

*Alan Macniven*

*The Vikings in Islay:  
The Place of Names in Hebridean Settlement History*

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DESPITE ITS highly-specialised-sounding title, this substantial book provides much more than (only) a focus on Islay or (only) a study of place-names. Divided into two main parts, Part 1, 'Background and Analysis', provides a thorough frame of reference for the study of Hebridean place-names, including an evaluation of how place-name data can and cannot be used in understanding broader histories; an overview of other evidence-types and how they can contribute to the picture; a contextualisation of Islay's place in Scottish history in the Viking Age and later; and Macniven's conclusions about the nature and extent of Scandinavian settlement in the Early Middle Ages. Part 2 comprises a place-name survey based on the 177 names of farm-districts listed on a mid-eighteenth-century map of Islay produced by Stephen MacDougall, which Macniven compares to the 'Rosetta Stone' (p. 32) for understanding the island's toponomastics. The survey is organised by parish, and includes, for each farm-name, its local pronunciation in the notation of the International Phonetic Alphabet; its 'geo-spatial context' (the place's OS Explorer map sheet number, National Grid reference, the proximity of the modern centre to that known in the eighteenth century, height above sea-level); its historically recorded forms; its etymology; its economic context (rental value and agricultural assessment, where known, at earlier points in history); its cultural context (associated holdings, monuments or archaeological finds on the site, other place-names within the settlement); and a map of the farm's location. There is also a useful glossary of Old Norse and Gaelic place-name elements, but it is a shame it is not cross-referenced to the actual place-names in the survey, which would have facilitated the understanding of patterns.

This idiosyncratic publication will be of interest and use to a variety of different audiences. Its attractive paperback cover and reasonable price-point

initially suggest a natural spot for it on the shelves of the local history section of a mainstream bookseller. Indeed, its clear writing is admirable, and the straightforward, informative presentation of the place-names in Part 2 makes the checking of individual names reasonably simple. On the other hand, the 120 pages of Part 1 are densely packed, with a somewhat dauntingly small font and tight line-spacing, though at almost an inch thick it is already a hefty tome. It certainly makes no concessions to 'dumbing-down' its technical matter, though again, even the most complex and difficult linguistic content is made readily accessible through the author's deft handling and fluent style. It advances arguments and methods that will be (and already have been) of import to specialists in place-name studies, historians of Scotland, and Scandinavianists. The use of MacDougall's map and of local pronunciation are productive innovations.

Macniven's overarching argument points toward a more extensive Norse influence on Islay than has often been suggested. The logical assumption from Islay's location, if nothing else, namely that the island would have been a locus of Norse interest, is somewhat belied by the lack of archaeological evidence of settlement sites, though material finds confirm Scandinavian contact. Macniven points to the 'allure of the traditional historical narrative of cultural continuity, with its memes of resilience and integration' (p. 105) as important factors in a reluctance to view Islay as a site of Viking Age Scandinavian settlement and population displacement. His counter-argument is generally built up solidly and persuasively without resorting to aggrandizement. I found the eloquent uncovering of the 'island-wide palimpsest of Old Norse material' (p. 80) and its relationship to topographical features particularly fascinating.

Given this measured and convincing approach, it is somewhat surprising to see toward the very end of Part 1 that Viking Age activity on Islay is compared to the Nazis' pursuit of *lebensraum* or the expulsion of Palestinians from Israel in 1948-49 (p. 116). The ideological implications of the closing sentence of the prose section will also be controversial: 'The Norse colonisation of Scotland's northern and western littoral was no piecemeal or peaceful process, but a forceful attempt by stalwarts of the old order to recreate pagan Scandinavian society in the west' (p. 120). Nonetheless, these more provocative statements will provide hooks for further research.

The book deserves a wider readership than the specificity of its title might allow. For instance, lessons from its lucid exposition of the methodology of the study of place-names, and its convincing interdisciplinary approach to the study of medieval Scotland, particularly of areas where there is very little by way of written record, can be appreciated and applied more widely than only

by those interested in Islay specifically. Students interested in those broader questions might be unlikely to find this book for themselves via library catalogue searches, but I would certainly recommend it for such purposes. That said, it is, of course, also valuable *because* of its focus. As Macniven points out, Islay – Banrìgh nan Eilean (Queen of the Hebrides) – was strategically and agriculturally valuable. Its particular history offers a fascinating case-study for all the factors that make it unique, as well as for what it can tell us about the bigger picture of Scandinavian Scotland.

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