

THE MOUNTAIN NAMES OF SCOTLAND—II.

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HAVING considered in a previous article the mountain names of Scotland from the historical point of view, it may now be of interest to consider them as names pure and simple; to look at their topographical distribution on the map as it stands to-day. It would obviously be impossible to take into account *all* the names, which must run into several thousands, and for the purposes of this analysis I shall take the list of "Munroes"—*i.e.*, all the mountains in Scotland of 3,000 feet and over—as set forth in the "General Guide Book of the Scottish Mountaineering Club." This list comprehends 544 names, and inasmuch as it includes almost all the best-known and most prominent hills in the Highlands and Islands, it may fairly be considered as representative of the whole.

First I shall take the generic names, and afterwards the specific ones.

Admiring the beauty as well as the interest of the mountains as nowadays we do, we might expect them to have imaginative or romantic names, particularly since these names were given, in the vast majority of cases, by people of pure Celtic blood, and the imaginative fervour of the Celts was a byword even as long ago as Classical times. Also, as a mere matter of curiosity, it must often occur to us to wonder what lies behind the tongue-twisting Gaelic syllables that sprawl across the map, and defy all efforts at pronunciation! It may be as well to say at once that a search for imaginative or poetical names will not be rewarded, though we shall discover much that is of interest otherwise. Nor is the reason far to seek. The people who gave the mountains their names *lived* among them: to them they were commonplace, they had no atmosphere of excitement or mystery, and no memories of long carefree days of enjoyment centred around

them. The idea of climbing them for pleasure, without some definite motive connected with hunting or herding, would have been unthinkable. As we shall see, the mountains were named from a purely utilitarian and practical standpoint, as to-day we name streets and squares. Only very rarely were considerations of beauty, significant form, and the like allowed to influence the choice.

To consider, then, the use of primary or generic words. We find that about 60 per cent. of all the mountains in Scotland over 3,000 feet listed in Munro's Tables have names which include the following six generic words—Beinn, Sgùrr, Càrn, Meall, Stob, and Creag, which occur in this order of frequency. The Beinns come first, but with only a small preponderance over the Sgùrrs—81 to 77. There is then a big drop to the Càrns—55, and a smaller drop to the Mealls—43, which are almost equal in numbers to the Stobs—41. Finally come the Creags, with 29 examples. By dividing these regionally, and considering their distribution over the country with reference to the meanings of the names, we should arrive at a fair estimate of the general character of the mountains to be met with throughout the Highlands.

Thus if we divide the country roughly into five areas—North, South, East, West, and Central—we find that the Beinns (rounded head or top), though they do occur in all areas, do so most frequently in the South and East. As we should expect, the Sgùrrs (sharp, steep hill: pinnacle) occur overwhelmingly in the West; next most commonly in the North-west and Centre, while the Southern district has only 5 examples, and in the whole Eastern area, including all the country east of the Perth-Inverness railway, there are only 4. On the other hand, again as we should expect, the position is reversed as regards the Càrns (heap or pile: heap-like hill). Out of a total of 55, no less than 31 are in the Eastern area, and their numbers decrease steadily as we move West and North. There are 11 in the Central region, and only one in the North. The Mealls (shapeless hill: mound) and Stobs (prickle: thorn: pointed hill) are almost confined to the South and South-west, with some examples in the Centre. The Creags (crag

or quarry-like hill) are in the East and West and hardly appear in the North or South.

Of the other generic names, the following are the commonest, though they are not numerous enough to consider regionally. *Sròn* (nose, promontory, headland) occurs 12 times in the Tables; *Mullach* (roof or ridge-like hill) occurs 9 times; *Stùc* (little hill jutting out from a greater, steep on one side, rounded on the other) occurs 7 times; *Aonach* (moory ridge) occurs 6 times; *Bidean*, *Mam*, *Maol*, and *Tom* occur each 5 times. There are, of course, many names not included in this list or even in the Tables; the variety of such generic names for mountains and parts of mountains is so great as to provide enough material for an article in itself.

Turning now to the secondary names, an analysis of these as they appear in the Tables yields the following results. (I should say that not *every* name is considered. A few are of doubtful authenticity, and some are still a puzzle to Gaelic scholars.)

In tabular form: (1) colour words or names indicating colour occur 122 times; (2) names involving natural features (plants, trees, rocks, water, etc.) occur 109 times; (3) names of a descriptive or adjectival type (great, small, rough, etc.) occur 105 times; (4) names which include objects (parts of the body, domestic utensils, etc.) occur 76 times; (5) names of animals or birds occur 49 times; (6) names involving people or personal names occur 41 times; (7) last of all come abstract names, occurring 11 times. Taking the list as a whole, nine separate words occur in the names of the mountains 10 times or more, viz., *mòr* (great), 35 times; *dubh* (black), 21; *dearg* (red), 20; *glas* (grey), 17; *beag* (little), 16; *garbh* (rough), 15; *liath* (grey), 14; *loch*, 11; and *clach* (stone), 10.

Taking the types of name separately, it will be seen that colour words are the most frequent of all. Of the colours themselves, grey in its various forms (*glas*, *liath*, *odhar*) is the commonest with 34 examples; red (*dearg*, *ruadh*) comes next with 23. Then black (*dubh*) with 21, the commonest single colour word. Then white (*bàn*, *geal*, *fionn*) with 19; yellow (*buidhe*) follows with 9 examples; blue (*gorm*)

and speckled (breac, riabhach) 7 each, and finally comes green (uaine) with 2 examples, both due to peaks having been named after "green" lochs in the corries beneath them. Secondly, the natural features class includes trees, of which the commonest is the rowan (caorrann), occurring in the names of 8 different mountains. Eleven mountains are named after lochs in their corries or the glen below; 6 are named after waterfalls, 5 after passes, and so on. Thirdly, of adjectival name elements, great (mòr) is by far the commonest, occurring in the Tables no less than 35 times, while small (beag) occurs less than half as frequently. Other adjectives occurring more than once are rough (garbh), middle, notched, curved, cold, slippery. An interesting group of 11 names is connected with noise, either of the wind or water, of the roaring of stags, of singing, shouting, or weeping (coronach). Seven mountains have names suggesting that they were associated with such human activities as hunting, fowling, singeing or burning, or that their slopes were used as a place of assembly or of refuge.

Fourthly, the class of object names includes many parts of the body; breast (8 times), head (4 times), shoulder-blade, tongue, teeth, heel, finger, shank, and others, 28 in all. Also such domestic articles as butter, basket, shoe, hat, knife, fork, file, box, couch, table, cup, wine. Clearly not all of these names were used because they were suggested by mountain shapes. Some play is given to fancy, as when, for instance, mist round a mountain top is likened to a hood, as in Beinn a' Chochuill. Fifteen names, like plough, saddle, byre, forge, furrow, millstone, refer to the business of agriculture and farming. In a group of their own come the following: castle, shield, sword, spear, plunder, and treasure-trove. Sword and spear seem to require interpretation. Perhaps the mountains so called were connected in some way with a remarkable weapon; perhaps Slioch is not really derived from "sleagh," a spear, as some have supposed.

Fifthly, of the animals from which mountains have been named, the commonest, as we should expect, is the deer, with seven examples. Then come goats, horses, sheep, and

cattle. The boar, the wolf, and the otter (dòbhran, Beinn, Dòrain) each occur once, but birds receive less attention than we might expect—eight in all to thirty-nine animals, and the list is completed by two marine creatures, the whelk and the limpet. It is difficult to explain the presence of these.

Sixthly, of personal names there are three Donalds who have mountains named after them, three Kenneths, and two Findlays. Of the rest some are quite modern. The following occupations also are represented. Mason and shepherd (twice each) and hunter. These we should expect, and indeed their absence would be surprising; but it would be interesting to know why and after what king Càrn an Rìgh was named, or what monk is commemorated in Beinn Mhanach. In addition, we have a mountain memorial to a priest, a cleric, a soldier, an archer, and (possibly) a dairymaid. There are three "maiden" mountains, two "black men," "old men" and "old women," and one instance of "young men." There is one example each of a Scotsman, the Fianna, the Caledonians (but this is doubtful), and the Spaniards. This last, Sgùrr nan Spainteach, commemorates the battle of Glen Shiel in the rebellion of 1715, the last battle fought on British soil against a foreign foe.

Finally we come to what is perhaps the most interesting, though certainly the most meagre and disappointing, group of all. These are the abstract or metaphorical names; names which have no practical or utilitarian motive behind them. There are only eleven of them, but they raise some interesting questions.

It is perhaps not so very hard to imagine why three mountains are named after Hell, while only one—and probably not even one, since the meaning of the name "Nevis" is still extremely doubtful—is linked with Heaven. Ben Nevis is popularly construed as "Hill of Heaven," and if this is correct it may mean no more than that it seems to fill the sky, and simply implies "Heaven touching." But what is the reason for the impliedly unenviable reputation of the Beinn Iutharns, one in the Laggan district, and two near the Cairnwell? Why should they particularly be associated with the nether regions? The Gaelic word for

Hell (Ifrionn, Iutharn), surprisingly enough, also signifies "coldness," and this may perhaps have something to do with the explanation of the name as applied to a mountain. Ben Wyvis, too, although it may simply mean "mountain of storm," has been interpreted in more sinister fashion as "mountain of terror." It has been suggested that its bulk—certainly considerable—was the cause of the terror it was supposed to inspire; but this hardly seems satisfactory. It is even possible that Nevis and Wyvis are a cognate pair of names derived from a root meaning "ugliness" or "shapelessness," and this is supported to some extent by their both being particularly bulky and massive hills. Two mountains are called "old." Again it is a puzzle to know why they should have been singled out in this way. Scientific geology was born in Scotland, but it is hardly conceivable that in the days when these names were given one mountain should have been thought to have been standing longer than another! Carn Aosda, near the Cairnwell, with its bare, stone-littered slopes, has a certain likeness perhaps to a bald head, and the "maol" in Glas Maol opposite, used adjectivally, means "baldness." But what of Seana Braigh—the "old brae"—in Ross-shire? Was it named so by people who had once lived near it, and having moved to a distance, referred to it, half-affectionately perhaps, as the "old" hill, the hill they used to know well? Probably this is to read too much into the word, and it is better to say simply that we do not know. Still more difficult is it to understand why the summit of Lochnagar should have been looked upon with such dislike as to have earned the name it now bears, happily concealed beneath the innocent-looking syllable "cac." And was Stob Coire Sgreamhach, which means "disgusting" or "nauseating" corrie, so called because it is difficult to keep a footing while walking on it, or because it inspires giddiness, with all its unpleasant symptoms?

So far, possibly with one exception, the list of abstract names shows a spirit strikingly derogatory to the mountains, and it is pleasant to be able to complete it with two names—Beinn Eibhinn and Càrn a' Choire Bhoideach—meaning respectively "joyful" and "beautiful." It is only justice

that the second of these should be situated in the White Mounth district, to offset the bad nominal reputation of Lochnagar! But there may be no connection between the two. And Coire Bhoidheach if beautiful and shapely is not more so than many other corries or the mountains which contain them. One would have expected many more such names: Gaelic is certainly rich in words expressing beauty, grace, and the like. "Eibhinn" normally means "joyful" or "glad," but may also mean "comely," and Beinn Eibhinn in the Alder district is one of the most strikingly "comely" mountains in the Highlands. A curious problem is set by the name "Alligin" (Beinn Alligin, Torridon). It has been suggested that this means "little jewel." If this is so, is it used as a term of endearment? To judge from mountain names in other parts of the world this would not be so absurd an interpretation as it sounds. Or is it, more practically, a name connected with the losing or finding of a precious stone? In this case it would fall into line with Sgòr na h-Ulaidh, which signifies the "peak of treasure-trove."

Nevertheless the paucity of terms of appreciation or imagination is such that the meanings of only about twenty names out of over 500 are not at once obvious in their significance, or require interpretation. Even of these few some are doubtful, and one is inclined to favour the more matter-of-fact and unimaginative alternative interpretation, where such exists.

What general conclusions can we draw from the foregoing analysis? We can say I think with certainty that those who named the mountains tended to identify them first of all by considerations of colour and relative size. This is what struck them most. We can sometimes tell from its name from which side or aspect a mountain or range was most familiarly known. The old name of the Cairngorms, the Monadhruadh or Red Hills, was clearly given by the inhabitants of Speyside, from which the rufous granite of the corries of Brae Riach is so obvious a feature, and contrasts with the dun-coloured Monadhliath (Grey Hills) on the opposite side of the valley. From Deeside the redness is not nearly so obvious. Secondly, they distinguished the mountains in relation to other aspects of the landscape;

then according to their shape or the shape of prominent parts of them, inasmuch as these suggested everyday objects or as being associated with occurrences in their own lives. In a less degree they named the mountains with reference to the birds and beasts that frequent them, and occasionally with reference to domestic animals. We should expect that some hills would receive personal names. Presumably these were given in most cases because an individual was particularly associated with the mountain, on account of some feat of hunting or the like. Some of these names are modern; memorials of the men who first ascended the hills in question. One at least commemorates an historic event.

It is somewhat surprising that so few mountain names are drawn from mythology, since other place-names in many parts of the Highlands are full of memories of the Fianna and the other figures and events of Gaelic folklore. Coire Cath nam Fionn of Beinn Bhrotain tells of some fabulous battle, but such names are very rare.

Finally, the fact that out of eleven abstract names no less than nine are derogatory or associated with unpleasantness, while only two express approval, seems to show, with the other evidence, that our ancestors had little love of their native mountains, or appreciation of mountain scenery as such. The unpronounceable and mysterious-looking names conceal meanings that are almost always severely matter of fact, and when there are deviations from this rule they usually indicate dislike rather than the opposite.

But with the generic names Gaelic comes into its own. England being on the whole a level land, the English language is poor in general words descriptive of high or mountainous country; Gaelic, on the other hand, is rich; so rich that it is absolutely impossible to find English equivalents, except by a lame periphrasis, for a tithe of this verbal wealth. This is sufficient to show that if the men who named the mountains did not feel inclined to go into ecstasies about them, they yet looked at them closely, and carefully differentiated the types of mountain contour from one another. They had a highly developed sense of mountain *form*; nor did they lack words to distinguish what they saw.