

Differentiating the Gaelic Landscape of the Perthshire Highlands

JOHN STUART MURRAY

INTRODUCTION, OBJECTIVE AND METHODS

The stimulus for this study arose from various sources. Firstly, Nicolaisen's (1976) observation that '*the number of Gaelic words used as basic elements in hill and mountain names is, of course, considerable*'. Secondly, Gelling's (1984) plea that toponymy should not be studied independently of landscape qualities. Lastly, Hough's (1990) view that placenames are '*endemic to the perceptions and shaping of a locality, for names alone create a mental image of special significance*.' In the language of Lynch (1960) therefore, names are essential to the '*imageability*' of place. The study was also driven by the easily made observation that the general name, càrn, predominates in the granite Cairngorms, whilst sguir does so upon the more glaciated gabbro of the Skye Cuillins.

Gelling has observed that there is not much left of the ancient variability and subtlety in the toponymic vocabulary of modern English. In the absence of fully distinctive English dictionary meanings therefore, the purpose of this study is to find out exactly what the diversity of Gaelic topographical names actually represents in terms of physical parameters, which are identifiable in the landscape.

The study area (figure 1 extends from Rannoch in the North, to the Trossachs in the South and from Breadalbane in the West to Strathbraan in the East. It was chosen because its toponymy is not only almost wholly Gaelic, but it also possesses a significant and representative diversity of topographic terms. It should be noted however, that meall and tom account for over 50 per cent of the names studied. It seems reasonable to assume that this proportion reflects the relatively rounded, rolling and unrocky nature of upland Perthshire when compared with other, more rugged areas of the Scottish highlands.

The choice of study area has one disadvantage however. As living Gaelic is absent, on site landscape investigation cannot be paralleled by a linguistic field study. Some of the last, but fragmentary attempts to do so were in Balquidder (Carnegie) and Breadalbane (Watson 1928).

The names studied and their frequencies were as follows: Beinn (76No), Bioran (8), Caisteal (11), Càrn (23), Cnap (5), Cnoc (34), Cruach (6), Dùn (33), Maol (10), Meall (193), Sgiath (22), Sgorr (8), Sìthean (13), Sliabh (4), Sròn (54), Stob (38), Stuc (16), Tom (89), and Tòrr (7) – 650 in total (see table 1). It is hoped that this large sample size should compensate for cartographic inaccuracies, omissions and inconsistencies. Creag

SCHEDULE OF NAME TYPES - SRON								1
NAME	NGR(NN)	MEANING	HT.	RELIEF	TOP	OUTLIERS	OUTCROPS	CORRIES
Sròn a Mhìlle Bhuidhe	447453	of the yellow Meall	739	210	✓ spur	of Meall Buidhe	NES	N
Sròn a'Choir Chuanach	457453	of the knobby corrie	837	387	✓	Craeg	NEW (scattered)	N
Sròn Chomh Choin	500444	of the small cottage cattle	900	300	✓ spur	of Strucht	NEW	NS (of same name)
Sròn Eich	616459	of a horse	600	310	x spur	of Meall	NEW (scattered)	N
Sròn Mhòr	675425	Big	805	321	✓ spur	of Meall. Sròn	NEW	E
Sròn Bheag	674424	Small	560	350	x slope	of Sròn	SE	S
Sròn a'Ghannuim	884480	of the calf	369	140	✓ spur	of Craeg	NW	
Sròn nan Colan	311303	of the young cows	590	340	✓	of Meall	NESW	S
Sròn Gharrbh	336384	rough	550	300	✓ slope	of Meall Garbh	NESW	E
Sròn Gharrbh	322331	rough	750	560	x spur	of Beinn	NEW	W
Sròn Phrìve	370350	of a pin	750	270	x spur	of Craeg	NE	NW
Sròn Sheamraig	356350	of a shearrock	550	440	x spur	of Beinn	SE	S
Sròn nan Eòin	401356	of the birds	836	316	✓	of Craeg	NESW	S
Sròn Tairbh	406370	of a bull	973	483	✓ spur	of Stob	NSW	N
Sròn Fauchainne	481396	of a brain	710	190	✓ spur	of Meall	NEW	NW
Sròn a'Chlachain	561330	of the village	450	340	x cliff	of Craeg	E	
Sròn Dha Mhurchaidh	607397	of two Murders	685	370	✓ spur	of Meall. Craeg	ESW	S

Figure 3.

(rock) has been omitted from the study because of the large numbers (422) involved and the likelihood that a translation to English is fairly straightforward.

A map search of the terms was carried out at 1:25,000 (Pathfinder) scale and distributions were mapped at 1:250,000 scale (figure 2). For each entry the following associated data was recorded (figure 3): National Grid Reference, qualifying nouns or adjectives (and their meaning), height, relative relief (degree of ruggedness), whether summits or outliers and the presence of corries and outcrops. Munro's tables (1990) were used as a source of grid references and elevations for hills over 2500ft in height. The information for each name type (see sample schedule of name types) was then collated, tabulated and analysed (figure 4).

Geology has been omitted from the study, as it appears that there is little relationship between the distribution of name and rock type as evidenced by the 1:250,000 geological maps (sheets 56N 04W & 56N 06W). For example, there seems to be no toponymic recognition expressed in changed name type or distribution of the major outcropping of granite which is found to the north west of Comrie in Glen Lednock.

In contrast, different name types appear to be directly related to geomorphology, in particular degrees of ruggedness. The concept of ruggedness has been adapted from Whittow (1992). When applied to a name type, it has been measured as the maximum difference in elevation within the kilometre square in which the name is situated. Very rugged has been defined as a height difference of over 300 metres, moderately rugged as between 200 and 300 metres and rolling as being below 200 metres.

RESULTS

Results for each name type are as follows. They should be read in conjunction with summary tables 1 and 2. Definitions are from Dwelly's *Illustrated Gaelic to English Dictionary* (1988).

BEINN (76) – *mountain, hill, pinnacle, high place* (figure 5)

These are frequent, of the highest elevation and concentrated in the mountainous areas of Mamlorn, West Balquhiddier and South Loch Earnside. Although only moderately rugged, they are very likely to be dominant summits possessing outcrops and corries. This supports Nicolaisen's view (1961) that '*relative height seems to be one of the factors that determine the usage of beinn in Scotland.*' Indeed the diminutive Am Beannan is the only slope recorded in the area. They are always qualified and if coloured most likely to be grey (liath), red (dearg), grey-green (glas) or dun coloured (odhar).

BIORAN (8) – *stick, staff, any sharp pointed thing* (figure 6)

These are rare, of medium height, but very rugged. They are very likely to be lesser summits with corries and outcrops. They are seldom qualified, implying a very specific form.



Figure 5. Ben More and Stobinian from the north-west.

CAISTEAL (11) – *Castle, fort, tower, garrison. Turreted mansion.*

These are rare, of medium height and moderately rugged. They are likely to be a lesser summit with outcrops, but less likely to have corries. Some are unqualified, several are steep (corrach). Almost half of them are slopes however. Only one out of 11 is associated with an archaeological artefact – a fort. Such a low figure suggests that the name is used to suggest a steep, castle-like form in the landscape rather than the actuality of a fortress (also see dùn).

CÀRN (23) – *heap or pile of stones loosely thrown together. Cairn. (figure 7)*

These are infrequent, yet widespread, high and moderately rugged. They are reasonably likely to be a lesser summit or slope with outcrops and corries. They are always qualified, usually by colour.

CNAP (5) – *knob, button, lump, boss stud, little hill.*

These are very rare, low, but very rugged and concentrated on East Loch Lomond side. They are likely to be an outlying summit with outcrops, but no corries. They are always qualified, according to size.



Figure 6. Am Bioran.

CNOC (34) – hill, knoll, hillock, eminence. (figure 8)

These are frequent and sometimes paired, in the low, rolling country to the South of the study area. They are likely to be lesser summits without outcrops or corries. This finding supports Nicolaisen's view (1961) that cnoc is '*apparently never applied to very high eminences.*' They are always qualified just under a quarter by colour – especially dubh or odhar and just over a quarter biotically – references to flora being twice as common as those to fauna.



Figure 7. Glen Artney. Càrn Labhuinn and Sròn na Maoile.



Figure 8. Glen Artney. Cnoc Brannan.



Figure 9. Cruach Ardrain from the north, near Auchtertyre Farm.

CRUACH (6) – rounded hill standing apart, mountain pinnacle. (figure 9)

These are rare, of medium height and ruggedness, and concentrated on Loch Lomondside. They are likely to be lesser summits with outcrops, but less likely to have corries. Half are unqualified, indicating a specific form.

DÙN (33) – heap, hill, hillock, mound. Fortified house or hill.

These are frequent, and sometimes paired, in the low, rolling country found in the valley floors of upper Glen Dochart and Strathearn. They are likely to be rocky, outlying summits without corries. None, in contrast to caisteal, are slopes. They are likely to be qualified by size or biotically. Only 12 per cent (4 number) are related to the existence of an archaeological artefact, usually a fort. Pathfinder maps are unlikely, however, to show all remains. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to conclude that dùn applies to landform which suggests a fort-like appearance or occupies a fort-like position, in relation to outlook for example. Dùn'n Aon Duine in its prominent position above South Loch Earnside is a good example of fort-like qualities of the landscape.

MAOL (10) – brow of rock, great bare rounded hill.

These are rare, of medium height, but very rugged and concentrated between Lochs Katrine and Lomond. However, their different physical qualities suggest that they are



Figure 10. Sgiath Ghlas and Sgiath Bhuidhe from the north-east in Glen Lyon.

not a dialectic substitution for meall as suggested by Nicolaisen (1961) – even though these are absent from the same area. They are likely to be rocky outliers with corries. They are always qualified, most often biotically.

MEALL (193) – *lump, mass of any matter, heap (as of earth), hill, eminence, great shapeless hill, mound.*

These are very common and widespread, moderately rugged and high summits, although 5 per cent are slopes. They are unlikely to be rocky or have corries. They are always qualified. If by colour, odhar and dubh are the commonest – suggesting an association with blanket peat. If by form, fat (reamhar) accounts for 10 per cent, but strangely, also rough (garbh) for 5 per cent. A wide range of qualifiers indicates therefore, a very general type of landform, providing a vehicle for a wide variety of differentiating descriptors.

SGIATH (22) – *wing, portion of land jutting into sea, shield. (figure10)*

These are infrequent, of moderate height and ruggedness and like maol, concentrated between Lochs Katrine and Lomond. Their physical similarity to sròn types, and the latter's absence from the same area suggest a dialectic substitution. They are more likely to be outliers (nearly 50 per cent are slopes) than summits, with both corries and

outcrops. They are always qualified, usually by colour (blue – gorm, the commonest) or biotically.

SGOR (8) – *sharp steep hill, rising by itself, or a little steep precipitous height on another hill or mountain. Peak, pinnacle.*

These are rare, moderately high, but very rugged. They are likely to be rocky, outliers with corries. Over half are slopes which suggests a different usage to that prevailing in Skye. All are qualified, usually biotically.

SÌTHEAN (13) – *little hill or knoll. Fairy hill. Big rounded hill.*

In Perthshire these are infrequent, moderately rugged and low – in contrast to the last phrase in the definition. They are mostly outliers with nearly a quarter being slopes. They are often paired, without outcrops or corries. One third are unaccompanied by adjectives. If qualified, they are usually black (dubh).

SLIABH (4) – *mountain of the first magnitude, extended heath, alpine plain, moorish ground. Extensive tract of dry moorland. Mountain grass, moor bent grass. Face of a hill.*

These are very rare, of medium height and moderately rugged. They are usually rocky. Half of them are outlying summits with corries. All are qualified. Given the generality of the dictionary meaning in relation to the physical nature of the study area it is surprising that they are not more common. This supports Nicolaisen's view (1961) that *sliaibh*, 'although still alive in Scottish Gaelic in general, is no longer productive in naming and probably has not been so for a number of centuries.'

SRÒN (54) – *nose, promontory, headland rising from a mountain to a strath. Ridge of a hill. (figure 7)*

These are frequent and widespread, yet with a significant concentration in Glen Artney along the Highland Fault. They are of medium height and moderately rugged. Half are outlying summits, though only 5 per cent are slopes, in contrast to *sgiath*, which they otherwise resemble. They are likely to have corries and outcrops. All are qualified, with references to fauna being commonest (37 per cent).

STOB (38) – *stake, any pointed stick, prickle, thorn. Remaining stump of anything broken or cut. Any sharp pointed stick. (figure 11)*

These are infrequent, high and very rugged and rocky. They are concentrated in the more glaciated West of the study area, in Mamlorn, West Balquhiddy and North Loch Lomondside and the great majority have corries. The presence of the less rugged, yet dominant, *beinn* type throughout these areas argues that *stob* is not a dialectic substitution for the former, more common name, but a name attached to a form distinct from *beinn*.



Figure 11. Brae of Balquidder from the east.



Figure 12. An Stuchd from the north.

STUC (16) – *little hill jutting out from a greater, steep on one side and rounded on the other. Cliff; rock, conical steep rock, precipice.* (figure 12)

These are infrequent, high and moderately rugged, concentrated in South Lochs Lubnaig and Earnside. They are likely to be outlying summits with outcrops and corries. One quarter is unspecified, but one fifth is; by colour.

Typical examples which support an asymmetric formal meaning would be Stuc a' Chroin to the South of Loch Earn and An Stuchd to the north of Loch Tay.

TOM (89) – *round hillock or knoll, rising ground, swell, green eminence. Any round heap.*

These are frequent in low, rolling country. Half are outlying summits, without rocks or corries. 20 per cent are slopes. All are qualified. Cultural references (40 per cent) are commonest. There are four references to hanging or hangmen for example. Biotic qualifiers (31 per cent) come next. Like cnoc and meall, if colour is specified, Tom is likely to be dubh or odhar, – suggesting a link with peaty ground. Indeed there are four occurrences of Tom na Moine.

TORR (7) – *hill, mountain of an abrupt or conical form, lofty hill. Eminence. Mound. Large heap. Rock.*

These are very rare and in Perthshire found in low, rolling country. The last finding tends to contradict the dictionary meaning. It may be however, that local ruggedness is too finely grained to be detected at the search scale employed. Ground inspection would verify this. Torrs are all outliers rather than summits. None have corries, but half have outcrops. The majority are qualified usually by size and then by colour (often grey).

Name	Number	Frequency %	Elevation (m)	Relative Relief (m)
Beinn	76	11.7	749	290
Bioran	8	1.2	562	339
Caisteal	11	1.7	500	235
Càrn	23	3.5	656	239
Cnap	5	0.8	283	358
Cnoc	34	5.2	354	183
Cruach	6	0.9	580	250
Dun	33	5.1	328	197
Maol	10	1.5	448	308
Meall	193	29.7	652	244
Sgiath	22	3.4	462	276
Sgorr	8	1.2	501	363
Sìdhean	13	2.0	389	253
Sliabh	4	0.6	464	253
Sròn	54	8.3	577	291
Stob	38	5.8	721	332
Stuc	16	2.5	655	285
Tom	89	21.5	284	182
Tòrr	7	1.1	312	177

Table 1. Frequency, average elevation and ruggedness (relative relief) of name types.

Name	Colour	Texture	Form	Biotic	Culture	Unspec.
Beinn	22.0	8.0	6.5	13.0	4.0	
Bioran			12.5	25.0		50.0
Caisteal	9.0		27.0		18.0	18.0
Càrn	26.0		7.5	17.0	17.0	
Cnap			40.0			
Cnoc	23.0	3.0	12.0			
Cruach			16.5			50.0
Dùn	9.0		27.0	15.0	3.0	3.0
Maol	10.0	10.0	20.0	30.0	10.0	
Meall	18.0	5.0	22.0	23.0	5.0	
Sgiath	32.0		18.0	36.0		
Sgòrr		12.5		37.5	12.5	
Sithean	23		23.0			31.0
Sliabh			25.0		25.0	
Sròn	5.5	7.5	7.5	37.0	5.5	
Stob	13.0	13.0	5.0	18.5	8.0	
Stuc	19.0	6.0	6.0		25.0	25.0
Tom	12.0	2.0	2.0	31.5	40.5	
Tòrr	43.0		57.0			14.0

Table 2. Frequency (%) of name qualifiers.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In Nicolaisen's 1961 study he continually asked the question whether differences in distribution were of a dialectical nature or were determined by differences in geomorphology or attributable to different phases in the expansion of Gaelic settlement. He concluded that a great deal more field work was necessary to establish these distinctions.

The research has shown that the name types studied do indeed possess distinguishing and identifiable physical attributes. For example, we can expect *sgorr*, *cnap* or *bioran* to be very rugged, but relatively low in elevation, when compared to *beinn*. *Stob* in contrast, is not only both high and very rugged, but also rocky. In complete contrast, *cnoc*, *dùn* or *tom* are likely to be found in low, rolling country and to be without outcrops.

Adjectival qualifiers can further differentiate formal types. Common, but differing kinds of associations can be identified. For example, *cnoc*, *dùn* or *sidhean* are often black or dun coloured, suggesting a link with peaty ground. Site observation also indicates an association with valley floor moraines. *Meall* on the other hand, when, in 18 per cent of instances, a colour is identified, is often linked with peaty hues, but at the much higher level of the rounded plateau. *Cnoc*, *dùn* and *sidhean* are sometimes also found in pairs, denoted by opposing adjectives such as big or small, black or white. Whereas *beinn* is never paired and more likely to be grey or red, whilst *sgiath* is more likely to be blue. In the study area however, only 15.5 per cent of the names are qualified by colour, and of these, over 50 per cent are either black or dun coloured. This preponderance may reflect the wide extent of blanket peat in highland Perthshire.

It has been observed (Drummond 1992) that the Gaelic colour spectrum is more differentiated than, and therefore, not precisely translatable into English. *It is pastel rather than primary, gentle rather than bold.* Meanings appear to overlap, but in fact are contextually informed and distinguished. In particular, blues and greens are more diverse in Gaelic and more differentiated than in English. It seems reasonable to assume that a pastoral people, reliant on transhumance, needed to have great precision in the way they described at a distance the perceived condition of upland grasses, prior to the moving of stock. Language then, becomes part of place through what it is required to name. Toponymically, it becomes specific to its context (Stuart-Murray 1995).

Some names of course, such as *bioran*, *caisteal*, *cruach* or *stuc* seem to possess such a specific formal meaning that they require no adjectival qualification. Others such as *meall* are always qualified, implying a form so general; it can be pointed, round, rough, notched, forked but most often fat – thus emphasising the dictionary definition. *Tom* is qualified culturally in just over 40 per cent of instances, which may reflect greater human activity at lower elevations. In contrast over a quarter of the much higher *sròn* type are associated with animal descriptors. This may relate to their position as outlook points overlooking valleys, such as Glen Artney, which lie at the edges of mountain complexes.

Comparison of the distribution of different name types reflects contrasts, at the larger scale, between landscapes of differing character. For example the common occurrence of stob in Balquidder reflects the greater ruggedness prevailing there than in the rest of the study area. The parallel occurrence of beinn in the same locality implies that this is not a case of dialectic substitution, but a name attached to a distinct form. A similar situation exists with the parallel distribution of maol and meall in the area between Lochs Lomond and Katrine. However, in the same area sgiath does, in part, appear to substitute for the formally similar sròn, which is absent from the locality.

In this way, an understanding of landscape through its toponymic themes and associations can inform the study of language. In general, however, the findings seem to support Gelling's argument that irregular distributions of landscape terms present in placenames are more due to differences in regional landscapes rather than differences in regional naming fashions.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

It would be productive for further studies to examine associations between name types, so that typical, toponymic landform profiles can be established and drawn. Associations could be established accurately if grid references were digitised. Iconic sketches could also be made of certain specific types, where distinctive forms exist, e.g. bioran, caisteal, cruach, sidhean and stuc.

During the course of the study, it has become apparent that there is not a clear relationship between toponymic density and landscape complexity. This may be due to cartographic idiosyncrasy, error or omission. A search of 1:10,000 scale and historic maps of selected areas, such as upper Glen Almond, where landscape though complex, is sparsely named at OS 1:25,000 scale, may lead to a resolution of this problem.

It would be useful if maps were digitised, so that toponymic distributions could be related to other data sets such as soil and vegetation, using GIS (geographical information systems) technology. The incidence of Gaelic colours and textures etc could be also mapped directly and then related to physical indicators of landscape character.

REFERENCES

- BEARHOP, D. A.
1990 *Munro's Tables and Other Tables of Lesser Heights*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Mountaineering Trust.
- CARNEGIE, MRS
Place-names of Balquidder. Scottish Geographical Magazine Vol XII
- DRUMMOND, P.
1992 *Scottish Hill and Mountain Names*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Mountaineering Trust.

- DWELLY, E.
1988 *Illustrated Gaelic to English Dictionary*. Glasgow: Gairm.
- GELLING, M.
1984 *Place Names in the Landscape*. London: J M Dent.
- HOUGH, M.
1990 *Out of Place: restoring identity to the regional landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press
- LYNCH, K.
1960 *The Image of the city*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- NICOLAISEN, W. F. H.
1961 'The Distribution of Certain Gaelic Mountain-names' TGSI, 45, (1969) 113–128
1976 *Scottish Place Names – their Study and Significance*. London: Batsford
- STUART MURRAY, J.
1995 *Unnameable Landscapes – Landscape Review 2* Lincoln NZ: Lincoln University Press
- WATSON, W. J.
1928 *The Place-names of Breadalbane* Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness Vol XXXIV
- WHITTOW, J.
1992 *Geology and Scenery in Britain*. London: Chapman Hall.