

Gaelic Place-Names: 'Gleann' and 'Srath'

By Alison Grant

The Gaelic words *gleann* and *srath* both mean a valley. These names are commonly Anglicised as *glen* and *strath* respectively. Whilst *gleann* usually refers to deep, narrow valleys, *srath* is reserved for wide and shallow valleys. Many of these valleys take their names from the rivers that run through them. *Glen Affric*, *Glen Dee*, *Glendevon*, *Glenluce* and *Glen Truim* as well as *Strathaven*, *Strathclyde*, *Strathnaver*, *Strathpeffer* and *Strathspey* all contain river names as their second element.

Other names containing *gleann* or *srath* are named for their characteristic features. *Glenbeg* in Aberdeenshire is little glen, *Glendhu* in Dumfriesshire is black glen, *Glen Falloch* in Perthshire is hidden glen, *Glengour* in Argyllshire is glen of the goats, *Srath an Aitinn* in Aberdeenshire is valley of the juniper, *Srath an Ioin* in the Highlands is valley of the marsh, *Strathmore* in Angus and in Sutherland are both big valley and *Strath Rannoch* in Easter Ross is bracken valley.

Some of these names convey a darker history. There is a glen on Islay which is known to the locals as *Gleann a Mhoirt* glen of the murder or *Gleann nam Marbh* glen of the dead. It is believed that the name commemorates a young girl who was sent out to look for a lost cow, and came upon the thief who had stolen the animal and killed it, and this man then set upon the girl and killed her too.¹ Similarly, *Glencoe* in Argyllshire is said to mean valley of the weeping, after the famous massacre of thirty-eight members of the Clan MacDonald by government troops which took place here in February 1692. However, in this case, the name dates back much further than the Seventeenth century, and is more probably named from the river *Comhan* which runs through the glen.

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