The Bottle Imp

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Gaelic Place-names:
Gleann* and *Srath

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 loin* 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.

Not all of these names have such ancient origins. For example, *Glenrothes* is a modern invention, created in 1948 for this 'new town' which was being built in Fife, by compounding the word *glen* with the name of local landowners the Earls of Rothes.[2] The elements *glen* and *strath* also frequently find their way into the names of Scottish whisky brands, with examples including *Glenfiddich*, *Glengrant*, *Glenlivet*, *Glenmorangie*, *Strathisla* and *Strathmill*. Whilst in some cases these brands are genuinely named from the valley in which the whisky is distilled, in others they are entirely modern inventions.

Gaelic *gleann* and *srath* were also both borrowed into Scots, in the forms *glen* and *strath* respectively. Scots place-names containing *glen* include *The Great Glen* near Inverness, *The Sma' Glen* in Perthshire, *Glenhead* in Stirlingshire, *Glens of Foudland* in Aberdeenshire and *The Fairy Glen* in Easter Ross. Scots names containing *strath* include *Strath of Menteith* in Perthshire, *Wester Strath* in West Lothian and *Strath of Kildonan* in Sutherland.

As Scots emigrated across the globe, they took their *gleann* and *srath* names with them. There are places named *Glencoe* in Nova Scotia and Ontario in Canada, in Illinois and Minnesota in the USA, and one in South Africa. There are transferred examples of *Glenelg* and *Glenorchy* in Australia. There is a *Strathglass* in Maine in the USA, a *Strathbogie* in Australia, and there are instances of *Strathmore* in Australia, Kenya, California and Canada.

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Notes
1 Jacob King and Michelle Cotter, *Place-names in Islay and Jura* (2012) p. 20.
2 Simon Taylor, *The Place-Names of Fife* (2008) Vol.2, pp. 432–33.

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