

Sliabh in Irish Place-Names¹

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The word *sliabh* is one of the most common generic elements in Irish hill and mountain names. Along with *binn*, *cnoc*, *cruach* and *mullach*, I made it the object of study for a Masters dissertation in 2004. Concerning *sliabh*, I noted that it is found widely throughout all 4 provinces of Ireland and that, in common with all the other elements studied, it can be applied to hills and mountains of greatly varying heights.²

As a common noun, *sliabh* is the word most likely to be found in English-Irish dictionaries as a translation for 'mountain', and it forms the basis for a number of derivatives, e.g. *sléibhteoir* 'mountaineer' and *sléibhtiúil* 'mountainous'. However, these simple statements belie the remarkable complexity of the word in terms of its wide range of meanings and problematic etymology. In the dissertation I found that it was semantically and structurally the most complex of the 5 elements

¹ This is a revised version of a paper delivered to the Society's Autumn Conference, 'Placing Names: A Study Day', held at the University of Chichester on 25th October 2008. The information on *sliabh* in townland names is taken from a later paper delivered to the Scottish Place-Name Society at their Spring Conference in New Galloway on 9th May 2009. It has been a long time in the making, as the first draft was written in 2002, shortly after attending the Scottish Place-Name Society's Autumn Conference in Aviemore. At this event Simon Taylor delivered an insightful paper on *sliabh* in Scotland, which motivated me to attempt a similar analysis for Ireland. I am grateful to Mícheál Ó Mainnín, Nollaig Ó Muraíle, Kay Muhr, Pat McKay, Alan Mac An Bhaird and the anonymous referee for their valuable suggestions. I also wish to thank Hywel Wyn Owen, Oliver Padel and Keith Briggs for their helpful feedback at the Chichester conference.

² P. Tempan, 'Five common generic elements in Irish hill and mountain names: *binn*, *cnoc*, *cruach*, *mullach*, *sliabh*' (unpublished MA dissertation, Queen's University Belfast, 2004). I delivered a paper summarizing the main findings of this dissertation to the Society's Annual Conference at St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra in April 2007, and an article is forthcoming in *Ainm*, the journal of the Ulster Place-Name Society.

studied. This in itself is sufficient reason to examine the element *sliabh* in Irish place-names in some detail.

Furthermore, *sliabh* has engendered no small amount of debate and controversy in Scottish toponymy, primarily because of a theory concerning early Gaelic settlement in South-West Scotland proposed by John MacQueen³ and developed by W.F.H. Nicolaisen.⁴ ‘Of all Scottish place-name elements’, according to Simon Taylor, ‘it is probably the most oft-quoted and overworked by early medievalists of all disciplines’.⁵ Since this theory relies heavily on an analysis of Irish names in *sliabh* which has, in my view, rightly been challenged by Taylor, it does no harm, and may indeed benefit Scottish place-name studies, to review the available Irish evidence for this element.⁶ However, in this paper, my remarks will be limited mainly to the Irish names.

³ J. MacQueen, ‘Welsh and Gaelic in Galloway’, *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society* 32 (1954), 77–92. The theory was restated in J. MacQueen, *Place-names in the Rhinns of Galloway and Luce Valley* (Stranraer, 2002), pp. 32–58.

⁴ W. F. H. Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names*, new edn (Edinburgh, 2001), pp. 51–60.

⁵ S. Taylor, ‘*Sliabh* in Scottish Place-Names: its Meaning and Chronology’, *Journal of Scottish Name Studies*, 1 (2007), 99–136 (p. 99).

⁶ George Broderick has also argued for *slieau* as a possible pre-Scandinavian element in the place-names of Man, in *Place-Names of the Isle of Man*, 7 vols (Tübingen, 1994–2005), VII, 343–52, and more recently in ‘Pre-Scandinavian Place-Names in the Isle of Man’, in *A Commodity of Good Names: Essays in Honour of Margaret Gelling*, edited by O. J. Padel and David N. Parsons (Nottingham, 2008), pp. 165–84 (pp. 171–76). I have similar reservations about these findings to those expressed by Jacob King in his review of *Place-Names of the Isle of Man* in the *Journal of Scottish Name Studies*, 1 (2007), 157–68 (pp. 164–65); See P. Tempan, ‘*Sliabh* in Irish Place-Names: Its Meaning, Distribution and Chronology, and Some Implications for Scotland and the Isle of Man’, *Newsletter of the Scottish Place-Name Society*, 27 (Autumn 2009), 3–8, which develops some themes of the present article but was published earlier.

Dictionary definitions

The *Dictionary of the Irish Language* defines Old Irish *slíab*⁷ as a) ‘a mountain, a mountain-range’; b) ‘a moor’, adding that it can refer to cotton-grass or bog down in botanical names.⁸

Sliabh (genitive *sléibhe*, plural *sléibhte*) is defined in Dinneen’s Irish-English Dictionary as ‘a mountain or mount, a range of mountains; a mountainous district, a heathy upland or plain, a piece of moorland, oft. low-lying; in Anglo-Irish, a piece of a “mountain”’.⁹

These definitions highlight the variety of meanings of *sliabh* in Irish. In what follows it is important to bear in mind that Hiberno-English *mountain* also has a broad semantic range. As well as referring to a peak, it can denote ‘moorland’ or ‘rough pasture’.¹⁰

Treatments in place-name works

An account of place-names containing the element *sliabh* is given by Joyce in volume I of *The Origin and History of Irish Names of Places*. Most of his examples relate to what he calls ‘principal mountains’ and ranges, but he acknowledges its occurrence in names of low-lying areas. He also highlights the variety of anglicisations which can disguise this word.¹¹

280 names in *slíab* attested in early Irish texts are listed in Hogan’s *Onomasticon Goedelicum*.¹² Not all of these are places in Ireland, and there are quite a few multiple entries due to variant forms of names.

⁷ In Old Irish the word may be written *slíab* or *sliab*, i.e. with or without a length accent, since there is no distinction between *ía-* and *ia*.

⁸ *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, edited by E. G. Quin, 3 vols (Dublin, 1913–76), s.v. *slíab*; accessed from <<http://www.dil.ie>>, 1–3–2009.

⁹ *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla—Irish-English Dictionary*, edited by P. S. Dinneen (Dublin, 1927), s.v. *sliabh*; accessed from <<http://www.ucc.ie/celt/Dinneen1.pdf>>, 1–3–2009.

¹⁰ For example, ‘In Ireland, wild pasture,’ *Chambers English Dictionary*, edited by Catherine Schwarz et al. (Edinburgh, 1990), s.v. *mountain*.

¹¹ P. W. Joyce, *The Origin and History of Irish Names of Places*, 3 vols (Dublin 1869; repr. 1875, 1913), I, 379–81. Note that volume I was originally free-standing, but was later published as part of a series by several publishers.

¹² *Onomasticon Goedelicum Locorum et Tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae, an index, with identifications, to the Gaelic names of places and tribes*, edited by E. Hogan

Sliabh was one of the hill-name elements examined by Éamonn de hÓir, Chief Officer at the Placenames Branch of Ordnance Survey Ireland, along with *binn* and *cruach*, in an article published in 1970.¹³ He carried out an analysis of names containing each element, including a breakdown by height, geographic distribution and the qualifiers used in the names. While this article is important as a pioneering study of Irish topographical elements and offers some important preliminary findings on the regional distribution of these elements, the data-set is incomplete due to reliance solely on anglicised forms from Ordnance Survey maps and the exclusion of range-names. In some cases this leads to untenable conclusions. In particular, the proposed association of *binn* with the highest peaks, *sliabh* with peaks of medium altitude, and *cruach* with low peaks is not borne out by a more detailed examination of the evidence.¹⁴ However, it must be realised that it is only since the mid-1990s that Irish forms of certain hill-names have been marked on Ordnance Survey maps, and that de hÓir did not have the benefit of the many surveys and databases published since 1970. At that time the Placenames Branch was only in the process of compiling its excellent database.¹⁵

Grammar and phonology

Now a masculine noun, *sliabh* was once neuter (now obsolete as a separate gender). It is derived from Old Irish *slíab* (an *-s* stem noun), plural *slébe*, with a dental plural *sléibte* emerging in Middle Irish. Like other neuter nouns it caused eclipsis of the following word, e.g. *Sliabh gCuilinn* (Slieve Gullion, AH)¹⁶ or *Sliab nOchel* (a historical form for

(Dublin 1910), pp. 604–12.

¹³ É. de hÓir, ‘Roinnt nótaí ar *sliabh*, *binn*, *cruach* in ainmneacha cnoc’, *Dinnseanchas*, 4.1 (June 1970), 1–6.

¹⁴ de hÓir, ‘Roinnt nótaí ar *sliabh*, *binn*, *cruach* in ainmneacha cnoc’, p. 3.

¹⁵ My research has benefitted considerably from the publication of this material in an on-line database, Bunachar Logainmneacha na hÉireann – Placenames Database of Ireland: <<http://www.logainm.ie>>; and also from the database of the Northern Ireland Place-Name Project, part of which was made available on the Pointer database hosted by OSNI: <<http://www.pointer-ni.gov.uk>>. This is currently off-line, but will shortly be made available in a new format.

¹⁶ The county abbreviations in this article follow the two-letter codes used in the

the Ochils, north of Stirling in Scotland).¹⁷ Names which have retained the eclipsis in their anglicised form are generally older than those without, e.g. Slieve Gullion (< *Sliabh gCuillinn*) can be taken to be an earlier form than Slievekirk, TE (< *Sliabh Circe*).¹⁸

A variation in root vowel quality between *ia* and *é* is seen in the declension of *sliabh*. In Old Irish, the breaking of the Proto-Celtic *ē* into a diphthong *ía/ia* is only seen in the nominative/accusative singular form *slíab*, since this sound change is conditional on a following neutral or *u*-quality consonant or consonant group.¹⁹ As this condition is only fulfilled in the Proto-Celtic nominative/accusative singular form **slēbos*, while the other case forms show *-es-* after the root (genitive singular **slēbesos*, etc.), the original long *ē* is preserved in all the other Old Irish case forms (genitive singular *slé(i)be*, dative singular *sléib*, nominative/accusative/genitive plural *slé(i)be*, dative plural *slé(i)bib*).²⁰

Etymology

A Proto-Celtic form **slēbos-* can be reconstructed for *sliabh*, as Indo-European *ei* develops regularly into Proto-Celtic long *ē*, and this in turn becomes *é* in Old Irish (or *ía/ia* by breaking). However, no such word is attested in Gaulish with the meaning ‘mountain’ or the like.²¹

Historical Dictionary of Gaelic Placenames / Foclóir Stairiúil Áitainmneacha na Gaeilge, edited by P. Ó Riain, D. Ó Murchadha and K. Murray (London, 2003–); see Appendix for full explanation of all abbreviated county names.

¹⁷ *Sliab n-Ochel* occurs in the Tract on the Mothers of Irish Saints (versions in *Book of Ballymote* and also *Book of Lecan*): see W. J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926), p. 209, n.

¹⁸ However, the eclipsis of *c*, *p*, *t* and *f* was pronounced but rarely marked in Old Irish orthography, e.g. Old Irish *Sliab Cua* (pronounced essentially the same as Modern Irish *Sliabh gCua*): see R. Thurneysen, *A Grammar of Old Irish*, translated by D. A. Binchy & O. Bergin (Dublin, 1946), §236.2, p. 147.

¹⁹ Using the terminology of Modern Irish, this means a broad (leathan) consonant (group).

²⁰ R. Thurneysen, *A Grammar of Old Irish*, §337, p. 215. The vowels in brackets are glide vowels not usually written in early Irish. This also explains why certain derivatives such as *sléibhteoir*, *sléibhtiúil* and *sléibhín* show no vowel breaking.

²¹ There is no entry for a root **slēb-* or **lēb-* in the glossary to G. Dottin, *La Langue Gauloise: Grammaire, Textes et Glossaire*, Paris 1918. The only relevant entry in A. Holder, *Alt-celtischer Sprachschatz*, Leipzig 1896–1913, is to the personal

Scottish and Manx Gaelic aside, *sliabh* has no certain cognates in other languages. Vendryes suggests that Old Irish *slíab* may be cognate with the root of Welsh *llwyfan* ‘platform, raised floor, stage’.²² This argument has the weakness that the possible Welsh cognate is not only a word which is unproductive in place-names, but also one which refers solely to a man-made feature rather than a feature of the landscape. Furthermore, Simon Taylor has pointed out that this link is not borne out by *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, which connects *llwyfan* rather with Irish *léibheann* ‘stage’.²³ Obviously, this is semantically far more satisfactory. This does not preclude the possibility that *sliabh* and *léibheann* are distantly related products of the same root, since the latter shows the same vowel without breaking as the genitive *sléibhe* and plural *sléibhte*, and a prefixed *s-* (seemingly meaningless) is a common phenomenon in Irish, as in other Indo-European languages.²⁴ However, an argument would need to be constructed to link these words semantically.

Walde/Pokorny²⁵ and Vendryes²⁶ both mention *slíab* in connection with an Indo-European root (*s)lei-*, meaning ‘to slide; slippery’, with *-b* extension, but Vendryes, with good reason, sees this link as semantically problematic.²⁷ This root is found with *-m* extension in a number of British river-names, such as the Scottish Leven, which flows into Loch Leven south of Fort William.²⁸ However, I would argue that its presence in the element *sliabh*, while thoroughly plausible, is less certain. The

name *Slebinus*, which is only attested in Irish medieval contexts.

²² J. Vendryes, *Lexique Etymologique de l'Irlandais Ancien*, 7 vols so far published (Dublin 1959–96), R/S, s.v. *slíab*.

²³ Taylor, ‘*Sliabh* in Scottish Place-Names’, p. 105.

²⁴ Cf. *sleacht* and *screig* as variants of *leacht* ‘burial monument’ and *creig* ‘crag’.

²⁵ A. Walde, *Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der Indogermanischen Sprachen*, edited and revised by Julius Pokorny, 3 vols (Berlin and Leipzig, 1927), I, 363.

²⁶ J. Vendryes, *Lexique Etymologique de l'Irlandais Ancien*, R/S, p. 131, s.v. *slíab*.

²⁷ A. Walde/J. Pokorny, *Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der Indogermanischen Sprachen*, pp. 664–65, also gives another root, **lei-* (in which the *e* may be either short or long) meaning ‘pour, flow, drop’ and which may either be a separate root or may ultimately have the same origin as the ‘slippery, sliding, slimy’ root.

²⁸ These were ably explored recently in a paper given by Alan James at the 1st Conference on the Medieval Toponymy of Ireland and Scotland held at Queen’s University Belfast, 5th–6th September, 2008: ‘A slippery customer: Indo-European **slei* and its progeny in Celtic place-names’.

question is two-fold: firstly, whether *sliabh* is **really** cognate with the root of *léibheann* and Welsh *llwyfan*; and secondly, whether either of these belong with IE **(s)lei-* ‘slip, slide’. If *sliabh* has anything in common semantically with *léibheann* and Welsh *llwyfan*, it seems to be a sense of ‘elevation’ rather than ‘slipperiness’ or ‘smoothness’, but the possibility that *sliabh* comes from a phonetically similar root with a quite different meaning needs to be considered seriously.

Others have taken a more positive view of these possible relationships, such as MacBain, who links Scottish Gaelic *sliabh* both etymologically and semantically with English *slip* and its derivative *slope*.²⁹ Thurneysen is more explicit, suggesting that the literal meaning of Old Irish *slíab* was ‘slope’, which he compares with Welsh *llyfr* ‘sledge-runner’.³⁰ Again, the fact that the cognate with the closest meaning is Germanic rather than Celtic is surprising, but thoroughly possible.

I do not have any definite answers at present regarding the etymology. Vendryes’ concluding comment is: *en somme, rien de sûr*, ‘on balance, nothing certain’, and I would concur with this.

Semantic range of *sliabh* in Irish place-names

It is possible to distinguish at least 3 different meanings of *sliabh* in Irish place-names:

- 1) a mountain or hill
- 2) a range of mountains or hills
- 3) a moor or area of upland

Within these categories further nuances can be recognised. For instance, the first group can be further sub-divided into:

- 1a) a mountain or hill standing alone
- 1b) a peak forming part of a range

Also the meaning ‘area of rough (mountain) pasture’ could be seen as an extension of meaning 3.

²⁹ *An Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language*, edited by Alexander MacBain (Stirling, 1911), p. 327.

³⁰ R. Thurneysen, *A Grammar of Old Irish*, §188, p. 117.

Within the data set for my MA dissertation I collected a total of 143 names in *sliabh*. Since this study focused on names of peaks and ranges, most of these names belong to categories 1 and 2. More recently I have collected instances of *sliabh* in townland names, many of which illustrate sense 3. Out of a total of 165 townlands, 6 of these contain *sliabh* as a simplex, 83 show it as a generic followed by a qualifier, 6 have it as a generic in a close compound, 13 have *sliabh* plus a suffix, and 57 have the element as a specific. Between the 143 names of peaks and ranges and the 163 townland names, there is an overlap of just 16 names which refer both to a peak and a townland named after it, such as Slievemore on Achill (MO), Slieve Gullion (AH) and Brackagh Slieve Gallion (DY). The remaining 147 townland names mostly exemplify *sliabh* in sense 3, a moor, area of upland, or an area of rough pasture. A representative sample of names in each category is given below.

Naturally, whether a mountain is considered to stand on its own or form part of a larger group is a question of degree of isolation, so assigning peaks to group 1a or to 1b can occasionally be a subjective choice. Nevertheless, the majority of names can be assigned to a group without too much difficulty.

1a) Mountains and hills standing alone

Sliabh Mis, Slemish, AM, 438m.

Sliabh Crúibe, Slieve Croob, DN 532m.

Sliabh gCallann, Slieve Gallion, DY, 528m.

Sliabh Liag, Slieve League, DL, 595m.

Sliabh Sneachta, Slieve Snaght, DL (Inishowen), 615m.

Sliabh Beatha, Slieve Beagh, FM/MN/TE, 380m.

Sliabh an Iarainn, Slieve Anierin, LM, 585m.

Sliabh Chairn, Slieve Horn, MO (near Kiltimagh, unmarked on OSI 1:50,000 map), 258m.

Sliabh Fothart, Forth Mountain, WX, 235m.

Sliabh Calláin, Slievecallan, CE, 391m.

Sliabh Cairn, Slievecarran, CE, 324m.

Sliabh Eilbhe, Slieve Elva, CE, 343m.

About half of the names collected in this category are from Ulster.

One could also add *Sliabh Corcra*, Purple Mountain, KY, to this group, but its status is somewhat different from the above names. It is

almost certainly a back-translation from English into Irish by the Ordnance Survey, as the English name appears to have been coined by eighteenth/nineteenth century visitors to the Killarney area.³¹

1b) Peaks forming part of a range

Sliabh an Earra, Slieveanorra or Orra Head, AM, 508m.

Sliabh na hAnachaine, Slievenahanaghan, AM, 405m.

Sliabh an Ime, Butter Mountain, DN, 500m.

Sliabh Bearnach, Slieve Bearnagh, DN, 739m.

Sliabh Binneáin, Slieve Binnian, DN, 747m.

Sliabh Coimhéideach, Slieve Commedagh, DN, 767m.

Sliabh Martáin, Slieve Martin, DN, 485m.

Crotshliabh, Crotlieve Mountain, DN, 347m.

Fionnshliabh, Finlieve, DN, 579m.

Corrshliabh, Corslieve, MO, 719m.

Sliabh Meáin, Slievemaan, WW, 759m.

Sliabh an Aird, Slieveanard, TY, 438m.

For further examples from the Mourne Mountains, see Micheál Ó Mainnín's article 'The Mountain Names of County Down'.³²

This sense is typical of Ulster, occurring most frequently in the Mourne Mountains of County Down, where the majority of high peaks have anglicized names in *Slieve-*. It is hardly to be found in Counties Galway or South Mayo. It is also uncommon in Counties Cork and Kerry, but there is a trio of names in *sliabh* on the Dingle Peninsula, all located just east of the Connor Pass:

Sliabh na nGabhar, Slievenagower, KY, 486m.

Marked *Slí na gCorr* on the OSI 1:50,000 map.³³

³¹ Prior to this the mountain had a name derived from Irish *na Tóimí*. This has survived in the names of three townlands (Tomies East, Tomies West and Tomies Wood) and also in Tomies Mountain, but the name is now understood to refer to a lower satellite of Purple Mountain, situated about 1km to the north of the summit. See P. Tempán, 'Some Notes on the Names of Six Kerry Mountains', *Journal of the Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society*, n.s. 2 (2005), 5–19 (pp. 11–13).

³² M. Ó Mainnín, 'The Mountain Names of County Down', *Nomina*, 17 (1994), 31–53.

³³ One might suspect that the English name Slievenagower is a corrupt anglicisation of *Slí na gCorr*. However, another possibility is that the name *Slí na gCorr*

Slievenalecka, (*An Starraicín*), KY, 456m.

The Irish name means ‘the steeple’. The English name appears to derive from an alternative, unattested Irish name **Sliabh na Leice*.³⁴

Sliabh Mhacha Ré, Slievanea, KY, 670m.

The anglicized form seems to derive from an alternative name, perhaps an unattested **Sliabh an Fhia*.³⁵

However, this cluster is disguised by the fact that all three mountains have Irish and anglicised forms of different origin on the OSI Discovery map, and in two of these cases the Irish name given contains a generic element other than *sliabh*.

If one were to take historical forms of hill-names into account, one could add many more peaks to this list, such as *Slievfinlehid*, KY. This name was recorded by the Ordnance Survey while mapping Kerry in the 1840s. It appears to derive from an Irish name **Sliabh Finnleithid*. Part of the mountain is within the townland of Derreenfinlehid. The mountain was later recorded as *Buachaill Finnleithid*, a name arising from the rock on its southern slope which is said to have been used as a look-out point by shepherds, or perhaps the rock itself is ‘the shepherd’. This is often shortened to *Buachaill*, Boughil.

In the Dublin and Wicklow Mountains there are several peaks that one could add to this group on the basis that there are Irish forms in *sliabh* on the OSI 1:50,000 map. These include:

Ballineddan Mountain, *Sliabh Bhuaile an Fheadáin*, WW, 652m.

Carriglineen Mountain, *Sliabh Charraig Linnín*, WW, 455m.

(‘way of the twists’) could properly refer to a winding track which climbs the mountain, rather than the mountain itself. If so, Slievenagower is a perfectly appropriate anglicisation of a separate name applied to the mountain, and this is confirmed by An Seabhac (Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha), who records the name as *Sliabh na nGabhar* in *Tríocha Chéad Chorca Dhuibhne* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1938), pp. 241, 244.

³⁴ ‘An Seabhac’, *Tríocha Chéad Chorca Dhuibhne*, p. 243, has *An Struicín* for this peak.

³⁵ Neither of these names are mentioned in ‘An Seabhac’, *Tríocha Chéad Chorca Dhuibhne*.

Fananierin Mountain, *Sliabh Fhán an Iarainn*, WW, 426m.
 Kirikee Mountain, *Sliabh Chíor Mhic Aodha*, WW, 474m.
 Kilmashoge Mountain, *Sliabh Chill Mochióg*, DB, 408m.

However, since the English names of these peaks all contain the word *mountain* preceded by the name of a settlement or townland, rather than an anglicisation in *Slieve-*, there is a strong possibility that some of these are relatively recent back-translations into Irish by the Ordnance Survey. None of the four Wicklow examples are mentioned by Liam Price in *The Place-Names of Co. Wicklow*, though the relevant settlement/ townland names are covered in some detail.³⁶

2) Ranges of Mountains or Hills

Sliabh Phartraí, Partry Mountains, MO/GY, 673m.
Bricshliabh, Bricklieve Mountains, SO, 322m.
Sliabh Gamh, Slieve Gamph or Ox Mountains, MO/SO, 545m.
Sliabh Bladhma, Slieve Bloom, OY/LS, 526m.
Sliabh Mairge, Slieve Margy or Slieve Margie, LS/KK, 336m.
Sliabh Eachtaí, Slieve Aughty, GY/CE, 376m.
Sliabh Eibhlinne, Slieve Felim, L/TY, 541m.
Sliabh Mis, Slieve Mish, KY, 851m.
Sliabh Luachra, Slieve Logher (anglicised form, rarely used), KY, 437m.
Sliabh Mioscais, Slieve Miskish, CK, 488m.
Sliabh an Nóglaigh, Nagles Mountains, CK, 428m.
Sliabh gCua, Slieve Gua or Slieve Goe (anglicised forms rarely used), WD, 794m. (Name once applied to the Knockmealdown Mountains, but more recently used of a parish in the northern-eastern foothills.)³⁷

³⁶ L. Price, *Place Names of County Wicklow*, 7 vols (Dublin, 1945–67). For Ballinceddan, see III, 159; Carriglineen, I, 18; Fananierin, II, 60–69; Kirikee, I, 21–22.

³⁷ ‘The name *Sliabh gCua* has come in recent times to be applied to Seskinane [parish], but the former is a misnomer, as it is quite clear, both from the Irish lives of saints and from the annals, that Slieve Gua is the ancient name of the whole Knockmealdown mountain range and not of its any particular portion’, Canon Patrick Power, *The Place-Names of Decies* (Cork, 1907), p. 168–69. I am grateful to John Fitzgerald of Watergrasshill for directing my attention to this reference, as it is not indexed in Power’s book. He also tells me that the name *Sliabh gCua* is alive and well and is used by a hurling club based in Tooraneena in this parish.

This sense of *sliabh* is chiefly found in Munster, areas bordering on Munster, and North Connacht. A number of these names apply to areas with few distinctive peaks and might be better described as upland areas rather than ranges, e.g. *Sliabh Mairge* and *Sliabh Luachra*. However, they have been included here as they are far more extensive than most of the areas in category 3.

Again, one could add several ranges to this list which have historical forms in *sliabh*, such as *Sliabh gCrot* or *na Gaibhlte*, Slieve Grud or the Galty Mountains, LK/TY, 919m.

3) Moors or Areas of Upland³⁸

Slievenamona, AM

Slieverush, AM

Seanshliabh, Shan Slieve, DN

Slievenabrock, DN

Slievenaglogh, DN

Slievenamaddy, DN

Slievedermot, DN

Slievegarran, DN

Slievedivena, TE

Sliabh Ard, Slieveard, TE

Sliabh Búrca, Slieveburke, GY (townland)

Sliabh an Aonaigh, Slieveaneena, GY (townland)

Sliabh na mBánóg, Slievenabawnoge, DB (townland)

Sliabh an Locháin, Slievealoughan, CE (townland)

Sliabh na bhFeadóg, Slievenavadoge, KY (townland)

Sliabh na Seasca, Slievenashaska, KY (townland)

Like category 1b, this sense is very well attested in Ulster, especially in County Down. However, there are many examples from other areas.

***Sliabh* as a qualifying element**

Sliabh also occurs in a number of names as a specific element in second position. Several of these are names of townlands or settlements. Just three names will be given as a representative sample:

³⁸ For further examples from the Mourne Mountains, see Ó Mainnín ‘The Mountain Names of County Down’.

Áth an tSléibhe, Athea, LK (townland, village). This village nestles at the bottom of a valley, surrounded by hills of moderate height. It seems that this is an instance of *sliabh* in sense 3 as there is no single dominant peak after which the village is likely to be named. In *Portrait of Limerick*³⁹ the name is interpreted as ‘ford of the high moorland’.

Binn Shléibhe, Benlevy (or Mount Gable), GY, mountain. The interpretation ‘peak of the mountain’, offered by Joyce⁴⁰, is tautological unless one understands *mountain* in its Hiberno-English sense of ‘rough pasture’ or ‘moorland’. Given that this mountain stands on its own and is not overlooked by any other major summit, the most likely interpretation of the second element is ‘moor’ or ‘bog’. Turf (peat) cut on this mountain provided fuel for the people of nearby Clonbur (2 miles to the east) and its surrounding area.⁴¹

Gort an tSléibhe, Gortatlea, KY, (townland) This townland lies between Castleisland and Tralee in the valley of the River Maine. It contains a small hill reaching 88m, but since this is gently sloping and the townland is generally quite low-lying (the lowest part being about 20m above sea-level), the sense of *sliabh* in this name is likely to be ‘moorland’ or ‘bog’. Another townland lying about 3km to the west is called *Clais an tSléibhe*, Clashatlea.

Discussion

The geographical distribution of *sliabh* as a generic element in names of hills, mountains and ranges is shown in Figure 1. Note that this map, taken from my MA dissertation, shows instances of senses 1 and 2, but not sense 3. The scarcity of *sliabh* in sense 1 in some areas is due to other terms which dominate mountain nomenclature, such as *mullach* in the Sperrins, *binn* in Connemara and South Mayo and *cruach* in South Donegal. In Munster a variety of terms is used alongside *sliabh*, such as *binn*, *cnoc*, *cruach* and *mullach*. Most significantly, *cnoc* is used even for the highest mountains in Munster, e.g. *Cnoc Bhréanainn* ((Mount

³⁹ M. Seoige, *Portrait of Limerick* (London, 1982), p. 83.

⁴⁰ P. W. Joyce, *Irish Names of Places*, III, 139.

⁴¹ A tourism website at <<http://clonbur.galway-ireland.ie/>> (accessed 29–1–2009) recommends walking to the top of Mount Gable by a ‘disused turf trail’.

Brandon, 952m), *Cnoc an Chuillinn* (958m), Knocknagantee (676m) (all KY), Knockaterriff (697m). This contrasts with the usage in Mourne where *sliabh* is applied to the loftiest peaks, whereas the highest example of *cnoc* is Knockshee (346m).

Sliabh in sense 2 is found mainly in Munster, the adjoining part of Leinster and parts of Connacht, particularly the north. It is absent from the rest of Leinster, Connemara and is scarce in Ulster. In Leinster this can be explained in part by the flat terrain of much of this province, but this is clearly not the case in Connemara and Ulster. Here the use of other elements to denote a range seems to be the key factor.

Other terms for ranges include *beanna* (plural of *binn*), e.g. *Beanna Beola* (Twelve Bens of Connemara, GY) and *Beanna Boirche* (Mourne Mountains, DN); *cruacha*, e.g. *na Cruach Gorma* (Blue Stack Mountains, DL) and *na Cruacha Dubha* (Macgillicuddy's Reeks, KY); *cnoc*, e.g. *Cnoic an Stacaigh* (Stack's Mountains, KY).

Sléibhte (plural of *sliabh*) is used for a number of ranges by the Ordnance Survey, e.g. *Sléibhte an Chomaraigh* (Comeragh Mountains, WD), *Sléibhte Dhoire Bheitheach* (Derryveagh Mountains, DL), but few of these designations have local currency. In early texts *sliabh* almost always appears in the singular.⁴² This even applies to large mountain ranges in Europe such as *Sliabh Piréin* (the Pyrenees) and *Sliabh Alpa* (the Alps).⁴³ This use of the singular form would be consistent with an underlying sense of 'a wilderness' (from which 'rough pasture' or 'moorland' could be a development), rather than 'a principal mountain',

⁴² Some plural forms occur in a poem forming part of the Metrical Dindshenchas (twelfth century), namely *Slébe Connacht* and *Slébe Ulad* (*The Metrical Dindshenchas*, edited by E. Gwynn, 5 vols, Todd Lecture Series (Dublin, 1903–35), IV, 164). However, these are not references to mountain ranges but to a number of separate mountains which happen to be in the same province. For instance, the peaks cited as belonging to *Slébe Ulad* are *Sliab Mis* (Slemish) and *Sliab Calland* (Slieve Gallion), cannot be considered as part of a single range since they are on opposite sides of Lough Neagh. The sense is therefore 'mountains of the Ulaidh or Ulstermen'.

⁴³ See the range of references for these two names in *Onomasticon Goedelicum Locorum et Tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae*, edited by Hogan, s.n.n. *Sliab Piréin*; *Sliab n-Ailp*, *Sliab Alpa*, *Sliab Ealpa*, *Sliab Elpa*. Hogan cites an instance of *Slébe Alpa* (plural) from *The Yellow Book of Lecan*.

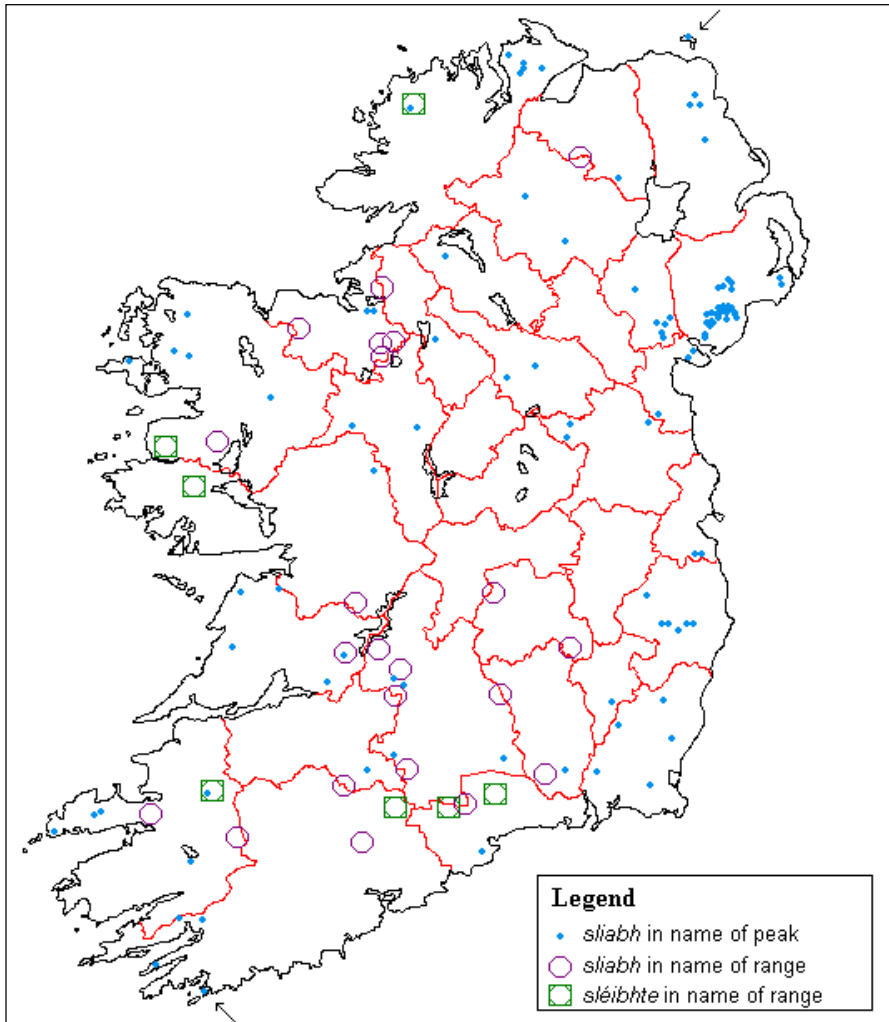


Figure 1: Geographical distribution of peaks and ranges with names in *sliabh* as generic (Tempán 2004).

as the singular number would be appropriate regardless of the size of the area and the number of peaks it may include. It seems likely that most of the place-names in *sléibhte* have been coined relatively recently by mapmakers. They are rarely found outside maps and official documents.

This is well illustrated in *Sléibhte Chnoc Mhaol Réidh* (Mweelrea Mountains, MO). The tautological use of *sléibhte* with *cnoc* points very clearly to a back-translation. In fact, local people do not use either element: *Maol Réidh* is quite adequate to describe both the massif and its summit. An imperative to put a name on every group of hills may be felt by the cartographer, the soldier or the climber, but for the hill-farmer the hills are simply an expanse of land for his stock to graze on, and the summits of the hills are not necessarily of greater importance than any portion of their slopes. This is not intended as a criticism of names created by the Ordnance Survey, as it is perfectly normal that new names should continue to be created for use by various constituencies. I merely wish to emphasise that the names of ranges in *sléibhte* have a different status from most of those in *sliabh*, as they tend to be of modern coinage and their usage is limited to certain contexts.

One important (apparent) exception to this tendency to avoid the plural form in place-names occurs in the name of *Sléibhte*, Sleaty (or Sletty, LS), known for its early church. Joyce suggests that the meaning is ‘mountains’ in this name:

There can be no doubt as to the original form and meaning of this name, as it is written *Sleibhte* by all Irish authorities; and Colgan translates it *Montes*, i.e. mountains. The name must have been originally given to the church from its contiguity to the hills of Slieve Margy, as Killeavy was called so from its proximity to Slieve Gullion.⁴⁴

However, this is not totally convincing, since Sleaty is located in the bottom of a major river-valley, that of the River Barrow, and Slieve Margy attains only a maximum height of 336m. Furthermore, the comparison with Killeavy, AH, overlooks the fact that *sliabh* is the qualifier in this name (*Cill Shléibhe*, ‘church of the mountain’), whereas it is the generic in Sleaty. I suggest that *Sléibhte* may have referred

⁴⁴ P. W. Joyce, *Irish Names of Places*, I, 380.

originally to a number of divisions of rough pasture, in which case it need not be seen an exception to the avoidance of the plural form for ranges.

Sense 3, ‘moor, area of upland’, is much more common than is generally acknowledged. As the word *mountain* has been widely used to render *sliabh* in all its senses in English, even though one might consider it inappropriate for this sense, the prevalence of this meaning has been obscured. It is particularly common in Ulster, especially in Mourne and North Antrim, where many examples are anglicised as *sieve* rather than translated. However, the impression of a strong concentration in East Ulster may be exaggerated by the high level of documentation and research in this area by the Northern Ireland Place-Name Project.

Many of the townland names with *sliabh* as a specific have this meaning and the same sense is found in many minor names, such as *Ceann Sléibhe* (Slea Head, KY) and *Binn Shléibhe* (Benlevy, GY). It would be an ambitious project, beyond the scope of this article, to gather all the instances of *sliabh* in this sense including the minor names. However, the townlands give a fairly accurate impression of the distribution of sense 3, since there is relatively little overlap with *sliabh* referring to a peak or range. Fig. 2 shows the distribution of *sliabh* as a simplex, generic and specific in townland names. It will be seen that it is widespread throughout the country. It is largely absent from certain areas of very fertile farmland, such as the Golden Vale and most of County Meath. It is also absent from most of Counties Kildare, Laois and Offaly, much of which is bogland or former bogland, forming part of the Bog of Allen. This may be because other elements such as *móin*, *currach* and *portach* are used in preference to *sliabh* for areas of bog. Another noticeable pattern is the group of 8 instances of *Sléibhín* along or near the south coast.

The sense ‘mountain pasture’ or ‘rough pasture’ could be regarded as a distinct sense of *sliabh*. However, it would be very difficult to distinguish in place-name from sense 3, ‘moor, area of upland’, since, whilst one reflects a geographical perspective and the other an agricultural view, the referent is often essentially the same.

This agricultural sense can, however, clearly be seen in a section from the Irish Law Tracts in which land was categorized in six grades

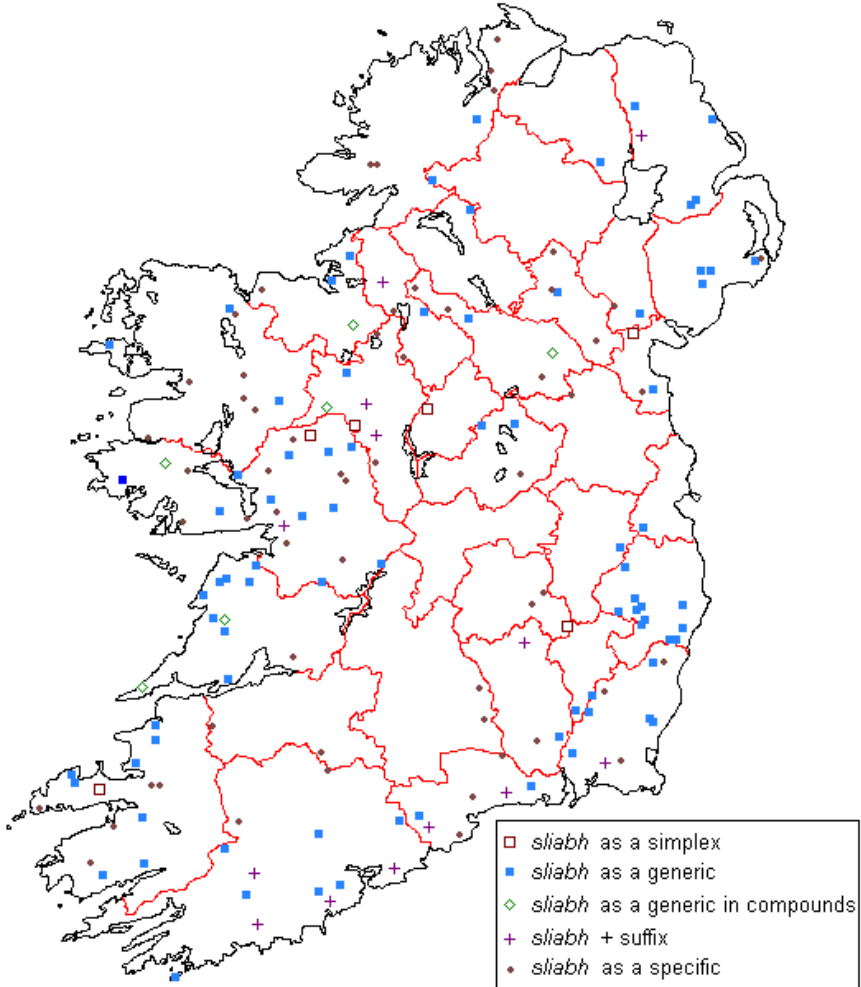


Figure 2: Geographical distribution of townland with names in *sliabh* (Tempan 2009).

according to value. There were three arable and three non-arable grades. The fifth grade of land, *antrenn* is defined as *slíab fraích 7 aitenn i suidiu* ‘heathery mountain and furze there’. This suggests pasture which was suitable for grazing. Only *andomain* ‘shallow ground’ was of lower value. This is described as *duibthír 7 móin* ‘black land and bog’ and could not be used for grazing. It may have been used for turf or as a source of reeds for thatching and basket making, etc.⁴⁵

The use of the word *sliabh* in this context is consistent with its use as a farming term, which may have a bearing on its original meaning, or at least its essential meaning in the earliest stages of Irish. This agricultural sense of *sliabh* may reflect an underlying meaning of a tract of land which cannot be profitably cultivated, of which a mountain is just one example. This possibility has already been suggested by de hÓir⁴⁶ and developed by Taylor.⁴⁷

Chronology⁴⁸

Sliabh is undoubtedly a word of considerable antiquity since place-names containing it are amongst some of the earliest documented in Ireland: *Sliabh Mis*, ‘mountain of Mis’ (Slemish, AM) is mentioned in AD 771. In this year a battle on the mountain between elements of the Dál nAraide is recorded in *The Annals of the Four Masters* [*i Slébh Mis*]. *Sliabh gCuilinn*, ‘mountain of holly/Cuilenn (a personal name?)’ (Slieve Gullion, AH) is mentioned in AD 830 [*moninni Sleibi Culinn*⁴⁹], as is *Sliabh Liag*, ‘mountain of the pillar-stone(s)’ (Slieve League, DL) [*i Sleibh Liacc*].

The antiquity of *sliabh* seems to be confirmed by its occurrence as a generic element in close compound names with the structure NOUN +

⁴⁵ F. Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin 1997), p. 395.

⁴⁶ É. de hÓir, ‘Roinnt nótaí ar *sliabh, binn, cruach* in ainmneacha cnoc’, p. 2.

⁴⁷ S. Taylor, ‘*Sliabh* in Scottish Place-Names: its Meaning and Chronology’, *Journal of Scottish Name Studies* 1 (2007), 99–136.

⁴⁸ The different structures occurring in *sliabh*-names in the Mourne Mountains and their chronology has been discussed at some length in Ó Mainnín, ‘The Mountain Names of County Down’, pp. 35–38. I have adopted a similar framework, as it is also applicable to Ireland as a whole.

⁴⁹ The reference is to St. Darerca, also known as Moninne/Monenna, a contemporary of St. Patrick and founder of a convent at Killeevy.

NOUN, such as *Crotshliabh*, ‘hump-mountain’ (Crotlieve Mountain, DN).⁵⁰ Dónall Mac Giolla Easpaig, who has analysed this group in detail, argues that this structure was unproductive by the Early Christian era and may have ceased to yield new names as early as AD 400.⁵¹ The only other mountain-name element found in this structure, to my knowledge, is *ais* ‘back, ridge’, occurring in *An Mhucais*, ‘pig-back’ (Muckish, DL). However, it should be noted that none of the attestations for *sliabh* in this structure are as early as those cited above.

A clearer indication of antiquity is given by the qualifying elements with which *sliabh* is found. In several names *sliabh* is combined with names of pagan deities, e.g. *Sliabh Eibhlinne*, LK/TY (from the name of the goddess Éblu⁵²), with figures from mythology, e.g. *Sliabh Bladhma*, LS/OY (from the name of a Milesian invader), with early Irish historical figures, e.g. *Sliabh Dónairt*, DN (named after Domangart, a saint contemporary with St. Patrick), and early population groups, e.g. *Sliabh Ara*, TY (in the territory of the *Araidh Tíre*).⁵³

An analysis of names whose first element is *sliabh* was carried out by Alan Mac an Bhaird while working for the Place-Names Branch of the Ordnance Survey in Dublin during the late 1970s.⁵⁴ I have been given a copy of this work, but it remains unpublished. In his study of this element, for which historical forms were gathered from a wide variety of sources in Irish and English, Mac an Bhaird found that, of the 330

⁵⁰ P. Tempan, ‘Close compound place-names in Ireland and Scotland’, in Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on the Languages of Scotland and Ulster, Islay, 2006 (forthcoming).

⁵¹ D. Mac Giolla Easpaig, ‘Noun + Noun Compounds in Irish Placenames’, *Études Celtiques*, 18 (1981), 151–63 (p. 152).

⁵² *Logainmneacha na hÉireann, imleabhar I, Contae Luimnigh*, edited by A. Ó Maolfabhail (Baile Átha Cliath, 1990), p. 248.

⁵³ See P. Tempan, ‘Towards a Chronology of Topographical Elements in Irish Place-Names: Some Strategies for Establishing Relative Chronology’, in Proceedings of the 23rd International Congress for Onomastic Sciences, York University, Toronto, 2008 (forthcoming), for more on the structures associated with *sliabh* and the element’s dating.

⁵⁴ A. Mac an Bhaird, ‘Logainmneacha dár Céad Eilimint Sliabh’ (unpublished notes made for An Brainse Logainmneacha, the Place-Names Branch of the Ordnance Survey Ireland, 1978).

names which he collected, 57 were recorded before AD 1200. Given the large percentage of Irish mountain names which are not recorded before the making of the six-inch maps by the Ordnance Survey between 1825 and 1841, this figure is remarkably high. Although no equivalent statistics are available for the other 4 common hill-name elements to enable an accurate comparison, it is beyond doubt that none of them would approach this figure. In terms of the structures in which it occurs, the next oldest element is *binn*, meaning ‘peak’ or ‘cliff’, for which I have found only 4 attestations before 1200.

However, it is also clear that some of the names are more modern. Names containing a definite article, such as *Sliabh na mBánóg* (Slieve-nabawnoge, DB) and Slievenamona (AM), represent a structure which only begins to emerge in the ninth and tenth centuries, and may be a good deal more recent.⁵⁵ *Sliabh an Nóglaigh* (Nagles Mountains, CK) cannot be older than the twelfth century, when the Anglo-Norman family of this name arrived in Ireland.⁵⁶

The relative dating of the various meanings of *sliabh* is more problematic, but certain observations can be made without fear of controversy. All of the early names in *sliabh* cited above belong either to sense 1a, ‘a mountain or hill standing alone’, or to sense 2, ‘a range of hills or mountains or an upland area’. Liam Mac Mathúna has drawn attention to the fact that the attestations given in the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* for the sense ‘moor’, our sense 3, are very late, coming from the later phase of what is termed Early Modern Irish, for example from the late sixteenth-century poetry of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn.⁵⁷ However, he presents good reasons for supposing that *sliabh* already had the sense ‘moor, moorland, mountainous land’ in Old and Middle Irish, such as the botanical name *cánach slébe* ‘cotton-grass’ or ‘bog down’, where *sliabh* is better understood as ‘moor’ or ‘bog’ than simply ‘mountain’.

⁵⁵ D. Flanagan, ‘Place-names in early Irish documentation: structure and composition’, *Nomina*, 4 (1980), 41–45 (p. 41). See also G. Toner, ‘The definite article in Irish place-names’, *Nomina*, 22 (1999), 5–24.

⁵⁶ S. De Bhulbh, *Sloinnte Uile Éireann – All Ireland Surnames*, 2nd edition (Foynes, 2002), p. 382.

⁵⁷ L. Mac Mathúna, ‘Old Irish heights and word-field potential’, *Studia Hibernica*, 24 (1984–88), 29–50 (pp. 44–45).

There is one important name which offers evidence for the early presence of *sliabh* in sense 3, namely *Sléibhte* (Sleaty, LS). In the Additions appended to Tírechán's compendium of Patrician churches in the Book of Armagh there is a quasi-legal document which records how the church of Sléibhte placed itself under the jurisdiction of Armagh.⁵⁸ The events recorded in this document took place in the late seventh century and the Book of Armagh itself is dated to the early ninth century. It should be noted that this is also an exceptionally early occurrence of the dental plural form. *The Dictionary of the Irish Language* attributes the emergence of this form (as opposed to earlier *slébe*) to the Middle Irish period, but its occurrence in the Book of Armagh places it firmly within the Old Irish period (AD 600–900).

As for the MacBain/Thurneysen view that the original meaning of *sliabh* is 'slope', this seems to imply that senses 1–3 are all secondary developments. This scenario is possible, but there seems to be little in the place-name evidence to support it, since *sliabh* so clearly has the sense of either 'mountain' or 'mountain range' in nearly all the earliest names. A semantic shift from 'slope' to 'mountain' would need to have taken place before the onset of Irish literacy and the recording of the earliest place-names.

Conclusions

We have seen that some names in *sliabh* are of considerable antiquity and that the element remained productive over many centuries. *Sliabh* has at least three meanings in Irish place-names, with further connotations being possible, and there is some evidence for all three principal senses from the earliest times. The senses 'a mountain or hill standing alone' and 'a range of hills or mountains or an upland area' are best attested in early names, but we cannot say with certainty that these senses are primary. Furthermore, the use of *sliabh* in an agricultural context gives some support for an underlying meaning of 'land which cannot be cultivated'. The element is widespread throughout Ireland, though some of the senses are restricted to particular regions. Regarding the word's etymology, an original meaning of 'slope' at the Common Celtic stage is possible, as is an etymological link with the English

⁵⁸ D. Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland, 400–1200* (Harlow, 1995), p. 156.

words *slip* and *slope* within a wider Indo-European framework. However, given the shortage of clear links with Brittonic and other Indo-European languages, this should be viewed with some caution and it seems advisable to keep an open mind.

Appendix: County Abbreviations

These are the county abbreviations used in the *Historical Dictionary of Gaelic Placenames / Foclóir Stairiúil Áitainmneacha na Gaeilge*.

AH: Armagh	GY: Galway	MO: Mayo
AM: Antrim	KE: Kildare	OY: Offaly
CK: Cork	KK: Kilkenny	RN: Roscommon
CE: Clare	KY: Kerry	SO: Sligo
CN: Cavan	LK: Limerick	TE: Tyrone
CW: Carlow	LD: Longford	TY: Tipperary
DB: Dublin	LH: Louth	WD: Waterford
DL: Donegal	LM: Leitrim	WH: Westmeath
DN: Down	LS: Laois	WW: Wicklow
DY: Derry	MH: Meath	WX: Wexford.
FH: Fermanagh	MN: Monaghan	