

Some Hydronyms in the Parish of Muckairn

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The area in the eastern end of the Parish of Muckairn, which we are considering in this article, is well supplied with interesting maps such as the 17th century Bleau (1654) and Pont maps, the 18th century Roy map (1745), the original Ordnance Survey First Edition maps of the 1870s, and the Loch Etive and Loch Creran Admiralty chart (1861).

One of the important watersheds in the geography of the area lies just west of the cottages at Am Bàrr near Barguilean. To the west of the watershed, all rivers, such as the Lonan, run either into Loch Nell and the sea, or into the River Lusragan and Loch Etive. To the east, all rivers and streams run in to Loch Etive. The latter are the systems I want to discuss, touching on names, meanings and associated folklore.

Rivers and streams usually provide the most ancient and well-used names in any parish. Another ‘rule’ is that the larger the river the older the name. The parish of Muckairn is no exception.

Indeed, the eastern boundary of the parish is marked by the River Nant referred to in an old document (Pont texts) as a *‘small river called Neant going by the church, fruitfull of salmond, it runneth from the south to the north, and falleth in Loch-aediff.’*

The name-form of the river in Gaelic is *‘Neannnd’*. Some experts, including WJ Watson in ‘Celtic Placenames of Scotland’, have translated this as ‘where nettles grow’. The derivation is from *‘Neanntag’* an older descriptive form of the modern word *‘feanntag’* or *‘deanntag’* [nettle]. I find that derivation somewhat unlikely.

It has been suggested that it is a Cumbric word, from the language of the Brythonic Celtic peoples of Strathclyde whose power-centre was Dumbarton. Reconstructions of Cumbric suggest that the word may derive from a form rather like the modern Welsh *‘Nant’* which means *‘stream’*. According to research conducted by Elizabeth Rennie, the Britons’ boundary with Dalriada lay somewhere in the area around Glen Branter and Loch Eck. If the name is Cumbric, it raises all sorts of questions about settlement patterns and relationships between the Gaelic Celts of Dalriada and their Briton neighbours to the south in the early years, 500-900AD.

There are many tales connected with Glen Nant or *Coille Neannnd* whose history ranges from ancient hut platforms to charcoal burning sites. I will restrict myself to two : both connected.

Making illegal whisky was a folk art in the 18th century (see Given, 2007). In this connection there is an interesting place name in a stream which flows into the Nant at *Leum an Tàilleir* [The Tailor's Leap] It is called *Eas na Caorach Duibhe* [The Waterfall or cascade of the black sheep] (approx. GR011281). There is one particular Gaelic song which is called *Tha Bainne aig naCaoraich Uile* [The sheep all are in milk]. This reference is a code for 'all the pot stills are in full production of whisky' so this particular waterfall may have a connection with distilling. A study of the map will show that it is in a fairly inaccessible place and makes a credible site for an illegal pot still.

Local folklore has it that the gaugers or excisemen from Kilchrenan found such a pot still at the head waters of the stream and caught the tailor (from the settlement of *Larach a'Chrotail* [Lichen Site] (GR017272) red-handed. He fled, was pursued and leapt the Nant at the Tailor's Leap to escape. The barrel of whisky from the pot still was transported by the gaugers to an upstairs room in the *Tigh Bàn* inn in Kilchenan where it was augured and drained by the potstillers during the night leaving the gaugers with an empty barrel to transport to the pier at Bunaw!

There are numerous other interesting placenames connected with the waters of the Nant such as *Càrn Mhic Dhonnchaidh*, a cairn which marks the spot where Iain Dubh MacDhonnchaidh, Campbell Tutor of Inverawe was shot by a fatal arrow in the early 17th century, or the meadow called *Lòn nan Cèard* [Tinkers'Meadow] where the Johnston travelling folk had a permanent camp in World War 1 so that the boys from the trenches had a fixed point to return to on leave. But these are possible subjects for a future article!

At this point it is maybe appropriate to draw attention to another stream which points to an even earlier stage in Muckairn history. This is *Allt a' Bhile*, the name given to the small stream which runs through the area of the parish known as *Taigh an Uillt*. (The Inn by the Stream), between Taynuilt Hotel and the War Memorial. It crosses the road at Taynuilt

Hotel and runs down through the village and the golf course to join the Nant at the small footbridge on the right-of-way to Airds Bay.

This watercourse gives a clue to the pre-Christian history of the village. The name "*Allt a' Bhile*", means "The Stream by the Votive Tree". Part of its course runs through a field, now incorporated into the present golf course. The field is called "*Lòn a' Bhile*" which means "The Field where there is a Votive Tree". A Votive Tree is one which grants wishes and receives prayer. It is usual to hang offerings on it - cloth or jewellery - to obtain a wish or act as a perpetual prayer. There is a Votive Tree, which is still in use, at *Bealach Gaoithe* near Kilchoan House in Melfort and another, I am told, on the north side of Loch Etive, although I have been unable to ascertain the location of the latter.

"*Bile*" can also mean a grove of trees such as those which were used by the pre-Christian priests, the Druids, as places of worship. It is important to preserve this name *Allt A' Bhile* as a direct link to our pre-Christian predecessors in Muckairn.

The third stream system which I would like to sketch out for this article is the Airds stream.

One of the charming characteristic of some streams and small rivers which run into Loch Etive, is that their waters are known by different names at different parts of their descent to the Loch.

The stream, which runs across the flat croftland at Hafton and Airds (GR997314) and which discharges into Loch Etive near Airds Bay House, is one such. It rises from three sources high in the Lonan Hills on the slopes of *Cruach Àrdanaidh* [Ardan's Mount] or possibly [Mount of eminences] and *Tom na h-Iolair* [The Eagle's Knoll]

The source that rises high on Cruach Àrdanaidh is known as *Eas na Dunaiche* (The Waterfall of Woe, Disaster or Misfortune) We can only speculate about the story which lies behind that name. The stream runs through the area where the sheilings of Kirkton and Airds lay. (There is a signposted path to the sheilings on the Glen Lonan Road). The name is probably connected with these times when, in accordance with ancient transhumance practice, the cattle, goats and sheep of the townships were driven to the summerlands in the high pastures. There, the elderly of the

townships and the young people camped out till Autumn in bothies of stone, turf and thatch and made butter and cheese for the winter. These were idyllic times remembered in many songs and poems of the Gaidhealtachd, but there could be a darker side too. Maybe there was a drowning there or an escapade on the waterfall which went wrong. We will never know and only the name remains as a sad echo from the past.

Part of the middle streamlet is known as *Eas na Ceann-Laraich* which translates literally as 'The Cascade of the Main Site'. Was this a main site for the 'black pots' that distilled whisky? I suspect that the name is a corruption of something more ancient and more interesting but until research provides an earlier form of the name it is probably best not to speculate. The watercourse crosses the Glen Lonan road at the present Corrachy entrance.

The lefthand stream is already known as *Allt na h-Airde* [The Airds Burn] in anticipation of its eventual arrival at sea level. It joins the other waters to form the main stream.

It is interesting that, nearby, there is what may be an ancient burial ground at GR991297. The burial ground stands at the head of a shallow glen called *Gleann 'Ille Choinnich* [The Glen of the Servant Saint(?) Kenneth]. An ancient pierced stone from the graveyard was transported from its entrance to the rock garden of Lonan House and, though broken up, is still there.

A series of rocks covered with 18th /19th C.(?) graffiti and an unrecorded cup marked stone stand on a hillock which I have tentatively identified as *Cruach Dubh Airdanaidh* [The Black Hill of Ardeny] (GR 994297). The locality was mentioned in a collection of local place names by the Misses Campbell who lived at Achdacallin and, from a reference in the Kirk Session records of the Parish, appears to have been a favourite meeting point for young people of Taynuilt. It is a somewhat ominous name, black being associated with magical practices!!

At nearly two-thirds of its way to the sea, the stream becomes known as *Eas A'Chlàir* [The Cascade of the Level Plain] where it runs through a pretty gorge with a series of waterfalls, accessible from the drove-path south of the level-crossing at Airds (GR 998313).

Only when it crosses the main road at *An Leth-Bhaile* (Hafton) does it become the placid stream known as *Allt A'Chlàir* [The Stream in the Level Plain], meandering across the crofts till it meets the tide at its estuary in Airds Bay.

As the final set of hydronyms in this article, I would like to turn now to the river that flows to Australia! It is the river system which geographically and historically I find to be the most interesting.

High on the slopes of the hill *Deagh Choimhead* [Good View] which dominates the north side of Glen Lonan, rises a small stream. It is known as *Allt na Seobhaig* [The Stream of the Peregrine Falcon]. It is shown well in William Roy's map. We do not know why it got this name. It is nice to think that it might be connected with the Iron Age warriors who, doubtless, hunted with hound and hawk on the heather slopes of the hill, an area now engulfed in dark conifers.

Before it reaches the sea at Loch Etive, this modest stream will have grown into a river and, in its course, will have been called by four names.

Allt na Seabhaig flows into the artificial loch now known as Angus' Loch and emerges into the green fertile valley known as *Gleann Luachragan* [Rushy Glen] in which nestles the township of *Baile 'n Deòir* (Balindore).

At this point the river itself is called the *Luachragan* and flows though flat arable land which has probably been farmed since the first millennium before Christ and may have been the land belonging to the very fine hillfort at Barguilean.

My mother's MacCallum family have lived in Taynuilt in an unbroken line since the 1690's and probably prior to that date. Her mother, Anne MacCallum, was brought up in the hamlet of Balindore as was my grandfather John MacCallum; a case of a MacCallum marrying a far out MacCallum cousin, his family being known as *Sliochd nan trì fichead burraidh* (Descendants of the 60 Blockheads!). They came originally from the north side of Loch Etive and why they got that nickname is another story! Both families were all Gaelic speakers, steeped in the traditions and heritage of the area. Descendants of the Balindore MacCallums still live in Balindore, elsewhere in the village and on the family croft at Airds. Unfortunately, my grandmother and grandfather died

before I was born but my mother, Mary MacCallum, inherited their lore and that of her forebears.

One story concerns the township of Balindore and the origins of its name.

The MacCallums were familiar with the tradition that a crozier reputed to be the pastoral staff of St. Maol Rubha had been connected with Kilmaranaig and that the Keeper of the pastoral staff of St. Maol Rubha owned land or lived at Balindore. They knew that the name derived from *Baile 'n Deòir* [the Township of the Keeper of the Staff of St. Maol Rubha]. Conversely, my Mother also knew that there was also a possible connection with the Campbell almoners or Dewars of the Priory of Ardchattan who might also have owned the land.

There was an alternative *sgeulachd* [story] which said that the name really derived from *Baile 'n Deoridh*: the [Township of the Weakling or Runt]. My Mother pronounced it *Deòrain* with the long vowel and a diminutive.

The story said that the men of *Baile 'n Deòir* and *Gleann Luachragan* were absent for some days reiving cattle. During that time a band of wandering minstrels descended on the place and made free with the food, the drink and the women of the township. The *Deòrain* (or weakling) was physically unable to do anything about this but it disturbed him greatly. At last he hit upon a plan. He had been trying to split a great oak log with a wedge and was at the point where the timber would split into two. He called upon the minstrels to help him. When they put their hands into the split to pull the halves apart, the *Deòrain* swiftly knocked out the wedge and trapped their hands. He then proceeded to cut their throats, thus ending his torment and the exploitation of the township resources.

On their return, the men of the Township were so horrified at this breach of Highland hospitality that they exiled the *Deòrain*. Local *beul aithris* [tradition] says that until quite recent times two beams in a byre in the Achadh Meadhonach croft at Balindore were pointed out as being those split by the *Deòrain*.

Alastair Campbell of Airds, in his fascinating trilogy of histories of the Campbells, throws doubt on a development of this story which said that the *Deòrain* (Walter Campbell) went off to Kirriemuir or somewhere in that area and took the English name of “Burn-house” after Tigh an Uillt the

area around the Hotel in Taynuilt. This became Burns and from that unlikely source the Bard was descended when the family subsequently moved to Ayrshire! It also seems to me a bit far-fetched, but it makes a good story.

The fields and hillocks of Balindore were all known by Gaelic place names, many of which indicate a connection with the very early Church.

The name of a pool in the Luchragan below Balindore does, however, seem to point to pre-Christian beliefs. My Mother thought that *Linne na h-Ighne* [Pool of the Maiden] was connected with a child-drowning and did not consider it to be an old name. It could, nevertheless, also refer to the presence of a female water-sprite who dwelt in the pool.

Water deities were extremely popular with early peoples for they controlled the water, the essence of life itself. The motions of springs, rivers and lakes clearly showed the supernatural powers of the goddesses who lived within, and offerings at such water-features were commonplace, especially of weapons and other valuables. The practice continues today at wishing wells across the country, and the Lady of the Lake is remembered as “Lady Luck”! Why should the pool at Balindore be any different?

It lies where the river crosses a contour line and becomes a series of pools and waterfalls. It was a place where sea-trout passed through on their way upstream to spawn and where the Balindore children of the early 1900’s played a game which involved sinking syrup tins to be fished up.

I remember it as a wonderful place of golden peat-water where dappled petals of light drifted on the gravel bed as the sun shone through the leaves on the overhanging trees.

Below the pool in question, the river changes in character and, after running through a gorge, flows through *Coille Nathais* [Nathais’ Wood]. The name links us directly with the Celtic story of Deirdre and The Sons of Uisneach who fled from Ireland to this area so that Deirdre and her lover Nathais or Naois could live in peace, safe from the pursuit of King Conchobar. Maybe the ancient woodland of Coille Nathais was their hunting ground.

The name is recorded in Pont's 17th century map, and is shown as KILLYNAGIK. It is shown as KILLENNAIS in a rental by the Laird of Calder of 1680 where it measures 2 merklands and is worth £68-13-4d in rental and presents.

The building, **Coille Nathais**, also appears in the Ordnance Survey 6" (First Edition) map in the 1870s. Today the stones of the farm are still to be seen and field boundaries can still be traced. Some energetic field-walking by Mr Michael Kidd of Taynuilt has identified that the area of the farm is a focus for old trackways from the Oban side and from Airds Bay, crossing the stream at a ford in the area (GR 983315). There is also evidence of a trackway to Balindore.

The river at this point is known as *Allt Nathais*, a name it bears until it reaches the zigzag bridge on the Oban road at *Tom na Pairce* [Park Hill].

From then onwards, as it approaches the sea, it is known as *Allt a Bhruthainn*. This name is possibly rooted in *bruich* [boiling], due to the bubbling water as the river goes down a steep gradient in a narrow valley in the final part of its journey past Muckairn House.

Another possible derivation is from *bruigheann* [fairy hillock]. There are enough conical shaped hillocks around the area to fit. Or there may be a connection with *Dùn Chathach* [The embattled Fort] which is beside the shore at the estuary of the river.

Another possibility could be *bruitheann* [skirmish]. As shown above, there was undoubtedly a ford over the river south of *An Glac Dhomhain* [The Deep Passage or Hollow] near the present road bridge over the railway and the river. The ford was possibly associated with an old route that led from Airds Bay through the ford to the farm at Coille Nathais and thence up the valley of the Luachragan to Balindore. There is a ridge west the ford, which is called *Barr an Tachair(t)* [The Ridge of Confrontation or Meeting]. Possibly there was a skirmish at the ford during some power struggle between local factions who recognised the river as a boundary line.

All these are intriguing possibilities. It may, however, be connected with *Bruthainn* [warmth]. The river valley runs north–south at that point: the warmth of a valley suntrap in the river bed on a summer's day.

I previously mentioned Australia. This refers to a farm which is no longer there. It is recorded in the first Ordnance Survey map in 1870s. It lay on the flat lands just where Allt a 'Bhruthainn bends towards its estuary below the present Muckairn House. It was said to be called Australia because a returning native said the birch woods on Airds Park and Muckairn around it resembled the Australian bush country. It is a strange name to find beside a river which has four very Celtic names on its way to the sea.

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