Elements of Celtic Place-names

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T̶HE CELTIC CULTURES and languages of the Atlantic fringe of
Europe have been in a state of constant decline for several cen-
turies. The Celtic languages of Cornwall and the Isle of Man are
practically extinct, the Gaelic of Scotland is spoken by some 75,500
persons, mainly in the Western Isles, while in Ireland, in spite of
government encouragement, only some 500,000 claim to speak
Gaelic, most of them, however, not using it in everyday life. In Wales
the language has been more tenacious and around 656,000 people
listen to their own Welsh radio and television programs and read
their own Welsh newspapers and novels. The greatest number still
speaking a Celtic language, however, are the Bretons and, in spite of
no encouragement and even opposition from the French government,
about one million of the inhabitants of Western Brittany still speak
the language that they brought with them from Britain between the
fifth and ninth centuries.

The Celtic languages are divided into two main groups, the Goi-
delic or Gaelic and the Brythonic. The former includes Irish, Scot-
tish and Manx Gaelic; the latter Welsh, Cornish and Breton. These
two groups are called the Q and P dialects respectively because of
the different development in each of the P.I.E. labio-velar stops. In
the Gaelic group P.I.E. * k *u* remains a velar stop (c/q), but be-
comes a voiceless labial stop (p) in the Brythonic group. Thus the
Irish Gaelic word for *five* is *cuig*, the Scottish *coig*, and the Manx
queig, whereas the Welsh is *pump*, the Cornish *pymp*, and the Breton
pemp. Compare also Irish and Scottish *ceann*, Manx *kione*, with
Welsh and Cornish *pen*, Breton *penn* "head." Another phonetic
feature distinguishing the two groups is the development of an
original *s* to an *h* in the Brythonic group, but its retention as *s* in
Gaelic; e.g. Scottish *sean*, but Welsh *hen* "old."

The orthography of the Celtic languages presents some problems
for non-linguists. Both Scottish and Irish Gaelic have a complex

orthography, based on a rule which insists that a consonant must be
flanked by vowels of the same quality, either "broad" (*a,o,u,*) or
"narrow" (*e,i*). Many consonants become either aspirated, softened
or muted (shown in orthography by the addition of an *h*). These are
the so-called "mutations" which occur in all Celtic languages, sub-
ject to certain grammatical rules, but are most obvious in the
written forms Breton, Cornish and Manx, where a more phonetic
orthography was adopted. Manx in fact took its ortography from
English, while that of Breton was influenced by French. Welsh de-
veloped its own spelling conventions, more phonetic, however, than
those of Irish or Scottish Gaelic.

Without a knowledge of the mutations to which a given letter is
subject it is difficult to use a Celtic dictionary, especially as all the
mutations occur only at the beginning of a word. In Breton, for
example, the letter *p* may occur as *b* or *f*, *k* as *g* or *c'h*, *t* as *d* or *z*, m
as *v*, *b* as *v* or *p*, at the beginning of a noun, adjective or verb. This
complicated variety may result in some seeming confusion in the
form of place-name elements; for exemple, *bihan* "little" may appear
as *vihan*, or *koad* "wood, forest" as *goad* or *c'hoad*.

Although numerous Celtic place-names appear in areas where a
Celtic language is no longer spoken, many of these place-names
retain their original form with little adulteration. This statement is
especially true for a large part of the Scottish Highlands and most
of Wales and Brittany. In Ireland, Cornwall and on the Isle of Man,
however, the influence of English has caused the adulteration of
most place-names; for example, *Slievenaman* for *Sliabh na mBan*
"mountain of women," or *Donegal* for *Dun na nGall* "fort of the
strangers." Many Breton names have been gallicized in their spel-
ling, but their basic forms have been little altered, such as *Paimpol*
for *Penpoul*, *Quimper* for *Kemper*, *Quintin* for *Kintin*, *Concarneau*
for *Konk-Kernev* "corner of Cornouaille" (a region of Brittany be-
aring the same name as Cornwall).

In all these areas many Celtic place-names have been replaced by
names of English or French type, in some cases translations of the
original name, as *Maryborough* for *Port Laoighise*, *Queenstown* for
Cobh in Ireland; *Holyhead* for *Caergybi*, *Fishguard* for *Abergwaun*,
Welshpool for *Y Trallwng*, *Swansea* for *Abertawe* in Wales; and
Châteauneuf-du-Faou for *Kastell-Nevez*, *Saint-Michel-en-Grèves* for
Lokmikael-an-Traez "cell of St. Michael on the shore" in Brittany.

The place-names of Scotland are more complex in origin than those of the other Celtic regions. The Highlands have place-names which are predominantly of Gaelic origin with the exception of some Scandinavian names in the North-West, particularly in the Hebrides and in Caithness, the Orkneys and the Shetlands, where little Celtic culture ever existed in historical times. It should be noted that Scandinavian names are also found in Ireland and Wales. The Scottish Lowlands, including the whole east coast, have names of predominantly English origin; but there are some interesting survivals of Celtic place-names even in this area, not only of Gaelic origin but also of the Brythonic type, testifying to the existence of tribes speaking a form early Welsh in southern Scotland in the early centuries of our era. Examples of these names are *Penicuik*, Welsh *Pen y Gog* "head or hill of the cuckoo," *Prenlas*, Welsh *Pren Glas* "green tree," *Ochilree*, Welsh *Uchel Dref* "upper farm," *Trevercraig*, Welsh *Tref yr Graig* "farm of the rock," a name often encountered in Wales in the form of *Tre'rcraig*. In the Edinburgh area Watson counted no less than 52 place-names of Old Welsh and 89 Of Gaelic origin.[1] Thus is the tenacity of place-names well illustrated as Welsh was not spoken in that area after the tenth century nor Gaelic after the sixteenth. Watson also give ssome examples of places which have had Old Welsh, Gaelic and English names at different periods.

In general the elements of Celtic place-names differ little in significance from those of other languages. Elements of topography form perhaps the largest group. The Celtic languages, especially Irish and Scottish Gaelic, have a very rich topographical vocabulary, especially for various types of mountains and hills. In Scottish Gaelic the terms *beinn, sliabh, monadh, cnoc, torr, tulach, meall, maol, carn, tom, stuc* and others refer to mountains and hills with varying qualities of appearance, height, steepness, ruggedness, etc., for which exact English equivalents do not exist.

Perhaps the most unique feature of Celtic place-names are the elements inherited from the early Celtic church and its saints. The early saints were a much-travelled group and the names of several of them are common to several or all of the Celtic countries. St. Cadog appears in place-names in Wales, Brittany, Cornwall and

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[1] William J. Watson, *History of the Celtic Place-names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926), pp. 132, 135.

Scotland, St. Kentigern in Scotland, Wales and Cumberland (once the home of a branch of the Welsh as the name suggests; the land of the Cumbrians or Cymry). St. Brigid appears in Ireland and Wales, in the latter as St. Ffraid, as does St. Colman and St. Ronan, who also appears in Brittany. However, the countries having the greatest number of saints' names in common are Wales, Cornwall und Brittany. St. David appears in place-names of all three, usually as Divy or Dewi, as do Saints Hernin, Carantoc, Petroc, Congar and Brioc. In Brittany perhaps the most common saint's name is that of St. Yves (Ewan or Euzen in Breton), a name also appearing in Cornwall. This list by no means exhaust the catalog of Celtic saints. It has been said that the saints of Brittany are innumerable, as the stars of heaven.[2]

Saints names generally appear with a prefix identifying their church or cell. In Scotland and Ireland *cill*, anglicized to *kil*, from Latin *cella* "cell," is the most common one; e.g. *Kilbrennan* "cell of St. Brendan," and *Kilmichael* "cell of St. Michael." In Brittany *log* or *loc* is also a common prefix, signifying a cell or hut, as in *Lokmalo* "cell of St. Malo." In Wales, Cornwall and Brittany *llan* or *lan* is the most frequently occurring religious prefix. Originally it meant an enclosure, as it still does in Scotland and on the Isle of Man, but by extension it came to signify the church adjacent to the enclosure or field in which the monks grew their food supply. Welsh examples are *Llansantffraid* "church of St. Brigid" and *Llanfihangel* "church of St. Michael," *Fihangel* being a mutation of *Mihangel* "Michael." In Brittany we have *Langristin* "church of St. Christine," *Gristin* again being a mutation of *Kristin;* in Cornwall *Lanmorran* "church of St. Morgan"; and among the few examples in Scotland, *Lanbride* "church of St. Bride."

The commonest prefixes in Celtic place-names appertaining to cultural features of the landscape refer to farms and homesteads. In Ireland, Scotland and on the Isle of Man this prefix appears in the form of *baile, bally* or *balley*. This word applies not only to individual farms but also to agricultural villages; in Ireland it also signifies a "townland," the smallest administrative unit. Evans claims that there are no less than 5,000 townlands in Ireland with names

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[2] For a study of saints' names in Wales, see E. G. Bowen, *The Settlements of the Celtic Saints in Wales* (Cardiff, 1954).

beginning with *bally* and 2,000 beginning with *knock*, Gaelic *cnoc* "hill."[3] In Brittany the prefix is *ker*, occurring in other Celtic lands, often in its original meaning of "fort" or "camp." It forms such names as *Kerian* "farm of Ian (John)" or *Kerstephan* "farm of Steven." *Ker* can also apply to a group of farms, as can the Welsh and Cornish equivalent *tre, tref* or *trev*.[4] Examples are Welsh *Tre-ffynnon* "farm or village of the spring" and Cornish *Trewartha* "upper farm." In Brittanny the prefix *tre* or *trev* is also found, but it is less common than *ker*, and is also used to denote the division of a parish gallicized as *trève*, as in the instance of *Trev-nevez* "new trève." Another common administrative prefix denoting a parish is *plou*, as in *Plounevez* "new parish" or *Plougastel* "parish of the castel."

Some terms referring to earlier practices of transhumance in Celtic countries are still to be found in place-names from most areas. In Wales a summer shieling is known as a *hafod* (*haf* "summer"), while the main or winter farm is the *hendre*, literally "old farm." In Cornwall the corresponding terms are *hewas* and *hendra*. In Ireland the shieling was known as the *buaile*, anglicized to *booley*, and in Scotland as the *airidh*. The Scottish term applies more generally to hill pasture, while its Manx equivalent *aeree* or *eary* has by extension come to mean a moor. On the Isle of Man the term *bwoaillee* is not exactly synonymous with Irish *buaile*, but is closer to the Scottish *buaile* and refers to a fold or pen, not necessarily in upland areas.

Other peculiarities of Celtic agriculture are reflected in the terms applied to different categories of farmland. In most Celtic-speaking areas farmland was divided into an infield, with the soil kept in condition for continuous cropping by the application of farm manure and seaweed, and an outfield, generally on the lower slopes of the hills or in areas of poorer soil, where crops were sown only at intervals without manuring and where cattle or sheep were grazed for the rest of the time. Beyond these fields stretched the common grazing lands on the moors and hill-sides. No Gaelic term for the infield seems to have been common over any large area. Uhlig re-

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[3] E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (New York, 1957), p. 28.

[4] In Wales *pentref* is an alternative affix denoting a village, though not an agricultural one.

ports the term *geadhail* from Jura,[5] while *faaigh* was used on the Isle of Man. In Cornwall the infield was known as the *gwel*, and in Wales as the *cae hen* or "old field." In Scotland the infield was divided into strips or rigs, known individually as a *gead* or *iomaire*, while potatoes were grown on both the infield and outfield in "lazy beds," known as *feannagan*. In Brittany the farmland was divided into the cultivated *douar gounid* or *meziou* and the intermittently cultivated *douar frost* or *douar skod*. Beyond the outfields lay the rough pastures, shared in common, and known in Scotland as the *coitcheann* and in Wales as the *cytir* (both meaning "common"), and in Brittany as the *menez*. On modern Welsh farms the rough pastures are known as the *ffriddoedd* (singular *ffridd*), and are an enclosed area of the *gwaun* "moor."[6]

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Appendix

The following list does not by any means try to include all the elements likely to be encountered in the place-names appearing on the topographic map of a given area, but is intended as a guide to the main elements common to all Celtic-speaking regions. However, an attempt is made to show differences in meaning that often exist between words of similar form in the different Celtic languages.

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[5] Harald Uhlig, "Typen kleinbäuerlicher Siedlungen auf den Hebriden," *Erd-kunde*, Vol. XIII, No. 2 (May, 1959), pp. 102–103.

[6] For a detailed account of terms and names connected with Celtic agriculture and rural settlements in Ireland, Wales, Cornwall and on the Isle of Man see Pierre Flatres, *Geographie Rurale de Quatre Contrees Celtiques* (Rennes, 1957), passim.

	Welsh	Cornish	Breton	Irish	Scottish	Manx	
Earth Mountain	daear mynydd ban*	dor menit meneth	douar menez monid	talamh sliabh (slieve) beann*	talamh sliabh beinn (ben) beann* monadh	thalloo slieau beinn**	*peak, horn. **occurs only once on the Isle of Man.
Summit	copa pen	bar pen cryben	barr kern kribenn	barr mullach	barr mullach	baare mullagh	
Head, Top	pen	pen	penn	ceann	ceann (kin)	kione (ken)	
Cirque	cwm	cum*	—	cumar**	coire	—	*occurs also in Cumberland. **ravine or tract of hills and lowland.
Gap, Pass	bwlch	aswy	hent-don	mam bragha bearna	bealach mam bearn	doarlish baarney	
Uplands	bre ucheldir blaenau	bre	bre	talamh ard	braighe	braid	
Moor	rhos gwaun morfa	ros gun hal	ros geun lann	ros* riasg mointeach	ros* mointeach	aeree eary reeast	*wooded promentory, wood, flat land.

	Welsh	Cornish	Breton	Irish	Scottish	Manx
Hill¹	bryn moel garth	bryn bron bre garth	bre(n) run kree'h torgenn	monadh (money) cnoc (knock) meall	monadh cnoc meall mam	tul(a) cronk ard
Mound, Tumulus	crug twmpath	cruk (creeg) tomen rynen	krug kree'h roz	tulach mollog	tulach tom torr	crongan
Rocky hill	twr	tor	tor*	tor	torr	—
Slope of hill	llethr	leder ryn	pantenn	learg	learg leitir leathad	liargach largy lhergy
Cliff	clogwyn	als leder clegar	tevenn	allt aill	bearradh creag	eaynin
Cave	cilfach	fow fogo (g)ogo	mougeo	uaimh uachais	uaimh	ooig
Rock	cerreg craig	carrek	karrek	creag	carraig creag sgeir*	carrick craig

*side of a hill.

*in the sea.

⁷ The terms given here by no means exhaust the very large number existing in all the Celtic languages for hills of all types.

	Welsh	Cornish	Breton	Irish	Scottish	Manx	
Stone	maen	men	maen	cloch	clach	clagh	
Flagstone	llech	leghven	lec'h	leac	leac	leac	
Valley	nant glyn ystrad dyffryn	nans glyn	nant traonienn	gleann srath*	gleann srath* (strath)	glion coan	*broad river-valley, field along river.
Hollow	pant	pans	izelenn	lag(an)	lag(an) glac	lag(an)	
Hole	twll	toll	toul	toll	toll	towl	
Plain	gwastatir maes	gun (goon)	maez	magh (moy) clar	magh blar	cheer-rea	
Marsh, Swamp	cors gwern*	cors gwern kersek kenak	gwern	corrach (curragh) corcagh bogach eanach**	boglach carr easg	curragh boglagh	*also meadow or alder-grove. **also uncut portion of peat bog.
Peat bog	mawnog	towarghek	taouarc'heg	moin(tean) portach	moine	moainee	
Sea	mor	mor	mor	muir fairrge	muir fairge cuan	mooir farrkey keayn	

	Welsh	Cornish	Breton	Irish	Scottish	Manx	
Island	ynys	enys	enez	inis, oilean	inis*, eilein	ellan	*also pastureland.
Coast	arfordir	glan, cost	arvor, aod	oirear, (oirthear)	oirthir	ooir, (or)	
Headland	trwyn	tron	beg	ros*, rinn	ros*, rinn, sron	stroin, rinn**	*also wood. **mountain ridge.
Peninsula	gorynys	gorenys	gourenez	leith-inse	tairbeart*	—	*also isthmus.
Cape	pentir	pentyr	penn-tir	ceanntire	ceann-tire	kione	
Bay	bae	plek-mor, zawn*	bae, pleg-mor	badh, cuan, camas	bagh, camus, oban*	bei	*cove.
Harbor Port	porth(fa), porthladd	porth	haor, aber	caladh, cuan	port, cala	purt	
Beach, Shore	traeth	treth*	traez, aod	traigh	traigh	traie	*also ferry.
Stony beach	—	—	—	cladach	cladach	claddagh*	*land along river.
Flat land by the sea	—	morrab	—	machaire	machair	mooiragh	
Sand	tywod	treth, growan*	traez	gainimh	gaineamh	geinniagh	*coarse sand.

	Welsh	Cornish	Breton	Irish	Scottish	Manx	
Water	dwr	dour	dour	uisce	uisge	ushtey	
Lake	llyn	lyn logh (lo)	lenn loc'h**	loch* (lough)	loch*	logh	*also arm of the sea. **also a marsh.
Pond, Pool	pwll llyn	pol lyn	poull* lenn stank	poll linn	poll linne**	poyll lhing dubbyr	*also hole or ditch. **also arm of the sea.
River	afon	avon	aven ster	abha	abhainn	awin	
Mouth of river, Confluence	aber	hayl	aber	inbhear	inbhir (inver)	—	
Stream	(cor)nant afonig	streth gover	gwaz-dour	sruth alt*	sruth allt	strooan alt	*valley-side or cliff.
Waterfall	rhaeadr sgwd	lam dour	lammdour	eas	eas	eas	
Bank	glan	glan	glann	bruach	bruach	broogh	
Fountain, Spring	ffynnon	fenten	feunteun	fuaran	fuaran	farrane	
Wood	coed	cos	koad	coill	coille	keyll	

	Welsh	Cornish	Breton	Irish	Scottish	Manx	
Grove	celli llwyn	kelly lon gwedhennek	brouskoad	fas-choill garran doire*	coille bad doire	keyll	*oak grove.
Tree	pren coeden	pren gwedhen	prenn	craobh crann	craobh crann	billey	
Fern, Bracken	rhedyn	reden	raden	raithneach	raineach	renniagh	
City,[8] Town	tref dinas	tre	ker* pennger	cathair baile mor	cathair baile(-mor)	balley	*also a farm.
Village[8]	tref pentref*	treveglos gwyk	keriadenn touinell	baile (bally) clachan**	baile clachan	balley	*non-agricultural. **in Ulster.
Farm[8]	tref hendre* tyddyn**	trev hendra*	tre ker	baile	baile	balley	*"winter" farm as opposed to hafod and hevas. **isolated farm.
House[8]	ty	chy jy	ti	teach	tigh	thie	

[8] There is an obvious connection between many of the terms for "town," "village," "farm," and "fort." Compare *caer* and *ker* with *cathair*. The Irish *lios* is cognate with Welsh *llys*, Breton *lis* and Cornish *lys*, a "court" or "palace." Scottish *lios* is used with the meaning of "enclosure" or "garden." For a detailed classification of some of these terms see Flatrès, *op.cit.*, pp. 221–225.

	Welsh	Cornish	Breton	Irish	Scottish	Manx	
Fort	caer din	ker (car) din	krenv(lec'h)	dun rath brugh** lios	dun rath	doon* peeley	*enclosed space. **also a district.
Cottage, Hut	bwth cwt	crowjy	pennti ti-soul*	bothan	bothan	bwaane	*thatched cottage.
Croft	crofft	crow	—	croit	croit	croitt (crot)	
Summer shieling, Fold	hafod	hewas	—	buaile (booley)	airidh buaile**	aeree* bwoaillee**	*moor. **fold.
Sty, Pen	crau	crow chall**	kraou* buorz**	cro mainnear	cro mainnir fang	croa	*stable. **for cattle.
Field	maes parc cae	maes park gwel	maez park	machaire (maghery) achadh gort pairc	machair achadh magh gort paire	magher	
Earth bank, Wall	clawdd	ke	kleuz	claidhe	callaid*	cleigh (cleiy)	*fence, hedge.

	Welsh	Cornish	Breton	Irish	Scottish	Manx	
Meadow	gwaun dol ton	pras ton	prad	cluain (clon) moinfhear	cluain lon faiche	lheeanee	
Barn	ysgubor	skyber	dourndi	sciobol	sgiobal sabhal	soalt	
Road	ffordd heol	ford	hent	bothar bealach*	rathad	raad bayr	*also a pass.
Bridge	pont	pons	pont	droichead	drochaid	droghad	
Ford	rhyd	res	roudour	ath	ath	aah	
Well	pydew ffynnon	pyth fenten	puns	tobar	tobar	chibbyr	
Cairn	carn	carn	karn	carn	carn	carn	
Church	eglwys	eglos	iliz	eagluis ceall (cill) domhnach	eaglais cill	keeil	
Church enclosure	llan	lan	lann	lann	lann	lann	
Hermit's cell	lloc*	lok penytty teghyjy	log	ceall (cill) diseart	cill diseart	keeil	*monastery.

	Welsh	Cornish	Breton	Irish	Scottish	Manx
Cemetery	claddfa mynwent	encladhfa corflan	bered gwered	roilig	reidhlic cladh	ruillic
Parish⁹	plwyf	plu	plou	sgireachd	sgire(achd)	skeerey
Township, Townland	tref	trev	trev	baile	baile	treen
High	uchel	ughel arth	uhel	ard	ard	ard
Upper¹⁰	uchaf	(g)wartha	uc'hel huel(la)	—	—	—
Lower¹⁰	isaf	yselhe	izel(la)	—	—	—
Large, Big	mawr	meor	meur	mor	mor	mooar
Little, Small	bach bychan	byghan (bean)	bihan	beag	beag	beg
Rough	garw	garow	garv	garbh	garbh	garee*
North	gogledd	cleth	hanternoz steren	tuath	tuath	twoaie

*stony land.

⁹ These units do not correspond exactly. See Flatrès, op.cit., pp. 179–217.
¹⁰ Generally applied to farms. In Wales, Cornwall, Scotland and on the Isle of Man the terms for "big" and "little" are more commonly applied to pairs of farms.

	Welsh	Cornish	Breton	Irish	Scottish	Manx
South	de(au)	dyghow	kreisteiz dehou	deas	deas	jiass
East	dwyrain	howl-derghevel	refer sav-heol	soir	ear	shiar niar
West	gorllewin	howlsedhas	kornog kuz-heol	siar	(s)iar	sheear neear
Black	du	dew	du	dubh	dubh	doo
White	gwyn	gwyn	gwenn	ban	ban	bane
Red	rhudd coch	rud cough	ruz	ruadh dearg	ruadh dearg	ruy jiarg
Green,[11] *Grey, Blue*	glas llwyd gwrm	glas lus	glas louet	glas liath gorm	glas liath gorm	glass leeah gorrym
Brown	gwinau llwyd gwrm	gell	gell	donn	donn	dhoan
Yellow	melyn	melen	melen	buidhe	buidhe	buigh

11 No clear distinction exists in the Celtic languages between "green," "grey" and "blue," and vocabulary applying to colors is generally primitive. *Liath* and its cognates generally refer to "dark grey," while *gorm* is generally "blue" but also "green." Welsh *gwrm* is "dark brown" or "dark blue."