

REVIEW:

Gregor Lamb, *Orkney Surnames*. Paul Harris Publishing, Edinburgh, 1981. 128 pp. Maps and tables.

Gregor Lamb is an Orkney schoolteacher, well-known at home for his dialect recitations, two volumes of which have been published by the Kirkwall Press. This handsomely produced book with the county arms in silver on a navy mock leather binding represents his first foray into the academic battlefield: unfortunately it has ventured disastrously far out of cover in some directions. The chapters on the origins of surnames from patronymics and place-names in and outside Orkney are mostly acceptable, while the statistical material (contributed largely by my friend Peter Leith, the knowledgeable registrar of Stenness), the bibliography and maps are certainly useful sources of information not previously assembled in print. But the heart of the book is surely the 58-page glossary of the surnames of Orkney, and here (besides the surname Flaws) we find major flaws.

My first criticism here would be of Mr. Lamb's criterion for inclusion—all surnames found in Orkney before 1700, whether or not they are still in use. This means for a start that some two-thirds of the names in the glossary are “no longer recorded in Orkney.” Since nearly all of these, like most surnames of Orkney origin, are also place-names, generally cited from their first and perhaps only appearance in a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century document, one may suspect that some at least were no more than territorial by-names such as are still used today (“Willie o' Flaws”) which never attained the status of true surnames by being passed on to descendants who left the place. Moreover, even if we are to believe the claim that no common surnames have arrived in Orkney since 1700, some interesting and characteristic ones not in the early records would have been worth including: where are the green-fingered Glues? (surely a place-name, though it is claimed all surnames originating in Orkney are included regardless of date) or where the Lambs themselves? (from ON *Lambi*, recorded as a personal name rather than a nickname.) The Newlands tinkers (probably Nolans) and the vanished Angels of Westray (said to be descended from the infant survivor of a wrecked ship from Archangel) do get a mention in Chapter 6, but not in the glossary.

Worse, however, Mr. Lamb has a theory. He expounds it in Chapter 5. In brief, it asserts that many Orkney surnames derive from highly offensive nicknames, applied mostly to a “Celtic population”. He admits that surnames were mostly formed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but still says (p. 92): “There is no doubt that there was a very large Celtic population in Orkney at the time surnames were formed,” and he means “native Celts”, not Highland immigrants. There is every reason to doubt that anyone could have recognised a separate “Celtic” element at that date: even in the *Orkneyinga Saga* there is nothing to indicate distinguishable groups of native peasants (as against imported Gaelic thralls) and the archaeological evidence seems to suggest that the Orkney “Picts” were assimilated to the Norse settlers long before 1000 A.D. To suppose that half a millennium later they were still being singled out by nicknames denoting dark skin or the practice of witchcraft is fantasy. Some forty surviving surnames, including many of the most widespread, are explained in this way. No matter if they obviously come from place-names: this is “too trite” (in the case of Seatter, explained as “a nickname from ON ‘sótigr’, meaning ‘sooty’ one of many names used by the Norse to describe people with swarthy skin” on p. 55 – but on p. 86 it is “a reference to dark sin”!) Or else the places “no doubt derived their name from the nickname given to the inhabitants” (Velzian, “from ON ‘vélinn’ meaning ‘wily’”, not from *vellirnir*, “the fields”, as given by Hugh Marwick in *The Place-Names of Birsay*.) No matter if the names are patronymics: Turfus is “not related to the first name Thorfinn...: from ON ‘thurfa’ or ‘thurfandi’ meaning ‘poor’ or ‘needy’” though the earliest form is given as Thurphinson. No matter if they are Scottish imports: they have replaced similar-sounding Orkney names. This may well be true of Baikie, but the Orcadian original is surely the place-name Beaquoy, not “some unrecorded ON word from which is derived ... the Danish word ‘backe’ meaning ‘bat’.” Grieve doesn’t mean a grieve, nor is ON *gröf*, from which Lamb derives it, allowed its usual sense of “pit” or “grave” (cf. Graves) – it has to mean a cesspool. John O’Groat was not a Dutchman but a Celt who ate groats or porridge. Even Harper is taken to mean the harp rather than its player, “referring presumably to [the Celtic peoples’] crooked shape.”

The dictionary has obviously been combed for nasty (if obscure) words rather than ones with any resemblance to recorded Norse nicknames. Scollay is not from ON *skalli*, “bald”, nor as Jakobsen suggested

connected with *skáli*, “hall” (like Skaill), but from *skolli*, “fox”. Peter Leith’s help is rewarded with a derivation from *leidr*, “loathed”, rather than Scottish Leith or an Orkney place-name (cf. modern Lythes) which could be from either *lyðe*, “meeting-place” (which Peter himself favours) or *hlíð*, “slope”. *Flágð*, said to account for both Flett and Flaws (both known place-name elements), seems to mean an ogress, not as Lamb says a (mortal) witch, and would hardly be applied even insultingly to a family or its founder. *Valskr*, said to be the origin of Walls (place- and surname: normally derived from *vágar*, “voes” or inlets), generally meant “French” to the Vikings, who had more specific names for Picts and Scots. As for “ON ‘fia’, meaning ‘enemy’ or ‘fiend’” whence Fea, the nearest I can find in Cleasby and Vigfússon is the obsolete verb *fjá* whose participle, *fjándi*, came to have these meanings.

Other confident assertions turn out to be guesses. Dass is said to mean “‘son of Da’, Da being a familiar form of the first name David” – unrecorded so far as I know. But there is a Norwegian surname Dass, said to derive from a Scottish Dundas who went to Norway: either another stopped half-way or the tradition that the family descends from a shipwrecked Norwegian may for once be true. Esson need have no connection with the place-name Essonquoy: Storer Clouston derived it from Eschen, a short form of Alexander found in early Orkney records. A few names such as Aim and Richan remain to be explained, but we can be pretty sure at least that Lamb’s derivations for them are as wrong as his other “nicknames”.

The book stands up reasonably well on three legs, quotations of early forms, place-name comparisons, and statistics, but the fourth, derivations – which are what most people look for – is very lame indeed. If this had been presented as a thesis it would have been sent back for extensive rewriting: as it is already in print one can only urge extreme caution and scepticism on the reader’s part. As for Mr. Lamb, whose undoubted sense of humour does occasionally show itself (“Hoy is also a Chinese surname and though it is not suggested that the Orkney Hoyes were Chinese, this does explain the high frequency of the surname Hoy in USA”) though I fear his Celtic theory wasn’t meant as a joke, he could fitly be paid with a nickname of his own: how about Major Flaws?

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