

A STUDY OF THE PLACE-NAMES OF UPPER DEESIDE

Introduction

This paper presents a report on a study completed in summer 1983. The paper is in two parts. The first, by Adam Watson and Elizabeth Allan of the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology, reviews past publications on place-names in Upper Deeside, next concentrates on the methods used in the present study, and then discusses how the place-names illustrate the area's changing linguistic and social history. The second part provides a preliminary analysis of the main place-name elements from the Deeside list; it was written by Ian Fraser of the School of Scottish Studies, who gave advice to the study throughout.

The aim of the study was to make a comprehensive collection of place-names in Upper Deeside. This took ten years of spare-time work, leading to a book (Watson & Allan 1984). Few unpublished names had been expected, as more work had appeared on the place-names of Upper Deeside than on any comparable part of Scotland. However, the book gives about 7000 place-names, many of which are published there for the first time.

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PART I

Past studies

The Ordnance Survey (OS) made the first major collection. Many names on the 1869 maps were incorrect, but subsequent editions revised some of these to make them correspond better with local forms.

Macdonald (1899) relied mainly on OS names, accepting most without checking locally, but querying others and sometimes giving local alternatives. He also searched some old documents, and from informants he collected a few unpublished names and noted some pronunciations. He died before completing the book. Alexander (1952) wrote, 'In regard to field-work he has had no equal in Scottish place-name study', but Alexander himself, along with MacKinnon (1887), MacBain (1922), and Watson (1904, 1926), is now considered to have made a better contribution.

On the other hand, Milne (1912) accepted all OS versions without checking locally, and noted no local pronunciations or old forms. He took Gaelicisation much too far with many names that were obviously lowland Scots, such as Gateside, which he translated as Gaothach Suidhe (windy seat). His (1908) article on place-names in upper Banffshire, which included names on the boundary of our area, showed the same uncritical approach.

Diack's (1944) book on standing stones included valuable collections of place-names from informants, with some pronunciations, and his unpublished manuscript on Glen Tanar contained a useful chapter on names. However, several published articles (reprinted in the 1944 book) made unwarranted assertions about linguistics. Other articles by him in Revue Celtique gave a few other names along with international phonetic symbols, but again with over-confident linguistic speculation.

Alexander (1952) collected many unpublished names from local people, and gave international phonetic symbols. However, he used his own anglicised spellings for

many OS names, as in Carn Taggart for Carn an t-Sagairt and Craigendall for Creag an Dail. Although he cited maps by Roy, Robertson, and Thomson, he overlooked or ignored many names in them. Also, he gave no map references for locations, although these were widely in use even in the early 1940s. Nevertheless, he far surpassed Macdonald and Diack as a critical scholar, and his book remains one of the best studies so far published for a Scottish county. He also wrote two later articles, one of which included some material not in his book.

Macdonald, Milne and Alexander did not describe locations even approximately, let alone accurately. Many place-name locations which must have been familiar to them are thus now unknown. However, Diack's collections from Glen Ey, Corriemulzie, Morrone and the Sleach included some detailed descriptions, sufficient for us to locate many names during visits there. Only Diack and Alexander gave field-names, but emphasised them less than hills, streams and farms.

Macdonald and Milne published no informants' names, Alexander only one, and Diack virtually none. The books by Diack and Alexander appeared decades after their interviews with elderly informants, when most of these people must have died.

All four authors largely ignored Scots and English place-names. Alexander wrote, 'It has not been thought necessary to encumber the pages unduly with the frequent commonplace names of the Hillhead type', and 'Woodhill, in various parishes with Woodend, Woodside, etc.', and 'Bridgend, Glengairn etc'. He gave no cases of Burn of -, Bridge of -, or Brig o -, and no Braehead or Littleton.

A list of proper names in Dwelly (1901-11) included a few Gaelic names from the area, collected from local people by W. J. Watson. Watson (1916) published a good, short article, and Seton Gordon's various books on the area gave unpublished names heard from local people. Johnston's Place-names of Scotland (1934) included some names of Deeside villages, rivers and hills, but many of his derivations, such as Bealaidh Tir for Ballater, clash strongly with local pronunciations and so can be rejected. In 1931, Parker published a map of salmon pools, Scott (1959) a revised version, and Anonymous (1980) a third; all had a considerable number of errors in spelling and locations, did not cover the upper Dee near Braemar, and did not show all pool names. Stewart's (1974) booklet on Perthshire names, including some on the boundary of our area, took all its names from OS maps, with no pronunciations or old forms, gave some obviously incorrect meanings such as Buchaille (sic) Bhreige as 'the herd who tells lies', and transcribed many map names incorrectly, as in Carn Geoidh for OS Carn a' Gheoidh.

Some of these comments may seem over-critical, but they are intended to show readers wishing to search further how to make the best use of earlier works. The books by Macdonald, Diack and especially Alexander became constant companions during our study. In any case, in place-name study, as in other kinds of research, new contributions rest on the shoulders of those who studied before.

Methods

Important guidelines for studying place-names in Irish and Scottish Gaelic were published decades ago (Joyce 1869; Watson 1904, 1904-5; MacBain 1922), and their worth still stands. We followed them, along with the standard modern methods reviewed by Nicolaisen (1979). The basic approach was to emphasise pronunciations and other information from local informants, and to check locations in the field. We supplemented this with detailed surveys of published names and unpublished material

in archive collections. As we had no experience of place-name study, we sought the help of professional workers from the beginning.

We had a few advantages, particularly our familiarity with the area, the people, and their speech. Both of us are native speakers of Aberdeenshire Scots and one (EA) was brought up in the study area. This made it easy to approach people informally and use tape recorders freely for noting pronunciations. Our close links with the people and our use of Scots speech for interviews were often important for getting authentic vernacular pronunciations. A few informants at first gave genteel versions of names, resembling the forms printed on maps and road signs, but when we questioned this, using Scots speech, they would admit that the vernacular forms were what they and their forebears had used.

However, as most place-names were obviously of Gaelic origin, a disadvantage was that we did not know Gaelic. We both learned Gaelic grammar to get a better basis for deriving Gaelic names.

We identified the exact locations of all but a few place-names, giving map references, and also visited every known location to check its position and possible derivation. Local people were asked for the name of every former habitation, field, pool, hillock, stream, and other major features. Periodically we looked for gaps where we had had few or no names, and then went to informants in these gap areas.

We spoke with 260 local informants, and visited some of them repeatedly. Their statements were checked with other local people, and we often took them out on to the ground in question. The study was wound up when the number of new names dropped below about one per two new informants. One of the most rewarding things in the study was meeting so many interesting people. Without them it would have been a mere desk job, sifting evidence of doubtful validity from extinct cultures. With their help, it was an exploration of a living culture, albeit one experiencing considerable change.

Nevertheless, spellings of names found in old documents were often important pointers to their derivation. We noted some early forms from published sources, but many more from unpublished papers and maps in estate offices and in other known archive collections on the area. Very few of these pre-date 1600, and most are from the late 1700s and the 1800s. Where we found unfamiliar place names in unpublished old papers, we went back to our informants to ask if they knew these names. Sometimes they did recollect hearing them, and occasionally even remembered locations.

These methods produced a fairly reliable base of map references, phonetic pronunciations and old spellings. Derivation of Celtic names was more subjective, and here we were greatly helped by comments on the manuscript by professional workers. If local informants pronounced a name as /alt 'beg/ and told us that this meant 'little stream', there was not much doubt that it came from the Gaelic name Allt Beag. With many names apparently Gaelic, however, local people did not know any meaning, and there were several possible derivations from Gaelic dictionaries; in such cases our suggested derivations are obviously more doubtful. In a few cases we could find no derivation from dictionaries, so that these were still more obscure. We ranked the reliability of Gaelic derivations on a scale from 1-6. This was useful in providing a standard, and also avoided the repeated use of such vague terms as 'probably', 'possibly', etc.

Unlike earlier authors in the area, we recorded all names that we found in

whatever language, so it will be possible to assess the numbers of Gaelic, Scots and English names in different parts of the area now and in the future.

Language

The place-names reflect the area's unusual linguistic history. Gaelic gave way not to English, as elsewhere in the Highlands, but to Scots from lowland Aberdeenshire. This has been the main speech of the entire area in recent decades, and of the eastern end of it for centuries. Although most names are of Gaelic origin, and a few show clear evidence of Pictish influence, many are lowland Scots. Lowland Scots names are commonest on farmland at the east end of the area and fewest in the mountainous west end. The names of fishing pools illustrate this change well. In the eastern part of the area, most pool names in Dee are Scots, such as The Lang Puil, The Holly Buss Puil and The Brig Puil, whereas in the far west most are Gaelic such as Am Poll Buidhe, Poll nan Clachan Garbha and Poll na Drochaide. Some names are Scots or English translations from Gaelic names, and we commonly heard the Gaelic version from older people and the translation from younger ones. An example is Preas nam Meirleach in Glen Luibeg, now usually given locally as The Robbers' Copse. We also came across deliberate anglicisation of Gaelic names. In one such case, an English deer-stalking tenant found it hard to remember a corrie as Coire Bhearnuisge, so he decided to call it The Big Corrie and expected local stalkers and ghillies to do likewise.

In the course of the work we came across Mrs Jean Bain, the last speaker of Aberdeenshire Gaelic, and this led to a study of her Gaelic (Watson & Clement 1983). Unpublished Gaelic poems from Deeside, dating from the late 1700s, were discovered (Watson 1983a), and also the Earl of Fife's unpublished journal which gave useful information on social history and land use (Watson 1983b) as well as place-names. An Appendix to our book presents some more unpublished poems and rhymes which emphasise place-names and which are still known locally.

Social history

Many of the names illustrate the major changes that have occurred in the area's social history and land use. Communities far up the glens were at one time largely self-sufficient, with a great variety of trades such as turner, shoemaker, fuller, weaver, etc. which are illustrated by the place-names. Many names refer to the mosses where people formerly dug peat for fuel; virtually all are unused today. We found many names of shielings, where people once summered with their cattle in the higher glens; none are in use now. There has been a great decline in the number of inhabited farms and crofts, due to the massive voluntary depopulation of the more remote glens. This still continues, so that some glens are now completely empty of people, and only the ruins of former homes remain. The visitor coming across some interesting old ruin would have difficulty finding out its name from our long alphabetical list. We therefore list separately the former habitations in each individual glen, since many people are more interested in these human aspects than in the names of hillocks or other natural features.

Along with this depopulation, and with farm amalgamations, many field names have disappeared. Some have been replaced by the field numbers on large-scale, modern OS maps. Names in the hills are also vanishing. Many of today's game-keepers and deer-stalkers were not brought up in the area, and are less inclined than

their predecessors to stay in one place for long. Also, the number of men employed has greatly declined, so that each man (with a Land Rover) now has a very big area to look after and cannot know the ground as intimately as the old-style stalker who walked his smaller beat every day.

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PART II

One of the useful aspects of this collection from the point of view of the professional onomastician, is the way in which all names have been investigated. Although one comes to expect settlement names to be the subject of more intense scrutiny in a survey such as this, topographic names, especially in mountainous areas, are often allocated less attention. In this study, however, there has been a particular effort devoted to the topographic element, in addition to settlement names, and in an area like Deeside which displays a wide variety of landscapes, from valley to high mountain zones, this has proved of inestimable importance.

Settlement Names

It is in the nature of mountainous areas that farms which are located in higher ground where conditions are marginal will be often poor and therefore more liable to abandonment at times of economic depression, social change or climatic deterioration. This has been a prominent feature of the settlement pattern of Upper Deeside, and is reflected in the large number of names which are either obsolete or which have reverted to being applied to topographic features. This situation can be repeated in other, similar, parts of Scotland, like upper Speyside, the Borders, and the Galloway hill country.

The two most common Gaelic habitative elements which are found in the area are baile 'farmstead' and achadh 'field'. There are some 50 examples of baile, such as Balintober, Balmenach, and Balintuim. Achadh is less common in Aberdeenshire, being a later settlement term. As its derivation implies, it is usually a smaller unit of land, and tends to be located in less favourable agricultural conditions. Most of the achadh names in Deeside apply to farm fields as such, although Auchnerran in Cromar, Auchallater and Auchtavan were farm names in their own right. Many farms with names containing baile and achadh are now deserted, such as Baile a' Mhuillin near Inverey and Ach an t-Sabhail in Glen Gairn. We may also note dail 'meadow' as being a common term. Many places so named are fields or water-meadows in existing farms, but a substantial number have acquired the status of farms, such as Dalnabo, Dallyfour (1599 Dalfour), Dalvorar and others. These are usually near major streams, in relatively good land.

Cill, the term for 'church', is virtually absent in the study area, although a few old church sites are referred to as such. Indeed, with the exception of more recent names containing kirk and chapel, few place-names relating to church activity exist. Gaelic eaglais 'church' occurs in a few instances.

The area was one noted for its shielings, transhumance being once an important

aspect of agricultural life, so it is natural that we find a large number of terms relating to these. The usual eastern Gaelic word ruighe is found widely, some 50 examples being recorded, together with a substantial number of the Scots equivalent shiel, like Shiel of Back Coire Buidhe, and Shiels of Allt na Meadhonaidh.

Finally, we may note a number of Scots habitative names, like those in Mains (from demesne), about 10 examples, usually in the form 'Mains of . . .'. Names including -ton (Scots toun) are confined to examples like Newton (which are often referred to as 'The Newton'), Milton and Kirkton of Crathie.

Field-Names

Field-names in the area display the expected pattern, i.e. they contain both Gaelic and Scots terms. Some of the Gaelic field-names, however, are unusual, and it is surprising to find a few terms which are normally encountered in Argyll and the Southern Hebrides. The basic field-names, such as those containing achadh and dail, are of course found in some numbers, although it is difficult to be precise about the original extent of either, since there must have been a good deal of replacement in the eastern part of the area, if not throughout its entire length, by Scots terms. In addition, the word roinn 'portion' is found in at least 30 examples, and loinn 'enclosure' is also common (20+ examples) in such names as Loinn a' Choirce, which becomes Loinchork in Glen Gironck, and also occurs in simplex as The Loin. Other terms are ailan 'green, meadow' (Allanaquoich, Allanmore); cluan 'meadow' in Clunie; innis 'meadow, haugh', which becomes Scots inch; and the unusual claigionn 'hillock, in-field' in Claigionn na Caithriseachd near Abergeldie. This is a term found in Argyll and Lochaber, but in few other places, to my knowledge.

Some terms which are common further west in the Gaelic-speaking area are relatively rare here, such as lón 'grassy meadow', although this does occasionally occur as a specific, like Rinloan and Baile an Loin, and there are a few examples of bàrd 'park'. The term eilean 'island' is also found here as a field-name, usually beside major rivers, and sometimes applied to islands cut off during changes in stream-beds. There are some 20 examples of these in generic forms, including 7 in simplex, a few hybrids such as The Eilean Park, and occasional farm-names like Baile an Eilein. It was interesting to find an example of losaid 'kneading-trough' (hence a very fertile field) at Invercauld. Normally this term is confined to Argyll.

Scots terms in this category are fairly predictable. They include haugh (and its diminutive haughie), howe 'flat ground' and frequent examples of park. Two examples of field-names containing the term waird, from Scots ward 'land enclosed by a dyke', were also recorded.

Hydronyms

Most water-names are Gaelic, but there has been a lot of anglicisation, and a few Scots hydronyms occur also. The standard Gaelic term abhainn 'river' occurs only as a specific in such names as Loinn na h-Aibhne (old form Loinahaun). Uisge 'water' is standard for the large streams such as the Dee, as Uisge Dé. The most common stream element is the term allt, with its diminutive alltan. For small streams, the term caochan is frequently used, and féith 'bog-stream' is very common. Other river or stream features include linne 'rocky pool', found mainly on the major streams and often Scotticised to linn, in the form 'Linn of . . .'. The term camas 'bend' or 'meander', found only on the larger rivers, becomes cambus in Scotticised

forms, like Cambus o' May. Wells are mostly denoted by fuaran, although tobar is also found, while there are springs in hill country named from Gaelic sùil or Scots swail 'eye', i.e. an eye-shaped green spot in otherwise dark or barren land.

Scots items in this category mostly involve the common stream term burn. It is clear that this element has expanded into parts of the west of the area, although it is naturally more common in the east. Again, 'Burn of . . .' is a usual formation. One other Scots element, grain, is fairly common, applied to a series of small rivulets which merge to form a larger stream. It produces occasional hybrids like Grains o Allt Deas in Glen Tanar, but most grain-names are in the south-east of the area, nearest lowland influence.

Mention should also be made of the Gaelic inbhir 'confluence', and its Scotticised form inver, of which over 20 occur in the area. Again, we find formations like The Inver of Bynack and The Inver of the Burn of Altdourie.

Other Toponyms

In an area where there is a great deal of topographic variety, mountain- and hill-names form a very high percentage of the total. Although the Cairngorms were not subjected to such a prolonged period of glaciation as the mountains in the west, where there is much more obvious evidence of severe dissection and formation of corries at much lower altitudes, they still present us with a large number of mountain terms.

For the highest summits, beinn, the standard term for 'mountain', and its Scotticised equivalent ben, are fairly numerous. The term monadh 'hill-range' also occurs. In neighbouring Speyside, the Cairngorms were referred to as Am Monadh Ruadh 'the red hill-range' to distinguish this from Am Monadh Liath 'the grey hill-range' to the west, more familiar in its anglicised form as 'The Monadhliath Mountains'.

By far the most common mountain term is càrn, with its Scotticised equivalent cairn. This could be said to be the standard mountain term for the Grampians - conical and round-topped rather than sharp-peaked. Sgor, of which more than 20 examples are found, indicates a stony or rocky surface, and is therefore a more specialised term than either càrn or beinn. Stùc 'projecting hill' is scarce, as one might expect in this area, but there are 7 hill names containing stob 'peak'.

Lower summits are sometimes also labelled càrn, as well as those in the high-summit category, but the term meall 'lump, hill' and its diminutive meallan occur most numerous in the names of lower summits. Sidhean 'rounded hill' or 'fairy hill', though extremely common in Inverness-shire and the north-west is less so here, with only 4 examples with the generic, and occasional occurrences where the term appears as a specific, like Tom an t-Sidhein. Torr(an) is also common, while tulach and tom are frequent for hillocks. Cnoc is also found, becoming Scots knock in forms like The Knock of Lawsie, while tulach becomes Tullich or Tulloch and is the generic for innumerable farm-names throughout North-East Scotland.

Druim 'ridge', 'back' is another common topographic element, which is anglicised to drum. Creag 'rock' becomes craig in Scots and is extremely common, as is clach 'stone'.

Valley features of larger size are denoted by Gaelic gleann and srath, the latter being usually the term for 'major river valley'. Both are common in the area, with

smaller valleys, gulleys and ravines having a variety of terms like clais, glac and lag. Hill-slopes of various kinds are found as bruach, leathad and leitir, and hill-promontaries as sròn 'nose'.

There are, in addition, numerous examples of coire 'corrie', or 'cwm', as is to be expected in a mountainous area, and the ravine-term, clais, is very common, often applied to former glacial melt-water channels.

The names of passes which were used as routeways include several interesting terms, such as bealach, a way between two peaks, and lairig, the term for a longer pass, as in Lairig Ghru. Cadha, referring to a way up a steep hill, is found in a number of names, such as Cadha an Fhir Bhogha 'the way of the archer' and Cadha Shios Feith Laoigh.

Scots terms are in general less common than Gaelic, and are either comparatively recent or confined to the east of the area. Moss and Muir are obvious examples, with formations like Muir of Tullich to denote moorland grazings pertaining to particular farm holdings. There are 12 examples of the term shank 'descending spur' or 'broad ridge', and a notch in the hills is often referred to as sneck, again a Scots term.

Conclusion

This survey of elements has, of necessity, been short. There is much variety, particularly of topographic names. On first sight, there is a relative lack of purely habitative names, but this is because a very large number of settlement names, usually of small farms, have toponymic origins. This may reflect the way in which man has exploited the area, often attempting to cultivate land at considerable altitudes in unpromising situations, and paying the penalties when marginal climatic change or a shift in economic conditions rendered occupation unprofitable.

The onomastic record of this collection, then, should not be viewed solely in a linguistic light. It is as much a record of economic and social change, and it is to be hoped that it will be regarded as a tool not only for onomasticians but for other scholars seeking further insights into the history of this fascinating and beautiful part of Scotland.

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CAITHNESS PLACE-NAMES*

In describing the sources and methods which I have used in my study of Caithness place-names, I shall only be referring to those six parishes which I have studied in detail, using the place-names on the 6" Ordnance Survey maps as a starting point. The six parishes are Reay, Thurso, Olig, Dunnet and Canisbay, all of which border the Pentland Firth in the north, plus Wick Parish on the east coast.

The reason for selecting these parishes in particular is that the most significant feature in the place-nomenclature of Caithness is the division between the Gaelic-influenced area to the west of the county and the Norse-influenced area to the east, and any study of Caithness place-names must obviously incorporate this linguistic orientation. The dividing line between Norse east and Gaelic west is surprisingly clearly defined, although it has been blurred to a certain extent by the gradual adoption of Scots or English as the language of all the people in Caithness.

Before examining the place-names themselves, one's first source has to be the work of the historian and the archaeologist who provide the historical backdrop against which the names can be evaluated. Precise dating of the various phases of settlement is impossible from place-name evidence alone due to the regrettable scarcity of early documentary references to place-names. The earliest date which has been suggested for the Norse settlement of Orkney, Shetland and Caithness is c. 800 AD.

The Scandinavians who came to the Northern Isles were of Norwegian origin and they possibly chose the area because of its proximity to Norway and because in many respects it was similar to their home territory. The Treaty of Perth (1266) marks the end of direct Norse control in Caithness but Norse influence in all aspects of everyday life persisted for some centuries after this date and Norn may have been spoken until the beginning of the 16th century, and some would suggest an even later date towards the end of the 16th century. It has to be remembered that Orkney and Shetland were under Scandinavian control until 1468, and there would have been contact between Orkney and Caithness during this time which would encourage retention of the Norn.

The gradual encroachment of Gaelic-speaking people from the west and south probably began in either the 12th or the 13th century once the authority of the Scottish crown had been established in the north. Professor Nicolaisen suggests this dating, commenting that: 'the boundary line between Gaelic and Norse Caithness must have been established before the end of the 9th century . . . and there seems to have been very little change in that situation before the 12th or even 13th century.' (Nicolaisen 1982, p. 80).

The movement of Gaelic-speaking people into Caithness increased in strength and spatial extent until the early 1700s, but by the later years of the 18th century Gaelic was slowly beginning to give way to English, even in the extreme west of the county, in Reay Parish, where Gaelic continued in use until the early 20th century. The Old Statistical Account (OSA) has the following to say regarding Reay Parish: 'The Gaelic or Erse language is chiefly spoken through this parish. Many indeed now speak both Gaelic and English' (OSA, vol. XVIII, Caithness, p. 158). This latter comment invariably indicates that Gaelic is in a threatened position, having been ousted as the language of communication with trading partners.

There is a small cluster of Gaelic names in Wick Parish but they have the appearance of being much later than the Gaelic names in Reay Parish. The Old