

# Gaelic Place-Names: 'Rathad'

The Gaelic word *rathad* (pronounced *RAH-ut*) means 'road, route, way', and is derived from Old Irish *rót*. It occurs as the initial element in names such as *Rathad na h-airigh* 'road of the shieling' (Isle of Skye), *Rathad an Tùir* 'road of the tower' (Isle of Tiree) and *An Rathad Geal* 'the white road' (Upper Deeside) and also as a qualifying element in names including *Loch an Rathaid* 'loch by the road' (Isle of Scalpay), *Bealach an Rathaid* 'pass of the road' (Inverness-shire) and *Tigh-an-rathaid* 'house by the road' (Argyll).

In some cases, the 'roads' in question are ancient routes across the difficult Highland terrain. The *Rathad nan Cuimeinach* or 'Comyn's Road' was a medieval route through the mountains, linking Atholl in Perthshire with Badenoch in the Highlands. The *Rathad an Rìgh* 'king's road' in Speyside may date back as far as the time of Alexander II (1214-1249). The *Rathad nam Meirleach* 'road of the thieves' was a famous route used by cattle rustlers from the Lochaber clans who made their way through the Cairngorm mountains to the rich pickings of Speyside and Moray. Using the *rathad* was not without its hazards, however, and in one famous raid in 1645, members of the Cameron clan stole cattle from the Clan Grant in Moyness, Morayshire, only to be pursued and slaughtered by the Grants at the battle of the Braes of Strathdearn. In contrast, *Rathad nan Dròbhar* 'road of the drovers' on Islay refers to an old route for the legitimate transportation of cattle on the island. Transportation of a different sort is reflected in the name *Rathad Mor nan Corp* 'high road of the bodies'. This was a 'coffin road' in Lochaber, which was the route taken to transport the dead from the remoter parts of the district to the burial grounds of Gairloch.

Other instances of *rathad* are relatively modern, and many are simply street names. For example, *Rathad Ùr* on the isle of Lewis is 'new road' and *Rathad A Braighe* (also on Lewis) is 'brae road'. *Rathad na Muilne* on the Isle of Raasay is 'mill road', *A' Seann-rathad* in Gairloch is 'the old road', and *Rathad an Fheoir* on the Isle of Skye is 'road of the hay'. In the town of Stornoway on Lewis, *Rathad an Domhnallaich* is 'MacDonald Road', *Rathad a Charraigh Chuimhe* is 'memorial road', in reference to the nearby war memorial, is 'island road' and *Rathad Chnoc Nan Gobhar* is 'goathill road'.

Other Gaelic words for types of road include *sràid* 'street', with examples including *Sràid na h-Eaglaise* 'church street', *Sràid na ha-Alba* 'Scotland Street' and *Sràid Sheumas* 'James Street'. *Barraid* 'terrace' is found in *Barraid na Mara* 'Seaview Terrace' and *Barraid Rois* 'Ross Terrace' whilst *slighe* 'drive' is reflected in *Slighe Churchill* 'Churchill Drive' and *Slighe Stiubhairt* 'Stewart Drive', all of which are located in Stornoway.

In some parts of the Highlands and Islands, these forms reflect the original names which had been coined by the native Gaelic speakers, but with the increasing demand for bilingual English and Gaelic signage on road and railway signs, in some cases these names are simply translations of existing Scots or English names. For example, the name Dumbarton Road in Glasgow has been translated into Gaelic as *Rathad Dhùn Breatann*, and Queen Street (also in Glasgow) is *Sràid na Banrighinn* (literally 'street of the female king'). For some names it is even necessary to synthesize new Gaelic words to 'translate' existing names, such as *pairèad*, which was coined to represent 'parade' in names such as Alexandra Parade in Glasgow. This demonstrates that as well as being a historic language, Gaelic is also a modern one, growing and evolving in response to the demands of the 21st century.

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