

Cape Wrath and its Various Names

A. B. TAYLOR

I

Introductory

Cape Wrath, a headland in Sutherland, rising 300 feet above the sea, forms the extreme north-west point of the mainland of Britain. It is separated from the main part of the parish of Durness by the Kyle of Durness, and by a twelve-mile stretch of uninhabited moorland.

The tourist can visit it from the village of Durness during the summer months by taking himself by car to the sands at Keoldale, joining a ferry-boat that crosses the Kyle once or twice daily and being conveyed in a mini-bus across the moor by a rough road that leads to the lighthouse (built in 1828). The Cape itself is not impressive from the landward side, but there are grand views of the cliffs and the sea to the east and south. The trip, exhilarating in the highest degree on a fine day, takes up to four hours.

When the writer visited Cape Wrath in 1970, the ferry-man, aged 65 and a Gaelic speaker, called the cape ['kɛp 'rɑ:θ] or, in Gaelic ['parau]. The bus-driver, a crofter aged about 35, used the more usual Gaelic pronunciation ['parəv], and said that the name was also applied to the moorland country between the Kyle and the headland. *Parph* and, more often, *Am Parph*, are the written forms in which the Gaelic name now normally appears.

If one leaves out Ptolemy's *Tarvedum*,¹ which is less likely to be Cape Wrath than Dunnet Head or, perhaps, Holburn Head further east, the oldest name of the headland is the Norsemen's *Hvarf*, c. 1200. Between *Hvarf* and the current Gaelic and English names there lies a curious diversity of other names, which have been gathered by the writer over a period of years in maps, sailing-directions and topographical writings. These include *de forro*, *capo bocam*, c. *de barels*, *Wraith head*, *Fairheid*, *Faro Head*, *Wrayght Head*, *Row na Farriff*, and variant spellings of these names. The purpose of this paper is to see if the names can be linked together, either phonologically or by the processes of scribal transmission. The story that emerges is a complicated one. It can best be told, it is hoped, by beginning with ON *Hvarf*, and then tracing the current names back to this etymon; after which the intervening names will be examined; and finally the results will be summarised so far as is possible in the form of a textual tree or stemma of the name.

ON *Hvarf* appears in the accounts of two separate historical episodes in old Icelandic sagas. In 1202 Gudmund Arason and Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson sailed northwards between

Lewis and the mainland of Scotland on a stormy voyage from Ireland to Norway. *Hrafns Saga*, written in Iceland 1213–40, records the course taken and quotes a verse by a poet, Grim Hjaltason, who was on board. A reference to *Hvarf* in the prose narrative is based upon Grim's verse, as the following extract shows:

After that they were driven towards Scotland, and lay several nights at a place called *Staurr*. Along the coast of Scotland they had a south wind so strong that the men who were there said that they had never been in such high seas as when they sailed out from the *Hvarf* in Scotland [*undan Hvarfinu á Skotlandi*]. Grim Hjaltason recited this verse:

The foaming billow blows beneath us.
 Now it blows hard from the south off *Hvarf* [*ór suðri fyri Hvarfe*].
 The mighty billows grow greater.
 Our toil is no little thing.
 The keel gives way and the storm brings men in peril.
 The ship sailed on most proudly.

Staurr, also mentioned in *Orkneyinga Saga*, is the Point of Stoer, a prominent headland of 500 feet, on the coast of Assynt, Sutherland. It will be noted that the prose narrative gives *Hvarf* the definite article, whereas the (earlier) verse does not do so.

In 1263 King Hakon Hakonsson sailed round *Hvarf* on his expedition to the west of Scotland. His saga, written in Norway a year or so later, says of his outward voyage:

King Hakon sailed on St Laurence's Day off *Hvarf* [*fyrir Huarf*].

and of the return journey, after leaving Skye:

From there he sailed off *Hvarf* [*fyrir Hvarf*], but when he came to *Dýrnes* [Durness] there was a dead calm.²

ON *hvarf* is a noun derived from the verb *hverfa*, which has the primary meaning of 'to make a turn', and the secondary meaning of 'to disappear'. The noun *hvarf* is used ordinarily in the sense of some kind of 'disappearance', but in a few place-names in the sense of 'a turning point'. The headland at the entrance to Bergen Sound in Norway is *Kvarven*, which appears in *Heimskringla* (thirteenth century), as *Hvarfsnes*. The southernmost point of Greenland, Cape Farewell in English, was *Hvarf*, appearing first in the same century in *Landnámabók*.³ In the north-west of Scotland, Cape Wrath is an inevitable turning-point, and with the name *Hvarf* must have been well-known to Norse seamen from the ninth century to the thirteenth.

ON *hvarf* also appears in Quarff, a district in Shetland: (*Quharf*, i.e. phonetically [hwarf] 1569. Clouston 1914:128). There is no headland here, but the village of Easter Quarff is the first point on the road from Lerwick to Sumburgh at which one can turn right to the west of the south mainland. Alternatively, as Fritzner's Dictionary shows, *hvarf* was used of farm settlements in out-of-the-way situations in Norway; and Jakobsen (1936:63) thought that this might possibly explain the meaning of Quarff in Shetland.

II

A phonological connection between G *Parph* and ON *Hvarf* was proposed for the first time, so far as the writer has discovered, by Henderson (1910:157). Without the benefit of early spellings, Henderson suggested in effect that the initial [p] in the Gaelic name is a de-aspiration of initial [f] developed from *Hv* in the ON name.

Numerous early forms are in fact available. The earliest ones of special significance are as follows:

de forro 14th century. Anonymous Venetian portolan chart, described and quoted by Andrews (1926:145). Probably originally preceded by *Capo* or *C*.

Faro Head c. 1540. Alexander Lindsay's *Rutter of the Scottish Seas* (Adv. MS 33. 2. 27, item 29, early 17th c.).

Row na farroy c. 1600. Timothy Pont's MS maps (no. P. 1).

Row na ferryif c. 1600. *Op. cit.* (no. P. 3).

Row na farriff c. 1600. *Op. cit.* (no. P. 2).

In Durines, west of the Diri-more, there is an excellent and delectable place for hunting, called the Parwe, where they hunt the reid deir in abundance; and sometimes they drive them into the ocean sea at the Pharo-head, wher they do take them in boats as they list 1639. (Gordon 1813:4).

locus . . . venatu celebris vulgo Parwe c. 1650. Gordon of Straloch (MacFarlane 1906-8: II. 438).

Parre head 1653. Gordon of Straloch, *Scotia Regnum*.

Parff Forest 1750. James Dorret, *General Map of Scotland*.

Barve Head 1789. John Ainslie, *Scotland*.

The above forms can be divided into four types according to how they begin and how they end:

- i Forms with an initial 'aspirate' [f] and with a final consonant.
- ii Forms with an initial 'aspirate' [f] but with no final consonant.
- iii Forms with an initial 'de-aspirated' [p] and with a final consonant.
- iv Forms with an initial 'de-aspirated' [p] but with no final consonant.

Timothy Pont's *Row na farriff* belongs to Type i, and is perhaps the most informative rendering of the name. Pont prepared his maps by travelling about the country, and what he wrote on his sheets is his Scoto-English version of each name as he heard it locally. *Row* is obviously G *Rubha*, 'cape'. The final element *farriff* is an accurate transcription of a hypothetical Gaelic form **Farph* pronounced in the usual Gaelic way [ˈfarəv] with a glide vowel between the final consonants *r* and *bh*. His transcription shows that the aspirated form was still in use by about 1600.

The forms *forro* and *Faro* have the initial aspiration but *not* the final [v] and thus belong to Type ii. As a name for the headland, *Faro Head* is of interest because it had a wide usage in maps, charts and topographical writings after its first recorded appearance in

Lindsay's *Rutter* in the middle of the sixteenth century. As this work will be referred to again in this paper, a word or two about it may conveniently be interpolated here.

This *Rutter* is a set of about two hundred sailing directions round the coast of Scotland prepared by Alexander Lindsay, a Scottish pilot, for a voyage made in 1540 by King James V from the port of Leith round the north and west of Scotland in 1540. The *Rutter* was probably put together a little before the voyage took place. The original in Scots is lost, but six later versions survive, three in English 'translation' and three in French. The fullest and best English text is in item 29 in Advocates MS 33. 2. 27 in the National Library of Scotland. It is in this MS that *Faro Head* occurs. The three French translations, as the writer has shown in his paper 'The Place-Name St Kilda' in *Scottish Studies* (1969: 150), stem from a primary French translation made from a Scots exemplar in 1546 by Nicolas de Nicolay, cosmographer to the King of France. The earliest of the extant French versions is in MS Harl. 3996 in the British Museum, and was originally prepared by Nicolay for presentation to the Cardinal of Lorraine in 1559. The present writer has an edition of the *Rutter* nearing completion.

The forms *forro* and *Faro* show that Type ii is a very early one.

There are other examples of Gaelic words having parallel forms with and without final [v]: e.g. *G marbh*, 'dead', has the pronunciations ['marəv] and ['marau].

Lindsay's *Faro* is a reasonable Scoto-English spelling of a hypothetical Gaelic ['farau]. It may have taken this form—and thus become popular among cartographers—by analogy with Italian-Spanish-Portuguese *faro*, 'a lighthouse'.

Type iv, with initial [p] and no final consonant appears next on the record, i.e. *Parre* 1653, ancestor of the ferryman's ['parau]. De-aspiration must have taken place among at least some Gaelic speakers by the early years of the seventeenth century.

Type iii, although it is the commoner Modern Gaelic form, is the last to appear certainly on the record. *Parff* 1750 and *Barve* 1789 are the earliest forms of this type that have been found. *Parph* is the form that appears most frequently on the area of the deer forest in nineteenth-century maps.

The form *Parwe* 1639, c. 1650, by the ambiguous spelling rules of the time, might represent either of the last two forms, type iii if we take <w> as equivalent to <v> for [v], type iv if we take <w> as representing the vowel [u], either of these being possible.

The evidence provided by the early forms quoted, therefore, indicates that the two Modern Gaelic forms of the name are descended phonologically, for the most part by separate routes, from ON *Hvarf*; and that the initial consonant in each form was affected by de-aspiration by the early years of the seventeenth century.

III

The development of the English name of the headland begins, like the form *Faro Head*, with Alexander Lindsay's *Rutter of the Scottish Seas*, c. 1540. *The Wraith Head*

occurs three times and in four of the six versions, with a variant *the Wrayth head* in one version.

On the face of it this *wraith* can hardly be anything but the Older Scots adjective 'angry', 'wrathful'; 'fierce', 'savage'; and (of the wind or the sea) 'violent', 'stormy', from the Old English *wrāþ*. As the corresponding English form of the adjective is *wroth*, the 'expected' anglicisation would be **the wroth head*. The actual English form first found (in John Speed's map of Scotland in his *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine*, London 1610) must result from a confusion of the Scottish adjective and the cognate noun (also *wraith etc.* in Scots) and the rendering of the latter by its English equivalent *wrath*.

Then, curiously, *Wrath* gives place in cartography to *Faro Head* for the next hundred and thirty years. We find *Faro* (or *Farro*) in Timothy Pont's manuscript maps; in Blaeu's *Atlas*, 1654 and subsequent editions; in Hermann Moll's maps of Scotland, 1714 and 1725; and in John Cowley's map of North Britain, 1734.

Then *Wrath* returns. The Rev. Alex. Bryce prepared a new outline of the north coast of Scotland, from the Ord of Caithness to Assynt on the west, which was engraved by R. Cooper in 1744. His outline is superior to any previous one. The north-west extremity is *Cape Wrath*, without alternative.

It is a little difficult to say with certainty how Bryce came to revive Speed's form. It is unlikely that he had seen Speed's *Theatre*, which must have been a book collector's piece by 1744. And if he had asked the local fishermen at Durness they would probably have given the Gaelic name ['parəv] or ['parau]. Speed's form must have survived in 'literary' English use. It appears, for example, in a description of the district of Strathnaver dated 1726, prepared probably by a local minister of the Church of Scotland:

The Parish of Durness lyes much on the sea coast as the former [*i.e.* Tongue], a few places excepted. Its bounded on the east by the Whitenhead and on the west with Farohead, or Cape Wrath a high promon. five miles at least betwixt both (MacFarlane 1906-8: I. 192).

The firm establishment of this form of the name, however, is due ultimately to its use in 1750 by James Dorret in his large four-sheet *General Map of Scotland*. This map was the basis of most maps of Scotland for the next fifty years.

IV

It is now possible to turn from the main lines of development of the Gaelic and English names to several variants that emerge on the way.

The medieval portolan charts produce two other names in addition to [*Capo*] *de forro*: *capo bocam* 16th century. Anonymous Venetian chart, described and quoted by Andrews (1926:142-3). Andrews says this chart is derived from a late fifteenth-century

revision of an earlier Catalan chart. The name appears twice, applied to Cape Wrath and also to what appears to be Holburn Head further east.

c. de barels 1538. Venetian chart by Bartolomeo Olives; described and quoted by Andrews (1926:196, 200).

Spellings of British names in the portolan charts are notoriously corrupt, the errors no doubt arising through repeated copying by Mediterranean chart-makers of names obtained from sailing directions or sketches originally made in the British Isles. The two names given above have little surface connection with a written form of ['farev], but the possibility of such a connection should not be excluded. It was possible at that time to misread *b* for *v*, *m* for *w* for *v*, and even *ls* for *ff*. All this may seem fanciful, although scarcely so to the student who has examined in detail the strange toponymy of the portolan charts.

The next variant is *Fairheid* which appears, surprisingly, as an alternative to *Wraith* in the three surviving French versions of Lindsay's *Rutter* of *c.* 1540. It is sufficient to quote the relevant 'direction' from the earliest of these French versions in order to compare it with the corresponding 'direction' from the only English version that preserves it. The English text is given first:

From Arquhytin to the Wrayth Head, otherwise called Faro Head, west, xv mille.

(Adv. MS 33. 2. 27, item 29, fol. 7)

D'Arquhytin à Wraithh otherwise autrement Fairheid cest à dire Bellepointe, Cest xv mille.

(BM. MS Harl. 3996, fol. 23)

Before discussing *Fairheid*, one may make some comments on points of detail in these quotations. *Arquhytin* is now Whiten Head and the distance given between the two headlands, 15 Scots miles, is substantially accurate. The English 'direction' is the first of many instances in which *Wraith Head* (or some variant of it) and *Faro Head* are given as alternatives. For reasons that are not clear, the French translation has imported *otherwise* from its exemplar, but has also translated it. While there are minor textual variations between MS Harl. 3996 and the other two French texts, they all have the same form *Fairheid*, and this must therefore have stood in the primary French translation of 1546.

At first glance, one might take *Fairheid* with its Scots orthography in the second syllable to be textually more original than *Faro Head* with its Mediterranean dress. But there are good reasons for a contrary conclusion. *Faro*, as has shown, fits into the main phonological development from *Hvarf* to ['parau]. *Fairheid* cannot easily be thought to do so. In sixteenth-century Scots, on the other hand, *fairheid* meant 'fairness', 'beauty'; and if it was a new name applied to this wild headland, one cannot imagine it being chosen by a seaman.

It seems possible that *Fairheid* resulted from a miscopying, at some earlier stage in the transmission of the *Rutter*, of *Faro* as *Fare*, *o* being misread as *e*—something which did happen in hands of the time. In Middle English and Middle Scots, one of the common

meanings of *fare* or *fair* as a noun was 'a journey or voyage'. Gavin Douglas, for example, uses *fair* in this sense in his *Aeneid* (1513). This, or the adjective *fair* 'beautiful', may have been the sense assumed by the scribe, doubtless himself wholly ignorant of the topography in question. It may possibly be relevant that there is a *Fair Head* on the north-east coast of Antrim in Northern Ireland.

If this hypothesis is accepted, then Nicolay would find both *Faro head* and *Fair heid* in his Scots exemplar in 1546. Perhaps he preferred the latter because it looked more authentic.

However the form *Fair-heid* arose, it seems to have found its way into some English text or map, for it turns up as *Faire heade* applied to Cape Wrath in Robert Adam's 'Armada' map of the British Isles (London 1590).⁴ This map is the last of a series illustrating the defeat and escape of the Spanish Armada. It is based substantially on Ortelius' *Scotiae Tabula* (1573), but Ortelius has *C. Wraith* or *ffaro head*. Outside the *Rutter*, this is the only occurrence of the name that the writer has discovered.

Another variant is *Wrayght Head*. This is found first in Mercator's large scale map of the British Isles (Duisburg 1564), and occurs repeatedly for nearly a century in maps deriving from the Mercator tradition.

The combination *-ght* is an uncommon but not unknown Scottish variant of *-cht* and *-tht*, themselves (with the so-called 'parasitic *t*') common Scottish variants of *-th*.

It is reasonable to suppose, therefore, that *Wrayght* is ultimately of Scots origin, and represents a Scottish *wraytht* or *wrayth*. Gavin Douglas's *Aeneid* again provides a parallel:

Reid the ferd buik quhar quene Dido is wraitht.
[Read the fourth book where Queen Dido is wroth]
(Book I, line 437)

V

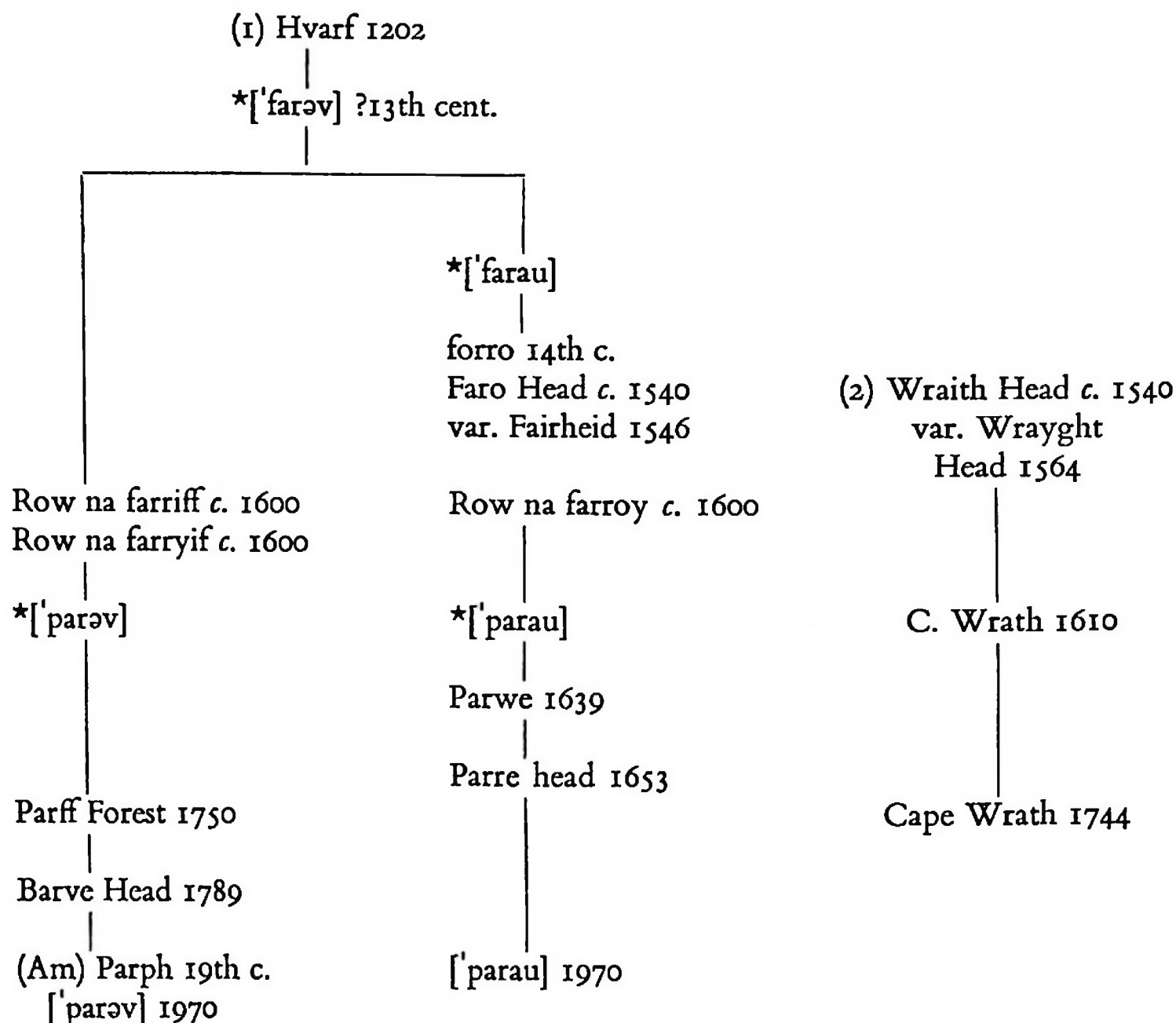
Summary

There are three names for this headland in use today: Scots-English *Cape Wrath*: Gaelic ['parəv] written *Parph* or *Am Parph*; and Gaelic ['parau], now in oral use only.

The two latter names are derived, for the most part phonologically, from the Old Norse name *Hvarf* meaning 'turning-point', recorded in two independent sources in the thirteenth century. The former is a new fifteenth- or sixteenth-century Lowland Scottish descriptive appellation, meaning 'stormy headland'.

The development of the three modern names is traced through a variety of intermediate forms extending from the fourteenth century onwards. Some of these forms were formerly popular among cartographers and topographical writers, e.g. *Faro Head* and *Wrayght Head*, and these are discussed in some detail. The resultant relationship of

the various forms of the names is shown diagrammatically (hypothetical forms are marked with an asterisk; the two corrupt forms from the portolan charts have been omitted):



NOTES

- 1 It might be possible to argue that there is a phonological connection between ON *Hvarf* and Ptolemy's *Tarvedum*, and Ptolemy's Greek text can be interpreted in such a way as to permit this identification; see Flinders Petrie 1918:17. But the writer accepts the arguments of Watson (1926:36) and Richmond (1955:137) that Ptolemy's *Tarvedum* refers to what is now Dunnet Head in Caithness.
- 2 The saga sources for the name *Hvarf* are: *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, MS AM. 155 fol., 17th c. Text in *Sturlunga Saga*, ed. G. Vjifursson (Oxford 1878) vol. II, p. 290. Derivative forms in *Biskupa Sögur* (Copenhagen 1855-78) vol. I, p. 483, and II, pp. 49, 50. *Hákons saga Hákonarsonar*, Codex Frisianus, 14th c., ed. C. R. Unger (Christiana 1871), pp. 572, 579.

- 3 *Hvarfsnes*, in *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, (Reykjavík 1941) vol. III, p. 392.
til Hvarfsins aa Graenlandi, in *Landnámabók*, ed. F. Jónsson (Copenhagen 1900) p. 129 (*Sturlubok*).
til Hvarfs, *op. cit.*, p. 4 (*Hauksbok*).
- 4 Robert Adams drew his map in 1588, and had it engraved by Augustine Ryther in 1590. Originals in British Museum; Pepysian Library, Cambridge; St. John's College Library, Cambridge. Reproduction in *Lord Howard of Effingham and the Spanish Armada with exact facsimiles of the Tables of Augustine Ryther A.D. 1590*, ed. H. Y. Thompson, Roxburghe Club, 1919.

REFERENCES

- ANDREWS, MICHAEL C.
1926 'Scotland in the Portolan Charts'. *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 42:129-53, 193-213, 293-306.
- CLOUSTON, J. STORER
1914 *Records of the Earldom of Orkney*. Scottish History Society, Edinburgh.
- DOUGLAS, GAVIN
[1513] *The Aeneid*. Ed. D. F. C. Coldwell. Scottish Text Society, Edinburgh. 4 vols. 1957-64.
- FRITZNER, J.
1886-96 *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog*. Christiana.
- GORDON, SIR ROBERT, OF GORDONSTOUN
1639 'Description of the Province of Sutherland', in *The Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland*. Edinburgh 1813.
- HENDERSON, GEORGE
1910 *The Norse Influence on Celtic Scotland*. Glasgow.
- JAKOBSEN, J.
1936 *The Place Names of Shetland*. London.
- MACFARLANE, W.
1906-8 *Geographical Collections relating to Scotland*. Scottish History Society, Edinburgh.
- PETRIE, FLINDERS
1918 'Ptolemy's Geography of Albion'. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 52:12-26.
- PONT, TIMOTHY
c. 1600 Manuscript maps of Scotland (in the National Library of Scotland).
- RICHMOND, I. A.
1955 *Roman and Native in North Britain*. Edinburgh.
- TAYLOR, A. B.
1969 'The Name St Kilda.' *Scottish Studies* 13:147-58.
- WATSON, W. J.
1926 *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*. Edinburgh.

Editorial Note

Dr Taylor had just completed a draft of this article before his sudden death in March 1972. This final version contains revisions by Mr A. J. Aitken, Editor of *A Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, to whom Dr Taylor had submitted his manuscript for comment.

