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A NOTE ON THE FUNCTION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN GAELIC POETRY

Irish Gaelic literature is unique in possessing an extensive collection of verse dealing with the history and origin of hundreds of places – lakes, rivers, mountains, etc. The collection is known as the *Metrical Dinnshenchas* or *History of Places* (Ir. *dinn* – ‘any noteworthy place, mountain, lake, river, or island’, and *senchas* – ‘history, story’). It is associated with the Middle Irish period, and is dated from 887 to 1079¹. The stanza quoted below is one of the many devoted to lakes (Ir. *loch*) and their names²:

Loch ind Eich, loch ind Aige, (1)
loch na nDrúad, loch na Dáime,
loch Láig, loch na Fer Fuinid,
loch Nechtain, loch nAthguinig.
(*Sliab N-Echtga II*)

Robin Flower called this collection an “Irish Dictionary of National Topography”, whereas Patrick Sheeran commenting upon this type of topographical poetry stated that: “However much an ability to tolerate – even enjoy – lists of things in poetry may be regarded as a sign of true devotion to the art, the topomania of the seanachies surely stretched that tolerance to the limit”³. There is some truth in both these statements: *Metrical Dinnshenchas* are devoted to meticulous descriptions of places, their histories and folk etymologies, and not seldom the presentations of places confine themselves to long lists, as in the stanza above.

¹ E. Gwynn, *The Metrical Dinnshenchas. Part III*, Hodges, Figgis, and Co., Dublin 1913.

² *Ibid.*, p. 306.

³ R. Flower, *The Irish Tradition*, Oxford 1947, p. 1; P. Sheeran, *Genius Fabulae: The Irish Sense of Place*, “Irish University Review” 1988, Vol. 18: 2, p. 192.

On the other hand, however, even for somebody unacquainted with Celtic literature, it must seem obvious that "Place and Past haunt the Irish Poetic mind"⁴. And this is equally true of ancient Irish poetry and the famous sagas, modern Scottish Gaelic poetry, as well as Anglo-Irish literature (cf. the concern with places and place-names in William Butler Yeats, James Joyce and Seamus Heaney, to mention only the most prominent names)⁵. Unsurprisingly, Irish and Scottish Gaelic literature, especially poetry, abounds in texts which make extensive use of topographical names, as illustrated by the following fragments (place-names underlined> from three different Irish poems:

Ionmhuin Dún Fiodhaigh is Dún Fionn (2)
 Ionmhuin is Dún os a gcionn
 Ionmhuin Inis Droighneach de
 Is ionmhuin Dún Sulbne.
 (*Deirdre and the Sons of Usna*)⁶

[Lovable are Dun Fidga and Dun Finn
 Lovable the fortresses above them
 Lovable the island of Driagende
 And lovable the fort of Sweeney.]

Coire dhá Ruadh, a ri Tuama, (3)
 atá eadroinn, cagail linn,
 Coire Bhreacáin blagh dar gconair,
 do ghabh creatán omhain inn.
 (*An Address to Aonghus of Islay*)⁷

[Between us, O King of Tuaim, is Coire dhá Ruadh,
 I fear it: Coire Bhreacáin is part of our path,
 trembling terror has laid hold of me.]

Bóinn is Síúir is Scin-Leamhain (4)
 agus Suca nach sriobhmall,
 adeirt na deighleabhair
 gurab uasile tú a Shionann.
 (*The Shannon*)⁸

⁴ K. E. Hirst Désirée, *The Southern Irish Poets of the Late 20th c.*, [in:] *Anglo-Irish Literature. Aspects of Language and Culture*, eds B. Bramsbäck, M. Croghan, Vol. 2, Uppsala 1988, p. 208.

⁵ Cf. a comment by one of the characters in Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*: "I'd recite the names to myself just for the mesmerism, the sedation of the incantation – Kinlochbervie, Inverbervie, Inverdrue, Invergordon, Badachroo, Kinlochewe, Ballantrae, Inverkeithing, Cawdor, Kirkconnel, Plaidy, Kirkinner [...]"; B. Friel, *Selected Plays*, Faber and Faber, London 1984, p. 332.

⁶ Source: E. Neeson, *Poems from the Irish*, Ward River Press, Dublin 1985, p. 136.

⁷ Source: O. Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry*, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1970, p. 171; the English translation comes from *ibid.*, p. 292.

⁸ Source: *ibid.*, p. 61; English translation p. 238.

[The Boyne and the Suir and the ancient Laune,
and swift-streamed Suca,
good books declare that art nobler than they,
O Shannon.]

This remarkable feature of Gaelic literature has to be seen against a very close relation between people and places: "Those O'Connells, O'Connors, O'Callaghans, O'Donoghues – all the Gaels were one, it may be maintained, with the very landscape itself [...] to turn off the family names connected with one of those houses was to call to vision certain districts – hills, rivers and plains; while contrariwise, to recollect the place-names in certain regions was to remember the ancient times and their memorable deeds"⁹.

According to E. Estyn Evans there was always a strong sense of geographical personality in the older Irish literature connected with a sense of the harmony and mystery of man's place in nature¹⁰; similar remarks were also made by the historian J. C. Beckett in connection with Irish history and the study of the relationships between the land and the people¹¹.

Though an important feature of older poetry, the usage of geographical names is preserved also in contemporary verse, not only in Irish, but also in Scottish Gaelic, as illustrated by the following fragment:

Mùirneag an toiseach Og-mhios, (5)
is Mèalaiseal is Mòinteach Shuardall,
is Loch nan Ruigheannan a' sniomh
a ghàirdeanan mu mo chom.
(*Leannan m'oige*)¹²

[Mùirneag in early June,
and Mèalaiseal and Swordale Moor,
and Loch nan Ruigheannan with its arms
clasped round me.]

According to Donald MacAulay: "In the Gaelic tradition there are many poems and songs about places. These appear also in modern verse, though not in such a high proportion and certainly to a different purpose [...]. There is local loyalty often expressed in poems about the poet's native place"¹³. The sense of loyalty very often expresses itself in poems not only about the poet's native place, but about the whole Gaeldom, as exemplified by this recent poem:

⁹ D. Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland*, Gill and Co., Dublin 1925, p. 56.

¹⁰ E. Evans Estyn, *The Personality of Ireland*, CUP, Cambridge 1973, p. 66.

¹¹ Cf. J. C. Beckett, *The Study of Irish History*, Belfast 1963, p. 17.

¹² A poem by D. S. Thomson, from *Nua-Bhardachd Ghaidhlig / Modern Scottish Gaelic Poems*, ed. D. MacAulay, Canongate, Edinburgh 1976, p. 163; English version by the poet himself, p. 162.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Urnaigheann aig a' bhòrd ann an Scalpaigh (6)
 Orain is bàrdachd anns an t-Ob
 Dannsa is deoch air an Tairheart
 Rèidio nan Gàidheal ann an Steòrnabhagh
 Deasbad ann an Taigh-Osda Chrois
 Cuimhneachadh ann an Uibhist-a-Tuath
 Fealla-dhà ann an Griomasaigh
 Ceanglaichean-teaghlaich ann an Uibhist-a-Deas
 Aoigheachd ann an iomadh àite
 agus RunRig na mo chluasan air feadh an turais.
 (A' Ghaidhealtachd)¹⁴

[Prayers at the table in Scalpay
 Songs and poetry in Leverbugh
 Dance and drink in Tarbert
 Rèidio nan Gàidheal in Stornoway
 Discussion in the Cross Inn
 Memories in North Uist
 Sport in Grimsay
 Family connections in South Uist
 Hospitality in many places
 and RunRig in my ears throughout the journey.]

Discussing related issues Sheeran stresses the importance of the Irish **sense of place**, which according to him is "a) a product of the native tradition; b) it is a **verbal** or **nominal** preoccupation and has little to do with any actual cultivation of things; c) it relates to death rather than to life". Further, he goes on observing that: "Both ancient and modern examples of topomania in our literature clearly demonstrate that place names held magical potency and were invoked at times of crisis"¹⁵. The invocative nature of places and their names is also stressed by Benedict Kiely – "Places so loved, names so often repeated as if they were charms and words of power and invocations of the very spirit of place, gathered about them their own sanctities and mythological significance"¹⁶. These remarks are confirmed by Estyn Evans, who talking about Irish habitat, heritage and history, mentions the existence of a pagan sense of communion with all nature running through the ancient tales and inspiring outstanding lyrical poetry¹⁷.

¹⁴ A poem by Coinneach MacMhanais, in: *Somhairle (A Celebration on the 80th Birthday of Sorley MacLean)*, ed. A. P. Campbell, Stornoway 1991, p. 85. The places mentioned in this poem are connected with the Gàidhealtachd, i.e. the area of traditional Gaelic culture and language.

¹⁵ P. Sheeran, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

¹⁶ B. Kiely, *A Sense of Place*, [in:] *The Pleasures of Gaelic Poetry*, ed. S. Mac Réamoinn, Allen Lane, London 1982, p. 104.

¹⁷ E. Estyn Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

It follows from the above that the use of topographical names in Irish and Scottish Gaelic poetry fulfills not only an aesthetic function, but it is also deeply rooted in the tradition, expresses the poets local loyalty, and it performs an invocative function.

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UWAGI NA TEMAT FUNKCJI NAZW GEOGRAFICZNYCH
W POEZJI IRLANDZKOJĘZycznej

Literatura irlandzkojęzyczna, a zwłaszcza poezja, obfituje w utwory poświęcone różnym elementom krajobrazu, np.: wzgórzom, rzekom, strumieniom czy jeziorom. Najbardziej znanym przykładem jest zbiór średnioirlandzkich utworów *Metrical Dinnshenchas*. Wprowadzanie nazw geograficznych do irlandzkich utworów literackich zawsze spełniało funkcje estetyczne oraz inwokacyjne. Również współczesna poezja irlandzka, a także gaelicka, posługuje się tym środkiem.

Oprócz funkcji estetycznych użycie nazw geograficznych bardzo często związane jest z lokalną tradycją, poczuciem lojalności i przywiązania do miejsc, a także swoistym irlandzkim „poczuciem miejsca”.