

5: PLACE-NAME CLASSIFICATIONS - REVEALING LAYERS IN THE LANDSCAPE

In the early twentieth century, Ordnance Survey published a brief booklet on the most common Gaelic words used on its one inch to the mile maps. This was enlarged in 1951 and 1968. The current 2005 Guide to Gaelic origins of place-names in Britain is much larger in scope, and runs to 36 pages of alphabetically listed names, with definitive examples and grid references. It is available online at: <http://www.gaelicplace-names.org/index.php>

As one of the authors of the guide states elsewhere:

We have become such slaves to the alphabet that we frequently forget its very nature of mere convenience, and tend to look upon its sequence ... as something which ... classifies or categorises beyond the order which it imposes ... Indeed this seemingly convenient tool is the enemy of all classification.

(Nicolaisen 2001, 2)

With this caveat in mind, an expanded version of the 'Guide to Gaelic Origins of Place-names in Britain' has been compiled here and divided into seven categories and twenty three sub-categories. The system chosen is based on the teaching and practice of Meto Vroom, a Dutch academic, and will be familiar to many landscape architects. In this scheme, landscape is classified according to three interacting horizontal layers: the abiotic or the non-living at the bottom, the biotic or living in the middle and occupation or cultural layer at the top (see fig. 3). Place-name categories in Gaelic can easily be attached to such names such as: *creag* (rock), *darach* (oak) and *baile* (township). The top layer can be further developed by considering Patrick Geddes's trio of 'Place, Work, Folk' to generate categories of

land use, occupation and people, which, in Gaelic, would give *àirigh* (shieling), *ceàrd* (smith) and *gille* (boy). These layers themselves can influence each other, often and literally from the ground up.

The siting of a summer shieling or temporary summer habitation will have been chosen because of the presence of running water and well drained and fertile soils which favour the growth of grasses palatable to grazing animals. Once shielings had been established, the long-term effects of pasturing animals and their manure will change vegetation patterns. Cutting of peats for fuel by shieling residents will alter drainage regimes and erosion patterns. These layers of landscape thus interact in a circular and continuous manner through time.

Processes of landscape change can also originate and be concluded within one layer. As humanity has moved from a hunter-gatherer to a global communications culture, with technology able to overcome many past constraints on development, it can be argued that the origins, relationships and consequences of landscape change now exist predominantly in the cultural top layer. On the other hand, more traditional societies, like shieling dwellers in the Highlands of the past, are more dependent on vertical processes of landscape change coming from abiotic and biotic layers. In the contemporary world, the dominant cultural layer can become increasingly disjointed, with modernist influences spreading virally from culture to culture through the mass media. This is sometimes expressed in the naming of streets after Hollywood movie stars, and the many squares and places commemorating African or American presidents, which exist throughout the world, and even earlier by British street names commemorating battles in the Napoleonic, Crimean and Boer wars.

We might think that early Celtic culture was exempt from the rapid spread of cultural influences. Some might suppose, for example, that the women of the shieling sang songs of love and loss in a purely local context. However, Donald Meek has argued that early Irish legend originating in Connacht and Sligo was transferred to the Perthshire Highlands. The Lay of Fraoch (*Laoidh Fhraoich*), where *Fraoch* means heather but is also the name of the hero involved, refers to the healing powers of rowan berries gathered

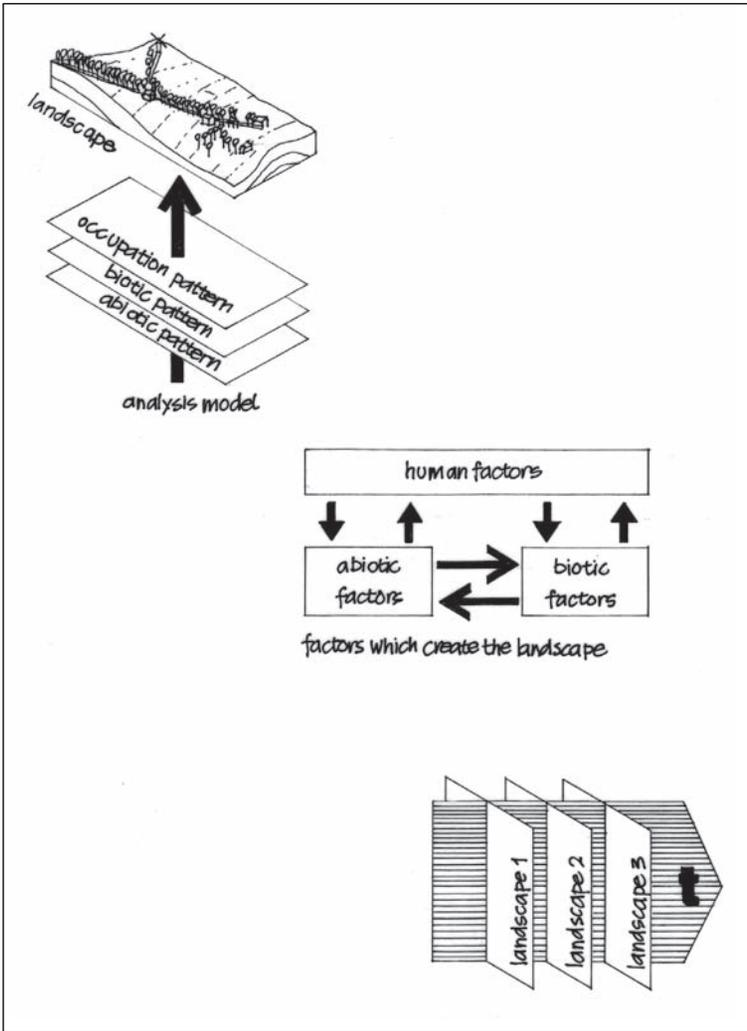


Figure 3: Layers in the Landscape

from a heathery island in a loch. In the eighteenth century the legend was associated with an island in Loch Freuchie, *Loch Fraochaidh* (NN864376), near Amulree, where berries abound on the hills. It is thought, before that, the *loch* was called after the Glen where it lies, *Gleann Cuaich*, Glen Quaich (NN797396). Both names were known in the eighteenth century.

Similarly, the Lay of Diarmaid (*Laoidh Dhiarmaid*) whose first origins can be traced to Ben Bulbin (Irish: *Binn Ghulbain*) in Sligo, has been relocated on Ben Gulabin (*Beinn Ghulbhain*) at NO102722 in Perthshire's Glen Shee (*Gleann Siodh*). Both mountains have a snout shape, though the name may also derive from the personal name Gulban. Here is a place-name, which has been applied to a new locality to accompany a ballad moving from Irish to Scottish culture. Moreover, the new context has been carefully chosen to echo the formal landscape character of the original location and so sustain the narrative action. The previous name of *Beinn Ghulbhain* and what attribute of the mountain it described, snout-shape or otherwise, is not known. The process begs the question: when is a place-name not the name of a place? Is it when it represents a symbol on a cognitive or narrative map?

Walter Scott situated his long narrative poem, '*The Lady of the Lake*' on Loch Katrine in the Trossachs. In the text he renames *Eilean Molach*, the shaggy or rough island, as Ellen's Isle (NN487083) after the story's heroine. Such was the poem's popularity that the name has persisted, albeit with the original Gaelic name also included on the map, along with another name from the poem, the Silver Strand, where other parts of the plot take place. Such an overlay of place-names coming from a poem, subsequently recorded by Ordnance Survey is on a scale beyond earlier practice. Such was the all pervading influence of Scott's fictionally transmitted psycho-geography, in the nineteenth century there were widespread protests against the raising of the Loch's level to supply water to Glasgow, which in the process concealed most of the Silver Strand.

How does a layer of Gaelic place-names sit in the abiotic / biotic / culture model of landscape when there are no inheritors of those who transmitted their unique toponymic psycho-geography to mapmakers of the late nineteenth century? How do we perceive this toponymic layer, when the culture, language and the land uses, which created it have vanished from the greater part of the Highlands? In some ways the named inheritance points to an inadequacy in the model, which supposes a continuous cyclical interaction between the abiotic, the biotic and the cultural. It does not envisage an interruption of the vertical process of influence and counter influence



Plate 5: Loch Katrine: Bealach nam Bò, Coire na(n) Ùrnisgean and Eilean Molach. (Bealach nam Bò is the break of slope in the left background below the rock face, Coire na(n) Ùrnisgean is above the steamboat and Eilean Molach is at the bottom right) (also in colour section)

in the process of landscape change. The model cannot accommodate the excision of Gaelic and its culture from most of the Gàidhealtachd. What remains is a toponymic layer representing a psycho-geography, which is frozen in time and detached from subsequent possible representations of the landscape. It is as if a chapter in the book of this landscape has been lost or erased. Such a notion is similar to the geological concept of non-conformity, where, though rock types may be physically contiguous, they are discontinuous in time.

It could be argued that the act of naming landscapes is in itself now dead, or at least no longer recognised by mapmakers. Loch Occasional in Balquidder appears and disappears when the River Balvaig floods. Whilst the name of this ephemeral water is known to local residents, it does not appear on any map. Similarly, there is an island of significant size, which has appeared in Loch Tay at the mouth of the River Dochart, as a result of siltation from forestry development further upstream in the catchment. It is mature enough to have developed riparian woodland in its own right. Although the island appears on the map, it is anonymous to both

cartographers and most of the local community. Even the continual flux and dramatic results of fluvial processes do not necessarily lead to new names. In the contemporary Highlands, perhaps we are less mindful of abiotic and biotic processes and their outcomes than preceding Gaelic-speaking populations? Given the density of their naming where it has survived in full, it is difficult to imagine how such a prominent island could have remained anonymous a few hundred years ago.

Mountaineers may be an exception to this trend. Several peaks in the Cuillins are named in Gaelic after nineteenth century climbing pioneers: *Sgùrr Alasdair* - after Sheriff Alexander Nicolson, *Sgùrr MhicChoinnich* - after John MacKenzie, *Sgùrr Theàrlaich* - after Charles Pilkington and *Sgùrr Thormaid* - after Norman Collie, who was MacKenzie's great friend and climbing companion. Perhaps such active naming in Gaelic still occurred because the Cuillins were relatively unexplored, and guides and informants of the time were local Gaelic-speaking Sgitheanachs. Or perhaps earlier names have been lost.

In other places, where Gaelic has been less active in recent times, and in contrast to nineteenth century Skye, climbing names are more likely to be in English, such as Cat Gully (NN641431) and Raven's Gully (NN642425) beneath Ben Lawers. In both cases, however, the newer English names refer to the adjacent Gaelic names of *Lochan nan Cat* and *Creag an Fhithich*, so continuity with past naming is sustained in translation. Less consistently, other recent naming can be completely unrelated to Gaelic. On Arran, The Bastion (NS997439) and the Devil's Punchbowl (NS004438) are unconnected with the earlier language's *Cioche na h-Oighe* (*Cioch na h-Oighe* -Maiden's Pap) and *Coire na Cìche* (Corrie of the Breast) although clearly a bowl and a corrie have some formal similarity.

Elsewhere amongst the granite tors of Arran, the names of Portcullis Buttress, Pagoda Ridge and Meadow Slabs can be found. The last is named after a patch of grass growing at its base, whilst the others all attempt to describe a visual quality. One name (Plate 8) which has a direct link to Gaelic is the Witch's Step (NS973443), translated, perhaps unfairly, from *Ceum na Caillich* (old woman). Naming activity amongst mountaineers and other outdoor

enthusiasts reflects their position as new insiders to the landscape. With some knowledge of language, new naming could become more able to build on earlier precedent, which has often successfully captured the *genius loci* or spirit of place, in a unique Gaelic lens.

Place-name Classifications

Place-name examples have been drawn from across the Gàidheiltachd, but there is preponderance from the central and southern Highlands. The spelling of names is for the most part listed in the forms represented on OS maps, with the addition of missing accents and minor, single letter corrections. Generic words are shown in nominative, genitive and plural forms. Apologies must be made for any awkwardness in translation. The detail of Gaelic names and the resultant grammatical complexity sometimes escape the brevity of English couplets. *Slios Meall na Saobhaidhe*, in Torricon, NG880480, Slope of the Rounded Hill of the Den does not run easily off the tongue.

Commentaries offered before each section of examples within a category do not cover each name listed in the tables. Instead, the text focuses on examples with a significant hinterland of interest and reference. However, the section on mountain form is more comprehensive than others owing to an earlier study by the author. In the field, alphabetical indexes of generic nouns and adjectives in the book's appendices can be used to locate names in the relevant categories. Pronunciations are indicative. They do not attempt to capture the subtleties of Gaelic speech. It would be very hard for any phonetic system to render the four Gaelic sounds for **R**, a unique number in any language, and its three sounds for the letter **L**, with any accuracy. Map references should be read along with the National Grid layout of squares labeled with N-.