

Archif Melville Richards:
A Place-Name Resource Database for Wales

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This article describes the background, characteristics and potential of the database which has recently been created from a personal archive of historical place-name material deposited at the University of Wales Bangor.¹ It then re-examines one exemplar place-name element in the light of the additional evidence now available.

Melville Richards

Professor Grafton Melville Richards (1910–73) held the chair of Welsh in what was then the University College of North Wales, Bangor.² It was ‘his brilliant reputation as the leading expert on Welsh onomastics that had brought him international acclaim’.³ He published extensively on literary, ecclesiastical and legal Welsh texts and on Welsh and Celtic syntax and philology.⁴ However, his abiding passion was the study of the place-names of Wales. This brought him into contact with fellow scholars in the International Congress of Onomastic Sciences and in the Council for Name Studies in Great Britain and Ireland, the precursor of the present Society for Name Studies in Britain and

¹ This is a revised version of a paper read (together with Gruff Prys) at the Fourteenth Annual Conference of the Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland held at the University of Wales Swansea, 2–5 April 2005.

² He graduated in Welsh and Celtic Studies from Swansea, completed a doctoral thesis on the syntax of the verb in the *Mabinogi* and then undertook further studies at Dublin and Paris. From 1936 to 1948 he lectured in Swansea, and from 1948 to 1965 at Liverpool (as Reader and Head of Celtic Studies). In 1965 he succeeded Professor J. E. Caerwyn Williams as Professor of Welsh at Bangor until his untimely death in 1973.

³ D. E. Evans, ‘Grafton Melville Richards (1910–1973)’, *Onoma*, 18 (1974), 610–25 (p. 619).

⁴ For a selective list of his publications, see *ibid.* and J. Spittal and J. Field, *A Reader's Guide to the Place-Names of the United Kingdom* (Stamford, 1990).

Ireland, becoming the Council's President 1967–72 (in succession to Professor A. H. Smith). He collaborated with two eminent toponymists in *The Names of Towns and Cities in Britain*.⁵

His research methodology is familiar to all onomasts of the pre-digital age. Over very many years, he gathered documentary evidence for place-names and personal names from historical sources deposited in record offices in Wales and England and from papers in private collections, material which was then assiduously transcribed by hand onto slips. Typically, each slip has a head-name, a location (where known) including a grid reference (where possible), historical forms, dates and sources. When he came across supplementary published notes or articles, his custom was to annotate slips over time, by adding, as marginalia, references to those secondary sources. The slips themselves do not record an etymology or an interpretation. With his interest in carpentry, he built an edifice of 159 boxes or drawers which is about four metres in length and two metres high. The number of slips was estimated as 330,000, 'amassed through his own single-handed efforts and single-minded devotion'.⁶

These slips provided him with the research material for his authoritative publications. The problems of identifying and locating very many medieval Welsh place-names, together with the lack of a dependable administrative hierarchy, prompted him, almost as a by-product but certainly as an aid for himself and subsequent researchers, to compile his important *Welsh Administrative and Territorial Units*.⁷

Another project was his proposed 'Welsh Onomasticon'. He had made a start by abstracting material relating to some 7,000 place-names in Wales, setting out selected historical forms for each name and providing a succinct etymology; he built a separate set of nine boxes specifically for what he evidently intended to be a dictionary of

⁵ M. Gelling, W. F. H. Nicolaisen and M. Richards, *The Names of Towns and Cities in Britain* (London, 1970).

⁶ Evans, 'Grafton Melville Richards (1910–1973)', 620.

⁷ M. Richards, *Welsh Administrative and Territorial Units, Medieval and Modern* (Cardiff, 1969).

Welsh place-names. Sadly, his untimely death frustrated completion.⁸ He also drew on this archive for an extremely popular and well received series of notes on place-names in the Welsh language weekly *Y Cymro*.⁹

Background to the project

On his sudden death, Melville Richards's research material was left *in situ* and then transferred to the Archives of the University of Wales Bangor (UWB), and located in a dedicated research room known as Ystafell Ymchwil Enwau Lleoedd Melville Richards / The Melville Richards Place-Name Research Room. That room contained all his notebooks, offprints, copies of public lectures, the 159 boxes of slips and the nine boxes for the proposed dictionary. Access was by arrangement.

In parallel with developments in UWB itself, and conscious of the national importance of this research archive, the University of Wales Board of Celtic Studies commissioned Professor D. Ellis Evans to produce a report on the archive, to apprise the Board of Melville Richards's work-in-progress and to suggest possible ways of achieving completion. The report¹⁰ concluded, *inter alia*, that one way forward would be to appoint a research assistant to work on a limited geographical area or on a toponymic theme.¹¹ In 1988, the Board of

⁸ However, material from these slips is being incorporated into the forthcoming H. W. Owen and R. Morgan, *Dictionary of the Place-Names of Wales*, a volume which will be dedicated to Melville Richards, and which was facilitated by grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Board (2000–03) and UWB (2006).

⁹ Published in a column entitled 'Enwau Tir a Gwlad' ('Names of Land and Country') between March 1967 and May 1970, notes which were subsequently edited by Professor Bedwyr Lewis Jones, Melville Richards's successor at Bangor, with the assistance of the archivist and toponymist Tomos Roberts, and published as M. Richards, *Enwau Tir a Gwlad* (Caernarfon, 1998) edited by B. L. Jones.

¹⁰ Minutes of the Board of Celtic Studies May 1974, Appendix H vii, 260–63.

¹¹ Tomos Roberts was appointed in 1975 to manage the archive and work on aspects of the names of Anglesey, some of which appeared in B. L. Jones and T. Roberts, 'The coastal toponyms of Anglesey', *Journal of the English Place-Name*

Celtic Studies decided to inaugurate a Welsh national survey of place-names.¹² One of the principal priorities of the survey was to be the digitisation of the Melville Richards place-name archive, in order to safeguard the security of the archive itself and to enhance accessibility for researchers. The survey's operational base would be at UWB. In 1991, Dr Terry James was commissioned to design an appropriate software package.¹³ In 1993 the Board of Celtic Studies agreed to fund the hardware, and in 1994 one researcher was employed to input the data from the archive. With the limited funding available, progress was inevitably laborious and protracted and had reached the letter C by the year 2000.¹⁴

In 2000 Professor Hywel Wyn Owen succeeded Professor Pierce and (by then) the late Professor Bedwyr Lewis Jones as director of the place-name survey. With the encouragement and support of the Board of Celtic Studies and in order to ensure completion within a realistic time-scale, Professor Owen obtained funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Board under the Resource Enhancement Scheme. The AHRB project ran from June 2001 until August 2004 and employed four part-time research assistants located in the Place-Name

Society, 11 (1978–79), 47–53 (and summarised in *Nomina*, 2 (1978), 27–29), and in T. Roberts and T. R. Jones *Enwau Lleoedd Môn / The Place-Names of Anglesey* (Isle of Anglesey County Council and Research Centre Wales UWB, 1996). A further researcher, Iolo Dafydd, continued the management while undertaking research on an area of north Radnorshire ('Enwau Lleoedd Cwmwd Deuddwr', unpublished MA dissertation, University of Wales Aberystwyth, 1980).

¹² Members of the executive committee were Dr Margaret Gelling (chair), Professor D. Ellis Evans, Professor R. Geraint Gruffydd (then director of the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, Aberystwyth), Professor Prys Morgan, with Professor Bedwyr Lewis Jones and Professor Gwynedd O. Pierce as, respectively, Director and Associate Director of the survey.

¹³ He had previously designed a programme for archaeological sites in Wales for the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments in Wales.

¹⁴ For an excellent and far more detailed account of the early years of Welsh toponymic studies, the inaugural stages of the survey and the technical and administrative difficulties relating to digitisation, see G. O. Pierce 'Welsh place-name studies: the background', *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 144 (1995), 26–36.

Research Centre at UWB.¹⁵ The actual inputting was completed on 1 March 2004 and the final four months of the project were devoted to checking and editing; the following six months were spent converting the database into a website by refining some of the access protocols, and mounting and trialling a secure website.¹⁶ The website known as ‘Archif Melville Richards’ (AMR) was available from 1 March 2005 as www.bangor.ac.uk/amr.¹⁷ The site is maintained by staff at Canolfan Bedwyr, UWB.¹⁸

Creating the database

Melville Richards was in the habit of transcribing personal names onto his slips, partly because they occurred in or were relevant to some of his edited texts, and partly because they were eventually to appear as part of his proposed Onomasticon. Since the dedicated funding was for a place-name database, it was decided to exclude personal names. However, each personal name slip was recorded by head-name and the entire personal name class was then abstracted to form a separate database.¹⁹ Personal names as they occurred within a place-name were, of course, not excluded.

The information on the place-name slips fell into distinct categories, each of which was allocated a database field: head-name, location (by

¹⁵ The project was located in the Centre at UWB in collaboration with Einion Thomas UWB Archivist and with Information Services who provided technical support and advice. Dr Terry James, designer of the original software, was retained as consultant. The following research assistants were engaged over the period of the two projects (Board of Celtic Studies and AHRB): Ann Daniels, Owain Davies, Catherine Lowe, Gruff Prys, Glynnis Roberts and Nesta Roberts.

¹⁶ Siân Lewis, Professor Richards’s daughter and executor, granted permission for the creation of the website. The original archive and all the research papers are also deposited at UWB by her.

¹⁷ The website was launched at the Annual Conference of the Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland held at the University of Wales Swansea, 2–5 April 2005, and at the National Eisteddfod of Wales, Eryri, 1 August 2005.

¹⁸ Canolfan Bedwyr is a centre of excellence in electronic lexicography at UWB.

¹⁹ Access to this personal name database is by arrangement with the Archivist at UWB.

parish and by county if indicated), historical form, date, source, grid reference (if indicated) and supplementary information (if any).

From the start of the project in 1994, the overriding consideration was that the database should retain the integrity of Professor Richards's original archive, thus providing the same information whether the researcher was handling the actual slips in the Place-Name Research Centre or accessing the website on a PC. Where he indicated doubt by means of a question mark, there was no attempt to resolve the matter. However, one exception was agreed upon. In citing grid references, Professor Richards, for some reason still unexplained, consistently reversed eastings and northings. The order has been normalised, and in order to facilitate use, corresponding NGRs have been added based on the 2004 conventions using the letter system.²⁰

Since the archive represents personal research material not originally intended for public scrutiny, and that digitisation took ten years, some features require caution.²¹

The limitations of the 1994 software meant that the head-name of each slip had to be entered in capitals. Consequently, users need to convert the head-word into lower case in accordance with standard orthography.²² Occasionally, for well known major places, Melville Richards did not indicate a parish or county at all, as, in his mind and for his own reference, it was obvious. Elsewhere, however, he indicated the location wherever possible, but expressed the administrative unit variously as township, ecclesiastical or civil parish, commote, cantref, lordship, county, county borough, rural or urban district. Care needs to be exercised in interpreting his locational categories.²³

²⁰ We are grateful for the co-operation of the Ordnance Survey in this matter.

²¹ A more detailed list appears in the section 'Cautionary notes' in the User Guide.

²² For example, BRYMBO needs to be cited as **Brymbo**, TON-TEG as **Ton-teg**, BETWS-Y-COED as **Betws-y-coed**, MOEL Y GAER as **Moel y Gaer**, and LLANDRILLO-YN-RHOS as **Llandrillo-yn-Rhos**. For the standard modern orthography of Welsh place-names, refer to E. Davies, *A Gazetteer of Welsh Place-Names* (Cardiff, 1957, 1975).

²³ Melville Richards indicated the administrative location of a place where it was known to him or where it was apparent from the documentary evidence. In those instances, for ease of reference, the pre-1974 county reference has been added in

While Professor Richards's handwriting was regular and neat, uncertainty occasionally arose particularly in transcribing an unfamiliar name, in identifying certain letters and combinations (such as -u-, -v-, -rm-, -m-, -nn-), in differentiating some capitals from initial lower case, in determining precise word divisions, in distinguishing his slightly stylised letter -d- from the symbol used by him (and many Welsh scholars in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries) as a convenient shorthand for Welsh voiced -dd-. These occasional ambiguities, however, also apply in reading the original archive.

Many medieval documents used several symbols to represent the Welsh velar [x], standardised as -ch- in modern Welsh orthography. Melville Richards replicated these different medieval symbols on the slips whereas the database represents those symbols as -z-. The context will almost always indicate where -z- represents -ch-.

The original programme could not insert a circumflex on w, W, y and Y. The later up-graded programme did have the circumflex for *ŵ* and *ŷ* but not W and Y. Intermittently in the archive, *Dôl* and *dôl* appear as **Dol** and **dol** in head-words, an inconsistency uncharacteristic of Melville Richards, and which never appears in his publications. The database has retained the inconsistency.

The documentary sources for the historical forms are abbreviated on the slips and on the database. However, these personal abbreviations were not always entirely consistent over the many years he worked on the archive. It has been possible to compile a bibliography of the sources on which the archive was based and to expand the abbreviations.²⁴

the database. Useful guides are Richards, *Welsh Administrative and Territorial Units*; and R. J. P. Kain and R. R. Oliver, *The Historic Parishes of England and Wales: An Electronic Map of Boundaries Before 1850 with a Gazetteer and Metadata* (Colchester, c.2001) also at <http://hds.essex.ac.uk>.

²⁴ For example, the same Mostyn (Flintshire) papers can appear as Mostyn and FRO Mostyn. Similarly, RC can stand for *Revue Celtique* and the Record of Caernarfon, but the distinction is usually self-evident on the basis of dates, volume or page numbers. These fuller source references are included as a separate file in order to save space on the main database. Some abbreviations continue to baffle.

Searching the database

Anticipating the needs of potential users was a prime consideration in designing the database fields.²⁵ For example, a user might need to search for a specific place-name or for all examples of that name within a parish or county or within certain grid parameters, or within a particular period in time, or within a single documentary source or set of sources, or any combination of those fields. The database has also been designed to allow for searches for a particular element.²⁶ Fields can be sorted alphabetically and chronologically.

Where a place-name occurred in a historical form only, Melville Richards, with considerable foresight, regularly flagged a postulated modern head-name on the slip in standard Welsh orthography. Consequently, whereas *Kaye Koghion* would be difficult, but not impossible, to trace as such, his standardised **Caeau Cochion** ('red fields') enables a trace to be established with greater certainty. However, the user needs then to be aware that **Caeau Cochion** does not necessarily exist as a modern name. There is also the (highly unlikely) possibility that his rendering of a particular historical form might, in time, require reinterpreting.

A place-name researcher commencing a new area will be able to

²⁵ Details on accessing the database are on the website's User Guide. Because of the need to protect the integrity of the archive, access is through an initial page which requires the searcher to accept legal responsibility for using the resource and provides the specific wording of the acknowledgement. Since search-room facilities provide for viewing and copying, similar facilities are available for the website, in that a limited print-out is possible for pages of twenty records per page.

²⁶ The database can identify an element or name wherever it occurs in the string of letters comprising the place-name. For example, ***bangor*** can trace Bangor, Bangor Is-coed, Capel Bangor and Cored Bangor Fawr. By the same token, in searching for **coch** 'red', the string search will probably identify the mutational variant **goch** and inflected plural variant **cochion**. However, a search for **gwyn** will identify the plural **gwynion** but not necessarily the feminine **gwen** especially in its mutated form **wen**. An authoritative list of mutational variants may be found in English in B. Griffiths and D. G. Jones, *The Welsh Academy English–Welsh Dictionary* (University of Wales, 1995, revised 2000), pp. xxviii–xliii.

recover all the place-names which Melville Richards had transcribed for that area and all the sources he had drawn on up to 1973. Discussion of a place-name can be enhanced through cross-reference to other examples in Wales.²⁷ The significance of an element can be refined by plotting its geographical distribution or its chronology. Intriguingly, it is possible to re-examine some of the detailed articles that Melville Richards himself had written on particular elements,²⁸ and provide graphic illustration of the actual distribution and frequency by grid reference and topography.

The database is of considerable use to researchers in related disciplines.

Archaeologists accustomed to look at place-names for evidence of, say, *caer*, *din*, *cas*, *castell*, *tomen*, *crug*, *clawdd*, will be able to extend the range of possible sites based on hitherto unknown forms. Settlement history can be illuminated by locating and dating unidentified examples of *tref*, *pentref*, *maerdref*, *maenor* and so on, and by examining routes on the basis of new forms of *sarn*, *rhyd*, *ffordd*, *porth*, *stryt* / *stryd*. Geographers will find new examples of *nant*, *aber*, *cryw*, *cymer*, *gwerddon*. Botanists will trace *rhedyn* and *craf*, and ornithologists locate the haunts of *hebog* and *tylluan*. Family historians will search for the location of cottages, fields and small-holdings. None of this is

²⁷ See the discussion of Bala below.

²⁸ For example, 'Hafod and hafoty in Welsh place-names', *Montgomeryshire Collections*, 56 (1961), 13–20; 'Meifod, lluest, cynaeafdy, and hendre in Welsh place-names', *Montgomeryshire Collections*, 56 (1961), 177–87; 'Welsh rhyd "ford" in place-names', *Études Celtiques*, 10 (1962), 210–37; 'The significance of *is* and *uwch* in Welsh commote and cantref names', *Welsh History Review*, 2 (1964), 9–18; 'The distribution of some Welsh place-names (*clogwyn*)', *Lochlann*, 3 (1965), 404–14; 'Welsh *sarn* "road, causeway" in place-names', *Études Celtiques*, 11 (1967), 383–408; '*march* "great, large" in Welsh place-names', in *Beiträge zur Indogermanistik und Keltologie, Julius Pokorny zum 80. Geburtstag gewidmet*, edited by W. Meid (Innsbruck, 1967), pp. 257–63; '*ffridd*/*ffrith* as a Welsh place-name', *Studia Celtica*, 2 (1967), 29–90; 'The distribution of some Welsh place-names (*ton*, *twyn*, *tyle*)', *Lochlann*, 4 (1969), 179–225; 'Welsh *dryll* as a place-name element', in *Indo-Celtica Gedächtnisschrift für Alf Sommerfelt*, edited by H. Pilch and J. Thurow (Munich, 1971), pp. 150–94, 219.

new methodology, but what Melville Richards's database does is to extend immeasurably the range of resources in Wales available to researchers in other disciplines.

***Bala* revisited**

This section of the article will illustrate how one specific place-name element can be reinterpreted in the light of additional information provided by the database.

The place-name element *bala* has hitherto prompted little curiosity.²⁹ Discussion is perhaps hampered by the fact that evidence for *bala* seems to be limited to place-names and to dictionaries; so far as we know, *bala* does not appear in literary texts, certainly not in the prose or poetic contexts that might provide a crucial narrative gloss on the meaning. We are therefore restricted by toponymic use but more significantly by extant lexicographical definitions.

Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru (GPC)³⁰ has nine citations s.v. *bala* with the comment that its use is now confined to place-names. Of these nine, seven are lexicographical. William Salesbury³¹ gave the meaning as *llyn* ('lake').³² Thomas Wiliems (1604–07) had *caput, ostium*

²⁹ It does not appear, for example, in the the words Sir Ifor Williams ever had reason to consider (as listed in A. E. Davies, 'Sir Ifor Williams, A bibliography', *Studia Celtica*, 4 (1969), or in J. Lloyd-Jones, *Geirfa Barddoniaeth Gynnar Gymraeg* ['The vocabulary of Early Welsh Poetry'] (Cardiff, 1931). Melville Richards himself devotes a mere eleven lines of *Enwau Tir a Gwlad*, p. 227, where he simply draws attention to its existence as a common noun before it emerged as a place-name element. However, Tomos Roberts, working from the original archive slips, suggested other interpretations, in 'Y Bala', in *Ar Draws Gwlad*, edited by G. Pierce, T. Roberts and H. W. Owen (Llanrwst, 1997), p. 11. This present article extends those suggestions, drawing on all the incidences of *bala* as revealed in the database.

³⁰ *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru. A Dictionary of the Welsh Language* (Cardiff, 1950–2002).

³¹ W. Salesbury, *A Dictionary in Englyshe and Welshe* (1547).

³² The lake itself is properly Llyn Tegid, where Tegid is a personal name. However, at the north-eastern end of the lake is the town of Bala and it is customary to hear, and to see on maps, the lake itself being referred to as Llyn Bala / Bala Lake.

fluminis.³³ John Davies (1632) was referring to the town of Bala and followed Wiliems in his interpretation: *est oppidum eius nominis & significat Caput fluminis e lacu fluentis, ait TW; emissarium*.³⁴ Edward Lhuyd (1707) had *the out-let of a lake*.³⁵ A manuscript dated 1722 in the Llansteffan Collection has *the sourse or head of a river, llynn, a flood-gate, sluice, dam, a pool-dam*.³⁶ John Rhydderch (1725) offered *a fountain head, sluice*.³⁷ John Walters (1773) had *flood-gate*.³⁸ Not cited by GPC is a lexicographical gloss by Roger Morys (16th cent.): *bala: llynn; Bala llynn, sef cyfwng y llynn ar afon* ('bala: lake; the bala of a lake is between the lake and the river').³⁹

Common to these historical dictionary definitions are the lake itself, and features associated with the outlet of a lake or source of a river from a lake. More specific modifications then include a sluice, flood-gate or dam to govern the flow. GPC compacts these meaning into *aberiad afon o lyn; the efflux of river from lake*. This article seeks to show that these are recent definitions, representing a semantic shift from an earlier definition which was closer to the etymology offered by GPC when it compared Welsh *bala* with Middle Irish *belach*, Modern Irish *bealach* (from a Celtic **belago-*), signifying 'gap, road, passage'.⁴⁰

³³ *Dictionarium Latino–Cambricum* (1604–07).

³⁴ *Dictionarium Duplex* (1632).

³⁵ *Archæologia Britannica* (1707).

³⁶ National Library of Wales Llst 6 /189 (1916).

³⁷ *The English and Welch Dictionary* (1725).

³⁸ *English–Welsh Dictionary* (1770–94).

³⁹ T. G. Jones, 'The Welsh bardic vocabulary', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 1 (1923), 310–33 (p. 320).

⁴⁰ In Ireland, Ballagh appears as a place-name in Fermanagh, Galway, Limerick and Tipperary (D. and L. Flanagan, *Irish Place Names* (Dublin, 1994)), in several Bally- names in Ulster (P. McKay, *A Dictionary of Ulster Place-Names* (Belfast, 1999)), and in Scotland in Balloch and as an element in some other place-names (G. Mackay, *Scottish Place Names* (New Lanark, 2000)). Robert E. Fowler in dealing specifically with *bala* (without citing the Gaelic cognates) proposed an Indo-European etymology from the root **gwel* 'drip down, overflow, gush forth' in *Words*, 5 (1948) 7–8, and I am grateful to Professor Peredur Lynch for drawing my attention to this reference.

Hitherto, only a few *bala* sites were known. The Merionethshire **Bala** is probably the only one familiar to most people. Many within Wales will know of **Baladeulyn** in the Nantlle valley, fewer are acquainted with **Pont Bala** in Llanberis. Edward Lhuyd c.1700 recognised that Bala features in several places in Wales: *pen y Bala in lhan-Danog parish Meirr:shire, Bala 'r Dheulyn in lhan lhyvny & llyn y Bala in lhan-Berys Caern:shire*.⁴¹

Searching the Archif Melville Richards database using the ***bala*** query reveals some fifteen sites,⁴² enabling us to verify the topography, providing evidence for suggesting that the Welsh *bala* signified a passage or route. The distribution is evidently mid and north Wales.

bala occurs as a simplex in the Merionethshire town **Bala** [SH9236] (*Bala* 1191, *ville de bala* 1278). In Welsh usage it is invariably preceded by the definite article, Y Bala, as with other minor *bala* places cited below, suggesting a known topographic feature with a recognisable meaning. Interestingly, the definite article also appears in occasional documents in French (*la Bala* 1331) and in English (*the Bala* 1482 and 1582). To the south west of the town of Bala is Llyn Tegid while to the east are the extensive wetlands of the river Dee. The bridge at the eastern end of Bala is Pont Mwnwgl-y-llyn, 'bridge at the lake's gullet' (*pont* 'bridge', *mwnwgl* 'throat', *y* 'the', *llyn* 'lake'). Maps clearly show routes north east of Llyn Tegid converging on Bala at what must have been the safest north-south passage. Maps also show 'Weirs', 'Sluice' and 'Ford' in that area, which helps to explain the later semantic shift.

Another **Bala** [SH5662] is at Pen-llyn at the north-west end of Llyn Padarn, between that lake and a former Llyn Bogelyn (*bogel* 'hub', *llyn* 'lake') otherwise known as **Llyn y Bala** (*llyn y Bala* 1694) now drained but frequently inundated in heavy rain. The river Rhythallt flows from Llyn Padarn through the swamp of Bogelyn. The name survives in the name of a nearby hill called **Bryn y Bala** (*Bryn y Bala* 1695). The significance of *bala* here is that the the road from Llanberis

⁴¹ *Parochialia* iii 108, *Archaeologia Cambrensis* Supplement (July 1911).

⁴² Several more place-names include the element *bala* but can be shown to refer to the Merionethshire Bala, and so have been excluded.

to Brynrefail (B4547) crosses between Llyn Padarn and Llyn y Bala.

Brynbala [SN5986] (*Brin Bala* 1788) is the name of a farm in north Cardigan. It is just west of a minor road (B4572) between Borth and Clarach, and lies between the sea and the road with a ford and several springs and wells nearby. Brynbala farm takes its name from the hill (*bryn*) slightly to the south. The *bala* here must surely be the narrow strip of land which became the minor road. There is no evidence, as far as we can tell, of there ever being a lake here.

Bala Hall [SJ0863] (*bala hall* 1632/3, *Y Bala-hol* 1698), later Llanrhaeadr Hall, is situated near a crossing of the river Clywedog near Llanrhaeadr-yng-Ngheinmeirch, in the Vale of Clwyd, Denbighshire. The route, now facilitated by a bridge, is between Pentre Llanrhaeadr and Llanynys through low-lying river meadows subject to occasional flooding.

Bala Bach [SJ1165] is in on the foothills of Moel Arthur between Llangwyfan and Llandyrnog, Denbighshire. There is a footpath on either side of a small stream here, which may have been the *bala* crossing point. However, it is three miles from Bala Hall (above) on the opposite side of the Vale of Clwyd and the farm may have been a subsidiary of Bala Hall (as *bach* suggests).

Rhyd-y-bala [SJ2017] (*Rhyd-y-Bala* 1828) in Llansanffraid, Montgomeryshire, is a ford (*rhyd*) through the river Efyrynwy (Vyrnwy) still followed by the footpath between Waun-fach and Godor.

Nant-y-bala [SH6300] three miles west of Tywyn, Merionethshire, is a narrow valley (*nant*) leading to a footpath crossing a stream in a valley called Nant Braich-y-rhiw.

The following sites have not been identified (apart from their parish) but it is possible to postulate a location which is in keeping with the idea of a passage.

Pen-y-bala [SH5827] (*pen y Bala* c.1700) is in Llandanwg parish, Merionethshire, and is almost certainly close to if not identical with Pen-sarn (*pen* 'end', *sarn* 'causeway, road'), the *sarn* here being Sarn Hir (*hir* 'long'), a 500 yard straight stretch which now carries the major road (A496) between Llandanwg and Llanbedr. To the west is the sea-marsh of Morfa Mawr (*morfa* 'sea-marsh, *mawr* 'great') and to the east several streams run under the road draining the wetlands on

either side. Pen-sarn may well have superseded *pen y Bala* precisely because *sarn* and *bala* were similar in meaning.

Dôl-y-bala [SH5555] (*Dôl-y-bala* 1726-7) is in Betws Garmon parish, Caernarfonshire, and is a river meadow (*dôl*) probably close to where the river Gwyrfaï leaves lake Cwellyn.

Dôl-y-bala [SH2530] (*dol y Bala* 1704) is in Botwnnog parish, Caernarfonshire, probably where Pont-rhyd-goch is today (*rhyd* ‘ford’).

Gwern-y-bala [SO2994] (*Gwerne a Balle* 1702) (*gwern* ‘alder grove, swamp, wetland meadow’) is in Hurdley township in the west of the parish of Churchstoke / Yr Ystog, Montgomeryshire. The location is unclear but *gwern* seems to confirm a wetland context.

Castell Bala, Erw Bala [SO1995] (*Castle bala alias Errow bala* 1694) (*castell* ‘castle’, *erw* ‘acre’) is in Llandysul parish, Montgomeryshire. Although the names have ostensibly been lost, and Melville Richards could only cite the parish, it is possible to be quite precise about its location. His documentary source was the Cefnbryntalch papers. Cefnbryntalch is a house a quarter of a mile from a motte and bailey castle overlooking the wetlands south of the river Severn. The route of the original *bala* may have been the line now followed by the railway north of Abermule, or, more likely, the route which led across the wetlands to cross the river by means of what is now the Glanhafren Bridge.

The place-name **Baladeulyn** occurs three times, with the elements *bala*, *dau* ‘two’ and *llyn* ‘lake’.

Baladeulyn [SH5153] (*Baladeulyn* 1283) is the name of the village in the Nantlle valley, located beside the existing Llyn Nantlle Uchaf (*uchaf* ‘upper’), otherwise known as **Llyn Baladeulyn** (*Llyn Boladulinne* 1536/9). The second, lower, lake to the west was drained and the land submerged by the slate spoil from the numerous quarries between Baladeulyn and Tal-y-sarn (*tâl* ‘end’, *y* ‘the’, *sarn* ‘causeway, road’). The *bala* would have been the location of the present bridge carrying the B4418 between Nantlle and Tal-y-sarn, under which the river Llyfni flows.

Baladeulyn [SH5860] (*Baladeuclyn* 1284) was the former name of the neck of land now called **Glan Bala** (*Glan y Bala* 1758) (*glan* ‘bank’) between lakes Peris and Padarn near the castle of Dolbadarn,

Llanberis, and crossed by **Pont Bala** (*Pont-y-Bala* 1838).⁴³

Baladeulyn [SH7057] is the neck of land separating the twin lakes Llynnau Mymbyr west of Capel Curig;⁴⁴ the lower lake also has a **Pont-y-bala** [SH7157] at the easterly end near Capel Curig.⁴⁵

In these three instances of Baladeulyn, the common landscape feature provides topographic evidence clearly supporting the contention that *bala* refers to a stretch of land affording a safe passage, in this case between two lakes. It also calls into question the assertion that *bala* means ‘outlet of a lake’ since Baladeulyn would then offer the curious concept of ‘the outlet of two lakes’.

The principal topographic features common to these fifteen examples of *bala*, most certainly the ten which have been located, is a route or passage through wetlands, for human and animal passage, most of them involving a river crossing. The absence of *bala* as a common noun in literary, ecclesiastical or legal texts is both surprising and regrettable, but the consistent use of the definite article argues strongly for a recognisable landscape feature. The *bala* names continue to emerge in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in mid and north Wales, later than the lexicographical definitions of ‘outlet’, and surviving with the connotation of ‘route’, usually a river crossing facilitated by a ford or bridge. However, it is easy to understand the semantic shift recorded by lexicographers, since a river or stream flowing from a lake or draining wetland is certainly evident in most locations.

We can therefore propose that the primary meaning of the Welsh element *bala* was ‘route, passage through wetland’. A secondary meaning of ‘river-crossing’ became established, linked with the ford or bridge which facilitated the crossing, and eventually incorporating local features such as ‘outlet’, ‘sluice’, ‘floodgate’ or ‘dam’.

Searching the database for *bala* sites known to Melville Richards

⁴³ In a reference to a 1284 letter from Edward 1 *datum apud Baladeuclyn*, a description which perplexed historians for some time since the only Baladeulyn known to them was the militarily insignificant Baladeulyn in the Nantlle valley.

⁴⁴ According to Tomos Roberts (see n. 9).

⁴⁵ According to J. Lloyd-Jones, *Enwau Lleoedd Sir Gaernarfon* (Cardiff, 1928), p. 96.

has enabled us to reinterpret its significance as a place-name element. In time, as more place-name studies are completed for other areas in Wales, more *bala* sites may emerge allowing us to test the re-interpretation of the element and its distribution. Ironically, he himself had accepted the meaning of ‘the outlet’⁴⁶ and ‘the outlet from a lake’⁴⁷ and ‘man lle y bydd afon yn llifo allan o lyn’ (‘a place where a river flows from a lake’).⁴⁸ The fact that the database format allows us to reassess his own material and enhance our understanding of Welsh nomenclature would no doubt have given Melville Richards immense satisfaction.

⁴⁶ In the proposed Onomasticon’s draft slip for **Bala**, Merionethshire.

⁴⁷ In Gelling, Nicolaisen and Richards, *The Names of Towns and Cities in Britain*, p. 45.

⁴⁸ *Enwau Tir a Gwlad*, p. 227.