NOTES AND COMMENTS

A. NOTES ON SCOTTISH PLACE-NAMES

20. *Path*

A not very frequent but nevertheless not unimportant element in the place-nomenclature from the Borders to the Moray Firth is *path*. It is most commonly found as the first part of the compound name *Pathhead* which occurs at least ten times on the Scottish one-inch maps: three times in Midlothian (in the parishes of Crichton, Kirknewton and Lasswade), twice each in Fife (in Dunino and Kirkcaldy), and Ayrshire (Dailly and New Cumnock), and once each in the counties of Dumfriesshire (St. Mungo's), East Lothian (Spott) and Kincardineshire (St Cyrus).[1]

In other instances, *path* appears as the second element of names like Cockburnspath, Hexpath, Redpath, Sisterpath (all in Berwickshire), and Merrypath Rig (Roxburghshire), Bentpath (Dumfriesshire), Neidpath Hill (Selkirkshire) and Neidpath Castle (Peeblesshire). For the last four names, as well as for a number of the Pathheads no really early spellings are available, but here is the relevant earlier evidence for some of the others:

PATHHEAD Midlothian (Crichton): *Pathheid* 1591-2 Register of the Privy Seal.

COCKBURNSPATH[2]: *Colbrandespade* circa 1130 Lawrie; *Colbrandespeth* 1335-6 Bain's Calendar; *Cowbrandispeth* 1443 Horne MSS.; *Coburnspeth* circa 1485 Wallace. The first element appears to be *Colbrand*, the name of a mythological Danish giant, but an identical personal name is, of course, always possible.

HEXPATH (Gordon): *Hextildespeth(e)* 1296 Instrumenta Publica, and Bain's Calendar; *Hecspeth* 1471 Horne MSS. Old English *hægstald* "warrier" forms the first part of this name.

REDPATH (Earlston): *Red(e)peth(e)* 1296 Bain's Calendar, 1494 Historical MSS. Commission; *Reidpeth* 1509-10 Register Great Seal; *Ridpetth* 1642 Blaeu. Probably not different from the modern meaning, unless the situation justifies derivation from Old English *hrēod* "reed".

SISTERPATH (Fogo): Sisterpeth 1335-6 Bain's Calendar; *Sestirpeth* 1451-2 and *Susterpeth* 1509-10 Register Great Seal.

From Old English *Sweoster-pæð*, here probably referring to nuns.

As it is not the purpose of this note to discuss the individual etymologies of these names we shall not comment on them further here. We are rather concerned with the meaning of the one constant element in all these names, the word *path*, for we cannot simply identify it semantically with the usual meaning of *path* as we know it from common usage to-day, nor can we, for that matter as *path* is one of those "difficult" Germanic words with initial *p*, with ease ascertain its pre-Germanic history.

With this in mind I want to re-examine briefly some of the findings recently published in an extensive article on our word by H. W. Bailey and A. S. C. Ross (1961). In their paper, the authors come to the conclusion that "besides its familiar meaning, it [*path*] has also the meaning 'valley' " and that "this latter meaning is attested in Anglo-Saxon, in later Northern English and Scottish, in East Swedish dialects, and possibly, in early Dutch place-names" (Bailey and Ross 1961:107).

For our discussion we shall here concentrate on the Scottish evidence which consists largely of place-name material. There is, first of all, the geographical position of the places referred to by the names listed above. In this respect, the *Pathheads* are particularly instructive as they indicate a relative position to the *path* in question. It can be shown that every one of them lies at the top end of a fairly steep track or road leading up the slope from lower lying ground. The names containing *path*—or rather its Northern Middle English form *peth* —as a second element are more difficult to assess, as obviously the settlement to which the name of the track was transferred could come into existence either at the top (Cockburnspath) or at the bottom (Redpath) of the slope which it ascended.

We do, however, also have a number of early references to the appellative *peth* itself, many of which do not seem to leave any doubt about the meaning of this word in Scotland. In 1496 we find this entry in the *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* (I, 297): "To drew the Gunnis in peththis and myris"; similarly in 1558 (X, 344): "In gettyng and convenyng of oxin at the pethis". The phrase "pethis and muris" occurs again in 1544 (*Maitland Club* 1833; for this and the other excerpts see also Bailey and Ross 1961:113), quite obviously referring to parts difficult to negotiate during a journey, like tracks up steep slopes, and bogs; and as late as 1957 the *People's Journal*

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reported from Banffshire that "the older folk of Gardenstown will welcome the provision of a new handrail at the Strait Path, the steep stair leading from the shore to the higher part of the village". None of these references, nor any others whose interpretation is clear, points to a meaning "valley", or the like, for Scottish *peth*. Nor can we accept for Scotland the meaning "a hollow or deep cutting in road" given by the OED on the basis of an incomplete, and therefore misleading, quotation from Patten's account of Somerset's expedition in which he explains the place-name *The Peaths* in Berwickshire from the fact that travellers have to ascend steep banks on either side of a valley "not by going directly, but by *paths* & foot ways leading slopewise". Unfortunately, Patten's etymology is not included in the OED quotation which gives the erroneous impression that the name derives from the valley itself. Without wanting to prejudice the semantic interpretation of material from other areas or languages, we therefore fully subscribe to the draft definition of *Peth* of the *Scottish National Dictionary*[3] for the (not yet published) part dealing with the letter *P*. This reads "A steep track or road, gen. leading down into a ravine (and up the other side), 'a footpath on an acclivity' which follows the contour of the slope."

NOTES

[1] The modern map also has a Pathhead in the parish of Cruden (Aberdeenshire), but as Alexander (1952:98) states that the older name was *pothead*, it is doubtful whether this name should be included here. A lost Pathhead is mentioned for the parish of Livingston (West Lothian) by Macdonald (1941:80); it is recorded twice during the last decade of the seventeenth century.

[2] The early spellings of this and the next three names have been competently collected by Miss May G. Williamson in her Edinburgh Ph.D. thesis on "The Non-Celtic Place-Names of the Scottish Border Counties (1944, p. 154-5), and are here quoted from this unfortunately unpublished work.

[3] The Editor, Mr David Murison, very kindly placed at my disposal the MS. collections for the SND and also generously allowed me to quote from his editorial notes.

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