

NAMES IN THE LANDSCAPE OF THE MORAY FIRTH

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At the very outset, I would like to draw your attention to the exact wording of the title of this presentation — ‘Names in the Landscape of the Moray Firth’ — for it has been chosen with more than usual care. Titles anticipate and make promises; they summarise and raise expectations; they sometimes tease and woo us. Above all, however, they open gates to paths of intellectual exploration at the end of which the mind should be comfortably satisfied. It is for all these reasons, but especially the last, that titles should be as accurate and as directional as signposts, for the sake both of those who shape them and of those for whose guidance they are intended. Otherwise their paths and ours will diverge from the very beginning.

Now that I have made you, the reader, disturbingly title conscious, you are entitled to know the reasons for this unusual preface. Why all this wordiness? Mainly to highlight the three major terms contained in the title — names, landscape, and Moray Firth — because these not only carry the greatest semantic freight but also represent the three key concepts of this discussion. They orient with regard to subject matter, setting and location or, put more simply, to the what, how and where. Let us briefly consider these points in reverse order.

It seems self-evident that, in a review of the place names of Moray, somehow the notion of Moray has to be one of its major shaping components but the question is: Which of the several possible Morays is it to be, since all of them are different in historical significance or spatial extent, or both? Is it to be the province, the diocese, the synod, the district? Is it to have largely historical, prehistoric, or ecclesiastical connotations, to express a nostalgic hankering after, or regret for, the passing of a comparatively recent administrative unit for which the name Moray had been revived earlier this century to replace the pair Elgin and Forres, or is it to acknowledge the current political status of the mauled district within the Grampian Region, i.e. what Donald Omand has called the ‘new Moray’?¹ In order not to be bound by the implications of any of these several Morays, I have added the generic Firth to the name Moray, thus making most of that estuary’s southern shore and the more or less immediate hinterland my bailiwick for the purposes of this essay. The northern delineation of the area to be surveyed is therefore unmistakable whereas its western, eastern and southern boundaries largely coincide with those of the former counties of Nairn, Moray and Banff.

The second semantically pregnant term — landscape — has also been chosen with deliberate care. After all, a title such as ‘Place Names on the Moray Firth’ or even ‘Place Names in Moray’ would have been quite an adequate successor to those used in past toponymic presentations to this

Society by Ian Fraser, Gillian Fellows-Jensen and myself. The word 'landscape', however, is to serve as a reminder that place names are not only embedded in language but also in the world out there. It would be misleading to regard names exclusively as the product of mental processes, and it is therefore understandable that some publications treat and present them, together with flora, fauna, rock formations, etc., almost like natural features, regarding the onomastic characteristics of a given area in more or less the same way as the botanical, zoological and geological ones, and not as past human footprints. There is, indeed, something almost 'natural' about the belongingness of names and their persuasive appropriateness. After all, it is through the process of naming, the speech act of identification, that we structure the actual world outside our minds as it offers itself to us, thus taming, mastering and domesticating a potentially threatening wilderness and turning it into a familiar habitat which we tend to call 'landscape'. There is no landscape without a network of names or, from the point of view of the creative act of naming, names make a landscape. It is therefore inevitable, because essential, that the word 'landscape' should appear in our title.

That the term 'names' is also part of it, is probably even more predictable as it points to the very subject matter to be explored, the 'what' of the triad. Naming is a ubiquitous activity; as far as we know, human beings everywhere and at all times have named and will go on doing so as long as man or woman draws breath. Names are so much more than lexical items with certain peculiar additional properties; they are a matter of survival, of orienting oneself in the world, and, for this reason, are as important as food, drink and shelter. Names never occur singly — this would be a *contradictio in adjecto* — but in their individuating function relate to other names through contrast, through juxtaposition, through stratification, thus forming onomastic fields which are ever-changing and ever-readjusting. To have a name is to be, but never in solitude. Without names we are lost.

A title like 'Names in the Landscape of the Moray Firth' therefore attempts to open a window on the toponymically structured, or perhaps rather the toponymically articulated, landscape of a region defined somewhat loosely and yet not without discernible boundaries. Harnessing this title for this essay is consequently an act of appropriation, a desirable closing in on the essence of 'Moray', whatever that may be these days; only the people of Moray can decide that.

Naturally, there are several ways of going about this business. Over eighty years ago, Donald Matheson, in his *Place Names of Elginshire*,² now thoroughly out of date and even in its own days highly suspect, chose the acceptable, though deceptively disruptive, device of listing names in alphabetical order, his sole purpose being, consonant with the main tenor of name scholarship in his time, the ferreting out of the so-called 'meaning'

of the names included in his alphabetical list. This approach assumes that it is possible, indeed incumbent upon us, to reduce names to the words they once were,³ and that the restoration of such original meaning or etymology is the prime purpose of name studies. It completely ignores, or at least obscures, the fact that names — whether derived from words, other names, or from arbitrary sound sequences — at the very point of naming acquire a content independent of all lexical needs and considerations, and that it is this content and not their etymologies that allows names to function viably in our efforts at effective communication. Nevertheless, the recovery of lexical meaning and of linguistic affinities is, of course, when carried out with competence and circumspection and with due regard to all the available evidence including early spellings and modern pronunciation, an essential first step, a *sine qua non* in all onomastic research, a kind of linguistic archaeology. It is, however, not the be-all-and-end-all; nor should such a fundamentally lexical procedure be confused with a thoroughly onomastic approach which recognises and exploits the status and function of names as names.

More recently, in 1976, in his contribution to Donald Omand's *Moray Book*,⁴ Donald Macaulay, bringing his considerable expertise as a Celtic scholar and his skills as a native speaker of Gaelic to bear on his investigation, chose to present the bulk of his material in several discrete categories, such as references to settlement, land division and fields, crops, domestic animals, 'activities', churches, and topographic elements, like water, raised ground, low ground, 'valleys', as well as non-domestic animals and birds, vegetation, shape and size, and colour. Such classificatory approach takes it for granted that the etymology of each name thus classified has been satisfactorily established; it is therefore a kind of second step, the findings of which, when described in this fashion and systematically analysed, go a long way towards making good use of place names as linguistic fossils and towards employing them in the reconstruction of past landscapes. If Donald Macaulay had not chosen to do this so recently, I might well have decided on such an approach for this investigation, but there is no need for this kind of duplication.

The third frequently practised and very fruitful method in the study of place names also starts with the supposition that the first step in establishing reliable etymologies has already been successfully taken and that the names in question have been made lexically transparent, not just semantically but also with regard to, for example, their pronunciation and their morphology. Instead of focusing on the several distinctive categories of meaning involved, as in Donald Macaulay's treatment, it attempts to make constructive use, on the one hand, of the linguistic features of names and, on the other, of their onomastic properties. Taking into account the well-known fact that names, because of their virtual independence of lexical meaning, their desemanticisation, so to speak, often survive when

words do not, this method tries to place names and their elements in their relevant distribution patterns in time and space and, subsequently, to derive from these patterns information regarding the historical stratification of languages in a given area and the geographical scatter of settlers speaking the languages in question. This, mostly historical, orientation to name studies underlies, for instance, my own book on *Scottish Place Names*⁵ which, like Donald Macaulay's chapter, was also published in 1976. Again, it would be inappropriate to reiterate in detail its conclusions concerning Scotland as a whole and the Moray Firth area in particular but it may be helpful to sketch out, with a few strokes of a broad brush, the picture as it emerges from the place-name evidence. The discussion of principles and methods without the use of illustrative examples is a pointless enterprise.

Leaving aside for a moment the fascinating question of the possibility that the Celts may not have been the first Indo-Europeans to have reached these shores,⁶ there cannot be any doubt that the region to the south of the Moray Firth was once settled by non-Gaelic speaking Celts whom we know as the Picts and whose linguistic connections were with southern Scotland and Wales and ultimately with the Celtic areas of the Continent, rather than with Ireland. According to that great Celticist, W J Watson, there are, or once were, fifteen names beginning with the generic *Pit-* in Banffshire, twelve in the county of Moray, and one in Nairnshire.⁷ These names quite clearly form part of the larger area in the Scottish east and north-east in which compound names containing this generic can be found, from the Firth of Forth northwards. As has been demonstrated convincingly, *Pit-* is the modern reflex (practically all the earlier name spellings use a form *Pet-*) of a Pictish word for a portion of land derived from an early Celtic **petia* and therefore, in a roundabout way, via Latin, is cognate with our modern English word *piece*.⁸ It is not found in the British Isles anywhere outside the area once settled by Pictish-speaking Celts, although it would be erroneous to assume that all the names in this group were actually given by Pictish speakers themselves. Many of the specifics in these names are, in fact, Gaelic.⁹ Some of these may have been translated or adapted from Pictish but the majority of them must go back to speakers of Gaelic who had adopted *pit* or *pet* as an element suitable for the naming of places, especially of farm-like settlements. This is certainly true of Moray as Donald Macaulay has shown¹⁰; he cites *Pitchaish*, *Pitchroy*, *Pircraigie*, *Pittendreich*, *Pittensier*, *Pitgaveny*, *Pitglassie*, and *Pittyvaich*. *Petty* also belongs here. It is unlikely that these names were given much before the tenth century from when on Gaelic-speaking settlers became well established in what had been Pictland. Such dating is supported by the dearth of ecclesiastical names beginning with *Kil-* (Gaelic *cill* 'church, churchyard') which seem to have become less fashionable or productive about the time the Gaels entered Pictland.¹¹

Other names which have survived from pre-Gaelic times are *Aberarder*, *Aberchirder* and *Aberlour* all of which contain river names as their specifics, and possibly *Fochabers*. Unlike *Pit-*, Pictish *aber* 'a river mouth or confluence' does, of course, occur in southern Scotland and also in Wales¹² but this wider distribution only emphasises the point that Pictish is not likely to have been as different from the Celtic languages south of the Firth of Forth which Professor Jackson calls Cumbric,¹³ or from the Brittonic ancestor of Welsh, Cornish and Breton as the evidence of the *Pit*-names when viewed in isolation might lead one to conclude. *Pluscarden*, despite the shift of stress to the first syllable, also contains an element which places it alongside the *Aber*-names, a topographic term now represented by Welsh *cardden* 'thicket, brake'.¹⁴ The area which has our attention was therefore once thoroughly Pictish, and we must assume that Pictish in this part of the world was a Celtic language, unlike the linguistic situation north of the Moray Firth.

As already indicated, these Pictish-speaking Celts on the south side of the firth were overrun and succeeded by Gaelic-speaking Celts from about the ninth century onwards. The incomers speaking this language not only utilised elements of the onomasticon, or name vocabulary, of their Pictish predecessors, like *Pit-*, but also brought with them and applied their own toponymic terminology. Chief among the generics used in settlement names and found wherever Gaelic speakers once settled in Scotland are the terms *baile* 'homestead' and *achadh* 'field'.¹⁵ The landscape south of the Moray Firth yields many examples of both as, for instance for *baile*, *Balblair*, *Ballachurn*, *Ballanlish*, *Ballanloan*, *Ballenteem*, *Balgreen*, *Balindalloch*, *Balnacree*, *Balnaferry*, *Balnageith*, *Balvenie*, and many others, and, for *achadh*, *Achfad*, *Auchenhalrig*, *Auchindown*, *Auchingoul*, *Auchintoul*, *Achnahannet*, *Auchnarrown*, *Auchness*, and others. Just as this area was once solidly Pictish, so it participated fully in the Gaelic settlement which followed. In fact, it can easily be shown that the presence of Gaelic here for about a thousand years has left an indelible mark on the toponymic palimpsest of our maps. In view of this extended and extensive influence, it is not surprising that this stratum is distinctly stratified within itself, the last places in our area having been named possibly around the beginning of this century. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of names to vouch for such a claim. These incorporate a plethora of Gaelic generics and specifics including many of the most classical ones such as *blàr*, *ceann*, *torr*, *tom*, *allt*, *beinn*, *cnoc*, *dùn*, *druim*, *aodann*, *leitir*, *gleann*, *inis*, *inbhir*, *ràth*, *àrd*, *barr*, *clac*, *cuil*, *lann*, *loch*, *logach*, *màgh*, and the like. Most of these, like their Pictish counterparts, have in the course of time become semantically opaque to speakers of Scots or English who have gradually turned into the dominating linguistic force but the lexical opacity of these names has not in any way detracted from their staying fully functional as names. While meaning is no longer accessible, the all-important content

still is, however much it may change from time to time and from person to person.

So much, or so little, for the Celts. As far as speakers of Germanic languages are concerned, there is, again in contrast to the region north of the Moray Firth,¹⁶ no place-name evidence to indicate that any Scandinavians ever held sway over our area.¹⁷ The Cromarty and Beaully Firths seem to have stopped even the boldest of them. Like the Romans before them, the Norsemen apparently never lived long enough in the Moray landscape to contribute to its articulation. As is to be expected, however, there is now a sizable crop of descriptive English names well anchored to the ground, such as *Berryhillock*, *Birkenbog*, *Cairnfield*, *Drybridge*, *Limehillock*, *Lintmill*, *Longmanhill*, *Marypark*, *Milltown*, *Newmill*, *Oakbank*, *Sandend*, *Whitehills*, *Broomhill*, *Househill*, *Lodgehill*, *Piperhill*, *Tradespark*, *Bogmuir*, *Cooperhill*, *Ferry Road*, *Grange*, *Imperial Cottages*, *Linkwood*, *Mouiton*, *Newton*, *Silver Sands*, *Westerfolds*, *Whiteinch*, *Whitemire*, and so on. These are now all names of settlements and are lexically, on the whole, quite transparent. We know what they mean as words. They are, therefore, the kinds of names that name scholars in the past, and sometimes even in the present, have often regarded as pedestrian, boring and not worth bothering about, and have consequently been accorded left-handed comments such as 'meaning self-evident'. From a purely etymologically oriented approach to name studies, this may well be true but this lack of etymological challenge does not make them less valuable and functional or worthy of study than names whose meaning is now obscure and has to be recovered through complex and lengthy procedures, if it can be recovered at all. When Donald Macaulay comments on the name *Dyke*¹⁸ that it probably means simply *dike*, there is that very kind of disappointment in his comment. I am myself not at all disillusioned by names like *Dyke* for I still want to know when and why they were first given. Because so many of them were coined so late and originally referred to rather minor features in the landscape, the recorded evidence for them is often almost non-existent, or at least scanty and hard to find. For example, in my extensive search for early spellings for my *Dictionary of Scottish Place Names* I have yet to find reliable documentary evidence for about half the names just listed, the 'self-evident' ones. They are thus among the most elusive toponymic material one comes across and are often traceable only in very local sources. In contrast, names which have come down to us from the Middle Ages or some other earlier period are usually so much better documented.

Another category of such comparatively recent names which, according to the language of the namers, can only be called English but which have local historical and genealogical, sometimes very personal, connections with this area, are those of the various ports and towns planned and developed from the seventeenth century onwards. Instances would be:

Dufftown, founded in 1817 by James Duff, fourth Earl of Fife; *Gardentown*, founded in 1720 by Alexander Garden of Troup; *Macduff* which was erected a burgh of barony for the Earl of Fife in 1783 and whose earlier name had been *Down* (1683); *Branderburgh* where Colonel Brander of Pitgaveny built a house for himself in 1830; *Castle Grant* which replaced *Freuchie* and *Ballochastell* when the Regality of Grant was erected in 1694; *Gordon Castle*, the old *Bog of Gight* (older *Geith*), named about 1685; and *Gordonstoun* which came into being when Sir Robert Gordon, from 1636 on, purchased such places as *Ogstoun*, *Plewlands*, *Ettles*, etc. to form the estate; *Grantown-on-Spey*, a town planned by Sir James Grant of Castle Grant in 1776; or *Cummingstown* whose proprietor, Sir William Cumming Gordon, planned it as a village in 1805. As a foreign intruder from south of the Border comes *Kingston* which, it is said, was created in 1784 by two Englishmen from Kingston-upon-Hull (even in Hull they don't call it Kingston anymore).

A related group consists of names like *Portessie* which became a fishing station in 1727; *Portgordon*, founded in 1797 by the fourth Duke of Gordon; *Portknockie*, founded in 1677; *Portsoy* which became a burgh of barony for Ogilvy of Boyne in 1550; and even *Lossiemouth*, the harbour of which was constructed in 1698 and for which our earliest record is from 1702, and *Buckie* which grew out of several separate villages. Names like these, despite their obvious Gaelic antecedents, are largely post-Gaelic echoes of coming to terms with the riskful ambiguity of coastscapes, offering onomastic promises of shelter and haven and livelihood for those in peril on the sea.

These two groups of names are excellent examples of how the toponymic ingredient of our landscapes is forever changing and how the onomastic field changes with them. Landscape has historical structure as well as current existence.

That this process of change is not yet complete and will, to some extent, continue for ever, is demonstrated not only by the several distillery names made famous to thirsty imbibers of the water of life all over the world, but also by such seemingly mundane names as *Ballindalloch Station*, opened on July 1, 1863; and closed November 1968; *Alves Station*, opened on March 25, 1858, and closed on November 7, 1966; *Dava Station*, opened on November 1, 1864, and closed on October 18, 1965; *Dunphail Station*, opened on August 3, 1863, and closed on October 18, 1965; and *Fochabers Station*, opened October 23, 1893, and closed on March 28, 1966.¹⁹ Although these stations do not exist anymore, having mostly fallen prey to Dr Beeching's axe in the sixties, the small settlements so named still do, but their content has changed. In all these instances, the originally appropriate generic — *station* — obviously no longer applies but the name persists, fossilising toponymically a way of locomotion now no longer in need of stopping places in these locations. Who says that only the ancient

has its fascination? We are still adding to the palimpsest that will one day be deciphered by our puzzled descendants.

It is also worth remembering that, in addition to or intermingled with, the official or standard place nomenclature there is the vernacular one that has never been recorded on any map and probably never will be. There are *Foggy* and the *Douce Borough*, and further east there are the *Broch* and the *Blue Toon*, and I understand that no self-respecting native would ever call *Gardenstown* anything but *Gamrie*. This unofficial vernacular consists of alternative names, often nicknames, in non-standard or dialect forms, of additional names, of local pronunciations, but also of names in other languages like Gaelic. Mainly these operate in a different socio-linguistic register and are therefore appropriate under particular circumstances, in particular company, and as, largely informal, responses to particular stimuli. They have hardly been seriously studied at all because of their non-official popular associations but are a rich source of information for a differently articulated vernacular landscape that supplements, parallels or replaces the official one.

There is one more important point I would like to make: We have already seen that *Kingston* is an individual, possibly an intrusive, transferred name but sometimes, perhaps due to the motivation or the ability to innovate imaginatively or for other reasons, groups of names or nomenclatures are transferred, and with them whole landscapes. If W J Watson is right, such transference happened on a grand scale when Gaelic speakers first settled in this area.²⁰ The names which he groups together in support of such a claim are *Banff* which literally means 'sucking pig' but as *Banba* was also a name for Ireland; *Elgin* which as a Gaelic locative case *Eilginn* could be connected with a diminutive of *Elg*, another ancient name for Ireland; *Boyne* and *Boyndie* which have equivalents in Ireland; and especially *Findhorn* (*Fionn-Éire* 'white Ireland') which was *Inwereren* in 1187-1203, the mouth of the *aqua de Eren*. Linking this with *Strathdearn* (*Stratheren* 1236) and *Auldearn* (*Aldheren* 1238) = *Allt Éireann* 'Ireland's Burn', he postulates a district name *Eryn* 'Ireland', and if his interpretations are right this would indeed be a remarkable accumulation of names reinforcing each other in their direct links with the country from which the settlers or their ancestors had ultimately come. The problem I have with this cumulative evidence, despite my great admiration for Watson as a scholar, is that it is very difficult to reconcile such a wholesale transfer with the several river names in question. I have been studying river names for almost forty years now, and instinct tells me that they do not behave in this way. Animal names for rivers such as *Banff* are quite common in the Celtic world, and *Boyne* and *Boyndie* might well have been created independently. For the second part of *Findhorn* and *Auldearn*, as well as the related *Deveron*, an original river name is more likely and much points in this direction, i.e. of *-horn*, *-earn* and *-eron* representing ancient river names meaning 'flowing

water'. If this explanation is acceptable, one might further suggest that this older name belonged to a pre-Celtic Indo-European stratum to which the river name *Nairn* probably also goes back.²¹ In addition, although an etymology is hard to establish, the name of the *Spey* may also belong here; a meaning 'hawthorn river' which Watson proposes for the most important river in the region is difficult to substantiate.

Whatever the explanation, it is highly probable that the Celtic people who settled in *Moray*, Gaelic *Moireabh*, the old *Murebe* or early Celtic *mori-treb-* 'seaboard settlement',²² may well have found other people already there whose language was very much akin to their own. *Moray* itself has an honourable, ancient history as a name but one would like to dig deeper. Unfortunately, the evidence that has come down to us does not allow much more than speculation, for even place names, that wonderful inheritance from several linguistic pasts, are not inexhaustive in their provision of knowledge, and there comes a point in prehistory at which even names cease to speak and only things still have a voice.

No doubt there were topographic features asking to be named, no doubt there were namers equipped and willing to name them, no doubt as a result there were names, maybe not as many as today but still enough to create a landscape; but maps were only in people's minds, and the ears that heard them in oral tradition have long been unhearing. Names, those eloquent, informative witnesses for the last 3000 years or so, at that point offer nothing but silence.

Notes

1. Donald Omand (ed.), *The Moray Book* (Edinburgh: Paul Harris, 1976).
2. Donald Matheson, *The Place Names of Elginshire* (Stirling: Eneas Mackay, 1905).
3. See W F H Nicolaisen 'Names Reduced to Words?: Purpose and Scope of a Dictionary of Scottish Place Names' in *Scottish Language and Literature, Mediaeval and Renaissance* edd. Dietrich Strauss and Horst W Drescher (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1986) 47-54.
4. Donald Macaulay 'Place Names' in Omand, *Moray Book* 248-263.
5. W F H Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names: Their Study and Significance* (London: B T Batsford, 1976).
6. *Ibid.*, 173-191. Also: W F H Nicolaisen 'Die alteuropäischen Gewässernamen der britischen Hauptinsel' in *Beiträge zur Namenforschung* 8 (1957) 211-268; 'Great Britain and Old Europe' in *Namn och Bygd* 59 (1971) 85-105, 'Thirty Years Later: Thoughts on a Viable Concept of Old European Hydronymy' in *Festschrift für Johannes Hubschmid zum 65. Geburtstag* edd. Otto Winkelmann and Maria Braisch (Bern; Switzerland 1982) 139-149; and 'Old European Names in Britain' in *Nomina* 6 (1982) 37-42.
7. William J Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1926) 407.
8. Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-names* 152.
9. *Ibid.*, 154.

10. Macaulay 'Place Names' 249.
11. Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-names* 143.
12. *Ibid.*, 164-165.
13. See, for example, Kenneth Jackson 'Angles and Britons in Northumbria and Cumbria' in *Angles and Britons* ed. Henry Lewis (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1963) 60-84.
14. Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names* 158-159.
15. *Ibid.*, 136-143.
16. See Ian A Fraser 'Norse and Celtic Place-Names Around the Dornoch Firth' in *Firthlands of Ross and Sutherland* ed. John R Baldwin (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 1986) 23-32, esp. 29-31.
17. A name like *Surradale* is a newcomer not recorded till the nineteenth century. I am grateful to Mr. Ian Keillar, Elgin for this information.
18. Macaulay 'Place Names' 260. *Dyke* is, on the other hand, a *curiosum* in so far as one would not expect an English name of such importance to have been recorded in the twelfth century in this part of the country. Is it possible that an English or Scandinavian loan-word in Gaelic was employed when this name was coined?
19. This information has been provided by the late Mr. Norris Forrest, Aberdeen.
20. Watson, *Celtic Place-Names* 228-232.
21. Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names*, 187.
22. Watson, *Celtic Place-Names* 115-116.