

Origins of some of our Placenames by Kate Murphy

The poet, John Hewitt wrote;

'I take my stand by the Ulster names,
Each hard clean name like a weathered stone.
Tyrella Rostrevor are flickering flames,
The names I mean are The Moy, Malone,
Strabane, Slieve Gullion and Portglenone.'

Hewitt is not the only poet to have enshrined our names in poetry and he goes on to say that 'They trip off the tongue/ Like the lilt of a song.'

And so they do, and we seldom wonder about what they mean until we encounter a visitor, as I did a couple of weeks ago who was looking for her ancestral home in Ag had owey which was, she thought in Londonderry. It took me a few minutes to realize that she was looking for Aghadoey!

There are 60,000 placenames in Ireland of which 6,700 are in Northern Ireland. Most of our placenames describe the natural features of the landscape – the mountains, lakes, hills, rocks, rivers etc. Like our own Portrush – Port Ros – the port on the point or promontory from which Hugh has titled his wonderful book.



Then we have the names which tell of the additions made by man the most common of which might be bally which as everyone knows means town. But did man raise a fort, build a church, or



a mill, or sink a well? There's no trace of it now but the name tells us there was a fort, a big fort, at Ramore head.

And we have words that describe all these – big (*mor*), small (*beag*), broad (*leathan*), narrow (*caol*), black (*dubh, doo*), yellow (*bui, boy*), grey (*liath, rea*), red (*dearg, roe*), old (*sean*) It's like a jigsaw puzzle, made more difficult because, in the first ordinance survey of 1832, the names were written down phonetically from the Gaelic so it's sometimes difficult to find their origins. The Scottish settlers who came to this part of the world didn't change the names although they often added to them. They had no problem with pronunciation because many of them spoke Scots Gallic and there was little difference.

Queen's University conducted a survey in the 90s, The Ulster Placenames Project. They did very well by counties Down and North East Antrim but they ran out of money when they got to the parish of Ballintoy! What it did show was that there are often different interpretations of a name – and that's my excuse if I get it wrong because I am not an expert. I'm someone whose interest in place-names is an extension of my interest in folklore and story. Take Coleraine, for example. The most usually accepted explanation is Cul Rathaine, the ferny corner but it can also be interpreted as Cul Rath Abainn – the corner of the river where the fort is. I like the ferny corner interpretation best, because I'm a sucker for a story, and the story is that Patrick came along and asked the local chieftain for a bit of land to build a church on. The chief, on the advice of his druids, said 'you can have that bit over there where the boys are burning the ferns', ie the poor land.



We live on the coast so it would make sense that there are lots of 'Ports' or landing places. There is Portadown – the wee black port.. Portstewart, which is called after the Stewart family, has an older name – Port na Binne Uaine which means the port of the green hill or cliff and locals still refer to an area above the town as the green hill. Port Bradden is the port of the salmon and Port Scadden, just before you come to the Devil's washtub, means the port of the herring. Butch



Fleming tells me he remembers herring being brought in there. Portballintrae is the port of the town by the strand. (Ballintrae is a placename that also occurs in Scotland)

Sliabh or slieve is a mountain and gives us Slemish, and Slieve Donard among others. *Cnoc* or *croc* or knock is a hill. Knocklayde translates as the broad hill and Knoccloughrim, the hill of the stony ridge. Some other words denoting hills which are familiar to us, are *ard* - the top, *alt* - a height, *druim* or *drom* - a ridge. *Maghaire* or moy is a flat place or plain and so Magheraboy is the yellow plain, maybe from gorse or buttercups that grew in profusion, and Magherameena is the middle plain although there is also a tradition that associates it with monks.

The word *abhainn* pronounced Owen or Avon means river (In England they have the river Avon) and *cluan* is a meadow so Cloonavon, the seat of our local council offices beside the Bann, is the meadow by the river, or the river meadow.

Bally which appears in so many of our towns and townlands, originally meant a homestead, a group of family houses, of the same kin. As they expanded it came to mean town or if it didn't expand into a town it was a townland.

There are three main words for fort – *dun*, *rath* and *lios*. A *dun* was usually associated with a king or chieftain and was the most important of the three. There are a number of interpretations of Dunluce but the most commonly accepted is 'the strong fort'. Dunseverick, Sobhairce's fort, was once a very important place; it was the seat of the northern kings at a time when four great roads led from the provinces to Tara, the seat of the High King. I know nothing about Sobhairce but the word for primroses is *sabhaircini* and in an old pamphlet I saw him described as 'the man with primrose coloured hair'. Far-fetched maybe, but I never drive past Dunseverick now without wondering about the man with the primrose coloured hair. And it is possible, because just down the road from there, is Sorley Boy's stronghold at Dunluce – Sorley *Bui* – Sorley of the yellow hair! *Rath*, which gives us our Rathmore or Ramore, is a ring fort and appears in many of our placenames, although they are sparse in Ulster.

Lios or *lis* is often translated as fort but it is more of a fortified dwelling place and is often attached to a name as in nearby Liscolman - Colman's fort

As one would expect, there are lots of words for field. There's *agha* as in Aghadoey, *gort* as in Gortmore (the big field) and *cloon* as in Cloonavon. *Cappagh* is a tilled plot of land (there's an area in Portstewart called Cappagh) and *Carrow* is a quarterland (Carrowrea – the grey quarterland)

There are three common words for church locally. *Cill* or *kil* is most widely used as in Kilrea – Rea's church and Kildare – the church of the oaks. *Teampal* gives us nearby Templastra (the church of the light) and *Donagh* or *doney* is often a church associated with St Patrick – Donaghmore – the big church.

Ballytober and Tobermore both developed near a *tober* or well and *muilleán*, a mill, gives us Ballywillan

Bile is an ancient tree, sacred to the druids. Billy today, is a townland with a scattered population centred on a Church but the parish of Billy is a large important ecclesiastical unit. This is no surprise, because when Christianity arrived in Ireland, the early Christians often superimposed



their churches on areas of pagan worship. For the same reason Moville means the plain of the sacred tree.

Finally, there are places associated with animals

Bo is a cow and gives us *Arboe* – *aird boe* – the promontory of the cow. *Caora* or *keeragh* means sheep so *Alitkerragh* is the height of the sheep. *Capall* is a horse and *Portnahapple* is the port of the horses. *Muc* is pig and *Crocnamac* is believed locally to have been a hill where pigs were kept. *Gelbhan* is a sparrow so, before they built a hospital there, *Altnagelvin* was a sanctuary for sparrows. *Bradán* is salmon and *Scaddan* herring.

These are just a sample of the words you might find. It's better than a jigsaw puzzle! Look for the words that describe your townland or home-place and you can find more information on irishplacenames.com

Our thanks to Kate for this excellent contribution.

Portrush Heritage Group

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