



ISSN 1754-1514

The Bottle Imp

Issue 12, November 2012
Gaelic Place-names:
Eilean* and *Innis

There are two primary words in Gaelic which mean island: *eilean* and *innis*. *Eilean* is more common than *innis* in everyday speech in Gaelic, although both are found in place-names. Examples of names in *eilean* include *Eilean Donan* 'St Donnán's isle', near Kyle of Lochalsh, *Eilean Tigh* 'house isle', off the coast of Raasay, *Eilean nan Ròn* 'isle of the seals', in Sutherland, and *Na h-Eileanan Siar* which is the Gaelic name for the Western Isles.

Another *eilean* is *Eilean Bàn* 'white isle', situated directly beneath the Skye Bridge, and featuring a lighthouse designed by Thomas and David Stevenson (the father and uncle of Robert Louis Stevenson respectively). David Stevenson's sons, David and Charles, followed their father into the family business and designed many lighthouses including the one located on *Eilean Mòr* 'big isle' in the remote Flannan Isles, off the coast of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. The *Eilean Mòr* lighthouse is famous for the mysterious disappearance of its three keepers in December 1900. Investigators who went ashore found a half-eaten meal and an overturned chair inside the lighthouse, but no trace of the men themselves was ever found.

However, not all *eileans* are islands, as the word can also be used to refer to a river meadow (often one that is liable to flooding), as is the case with *Eilean Aitinn* 'meadow of the juniper' and *Eilean Dubh* 'black meadow', both in Aberdeenshire. A third meaning for *eilean* is a piece of raised ground surrounded by marsh, as in Ellon (literally *eilean*), also in Aberdeenshire.

The spelling of the other Gaelic term for an island, *innis*, is frequently Anglicised as *inch* in place-names, and this element is often found in combination with a saint's name,

such as *Inchcolm* 'St Columba's isle', in Fife, *Inchmarnock* 'St Marnock's isle', off the island of Bute, and *Inch Kenneth* 'St Cainnech's isle', off the island of Mull. In many cases, these are small islands located either in lochs or off the coast of a larger island, where there would have been a small chapel dedicated to the saint in question.

Innis is also found in secular contexts, as in *Inchgall* 'isle of the strangers', in Fife, *Inchfad* 'long isle', in Loch Lomond, and also *Inchcape*. This last example is the Gaelic name for the Bell Rock, famed for the lighthouse built there by Robert Stevenson (grandfather of Robert Louis Stevenson) and the second element may be Gaelic *sgeap* 'a beehive' in reference to the shape of the rock.

In parallel with *eilean*, *innis* has secondary meanings including a water meadow and a dry piece of land surrounded by marsh. Examples include *Inchnadamph* 'meadow of the stags', in Sutherland, *Inchterf* 'meadow of the bull', in Stirlingshire, and Markinch 'meadow of the horses', in Fife.

Innis was also borrowed into Scots at a very early stage, and the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* has a record of the place-name *Redinche* in a document dating from 1198-99. Similarly, the Scots writer Andrew of Wyntoun described in his fifteenth-century *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland* the Pictish King Brude's gift to St Serf of 'the *inche* off *Lowchlevyn*'. This island in Loch Leven is still known as *St Serf's Inch*, and was the location of the Augustinian Priory where Wyntoun himself was Prior.

In these early instances, the *inches* in question were islands, but in modern Scots, *inch* is much more commonly used of a river meadow, or 'haugh', with examples including *North Inch* and *South Inch* in Perth, *Inchwood* and *Netherinch* in Stirlingshire, and *Abbotsinch* and *Kings Inch* in Renfrewshire.

Dr Alison Grant

Editor

Scottish Language Dictionaries



ASLS is a registered charity no. SC006535
ASLS is supported by Creative Scotland



ALBA | CHRUTHACHAL



www.thebottleimp.org.uk

The *Bottle Imp* is the ezine of the Scottish Writing Exhibition www.scottishwriting.org.uk
and is published by the Association for Scottish Literary Studies www.asls.org.uk