

# Gaelic Place Names: 'Bodach'

**By Alison Grant**

The Gaelic word *bodach* (pronounced **bot**-ach) can mean 'old man' and also 'spectre, ghost'. It occurs in a variety of place-names across the Scottish Isles including *Loch nam bodach* 'loch of the old man/spectre' on Lewis, *Carraig nam bodach* 'rock of the old man/spectre' on Mull, *Sloc nam bodach* 'hollow of the old man/spectre' on the Isle of Colonsay, *Leanag nam Bodach* 'the little meadow of the old men' on Arran, *Allt nam bodach* 'stream of the spectre' on the Isle of Islay and *Buaile nam bodach* 'cattle-fold of the old man/spectre' on the Isle of Barra.

It is also found in mainland names including *Achadh nam bodach* 'field of the old men' in Aberdeenshire, *Cadh a' bhodaich* 'the old man's path' near Nigg, *Baile nam bodach* 'farm of the old men' in Inverness-shire, and *Drumore-na-bodach* 'big ridge of the old men' in Kintyre. *Tigh nam bodach* 'house of the spectre' in Glen Cailleach, Perthshire, is the site of a Pagan shrine where various stones resembling human figures have been designated as the *Bodach*, the *Cailleach* 'old woman' (wife of the *Bodach*) and their various children. The stones are connected to a local fertility legend which describes how these supernatural beings were given shelter in the glen by the natives, and left the stones behind in the care of the community in return for continuing fertility in the area.

There are also several Scottish mountains named *Am Bodach* 'the old man, the spectre', the most famous of which is located in the Mamores in Western Scotland. Another *Am Bodach* in the Cairngorms is paired with nearby *A' Chailleach* 'the old woman', in parallel with the Glen Cailleach legend. There are also two rocks off the coast of Cape Wrath which share these names, and two distinctive stones near Achamore on the Isle of Gigha which are likewise referred to as the *Bodach* and the *Cailleach*. Other mountain names containing *bodach* include *Bodach Mòr* and *Bodach Beag* in the Highlands, which are 'the big old man' and 'the little old man' respectively. *Creag nam bodach* 'rock of the old man/spectre', and *Stac nam bodach* 'cliff of the old man/spectre' are both located in Perthshire.

*Rhubodach* on the Isle of Bute is less straightforward, in that it may be

from *rubha a' bodach* 'point of the old man' but could instead be from *An rubha Bódach* 'the point of Bute'.

The word *bodach* was borrowed into Scots, in the same senses of 'old man' and 'spectre, ghost'. It was popularised in the nineteenth century by Sir Walter Scott in novels including *Highland Widow* and *Waverley*. In the latter, the *Bodach Glas* or 'Grey Spectre' is described by the Highland Chieftan Fergus Mac-Ivor as the ghostly gray-clad apparition of a Lowland Chief killed by one of his ancestors, who appears to members of his family when disaster is impending. The word also evolved into the North-East Scots dialect word *boodie*, *boody*, which shares the meaning of a spectre or apparition.

In more recent times, the *bodach* has found its way into the fantasy writing of Scottish children's author Mollie Hunter, whose 1970 novel *The Walking Stones* has the alternative title of *The Bodach*, and also into the mainstream science-fiction genre, where *bodachs* feature in several of the *Odd Thomas* series of books by American author Dean Koontz.

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