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Burnside of Duntrune: An Essay in Praise of Ordinariness

W. F. H. NICOLAISEN

Names, and place names in particular, have long been recognized as very special raw material for the study of linguistic stratification and settlement history. Their potential longevity, their often amazing power of survival, their ability to outlive the languages that coined them and the lexica from which they were coined provide them with an aura of fascination, and even the most hard-headed name scholar or linguist cannot help succumbing, on occasion, to what may almost be termed the romance of names. Exploring and exploiting this fascinating potential has therefore, in the course of the last two centuries, become the legitimate pursuit, if not the all-absorbing pre-occupation, of scholar and layman alike. As a result, our understanding of the nature of names has been greatly enhanced, our methods in handling them been greatly refined, and our strategies in laying bare their secrets become much more sophisticated.

It is probably no exaggeration to claim that much of this undoubted fascination of names and most of the very keen, and sometimes very passionate, interest taken in them by an ever-growing number of people[1] stem from a desire to make transparent what is opaque, to recover, or at least to establish, meaning for the meaningless, and to gain access to a seemingly inaccessible past. The investigation of names, demanding, as it does, the careful piecing together of scraps of evidence, from the earliest spelling to the modern pronunciation, pleases or arouses the detective that is in all of us, and the devices and successes of onomastic etymology become the appealing trappings of stealthy stalking and dramatic disclosure. Solving, to our own satisfaction if not necessarily to that of others, the "Case of the Mysterious River Name" creates a sense of achievement not easily rivaled by any other intellectual endeavor, and having "solved" it, we are not going to be stopped from taking on another case, and yet another, and another . . ., and we are not easily persuaded that sometimes our skills do not quite match our tasks.

Indeed, so strong is our concentration on the spectacular that we tend to ignore, or at least neglect, those names which do not challenge the

onomastic Sherlock Holmes in us and which we therefore regard as blandly pedestrian or almost disconcertingly accessible without much work on our part and which, in our dismay at having been cheated, we dub "self-explanatory." What we presumably mean by this is that such names, which have an awful habit of being highly repetitive, from an etymological point of view wear their lexical meanings on their sleeves, so to speak, thus depriving us of satisfying our urge to unravel mysteries and to expose the hidden. It is to some of these Cinderellas of name studies that I wish to draw attention in this brief essay, taking as my starting-point the assumption that there is no such thing as a "self-explanatory" name, and that we are more likely to learn something of general significance about those characteristically human traits of names, naming and using names from the commonplace, ordinary and frequent than from the singular, extraordinary and rare, however attractive and revealing this latter group of names may be in other respects.

The evidence which I wish to discuss consists of names of populated places in Scotland as registered in the Census of April 23, 1961, the last census for which such detailed population figures are available.[2] All the names in question are, at least in a Scottish context, lexically transparent to speakers of English, and the places to which they apply are, more often than not, among the smaller settlements, having anything down to a dozen or two inhabitants. Because of their comparatively small size – quite often they are farms or little hamlets – and because all of them have been coined within the most recent stratum in Scottish linguistic history, English, there is little likeihood that these names have been given in imitation or commemoration of names of important places elsewhere; it therefore follows that, in their morphological structure as well as in their choice of elements, they resemble most closely a kind of English onomastic vernacular in Scotland, at least as far as the naming of inhabited places is concerned. Thus their significance as a corpus lies, on the whole, in their very insignificance as individual names. Blandness and humbleness are their virtues.

Naturally, it is impossible to survey, on this occasion, all the names which would fall into this category. I have therefore selected only those names which, in their choice of generics or specifics, or both, demonstrate an interlocking relationship with other names or an interdependence of the geographical features associated with the naming of the settlement. The purpose of this selection is to utilize this substantial so-called "self-explanatory" group of place names for the furtherance of our understanding of how we create and view a landscape through the act of naming and of how confined, specific and almost predictable this process and its

results really are. Our vision in creating a familiar habitat onomastically is fairly limited, it seems, but it is a vision which nevertheless deserves our best attention.

The prototype of the kind of name which will be at the heart of our discussion not only occurs most frequently in the census lists, it is also the name which, perhaps because of its frequency (16 occurrences), first made me aware of the peculiar properties of the group of names which it represents: *Burnside*. This name, on a Scottish map, in a Scottish landscape, offers absolutely no problems to the would-be onomastic etymologizer; its lexical meaning is as clear today as when it was first given, and the fact that its specific – *burn* – is the only word which anybody ever uses in Scotland in reference to a smallish water-course (larger water-courses are *rivers*) locates it without a doubt in a clearly definable and understood linguistic, cultural and even national context. *Burnside* is a *Scottish* place name. At the same time, the same specific indicates one of the most favorite and most advantageous locations for any human settlement which is to have any real chance to prosper – near a stream, or at least near a source of water. As part of a compound name, *Burn-* speaks of the conscious and deliberate attention the namers (settlers ?) gave to this choice of site and to the prominence of this relatively major geographical feature in the vicinity of the human habitation. The generic *-side* divulges the precise directory relationship which that habitation has to the geographical feature: It is located by the *side* of a *burn*, not anywhere else. It is where its name says it is. That a name like *Burnside* has taken on new toponymic content in addition to its lexical meaning or, in suburbia or in a cityscape where the original watercourse may have become all but invisible, to the exclusion of that lexical meaning, is another matter which cannot concern us as part of this discussion, although it points to some other very interesting aspects of the so-called "self-explanatory" name, as does the shift of the stress to the generic *-side* which clearly distinguishes the name *Burnsíde* from its lexical counterpart *búrnside*. *Burnsíde* can therefore not be anything but a name although its word origins are never in doubt.

Of course, the preceding commentary and analysis will not have created the kind of excitement which might have followed the rigorously argued and amply supported revelation that *Oxton* in Berwickshire (*Hulfkeliston*, *Ulfkeliston* 1206) was originally "Ulfkell's settlement," that *Leadburn* in Midlothian (*Legbernard* c. 1128) is a late re-interpretation by English speakers of a Gaelic name meaning "Bernard's stone," or that *Ancrum* in Roxburghshire (*Alnecrumba* c. 1124, *Alncromb* c. 1150) represents a development of an early Celtic name meaning "bend on the

river *Ale* (*Alne* 1176).''[3] These three names are either misleading in their modern forms (*Oxton* and *Leadburn*) or completely opaque semantically (*Ancrum*). They masquerade in new guises, are not what they seem, whereas *Burnside* and the category of names for which it stands are exactly what they appear to be.[4] As individual etymological puzzles they have little or nothing to offer, but when taken out of their isolation they begin to speak of patterns, perceptions and polarities, and it is the very fact that their etymologies are not in doubt and do not have to be argued over that makes them such splendid evidence.

Burnside is given a much fuller sense when contrasted, on the one hand, with such names as *Birkenside, Bogside, Braeside, Damside, Denside, Dykeside, Gateside* (9 examples), *Glenside, Hillside, Kirkside, Knowside, Lochside* (4 examples), *Moss-side, Muirside, Myreside, Rigside, Roadside, Springside, Voeside, Waterside* and *Woodside* (5 examples), and, on the other hand, with *Burnfoot, Burnhead, Burnmouth* or even *Burnbrae, Burnbanks*. Not only does *-side* turn out to be an extremely popular toponymic generic (representing a popular location for a settlement in relation to a perceived geographical feature), but there are apparently other discernible locations along the course of a stream which by their very existence define *-side* as non-*foot,* non-*head,* non-*mouth,* non-*brae,* and non-*bank(s). Burnside* as an isolated named feature is inconceivable without other named features (actual or potential) such as *Bogside, Glenside, Hillside* and *Woodside,* or *Burnfoot, Burnhead,* and *Burnmouth.* Perhaps one might go even one step further and claim that a settlement name such as *Burnside* would be *impossible* without other settlements called *Bogside, Glenside, Hillside, Woodside, Burnfoot, Burnhead, Burnmouth,* and so on; for it seems reasonable to adopt the premise that it is not necessary for a natural feature to have been named *Burnside, Woodside,* or *Burnmouth* before such a name could have been transferred to a settlement built in or near such a location.[5] *Burnside, Woodside,* and *Burnmouth,* may, in many instances, well have meant or have had the onomastic potential to mean from the very beginning ''settlement on the side of a burn,'' ''settlement on the side of a wood,'' or ''settlement at the mouth of a burn,'' respectively. This is, however, a tangential consideration which does not affect the central thrust of the main argument advanced here which is rather an extension of the theory of ''onomastic fields''[6] than an exposition of how words become names or what the relationship may be between lexical meaning and onomastic content.[7] Name transfer from a natural feature to a man-made one is, of course, always possible but only provable in the rarest of cases where the evidence permits such proof.

The two generics found compounded with *Burn-* which most emphatically indicate a locational relationship to a water-course, in addition to *-side*, i.e. *-head* and *-foot*, make quite frequent appearances in combination with other topographical specifics, often the same as those to which *-side* may be added. Thus we have: *Bankhead, Bayhead, Boghead, Braehead(s), Carsehead, Craighead, Crofthead, Damhead(s), Denhead* (5 examples), *Drumhead, Dykehead* and *Dykegatehead, Edgehead, Fauldhead, Gatehead, Glenhead, Greenhead, Haughhead, Heughhead, Hillhead* (5 examples), *Holmhead, Knowehead, Lawhead, Loanhead, Lochhead, Mosshead, Muirhead* and *Parkhead* (4 examples each), *Pathhead, Sandhead, Townhead* (7 examples), *Wellhead(s)* and *Woodhead(s)*; also *Bankfoot, Bridgefoot, Croftfoot, Glenfoot, Greenfoot, Lochfoot, Muirfoot, Townfoot,* and *Waterfoot. Side, head,* and *foot* are paralleled by many names containing the element *end* which semingly does not occur with *Burn-*, perhaps because of the semantically equivalent formation *Burnmouth.* Names with the generic *-end* are, for example: *Bankend, Bogend, Bridgend* (10 examples), *Broomend, Campend, Causewayend, Craigend(s), Denend, Greenend, Hillend* (4 examples), *Lochend, Moorend, Mossend, Muirend, Riggend,* and *Woodend* (8 examples). *Bank,* too, is found with specifics other than *Burn-*, such as: *Carsebank, Causewaybank, Chapelbank, Deanbank, Kirkbank, Kirkfieldbank, Mossbank, Springbank, Wellbank,* and *Woodbank.*

These lists are, of course, not exhaustive but they are sufficiently representative to reveal that the geographical features which enter into these orientational names as specifics are not only small in number but convey the notion of landscape perceived in relatively simple terms – the hill, the wood, the burn, the bridge, the moor, the path or gate (road), the loch, the glen, etc. – and structured accordingly. On a taxonomical scale, these terms – and that applies to *bank, bog, dyke, dean, croft, dam, law, loan, knowe,* etc. as well – would be placed near the semantically least discriminatory end but this lack of semantic discrimination obviously does not disqualify them from providing an adequate or even satisfying, certainly a manageable, sense of landscape – quite the contrary. It is also worth noting that topographic terms adopted by Scottish English from Scottish Gaelic, such as *bog, brae, craig, drum, glen, loch,* and others, feature prominently in these toponymic permutations, as expressions of the very Scottishness of the landscape perceived and named.[8] Vernacular landscapes are never culturally neutral, neither lexically nor onomastically.[9]

This becomes even more apparent when we widen the selective meshes of our investigatory net and also consider names in which the place of the

lexical specific is taken by the name of a feature near the settlements in question. As far as the type *Burnside* is concerned, compounds containing names of water-courses are the most obvious examples, such as *Devonside, Earnside, Edenside, Leetside, Lochtyside, Lochyside, Ness-side,* or *Tarfside.* Similar names are found with the generics *-bank* (*Almondbank, Blyth Bank, Clydebank, Cononbank, Deebank, Edenbank, Gala Bank, Gogar Bank, Luggiebank, Lunan Bank, Manor Bank, Noranbank,* and *Teviotbank*), *-foot* (*Blackwaterfoot, Byreburnfoot, Caddonfoot, Elvanfoot,* and *Lendanfoot*), *-head* (*Kelvinhead, Lunanhead, Wanlockhead,* as well as *Lochdonhead, Lochearnhead,* and *Lochgilphead,* instead of the lexical *lochhead*), and *-mouth* (*Edenmouth, Eyemouth, Lossiemouth, Taymouth*). These toponymically oriented compounds for which there is, by their very nature, no equivalent or starting point in the lexicon make it clear that, as far as the creators of these settlement names were concerned, structured orientation in a landscape is achieved as much by relating to existing names as by discerning features picked out with the help of the topographic sector of the vocabulary. The inclusion of a river name like *Eden* or *Lunan* or *Teviot* gives the new settlement a specificity and locatory precision which words such as *burn* or *hill* or *loch* cannot provide. If the danger of creating an instant, easily misunderstood, hierarchy can be tolerated, one might be tempted to call *Devonside, Clydebank, Caddonfoot, Kelvinhead,* and *Lossiemouth secondary* names which would not exist, or would certainly lose much of their structural function, without the *primary* names *Devon, Clyde, Caddon, Kelvin,* and *Lossie* which they embrace. Such onomastic rather than lexical compounds also demonstrate that, despite their non-English or pre-English origins and their undoubted semantic opacity, *Devon, Clyde, Caddon, Kelvin,* and *Lossie* are toponymic (or hydronymic) ingredients of the English language and therefore on a par with *burn, hill,* or *loch,* and certainly with *Blackwater* and *Byreburn.*

That the equivalency of function is complete is shown by the onomastic contrasts *Edenside – Edenbank* and *Lunan Bank – Lunanhead* which parallel *Burnside – Burnbank* and *Burnbank – Burnhead,* respectively. *Clydebank – Clydeside* and *Deebank – Deeside* are other cases in point, although in these instances the *-side*-names represent districts or regions rather than well-defined settlements. When we look beyond the category of place names derived from river names we discover that primary names can generate quite a few secondary names in this fashion, as, for example, *Ayton Castle, Cocklaw, Mains,* and *-law; Caverton Hillhead, Mains* and *Mill; Fala Dam, Hill, Mains, Mill,* and *Cottages; Old Cambus East Mains, Townhead,* and *West Mains; or Preston Grange, Links, Mains,*

and *-pans*. The primary names *Ayton, Caverton, Fala, Old Cambus,* and *Preston* are also extant.

This principle of onomastic contrast is even more apparent and more common in place names in which a name, not a word, takes on the role of generic. In such names, distinctions and oppositions are achieved through appropriate lexical specifics, such as those referring to the points of the compass, so that we find *East* and *West Barns, Bennan, Blanerne, Brackly, Cairnbeg,* etc.; *Easter* and *Wester Balgedie, Broomhouse, Calcots, Cowden, Culmalundie, Friarton,* etc.; or *North* and *South Balfern, Belton, Boisdale, Braegar, Connel, Corston,* etc. Similar contrasts, usually supported by the lie of the land, are seen in such pairs as *Low* and *High Valleyfield; Lower* and *Upper Barvas, Bayble, Knockando, Largo,* and *Milovaig; Nether* and *Upper Blainslie, Coullie, Dysart,* and *Urquhart;* or *Nether* and *Over Hailes*. An original difference in size accounts for *Little* and *Meikle Clinterty, Pinkerton* and *Port of Spittal;* and earlier and later settlements are contrasted in *Old* and *New Belses, Deer, Downie, Pentland,* and *Scone*. The use of *Mid* and *Middle* implies a tripartite division perfectly represented by *East, Mid,* and *West Calder* but less so by *Mid* and *West Yell, Middle* and *Wester Norton,* and *Middle* and *Easter Softlaw*. In these last three instances, it is safe to assume that there used to be, or perhaps still are, an *East Yell,* an *Easter Norton,* and a *Wester Softlaw,* respectively, but is not necessary for the threesome to have been complete at one stage in all instances. *Little Ballinluig* is sufficiently distinguished from *Ballinluig, Little Brechin* from *Brechin, Little Haddo* from *Haddo,* and *Little Lour* from *Lour,* as not to call for the use of a contrasting epithet *Meikle;* the larger settlement is represented by the unmarked name in these cases. The same may well be true of *High Auldgirth* vs. *Auldgirth, High Blantyre* vs. *Blantyre, High Bonnybridge* vs. *Bonnybridge, High Burnside* (!) vs. *Burnside, Low Banton* vs. *Banton, Low Grange* vs. *Grange*, and perhaps even *Meikle Kilchattan* vs. *Urchany*, although for the use of *Meikle* the argument is not so easily supported. It is also well worthy of note that in the majority of examples the specific *New* is not paralleled by *Old,* just as the many *Newtons* or *Newtowns* do not have contrasting *Oldtons* or *Oldtowns,* and probably never had. *New Pitsligo* vs. *Pitsligo* expresses the relationship between these names and between the settlements to which they apply, quite adequately; the zero specific in *Pitsligo* has to be interpreted as "old."[10] In all these examples, however, flaws in the basic evidence created by incompleteness, the vagaries of survival and documenttion, and historical change make it impossible to arrive at clear-cut pronouncements in each case. Historically, for example, *Northberwick* was contrasted with *South-*

berwick; now the latter is always only *Berwick*, obscuring the meaning of *North-* in the former.

Some of the *Newtons* and *Newtowns* just mentioned may serve to build a bridge to our last category of names to be paraded, for both of them also occur quite frequently qualified by the name of the place which formed the "old town." Thus we find *Eccles Newton, Edrom Newton* and *Roxburgh Newtown,* But also *Newton Mearns* and *Newtown St. Boswells,* as well as the name type *Newton of Airlie, Newton of Arbirlot, Newton of Balcanquhal, Newton of Balcormo, Newton of Ballunie, Newton of Darnaway, Newton of Falkland*, etc., and *Newtown of Ardtoe, Newtown of Beltrees* and *Newtown of Swiney.* In Scotland, this type is formed on a Gaelic phrase model like *Allt Bad nan Clach* "burn of the clump of the stones," *Allt Creag Chait* "burn of the rock of the cat" or *Allt Uamha na Muice* "burn of the cave of the pig."[11] In its simplest form it occurs in Scottish English names as *Burn of Corrhatnich, Burn of Badenhilt, Burn of Berryhill* or, with other generics, *Mains of Balmanno, Bridge of Orchy, Grange of Barry, Heights of Auchterneed, Banks of Strichen, Moss of Barmvckity, Barns of Claverhouse, Boat of Garten, Greens of Coxton, Hill of Gutcher, Point of Coppister*, etc. What distinguishes the formation *Newton of Ballunie* from, let us say, *Mains of Balmanno* is the observation that lexical compounds such as *Newton* and *Newtown* occur much more frequently as independent place names than simple generics like *Mains.* In a way, therefore, *Newton of Ballunie* represents a kind of tertiary name because both components, generic and specific, are onomastic in nature. The Scottish map is full of illustrative examples in the appropriate regions, such as *Backmuir of New Gilston, Midtown of Barras, Bridgend of Lintrathen, Burnside (!) of Duntrune, Hilton of Cadboll, Eastertown of Auchleuchries, Kirkton of Glenisla, Milton of Balgonie, Muirton of Ardblair, Backhill of CLackriach, Bailiesland of Leuchars, Castletown of Blairfindy, Boreland of Southwick, Coaltown of Burnturk, Newlands of Clyth, Hatton of Eassie, Townhead of Greenlaw,* and many others. Among these there are several examples of binary oppositions, such as *Milton* and *Coaltown of Balgonie, Milton of Conon* and *West Grange of Conon, Milton of Finavon* and *West Mains of Finavon,* but usually the contrast is with names containing simple generics such as *Mains, Grange, Crofts,* and *Clachan* or, most frequently, with the unqualified primary name itself, like *Broomhill of Ord* vs. *Ord, Kirkton of Oyne* vs. *Oyne,* or *Burnside of Duntrune* vs. *Duntrune.*[11]

Such two-member clusters of related names may have been, or may still be, part of more diversified toponymic constellations involving several names; only a detailed examination of all the sources, contemporary and

historical, would show this. There is ample evidence, however, that many primary names have spawned quite a variety of secondary and tertiary names which can only be fully understood as part of such self-contained "mini-fields." Such clusters or fields, in their turn, link up with, exist through contrast with other clusters and fields and individual names, mutually defining and legitimizing each other. These are best identified and analyzed through observation and description of their synchronic function and usage, and through the strategies of investigation which, for their own purposes, resist the lure of etymological detective work and historical interpretation. If approached in this manner they have a wealth of information and insight to offer to the scholar, and their lack of teasing obscurity turns out to be anything but pedestrian blandness. There is no name in the world that does not excite in some way or other; one only has to be sensitive and open-minded enough to notice its appeal.

State University of New York at Binghamton

Notes

[1]For North America, this is demonstrated by the annual reports, ably edited by E.C. Ehrensperger for so many years, on published and projected work in the field of name studies.

[2]General Register Office, Edinburgh. *Place Names and Population Scotland.* An alphabetical list of populated places derived from the Census of Scotland (Edinburgh: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1967).

[3]For these names, see W.F.H. Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names: Their Study and Significance* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1976), pp. 18, 172, and 186.

[4]This does not mean that we can take these names at face value; their documentary record has to be thoroughly investigated. Otherwise *Primside* (Roxburghshire) which is *Prenwensete* in the Melrose Liber (i.e. Cumbric *pren wen* "white tree" plus Old English *sete* "seat"), or such Sutherland names as *Linside, Coulside* and *Fallside* which, as their Gaelic antecedents *Líonasaid, Culasaid* and *Fealasaid* show, contain Old Norse *setr* or *sætr*, could easily be mistaken for our type of name. *Moorfoot* (Midlothian), too, has to be discarded because early spellings such as *Morthwait* 1140–53, *Morthwayt* pre-1153, *Morthweth* 1174, *Mortwait* and *Mortwath* 1361 and others persuasively argue for a derivation from Old Norse *morþveit* "moor place."

[5]This is an argument which I put forward and developed in greater detail at a place-name symposium in Reykjavík (Iceland), August 11–13, 1983: "The Semantics of Place Names and Their Elements," *NORNA-rapporter,* 28 (1985), 60–71.

[6]See W.F.H. Nicolaisen, "Lexical and Onomastic Fields," *Proceedings of the Thirteenth International Congress of Onomastic Sciences,* Cracow 1978, Vol. II (Cracow, 1982), pp. 209–216.

[7]These, of course, are also very important considerations although not of direct relevance here. See, for example, W.F.H. Nicolaisen, "Words as Names," *Onoma,* 20 (1976), pp. 142–163.

[8]For the definition and derivation of such terms and of words peculiar to Scottish English see William Grant and David Murison (eds.), *The Scottish National Dictionary* (Edinburgh: The Scottish National Dictionary Association, 1931–1976).

[9]That this also applies to the onomastic structure of vernacular landscapes in literature is suggested by W.F.H. Nicolaisen, "An Onomastic Vernacular in Scottish Literature," in: J. Derrick McClure (ed.), *Scotland and the Lowland Tongue* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1983), pp. 209–218.

[10]The opposite is true of *Old Aberdeen* vs. *Aberdeen, Old Montrose* vs. *Montrose, Old Meldrum* vs. *Meldrum,* and similar ones; in these names the unmarked partner in a pair is the more modern.

[11]For a detailed account of the origins of this type of name in Scotland see W.F.H. Nicolaisen, "The Type *'Burn of-'* in Scottish Hydronymy," *Scottish Studies,* 3 (1959), pp. 92–102; "Names Containing the Preposition *'o ' '' Scottish Studies,* 4 (1960), pp. 195–205; " *'Hill of-'* and *'Loch of-','' Scottish Studies,* 9 (1965), pp. 175–182; also *Scottish Place-Names,* pp. 56–64.