier research produced pioneering works, notably *The History of the Celtic Place-names of Scotland* (1926) by William J. Watson, which to this day remains the standard work on this important area. Various aspects are treated in *Scottish Place-names* (1976, revised edition 2001) by W. F. H. Nicolaisen, and there have been distinguished contributions in local studies. W. J. Watson preceded his monumental work with a study of his native county in *Place Names of Ross and Cromarty* (1904). *The Place Names of Upper Deeside* (1984) by Adam Watson and Elizabeth Allan is a very detailed study of an area where Gaelic and Scots mingled in an unusual way. Ian A. Fraser's *The Place-Names of Arran* (1999) deals with an area where Gaelic has only recently died out; Richard A. V. Cox's very detailed study, *The Gaelic Place-Names of Carloway, Isle of Lewis* (2002), with one where it is still very much alive. Many of these studies remain as PhD theses on the shelves of university libraries, but one is about to see the light of day as part of a forthcoming four-volume study, *The Place-names of Fife* by Simon Taylor.

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