Notes on Collection and Research

The Lothian Witches of 1591, and a link with Burns

(EDITORS)

For the latest in the series of annual greetings to the School's helpers and informants, a rare contemporary woodcut relating to the Lothian witches of 1591 was reproduced (Plate III), by kind permission of the Librarian of the University of Glasgow, where one of the few known copies of the broadsheet *Newes from Scotland* printed by Wright in London is preserved. This purports to give an account, 'according to the Scottish coppie', of the 'examinations' of a notable sorcerer, Dr Fian, *alias* John Cunningham, schoolmaster of 'Saltpans in Lowthian', and a number of associate witches, 'as they vttered them in the presence of the Scottish king . . . discouering [among other things] how far they pretended to bewitch and drowne his Maiestie in the Sea comming from Denmarke' with his bride.

Much as one would welcome pictorial information on the domestic scene in sixteenth-century Lothian, there is no reason to believe that the engraver—perhaps a Londoner, like Wright the printer—had either worked from drawings made on the spot, or was concerned to do more than whet the English readers' appetite by imaginary embellishment of the events reported in the text. The brick-like background to the cauldron and its log fire is but one of several hints that the incidents depicted represent a generalised English, rather than Lowland Scottish, impression of the appropriate setting. In such a source this is hardly a surprise.

What is surprising, and seems to have escaped previous remark, is the complete irrelevance to the text of some of the incidents emphasised in the woodcut (right centre and foreground). These evidently refer to the 'incredible' tale of 'the poore Pedler trauailing to the towne of *Trenent*', who is mentioned in the preface to Wright's account merely because previously-circulated 'written copies' of the news (now lost) had quite wrongly named him as the first to reveal the witches' intention to destroy that great opponent of the Devil, King James VI. This spurious incident, had, according to the preface, described the 'wonderfull manner . . . [whereby the pedlar] was in a moment conuayed at midnight, from *Scotland* to *Burdeux* in *Fraunce* . . . into a Marchants Seller there', but, through the merchant's loyalty, had been returned in time to provide evidence that supposedly saved the King, and at least unmasked the unfortunate

PLATE III. Woodcut illustration from *Newes from Scotland*, 1591. Reproduced by courtesy of the Librarian of the University of Glasgow.

witches. Despite its irrelevance to Wright's edition of the *Newes*, which the woodcut purports to illustrate, this has for us a special interest since it represents an early version of a migratory legend still popular in Gaelic tradition, though apparently an import from further south (Bruford 1967: 27–30). A lively Ayrshire version, in which the witch-carousal also takes place in 'a merchant's wine cellar in Bourdeaux', appears in a letter of 1790 given below, written by Robert Burns.

The retention of the pedlar incident in the woodcut, despite its rejection in the text, reflects the formidable unreliability of many of the sixteenth-century news-sheets. This particular blunder may suggest that Wright had been in the process of pirating the earlier 'written' account (whether printed or manuscript), adding his own woodcut embellishments, when fresh 'news from Scotland' led him to abandon his original text. Probably haste, and lack of conscience, led to the retention of the illustration.

Of the other scenes in this woodcut, only the shipwreck (top left) is clearly described in the text. In the event the King's ship was not wrecked, so this presumably represents the destruction of a 'vessell comming ouer from the towne of Brunt Iland to the towne of Lieth, wherein was sundrys Iewelles and riche giftes, which should have been presented to the now Queen of Scotland, at her comming [from Denmark] to Lieth'. The cauldron scene (top right) is not mentioned in the text, nor yet in the Dittays in Pitcairn (1829), but is no doubt a stock idea about witches. The Devil in the tree-stump pulpit is not explicitly mentioned, though there are references to 'the Diuels readings', and to the Prestonpans schoolmaster writing down his commands to the witches. Of those unfortunate people, only the school-master clerk is clearly identifiable in this woodcut.

One other incident in the text, the story of the cow made to take the place of the girl, can with some probability be recognised in another woodcut in the pamphlet. This also represents a form of a legend still living in Scotland, a version of which has lately been recorded in South Uist for the School's archives.

Robert Burns to Captain Francis Grose: Letter 401 (undated), 1790
(Ferguson 1931, 2:22–24)

Sir,

Among the many Witch Stories I have heard relating to Aloway Kirk, I distinctly remember only two or three . . .

The last relation I shall give, though equally true, is not so well identified as the two former, with regard to the scene: but as the best authorities give it for Aloway, I shall relate it.—

On a summer's evening, about the time that Nature puts on her sables to mourn the expiry of the chearful day, a shepherd boy belonging to a farmer in the immediate neighbourhood of Aloway Kirk, had just folded his charge, and was returning home. As he passed the Kirk, in the adjoining field, he fell in with a crew of men and women, who were busy pulling stems of the plant ragwort. He observed that as each person pulled a ragwort, he or she got astride of it, and called out, 'Up horsie!' on which the ragwort flew off, like Pegasus,

through the air with its rider. The foolish boy likewise pulled his ragwort, and cried, with the rest, 'Up horsie!' and, strange to tell, away he flew with the company. The first stage at which the cavalcade stopt, was a merchant's wine cellar in Bourdeaux where, without saying, by your leave, they quaffed away at the best the cellar could afford, untill the morning, foe to the imps and works of darkness, threatened to throw light on the matter, and frightened them from their carousals.—

The poor shepherd lad, being equally a stranger to the scene and the liquor, heedlessly got himself drunk; and when the rest took horse, he fell asleep and was found so next day by some of the people belonging to the merchant. Somebody that understood Scotch, asking him what he was, he said he was such-a-one's herd in Aloway, and by some means or other getting home again, he lived long to tell the world the wondrous tale—

I am, D^{r} Sir
ROB^{T} BURNS

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Place-Names from Oral Tradition—An Informant's Repertoire

IAN FRASER

The purpose of this paper is to examine briefly the extent and nature of information supplied by two informants, who were interviewed by the writer for the purpose of collecting place-name information. As can be seen from the accompanying maps, both of these informants live in crofting townships, which have a fair amount of hill pasture, and a considerable coastline. Knockrome in Jura is probably the largest crofting township in the island. The crofts are larger than one normally finds in the islands, and the township's hill land is extensive, with good sheep and cattle grazing, despite competition from Jura's large deer population. The emphasis is on stock rearing, and the growing of hay and fodder for winter feed. The township enjoys a pleasant, sunny position on the northern curve of Loch na Mile, about four miles from the pier at Craighouse. In 1961 Knockrome had a population of 16.

Achmelvich, on the other hand, is sited on its own bay on the West Sutherland coast. It has a rugged, highly-indented coastline, with a limited amount of arable land and a common grazing which was described by the informant as 'poor and rocky, with a number of dangerous places in which sheep were liable to be lost.' In keeping with the economy of the area, there was a good deal of fishing activity in Achmelvich, but since the decline in manpower in the village (the population is now down to 16, like Knockrome), the emphasis has been on lobster- and crab-fishing.

The informants selected for these two townships had backgrounds typical of their neighbours in the village. The Knockrome informant spent almost all his time in cultivating his croft, and rearing sheep and young cattle for the Oban market. The informant in Achmelvich, now semi-retired, had been a crofter-fisherman, with more emphasis on fishing when prices were good. Both of these men, then, were ideal informants. They had an interest in the subject of place-names, since by reason of their occupations, the names of the various features in and around their villages were of importance to them in their daily work. They had both been brought up in families which laid much emphasis on village lore of all kinds, and it was obvious that they held a deep attachment to the history and development of their communities.

It is probably relevant at this juncture to examine briefly the techniques used for recording place-name information of this kind, *i.e.* names which occur in the oral tradition of a community. A six-inch Ordnance Survey plan is used. The informant and the fieldworker discuss the names on the map, the conversation being recorded on tape.

Care is taken to record pronunciations for each name already in use on the map, and in addition, the informant supplies the names of all the places which do not appear, thus providing a complete place-name coverage for the village, as far as the informant's knowledge goes and his memory serves.

When we examine the maps of the two townships involved, we can see that each informant has provided about seventy place-names for his own community, never before recorded. Not surprisingly, the occupation of each man is immediately apparent from the distribution of names. The Knockrome man, whose chief preoccupation is the land, is extremely well-versed in the place-names of his common grazing as well as those of his arable land. Generally speaking, the higher the density of unmapped place-names in a given township, the more conscious and interested is the informant in the history of his surroundings. There are other factors as well, of course. A landscape with a lot of physical detail in the form of little hills, streams, lochs, or an indented coast, will obviously require a great number of names to distinguish one feature from the next. A flat, featureless moor or plain, or a straight, unbroken stretch of coast will naturally lend itself to fewer place-names. From the point of view of the Knockrome informant, however, the limits of his place-name knowledge are plainly seen from the map. *At the six-inch scale*, he is not very knowledgeable about place-names outside the bounds of his own township, although he is able to give an extremely comprehensive list of names for the entire area of the township lands. Essentially, this is generally the distinguishing mark of the crofter informant in place-name collection in the field.

The repertoire of the Achmelvich informant differs from that of the Knockrome man in several vital respects. About fifty per cent of the unmapped place-names which he provides are situated on or near the coast. Admittedly, the coast and the sea play a much more significant part in the economy of Achmelvich as compared with Knockrome, and the informant's occupational background has necessitated an intimate knowledge of coastal features not only of his own township but of neighbouring townships as well. Being a crofter, of course, he has the same detailed knowledge of the village lands and grazings as his counterpart in Knockrome, although the Achmelvich common grazings are of considerably smaller extent.

Thus, we can see that both of these men provided comprehensive place-name information for their respective townships. In this way, by studying the kind of place-name information collected, we can also come to some general conclusions about the upbringing of both of these individuals, the traditions which they learned from their forebears and the attitudes which they adopt towards the lore of their community. This particular branch of name studies is therefore a most valuable exercise in that the collection of these minor place-names provides not only a highly detailed record of the entire place-name fabric of a community, but also an insight into many of its historical and linguistic aspects.

It is obviously impossible in this short article to give a detailed list of the place-names collected from these two informants, but appended is a representative one.

SOURCES

(1) *Place Names and Population, Scotland.* H.M.S.O. 1967.
(2) Ordnance Survey Maps (six-inch), County Series, ARGYLL No. 199; SUTHERLAND No. 69.
(3) School of Scottish Studies Archive PN 1967/19, 1968/6, 1969/32 and 33.

Appendix

Examples of Place Names from Oral Tradition

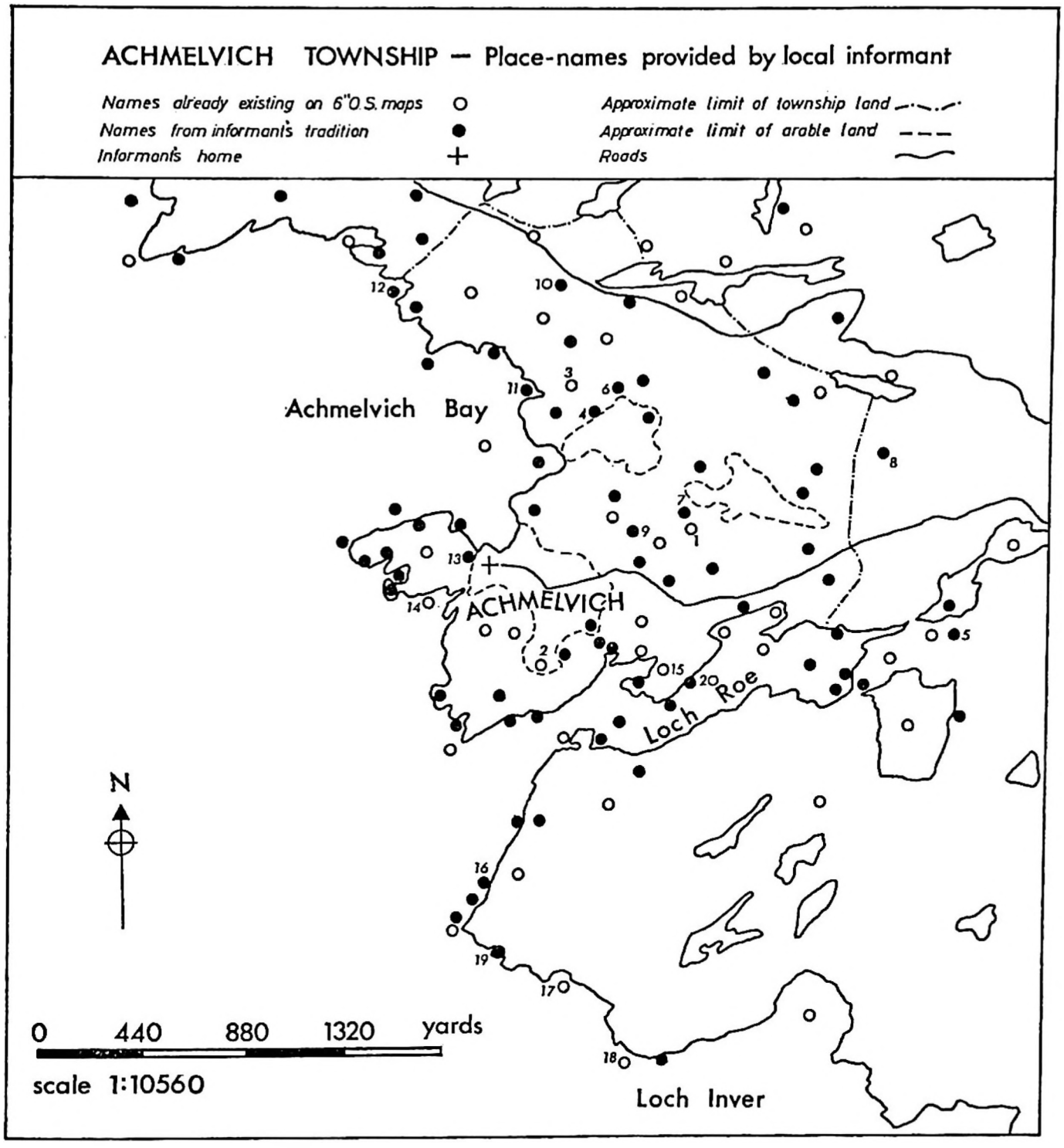
ACHMELVICH

(a) Inland

1	*Cnoc an Taghain*	Polecat's Knoll
2	*Cnoc a' Chlamhain*	Buzzard's Knoll
3	*Gleannan an Fheadair*	The Whistler's Little Glen
4	*Gead nan Caorach*	Sheep's Plot
5	*Cadha na Circe*	The Hens' Pass
6	*Bealach na Cnaimhean*	The Pass of the Bones
7	*Catha Bhaile Gheamhraidh*	The Pass of the Infield
8	*Glac na Ciste*	The Ravine of the Coffin
9	*Baile an Fhoghair*	Another infield. Presumably a small plot of ground where cattle were kept in the autumn.
10	*A' Chabhairnidh Ruadh* ['kavar'nih]	Similar to the more common *cachaleith*—The Red Gate.

(b) Coastal

11	*Geodha nan Gobhar*	Goats' Geo
12	*Geodha nam Muc*	Swine's Geo
13	*Geodha nan Earaichean*	Boats' Geo
14	*Port an Tairbh*	The Bull's Port
15	*Port an t-Seilisdeir*	The Iris Port
16	*An Luinge*	The Ship (a ship-shaped rock). The dative case is used here instead of *Long*.
17	*Camas a'Mhaide*	The Bay of the Stick
18	*Rubha a' Bhacain*	The Point of the Tether-stake. There are a number of meanings for *bacan*, and the informant was uncertain as to the origin, but he guessed that cows were tethered here to prevent them wandering too near the cliff edge.
19	*An Cat*	The Cat. Rock shaped like a sitting cat; a good landmark.
20	*Port Falaichte*	The Hidden Port. Boats used in poaching expeditions were kept here.


ACHMELVICH TOWNSHIP — Place-names provided by local informant
Names already existing on 6"O.S. maps
Names from informant's tradition
Informant's home
Approximate limit of township land
Approximate limit of arable land
Roads
Achmelvich Bay
ACHMELVICH
Loch Roe
Loch Inver
N
0 440 880 1320 yards
scale 1:10560

KNOCKROME

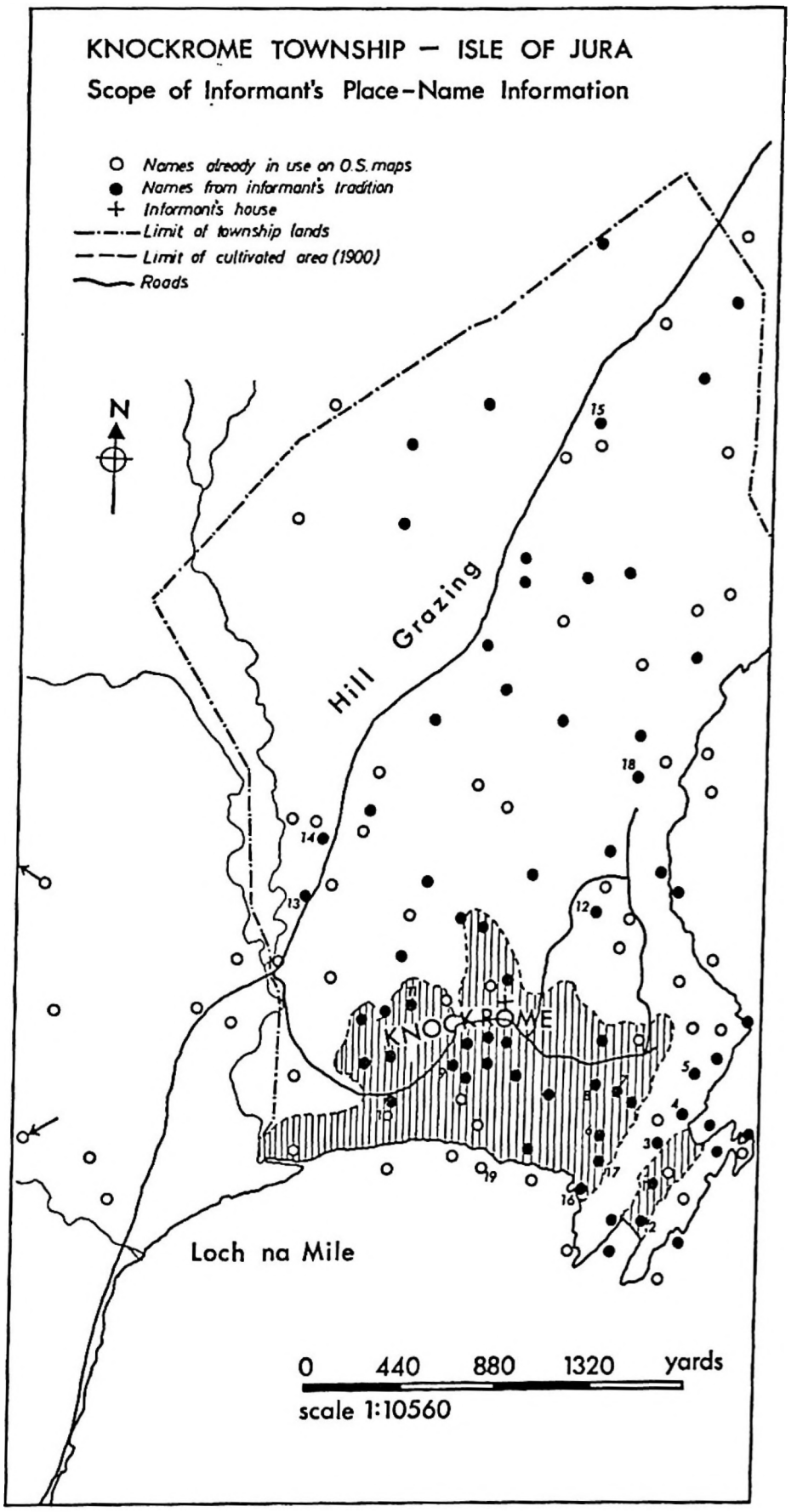
(a) Inland

1 *Lag na h-Iollain*	Hollow of the Fishing Rock
2 *Fearann nan Iosgairean*	The Fishermen's Land, beside the shore
3 *Cnoc an t-Seann Duine*	The Old Man's Knoll
4 *Leathad an Eirinnich*	The Irishman's Lea
5 *Muinntir Eachann*	Hector's Household or Family (name attached to a now deserted croft)
6 *Am Màs*	The Buttock (a field)
7 *Ruighe Iain Chaimbeal*	John Campbell's shieling
8 *Geadhail a' Chruithneachd*	The Wheat Park
9 *A' Bhuaile Earrach*	The Spring Fold or Enclosure
10 *Eadar à Iùra*	Lit. 'Between two Juras'—the space between two prominent standing stones, by tradition commemorating the graves of two 'kings' iù and Rà. These were supposed to have given their names to the island.
11 *Goirtean Creadh*	The Little Clay Field
12 *Cnoc an Lín*	The Flax Hillock (where flax was dried at one time)
13 *An Gàradh Breac*	The Speckled Dyke
14 *Na Geadan Riabhach*	The Brindled Plots
15 *Sruthan na h-Airigh Bhuidhe*	The Burn of the Yellow Shieling
16 *Geadhail na Mùrlach*	The Slattern's Park (according to tradition). Ir. *muirleach* is a marsh or puddle; *mùrlach* is a dogfish in Islay.
17 *Iomar Uidsean*	Hugh's Rig (Uidsean is the Jura equivalent of the personal name *Uisdean*)
18 *Gàradh na Beisde Duibhe*	The Otter's Dyke

(b) Coastal

19 *Rubha na Togsaide*	Hogshead Point (*Togsaid* is a corruption of the English hogshead)

Significantly, the bulk of the Knockrome informant's lore is related to the land and the agricultural economy of the community. At the same time the Achmelvich man's repertoire is much more varied, and shows the dual local tradition of fishing and crofting in a very marked manner.


KNOCKROME TOWNSHIP — ISLE OF JURA
Scope of Informant's Place-Name Information
Names already in use on O.S. maps
Names from informant's tradition
Informant's house
Limit of township lands
Limit of cultivated area (1900)
Roads
N
Hill Grazing
KNOCKROME
Loch na Mile
0 440 880 1320 yards
scale 1:10560