Gaelic Place Names: 'Gille'

By Alison Grant

The Gaelic word   (pronounced ***geel***   ) meaning boy, lad is ultimately from Old Irish   . It occurs in place-names such as   burn of the boy in Angus,   burn of the stuttering boy on the Isle of Arran and   loch of the fat boy on the Isle of Rum, but otherwise can be rather an elusive toponymic element to identify with any degree of certainty.

One difficulty is that some of the names which appear to contain   turn out on closer inspection to have arisen from the corruption of another element. For example,   in Urray Parish, Ross-shire has the appearance of a   name, but the historical form   from 1569 reveals that the original element was Gaelic   church and the name means instead   Christ s

Kirk .[1] Similarly,   is also easily confused with Gaelic   ravine, watercourse , found in place-names such as   on Lewis and   on Rum. A further complication here is that   was originally a loan-word from Old Norse   cleft, gully , and further place-names containing this Norse element also add to the confusion, including   on Arran and   in Caithness.

Additionally, the plural form of Gaelic   is   , which is remarkably similar to   , the plural form of   , and the two elements are often muddled. For example, the modern form of   , a famous mountain in the Cuillin range on the Isle of Skye, appears to indicate an etymology of peak of the lads , which nineteenth-century scientist and mountaineer Prof. J.D. Forbes claimed was derived from the untimely fate met by some who attempted to climb

it .[2] However, there is little evidence to substantiate this folk etymology, and the name is perhaps more likely to be a corruption of   peak of the (steep) watercourses .

Another problem with identifying genuine   names is that the word developed a secondary meaning of servant, devotee , which was commonly used as an initial element in Gaelic personal names in combination with the name of a saint. For

example,   means servant of St Patrick and   means servant of St Brigid (as exemplified by the name of the thirteenth-century poet and crusader   ). These names were often bestowed upon a child born on a particular saint s day, with many of them surviving as modern surnames, including   ,   ,   ,   and   (from Mary). Some of these personal names and surnames were subsequently used in the formation of place-names, such as the   names found in Perthshire, Fife and Midlothian,   (earlier   ) in Fife and   in Aberdeenshire. Names formed in this manner, where   has effectively become a lexically-redundant segment within the qualifying element of a Scots place-name, must be regarded as semantically separate from Gaelic toponymic formations such as   loch of the boys on Islay or   hill of the wronged boy near Granton-on-Spey, where   functions in its original sense of boy, lad .

in the secondary sense of servant was also borrowed into the Scots (and English) language as   or   , originally in the sense of a male servant, particularly an attendant on a highland chief, before developing the modern meaning gamekeeper, assistant to a sportsman . It is possible that Scots place-names such as   in North Lanarkshire and   in Perthshire contain this Scots word rather than a Gaelic personal name or surname.The Gaelic word   (pronounced **geel**   ) meaning boy, lad is ultimately from Old Irish   . It occurs in place-names such as   burn of the boy in Angus,   burn of the stuttering boy on the Isle of Arran and   loch of the fat boy on the Isle of Rum, but otherwise can be rather an elusive toponymic element to identify with any degree of certainty.

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