

## Some Thoughts on Place-name Training

I have for a number of years suggested at the AGMs of the Scottish Place-name Society/Comann Ainmean-àite na h-Alba that we should consider some sort of training in place-name studies for our members. Be careful what you wish for, as on my appointment to the Sanhedrin of this august body, it has rebounded as “Why don’t you draw up a paper with suggestions for this?”!

Our society has both a large voluntary amateur membership and a very close relationship with professionals working in the field. This mirrors other societies of which I am a member, such as NOSAS, the North of Scotland Archaeological Society, where enthusiastic amateurs assist on digs with the professionals, the Gaelic Society of Inverness, where those from business, education and the arts combine to further the language’s interests and facilitate research and publish on a wide range of topics and the Inverness Field Club, where those from a range of backgrounds scientific, geographical, historical, etc. combine for talks, field-trips and excursions.

I recently gave a hybrid talk on place-names to the aforementioned NOSAS concentrating on those I thought would be of particular use to archaeologists. Incidentally, thanks is due to Bill Paterson, as I opened my talk with this apt quote from the editorial of No. 51 of Scottish Place-names News: “It has sometimes been frustrating to observe a lack of communication between archaeologists and place-name experts, when to anyone with even a slight and casual interest in toponymy a place-name could have been highly relevant. A particular memory is of a Time Team excavation when there was initial disagreement about what visible earthworks could represent. An open mind is, of course, a great thing, but it would not have been an intellectual crime to allow the name of the place to raise a degree of cautious expectation. The location was Dinmore Hill in Herefordshire, an English county marching with Wales. In Welsh *din mawr* is ‘big fort’, yet no thought seemed to be given to asking someone knowledgeable whether local place-names might provide clues about the character of the place centuries ago.” The importance of drawing on a wide range of talents is similarly, I feel, vital to our research.

The initial question we should answer then, is whether we leave the job of place-names’ study and proselytizing to a select body of university trained toponomysts or whether we try to widen the pool of researchers. Given the very existence of our organisation constituted as it is with a voluntary membership, I think the answer is self-evident, i.e. that our task, nay duty, is not only to spread the word of what is already known but also to encourage the active participation of the willing membership in further investigation. The next question is how can the novice, or even those with a deal of experience in one field, participate and how can we as a society further enable that? Given that those of us already involved tend to come from either linguistic and/or historical backgrounds, encouraging others to join in and widening the skills base should bring benefits to the discipline in general. I well remember

Doug Fraser, a geographer by background, giving a fascinating talk on Buchan place-names at an Aberdeen conference but seen from a totally different perspective to my own historical and linguistic education, and to that of many others present. Another added advantage is that it brings a wealth of local knowledge which no one individual can ever have of all districts of Scotland.

What type of training is needed then? This is where I would welcome feedback from the committee in both identifying this need and in how to achieve it. Below are just some of the areas I feel would be of use, if not to others, certainly to me! There may, of course, be more.

**Historical sources:** Simon Taylor has provided excellent bibliographies on our website. Which of those are available on-line though, and how can they be accessed? Are some of these sites accessible only through university portals? Should we as a society purchase membership of these more academic sites with entry as a benefit to our members or is the cost prohibitive?

**Maps:** NLS sources and how they can be used? Copyright issues. The NLS itself has run online training on them but I at least, find distant virtual training fairly ephemeral without hands on practice. Roddy MacLean has used them to great and good extent in his Place-Names of Inverness and Surrounding Area but how has he negotiated copyright on the examples?

**Language:** W.F.H. Nicolaisen's Scottish Place-Names still provides the best general introduction to the subject, organised as it is mainly in chapters by language. There are the long-standing OS Guides to the Scandinavian, Scots, Welsh and Gaelic origins of place-names in Britain, (which strangely do not appear discreetly under their website's list of 'guides'). A more detailed aide to general elements is the glossary in Simon Taylor's The Place-Names of Fife, Volume V. W.J. Watson's Celtic Placenames of Scotland covers much Goidelic and Brythonic but is not as systematically organised as P.W. Joyce's Irish Names of Places. A.G. James' BLITON, readily available on our website, is exemplary for Brittonic place-names, though perhaps a little over-detailed for general use. Volumes 25 and 26 of the English Place-Name Society, English Place-Name Elements, presumably covers what will be needed for the southern areas. For Norse, there is Richard Cox's The Settlement Names of Lewis, Vol 1, but it's not terribly user friendly as a guide to elements and quite heavily biased to phonetics.

**Literature:** Many places are also mentioned in imaginative literature as opposed to dry administrative records. Again this can prove a fertile source as the description of the place may be as frozen as the linguistic term. An anonymous Irish poet wrote of Cill Cháis, lamenting the destruction of the woodlands there by planters: 'Cad a dhéanfaimid feasta gan adhmad? Tá deireadh na gcoillte ar lár'; Now what will we do for timber? With the last of the woods laid low. This is Cill Cháis nowadays.



So perhaps literature can provide as accurate, or indeed inaccurate, an interpretation as 'early forms'. It is a snapshot in words of the place at a certain period, and probably most useful in research of pre-industrial areas. But as the picture above demonstrates, the nature of a place can change and then change back again. In his majestic work, *Mediterranean*, Ernie Bradford wrote regarding deforestation, "The gaunt, bare islands which have become totally identified with modern man's image of Greece were once forested and thick with hardy plants that held the soil against the winter rains. In vain may one look for springs and streams mentioned by classical writers." Another poet wrote of 'the limpid waters of the Kelvin', laughable in my student days in Glasgow, but salmon have now returned there.

**Sketching:** The doyenne of English place-name studies Margaret Gelling, gave a talk to this society at one of our earliest conferences where she stressed the importance of fieldwork, of actually going out and looking at places, particularly when trying to get a sense of why one element rather than another was used in a particular situation. She also praised the sketch work of her illustrator, Ann Cole, who frequently caught patterns of shapes which photographs could not. But how many of us are dextrous with a pencil?

**Photography:** A specific course on photographing features which can often be quite broad and difficult to capture. Bill Paterson's photographs in our newsletter manage this to great effect. Can he share his wizardry?

**Biology and particularly botany:** To what extent does the effect of seasons have on naming practices? Our own Pete Drummond, Roddy MacLean and John Murray all mention the importance of plant colour in naming practice, particularly in transhumance land.

**Geology:** Do certain place and colour names match certain rock types or formations? Landscape has changed not merely due to natural and gradual man-made processes but, of late, through vast navy and machine facilitated movement. I remember the course of the Tay being altered north-west of Dunkeld when the A9 was upgraded. The Molendinar has gone underground and Loch Tummel is twice its pre-hydro scheme size.

**Specialised expertise:** We have a vast array of talent within our own ranks, but can also, no doubt, think of other specialists who would be willing to help in specific fields. We probably know the go to person for certain topics, e.g. Richard Cox for Old Norse, Roddy MacLean for botany, but do other members? Should we draw up an advisory group of experts on these various topics? Should we have a recruiting drive for experts in certain fields?

## Training

### **A Guide:**

What form should the training take? Should it be in a permanent form? Do we need a handbook such as Kenneth Goldstein's *A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore* (1964) or Seán Ó Súilleabháin's *Láimhleabhar béaloideas* (1937) and *A handbook of Irish folklore* (1942)? Have these dated or do the basic principles still hold? Do we need a similar published manual or has the book been utterly displaced by adaptable online content?

### **Courses:**

Would training days be feasible and if so in what form? On-line videos might be a way to introduce the subject to newcomers, but by the time they reach us, they may already be past the apprentice level. Face to face training would be most preferable if some of our members were willing to give of their time. If at a weekend there would obviously need to be consideration of the practicalities of location, cost, etc. Would a week long residential course as part of Sabhal Mor Ostaig's summer school be achievable, as a long term aim? Those teaching one of our sessions there could attend a Gaelic or other cultural course that week and make a holiday of it.

### **On-going Training:**

Do any of the universities – yes, Glasgow, I am thinking of you – have the appetite to undertake extra-mural training in a similar way as they use enthusiastic volunteers in archaeological digs? The Irish Folklore Commission had a scheme in the 1930s where they enlisted schoolchildren all over the country to gather folklore and this still exists as valuable source material. Could local enthusiasts throughout Scotland be trained to gather place-names in a systematic way?

### **On-line Training:**

Could we encourage the development of an on-line introductory course along the lines of the Open Learn scheme of the Open University's *Gaelic in Modern Scotland*? This is free and open to all.

<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/languages/gaelic-modern-scotland/content-section-0?active-tab=description-tab>

These, then, are just some of my own musings on what could be done. Whether it needs to be done and, if so how, is a matter for the committee and the membership.

[Note to author. Stop coming up with bright ideas!]