*East Sutherland By-Naming**

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There are few areas in eastern Scotland where Gaelic still remains the language of daily use, and those which exist are usually isolated islands of Gaelic surrounded by vast expanses of English. The northernmost Gaelic pocket of this kind is located on the coastal fringe of East Sutherland, in the villages of Brora, Golspie, and Embo. There were about 200 speakers of the local East Sutherland Gaelic in the area in 1964, more than half of them in Embo. Perhaps as many again live in the various industrial areas of Britain, and probably the majority of these exiles visit the home area from time to time and use Gaelic at least sporadically.

The persistence of Gaelic in East Sutherland is the result of a peculiar social and economic history. The present-day local speakers are descended from inland Clearance victims who were forced to take to fishing to survive when removed to the coast. These exiles made a place for themselves on the margins of an agricultural area as a distinct occupational group, fishermen among crofters and tradesmen. The occupational schism which arose was mirrored in the social patterns of the area, and the fisherfolk remained a sharply separate group until well into the present century, when the failure of the local fishing industry destroyed their occupation, and with it their unique identity.[1]

The social and even residential separateness of the fisherfolk led to considerable inter-marriage and a high concentration of a few family names within the East Sutherland Gaelic population. 30 of the 42 local Gaelic speakers resident in Brora in 1964 had the family names Sutherland, MacRae, or MacDonald; 49 of Golspie's 54 speakers had one of those same three names. In Embo 82 out of 105 speakers bore the names MacKay, Ross, or Fraser, with the first greatly predominating (56 MacKays in the 82). These same six surnames are also dominant among the East Sutherland Gaelic speakers living elsewhere in Britain.

Since certain favourite Christian names also occur with very high frequency in this population, it is extremely common for more than one person to have exactly the same sequence of given and family names. There were 5 contemporaneous John MacRaes in Brora at one point, and at least 13 William MacKays in Embo. Under such circumstances it is apparent that a person's official set of names is of little use in

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identifying him, and in fact official names are practically non-occurrent within the Gaelic communities. Instead, 'by-names' are used, regularly as terms of reference, and occasionally also as terms of address.

In Gaelic-speaking East Sutherland by-names are nearly universal, but not all by-names are used in the same way. Rather they fall into several distinct groups according to their potential offensiveness, and the rules for using them vary accordingly. There are three principal groups: by-names which are never offensive to the person named, by-names which are always offensive to the person named, and by-names which are offensive or not according to the identity of the user.

The commonest variety of by-name is also the only variety which is reliably inoffensive. This is the basic genealogical by-name, which consists in East Sutherland of the individual's Christian name, often in a diminutive-affectionate form, followed by the Christian name of either his father or his mother, again often in a diminutive-affectionate form. A fictitious example, but one composed of actual local elements,[2] might be [ʒesi ɛ̃:ni] 'Jessie Johnny'. Often there is a possessive element consisting of the preposition *aig* 'at' interposed between the two names: [ʃĩ:n ig ʒimag] 'Jimmag's Jean'. There seems to be no social significance attached to the choice of father's name versus mother's name as the genealogical tag in the by-name. In fact, it is not uncommon for a family of siblings to be split down the middle, with some of the children by-named after the father and some after the mother. Sometimes an individual develops alternative by-names, one with his father's name as tag and another with his mother's name as tag: both may continue in use, but among different sets of people.

Only two generations are included in East Sutherland by-names, normally the individual's own and the parental generation. Rarely, the parental generation is skipped over and a grandparent's given name is used as genealogical tag: the reason may be that the grandparent is a rare and forceful character, or that the child is illegitimate and has been raised by a grandparent rather than by the actual mother. A husband's name may also come to compete with a parent's as the tag in a woman's by-name, so that she has a genuinely genealogical by-name which is chronologically prior, and a pseudo-genealogical by-name which is acquired by marriage.

Although it is very common for a child to have the same given name as a parent, there is a general tendency to avoid repetition of any name in exactly the same form. Instead, the second-generation individual gets a slightly different diminutive form of the name in question, for example: [ʒɔni ʒɔn:a] 'Johnny Johnna'.

The relatively small number of people who have double given names (*e.g.* John James, Isobel Ann) are normally referred to by just their own two given names, provided that there is no one else in the village with exactly the same set of double given names. But if there is a need to identify such a person very particularly (say for the benefit of someone who has been away from the community for a long time), most people with double given names will prove to have genealogical tags available as well. However rarely these may be used, they are genuine genealogical by-names and not

spur-of-the-moment creations to fill a temporary need; informants resisted experimental creation of genealogical by-names by analogy as unintelligible, when I coined some for people who seemed not to have any—demonstrating that genealogical by-names must be established by usage in order to be viable.

Since genealogical by-names commonly affect a whole group of siblings, the family as a whole sometimes comes to have a *collective* genealogical by-name. A family group by-named after the father [dõ:l'i] 'Donelly' might come to be known collectively as [nʏ dõ:l'iç] 'The Donnellies', for example.

There are not many by-names aside from the basic genealogical variety that are inoffensive enough to be used freely and openly. Among the descriptive by-names—that is, those by-names which identify individuals in terms of physical characteristics, occupation, or place of residence or origin—there are some which can be used with impunity. This is true for example of by-names in which the second element is *beag*, literally 'small', but used here to mean 'young' or 'junior': [tɔm:a veg] 'Young Tomma' (as opposed to a father, grandfather, or the like who was also a 'Tomma').

Another variety of by-name which sometimes provides an inoffensive, freely usable designation is what I call the nonsense by-name. Most of these by-names have no lexical content and consist simply of meaningless syllables. But by-names can also usefully be considered lexically 'empty', even if they happen to coincide with an actual word, so long as the users of the by-name refuse to connect the by-name with the 'word' of the same shape.[3] And finally, if a by-name coincides with a perfectly ordinary name, such as 'Jim' or 'MacTavish', and yet the person so designated has not actually got James or MacTavish as any part of his official name, the by-name is in effect a nonsense by-name.[4] Since a nonsense by-name by definition has no obvious connection with the person it designates, its offensiveness or inoffensiveness is totally unpredictable to an outsider, even a Gaelic-speaking outsider. Nonsense by-names are in fact much more likely to be offensive than not; but an occasional one can be used freely.

Although the bulk of East Sutherland's by-names are actually offensive to the people designated (aside from the neutral genealogical by-names), there is only one variety of by-name that is predictably offensive as a whole group, namely the derisive by-names. These by-names, like the descriptive by-names, are based on an actual attribute of the person in question. But where the descriptive by-names are objective, embodying an identifying attribute rather dispassionately, the derisive by-names invariably reflect a critical or hostile view of the attribute involved. If a man who has lost his hair is by-named 'Baldy', for example, the by-name is a straightforward description of the resultant state; but if he is by-named 'The Hairy Ape', or 'Curly', an element of fun-poking or mockery has appeared. Such derisive by-names are quite common in East Sutherland, and they are sometimes painfully pointed. What's more, the few East Sutherland by-names that on the face of it seem to be flattering are actually derisive in intent: any by-name which sounds like praise is sure to be intended to cut

the bearer down to size in the public regard. It is hardly necessary to say that all of these derisive by-names can only be used with the greatest circumspection, since violent objection would be made if an individual overheard such a by-name applied to himself or to his family or friends.

Besides the derisive by-names, many of the descriptive by-names are offensive to the designee. A man may not like to be reminded that he is bald, or lame, or stout, even if it is obviously true, and so he may take exception to hearing himself described by reference to an attribute he finds unflattering. People also often object to the nonsense by-names they have acquired, although the reason for the offensiveness of many nonsense by-names is less obvious.

It is largely nonsense by-names, with perhaps an occasional descriptive by-name, that make up the groups of by-names which are offensive or not according to the identity of the user. Some individuals tolerate the use of a nonsense by-name from a friend or contemporary, while they would resent its use by a younger man or a recent acquaintance. Such nonsense by-names as are tolerated in this way, along with a few which are completely accepted by the designee no matter what the status of the user, constitute the only group of by-names that seem to be used in direct address as well as referentially.

Descriptive, derisive, and nonsense by-names are all quite common, but as independent types they are nowhere near so prevalent as the basic genealogical by-names. What gives these three non-genealogical varieties their greatest currency, actually, is that they have been absorbed into the genealogical pattern: a man's nonsense, derisive, or descriptive by-name very often appears instead of his given name as the genealogical tag in his children's by-names. The children of a man named George, but called [hwʏitag] 'Whitey' because of his very fair hair, will probably be called [me:ri hwʏitag] 'Mary Whitey', [bilag hwʏitag] 'Billag Whitey', and so forth, rather than [me:ri šorʏs] 'Mary George and [bilag šorʏs] 'Billag George', so that the father's descriptive by-name will be perpetuated. The offensiveness of such a 'secondary' genealogical by-name depends on the offensiveness of the parental by-name; if the father objected to being called [hwʏitag], the children will also object to that by-name being incorporated into their genealogical by-names.

The chief reason that genealogical by-names so predominate in East Sutherland is that whatever other by-names a person has, he will often have a genealogical by-name as well, whether of the 'primary' type with a parent's actual given name as genealogical tag or of the 'secondary' type with a parent's by-name as genealogical tag. Many individuals have both genealogical and descriptive by-names, for instance, or both genealogical and nonsense by-names. The frequency of multiple by-names for one and the same person is the best indication that by-names in East Sutherland have more than a merely utilitarian function.

The sheer utility of by-names in communities where so many people have identical names is beyond question. The inoffensive by-names, available for open use by anyone

at any time, are genuinely indispensable to communication. A genealogical by-name of the primary type, whether or not it is ordinarily in use within the community, is usually available for reference and will be produced immediately if any question of identification arises. In fact, community members will freely introduce their own genealogical or descriptive by-names (provided the latter are inoffensive) to identify themselves if the need arises—for example, when meeting an emigrant who has returned to East Sutherland for a visit after many years away.

But if identification were the sole function of the by-names, no one would have more than one, and we have seen that this is not the case. By-names have at least two other functions: they serve as an index of social solidarity, and they entertain.

Because offensive by-names are exactly that and are capable of causing serious social rupture if used in the wrong company, the actual use of an offensive by-name takes on great social significance. An individual can only use a highly offensive by-name in the company of like-minded people—that is, among friends who share with him the generally critical, patronising, or otherwise socially-distanced attitude that an offensive by-name inevitably expresses toward the man or woman it attaches to. The assumptions are that all members of the group share the same stance toward the offensively by-named person, and that no member of the group will betray the use of the offensive by-name to parties who would take offence. Thus the user of an offensive by-name indicates his oneness with, and his confidence in, the people in whose presence he uses that by-name.

Refusal to use a highly offensive by-name is of course equally an act of social support, but in this case support for the individual who bears the by-name. Near relatives and close friends can generally be counted on to adopt the stance of the by-named person, so that if he finds his by-name offensive, they will object to it, too, on his behalf.

In the case of the highly offensive by-names, use or non-use of the by-names serves as a measure of social solidarity among fellow-users or fellow non-users. On the other hand, where offensiveness comes and goes with the identity of the user, the open use of a by-name indicates solidarity in another direction, namely between the user and the person named. Inoffensive by-names are of course incapable of reflecting social solidarity in either of these directions, since they may be openly used by any one at all.

Similarly, inoffensive by-names are too straightforward as designations to have any entertainment value. But the offensive by-names, pointed as they are, have great power to amuse. The people who use them relish their trenchancy, and often the humorous associations connecting the by-name to the person named are so rich that the mere mention of the by-name produces hilarity in a group of friends who use it among themselves. It is noticeable, too, how rich a stream of anecdote and incident tends to be released at the mention of an offensive by-name; inoffensive by-names are far less likely to produce this result. Either the most colourful people attract vivid by-names, or the existence of a vivid by-name provides a mnemonic link to colourful incident; or perhaps both tendencies exist and reinforce each other.

By-names are easily acquired in Gaelic-speaking East Sutherland. Genealogical by-names are practically a birthright, and non-genealogical by-names can be evoked by almost any individual trait or trivial incident. The emergence of a new by-name is probably only a symptom of what must be a constant flow of dubbing: some epithets are an instant success and adhere to an individual ever after, while others are immediately forgotten. By-names do come and go. One informant laughingly supplied a nonsense by-name by which she was known in her youth, although no one ever calls her by that name now. She had only a vague idea of how she came by this early by-name and none at all of why people stopped calling her so. Another man commonly goes by a descriptive by-name which he can only have acquired in middle life, since he was already in his forties when he took the job that supplies the by-name. Before that he seems to have been called mainly by a genealogical by-name, which of course he still retains, although it is now rarely used. But for the most part by-names, once acquired, are stable, within at least a certain circle. If an individual has multiple by-names, two different groups of people may each refer to him by a different by-name, but they will generally be consistent in their usage even though well aware of the alternative by-name.

The strength of by-naming in East Sutherland is reflected in the fact that the practice has been carried over into the English-speaking population. All varieties of by-name flourish among the English speakers except for the genealogical. The reason for the lack of genealogical by-names is simple: the numerically and socially dominant part of the English-speaking population consists of 'incomers', and since no one on the local scene knew their parents, there is no possibility of identifying them by referring to a familiar parental generation. On the other hand, descriptive, derisive, and nonsense by-names are in very general use among all segments of the English-speaking population: incomers, natives, and the mono-lingual English-speaking offspring of Gaelic parents alike. The force of the by-naming habit in this area is illustrated well by the case of an English-speaking incomer who had lived all his life in various parts of the northeast Highlands without acquiring a by-name before he came to East Sutherland as a middle-aged man. His wife was overheard using an endearment in speaking to him, and overnight he acquired that endearment as an unshakeable by-name. There are people in the area today who know him by his by-name alone and have no idea what his actual family name is—as in fact is often the case in both the English-speaking and the Gaelic-speaking communities, since even in the former the by-name may come to overshadow the official name.

Perhaps the greatest interest in the by-naming practices in East Sutherland lies in the transfer of the institution from one group within the population to the population at large. The penchant for by-names exists here because this area was once inhabited primarily by a Celtic society in which the bulk of the population shared a very few clan names. This Celtic society is long since reduced to a sub-group within a heavily English-speaking population, and the Gaelic language is nearing extinction on the local

scene. Yet despite the fact that the introduction of a great variety of non-Celtic names has enormously diminished the utilitarian function of by-names in the area, the value of by-names as entertainment and as an index of social solidarity has been great enough to ensure that by-naming as an institution will long outlive the Gaelic-speaking society that gave rise to it.

NOTES

1 Gaelic speech was not originally part of the separate identity of the fisherfolk, since the agricultural population was also Gaelic-speaking. But the extinction of Gaelic among the crofters has run a half-century ahead of its extinction among the fisherfolk, and Gaelic is only now as terminal in the erstwhile fishing population as it was 50 years ago in the agricultural population. Because of this linguistic lag, the use of Gaelic has been a significant social marker for some decades past; and indeed, since the petering out of the fishing industry in the 1930s and 1940s, Gaelic speech has become the single greatest sign of a social division which was once primarily occupational.

2 All examples of by-names given here, unless identified as actual, are coined in this way.

3 This is the case with the actual by-name of a (deceased) East Sutherlander called [ali e:u]. The second element of this by-name coincides with the local word for 'a shout' [e:u], but informants rejected any connection between the by-name and the word 'shout'.

4 By-names of this kind are not uncommon in East Sutherland, and it is possible, as an informant has suggested, that they come from football games, where boys are sometimes called after a local or national figure who plays in the same position.