

# Gaelic Place Names: 'Gille'

## By Alison Grant

The Gaelic word *geel* (pronounced *geel*) meaning boy, lad is ultimately from Old Irish *geall*. It occurs in place-names such as *Geallach* burn of the boy in Angus, *Geallach* burn of the stuttering boy on the Isle of Arran and *Geallach* 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 *geall* turn out on closer inspection to have arisen from the corruption of another element. For example, *Geallach* in Urray Parish, Ross-shire has the appearance of a *geall* name, but the historical form *Geallach* from 1569 reveals that the original element was Gaelic *geallach* church and the name means instead Christ's Kirk.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, *Geallach* is also easily confused with Gaelic *geallach* ravine, watercourse, found in place-names such as *Geallach* on Lewis and *Geallach* on Rum. A further complication here is that *geallach* was originally a loan-word from Old Norse *geill* cleft, gully, and further place-names containing this Norse element also add to the confusion, including *Geillach* on Arran and *Geillach* in Caithness.

Additionally, the plural form of Gaelic *geallach* is *geallachan*, which is remarkably similar to *geallach*, the plural form of *geallach*, and the two elements are often muddled. For example, the modern form of *Geallach*, 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.<sup>2</sup> However, there is little evidence to substantiate this folk etymology, and the name is perhaps more likely to be a corruption of *geallach* peak of the (steep) watercourses.

Another problem with identifying genuine *geallach* 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, *MacFhionn* means servant of St Patrick and *MacBrìghde* means servant of St Brigid (as exemplified by the name of the thirteenth-century poet and crusader *MacBrìghde*). These names were often bestowed upon a child born on a particular saint's day, with many of them surviving as modern surnames, including *MacFhionn*, *MacBrìghde*, and *MacFhionn* (from Mary). Some of these personal names and surnames were subsequently used in the formation of place-names, such as the *MacFhionn* names found in Perthshire, Fife and Midlothian, *MacBrìghde* (earlier *MacBrìghde*) in Fife and *MacFhionn* in Aberdeenshire. Names formed in this manner, where *MacFhionn* 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 *MacFhionn* loch of the boys on Islay or *MacBrìghde* hill of the wronged boy near Granton-on-Spey, where *MacFhionn* functions in its original sense of boy, lad.

*MacFhionn* in the secondary sense of servant was also borrowed into the Scots (and English) language as *MacFhionn* or *MacFhionn*, 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 *MacFhionn* in North Lanarkshire and *MacFhionn* in Perthshire contain this Scots word rather than a Gaelic personal name or surname. The Gaelic word *geel* (pronounced *geel*) meaning boy, lad is ultimately from Old Irish *geall*. It occurs in place-names such as *MacFhionn* burn of the boy in Angus, *MacFhionn* burn of the stuttering boy on the Isle of Arran and *MacFhionn* 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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also add to the confusion, including *Ben Alder* on Arran and *Ben Alder* in Caithness.

Additionally, the plural form of Gaelic *beinn* is *beannaich*, which is remarkably similar to *beannaich*, the plural form of *beannaich*, and the two elements are often muddled. For example, the modern form of *Beinn Dearg*, 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.<sup>4</sup> However, there is little evidence to substantiate this folk etymology, and the name is perhaps more likely to be a corruption of *Beinn Dearg* peak of the (steep) watercourses.

Another problem with identifying genuine *beannaich* 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, *Beannaich Pàdraig* means *servant of St Patrick* and *Beannaich Brìghde* means *servant of St Brigid* (as exemplified by the name of the thirteenth-century poet and crusader *Beannaich Brìghde*). These names were often bestowed upon a child born on a particular saint's day, with many of them surviving as modern surnames, including *Beannaich*, *Beannaich*, *Beannaich*, and *Beannaich* (from Mary). Some of these personal names and surnames were subsequently used in the formation of place-names, such as the *Beannaich* names found in Perthshire, Fife and Midlothian, *Beannaich* (earlier *Beannaich*) in Fife and *Beannaich* in Aberdeenshire. Names formed in this manner, where *beannaich* 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 *Beannaich* loch of the boys on Islay or *Beannaich* hill of the wronged boy near Granton-on-Spey, where *beannaich* functions in its original sense of *boy, lad*.

*Beannaich* in the secondary sense of *servant* was also borrowed into the Scots (and English) language as *beannaich* or *beannaich*, 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 *Beannaich* in North Lanarkshire and *Beannaich* in Perthshire contain this Scots word rather than a Gaelic personal name or surname.

