

## *The Place-Names of Illeray*

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The island of Baleshare is on the south-west side of North Uist, separated from it by extensive tidal sands which afforded crossings at selected points during low tide. Now, a causeway provides a road link with the mainland of North Uist. It is only in comparatively recent times, however, that the name Baleshare (Gaelic *Baile Sear*, east township/farm) came to be applied to the whole island, which was, in fact, originally called Illeray (Gaelic *Iolaraigh*, the -ay/ -aigh suffix indeed denoting 'island'). Baleshare was a township in Illeray. This is confirmed by seventeenth-century documents which refer to 'Eastertoune in Iyllaray' (RMS 1657) and 'Castertoun<sup>1</sup> in Illaray' (Retours 1644). In the early sixteenth century, Illeray had the status of *tir-unga*,<sup>2</sup> 'ounceland' (Scots 'davoch'), and earlier, in 1389, the Charters of the Abbey of Inchaffray refer to it as *quatuor denariatas terre in Ylara*. Baleshare, in contrast, was a merkland in the *Retours* of 1644. Now the name Illeray is confined to the northern part of the island—a striking case of the whole and the part exchanging names. It is this northern area that is the subject of the present note.

A recording of Illeray place-names was made by the writer in June 1973 (SSS PN 1973 34, 35): these are listed at the end of this note. Like all township place-names in the Hebrides, they vary a good deal, ranging from personal names like *Gearraidh Dhughail* (7) and *Tobhta Uisdein* (16) to purely descriptive terms like *Struthan Bàn* (11) and *Cuidhe Caol* (81). There are, however, a number of important minor names which provide pointers to various aspects of former settlement, a number of local customs and techniques, and not least, a number of precise locations of cattle- and sheep-folds, now mostly disused, but once important in the local economy. Unfortunately, as with many minor place-names, especially those gathered from oral tradition, the accurate dating of most of them is well-nigh impossible. The only exceptions are those which include personal names, and even there certainty is rare.

One of the most important of the minor names in the list is *Abhainn Husabost* (2). This seems to derive from Old Norse *húsbolstadr*, house-stead. Beveridge (1911:79) noted the existence of *Sgeir Husabost*, a skerry on the western shore of Illeray. This evidence suggests that Husabost was located approximately on the present site of Teanamachar (*q.v.*), although the removal of arable ground by sea erosion is a factor which may have to be taken into account. There seem to be no historical references, either in maps or documents, to Husabost, so we must assume that it occupied a position somewhere on the western machair. *Sgeir nan Laogh* (29) was pointed out as a place where a cattle fold had been, evidently when much of the present *Traigh Leathann*

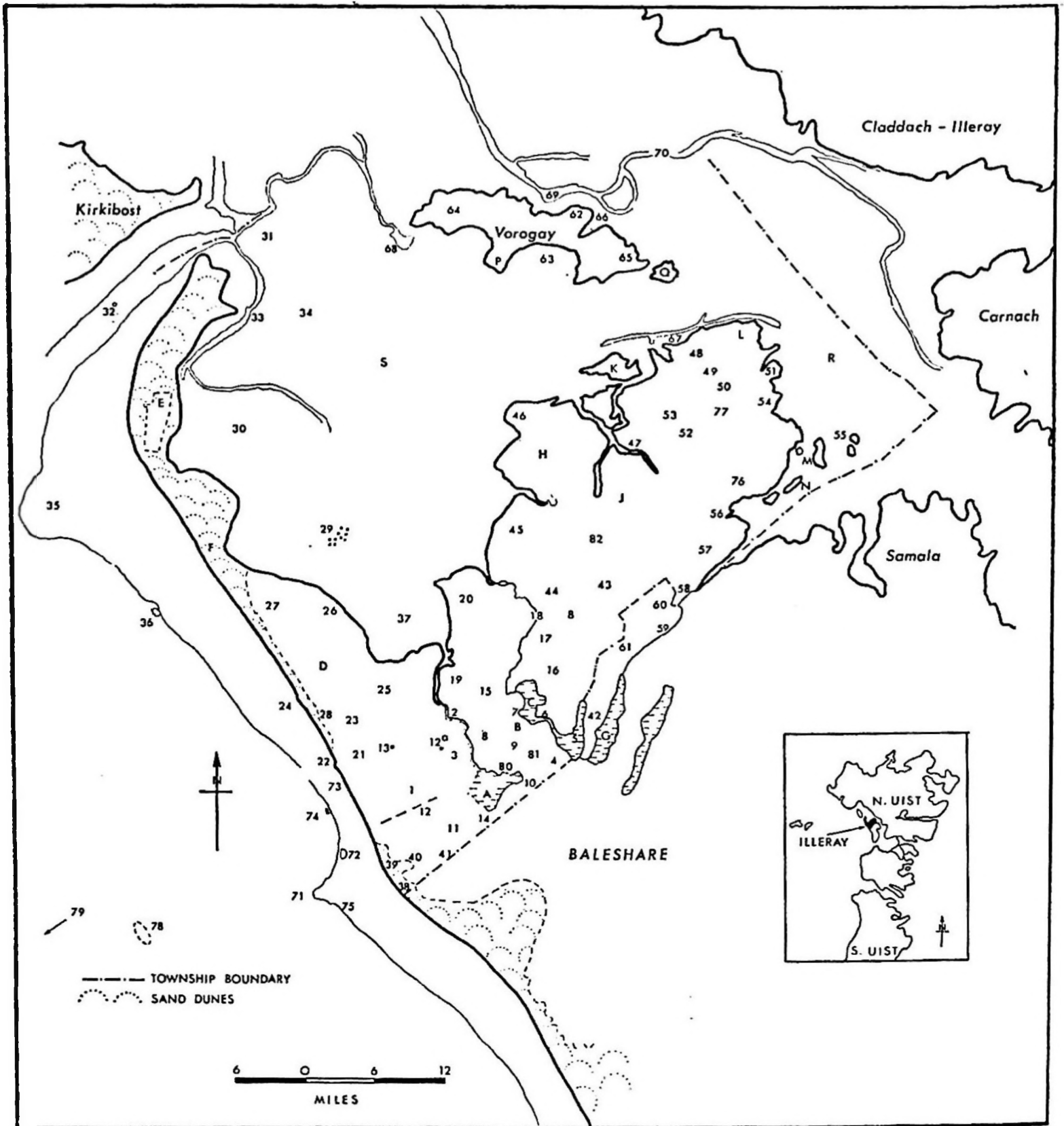


FIG. 1 Map of Illeray, Island of Baleshare, North Uist. (Numbers and letters refer to the lists of place names.)

was cultivable. According to tradition, the sea broke through the *Mol Greannach* (F) and eroded much arable land, so that all that remains of the fold today is a rough pile of boulders on an otherwise featureless strand.

Illeray is in many ways typical of the crofting townships of the west side of North Uist. It has flat, sandy machair soils, rich in lime, and, by today's crofting standards, is fertile and prosperous. Clearly the emphasis was, and still is, on agriculture, especially on animal husbandry. The sea was less exploited, there being few suitable deep-water 'ports', and an extremely exposed coast on the west. This is borne out by an examination of the place-names. *Gearraidh*, pasture-land, is by far the most common term used in the naming of fields, although *leaba*, bed, and *talamh*, ground or land, are both used on three and two occasions respectively. *Cuidhe* is used for small folds where cattle and especially calves were penned. For lambs the enclosure was known as *cotan*, which like *stalla*, occurs in a single instance. The low incidence of topographic terms like *cnoc*, hillock (four examples) and *lag*, hollow, (three examples) testifies to the flat nature of the landscape. The hillocks in question are all very slight rises in the ground. The term for water-courses are *abhainn*, river (three examples), and in one instance *sruthan*, little stream. *Allt* is rare on the west side of Uist. Many coastal names predictably contain the word *sgeir*, rock or skerry, twelve being recorded in Illeray. On a sandy coastline, individual rocks, many of them quite small, achieve significance as landmarks, and are consequently named. *Rubha*, point, is likewise common (five examples). *Oitir*, shoals, and *Faodhail*, sands, are also used. The relative scarcity of the term *port*, boat-port (two examples) is a good indication of the lack of sea-faring activity in the economy of Illeray.

In the lists that follow, letters A to T denote names already in use on the 6 inch Ordnance Survey map, while numbered names have been collected from the Illeray informant.

*Names Included on the Six-inch Ordnance Survey Map (1903)*

A	<i>Loch Mhic Coain</i>	Cowan's Loch
B	<i>Dùn Mór</i>	Big Dùn
C	<i>Loch an Duin Mhoir</i>	Loch of the Big Dùn
D	<i>Lag Gorm</i>	Green Hollow
E	<i>Slugan</i>	The Gullet
F	<i>Mol Greannach</i>	Rough or Crabbed Beach
G	<i>Loch nan Teang</i>	Loch of the Tongues (of land)
H	<i>Rosamul</i>	O.N. <i>hross-muli</i> , horse-ridge. Since this is a point of land, Gaelic <i>ros</i> , point, may be more correct.
K	<i>Glas-Eilean</i>	Grey Island
L	<i>Carnan nan Long</i>	The Little Cairn of the Ships
M	<i>Eilean nan Carnan</i>	Island of Cairns
N	<i>Eilean na Mòine</i>	Peat Island
P	<i>Rubha Bàn</i>	White Point

Q	<i>Glas Eilean Beag</i>	Little Grey Island
R	<i>Faodhail nan Caorach</i>	Sheep Sands
S	<i>Traigh Leatham</i>	Broad Shore
T	<i>Teanamachar</i>	(Not in use in this form. See no. 1 on <i>List of Place Names from The Informant's Repertoire</i> below).

*List of Place-Names from the Informant's Repertoire*

- 1 *Teanamachar* (O.S. spelling).<sup>\*</sup> Locally called 'An t-Seana Mhachair', the Old Machair. Also known as 'Machair' and used as such in the postal address.
- 2 *Abhainn Husabost* O.N. *hús-bolstadr*, house-stead. Gaelic *abhainn*, river. This is a short stream which joins Loch an Dùin Mhóir and Loch Cuidhe nan Laogh (6).
- 3 *Leaba Dhubh*, The Black Bed or Couch.
- 4 *Rubha Geugannach*, Point full of little Branches (usual word is *geugagach*).
- 5 *Loch Cuidhe nan Laogh*, Loch of the Calves' Fold.
- 6 *Abhainn an Duin Mhóir*, River of the Big Dun.
- 7 *Gearraidh Dhùghaill*, Dugald's Pasture-land. This term *gearraidh* is often used to describe the out-bye land in Uist, *i.e.* the area between the common-grazing and the arable. It is usually enclosed by a fence or dyke.
- 8 *Guala a' Choinnich*. *Guala* is the local form for *gualam*, shoulder or corner. *Còinneach* is 'moss'.
- 9 *Dun Beag*, Little Dùn.
- 10 *Gearraidh nan Clach Loisgte*, Pasture-land of the Burnt Stones.
- 11 *Struthan Bàn*, Little White Burn.
- 12 *Gàradh a' Mhadaidh*. The Dog's Dyke. This was the line of an old march dyke a few hundred yards west of the present boundary with Baleshare. Dykes in the island were originally made of turves, stone being somewhat scarce, and less easily dismantled. According to tradition, the men of the village were pulling down the dyke, which was a fairly unpopular job, when one man shouted 'Leagaibh gàradh a' mhadaidh'! (Pull down the dog's dyke!) The name has remained for the site ever since.
- 13 *Tobar Mór*, The Big Well. The most reliable source of water in the area. Others existed, but were not named.
- 14 *Gearraidh nan Curran*, Pasture-land of the Carrots.
- 15 *Gearraidh Chrò*, Pasture-land of the Fold.
- 16 *Tobhta Uisdein*, Hugh's Ruined House.
- 17 *Cuidhe nan Laogh*, Calves' Enclosure.
- 18 *Abhainn Ghearraidh nan Ceap*, River of the Pasture-land of the Turves. A place which supplied turf for thatching, dykes, *etc.*
- 19 *Gearraidh nam Feannag*, Hooded Crow's Pasture-land.
- 20 *Rudha Bàn*, White Point.
- 21 *Talamh na Sgeir Fhaoiteig*, The Ground of the Cowrie Skerry. *Faoiteag* is a small univalve shellfish, *concha veneris*, and was often carried in the pocket for luck (Macdonald 1972: 119). On being asked the meaning of this word by the writer, the informant produced

<sup>\*</sup> the only name in this list that appears on the O.S. map.

one from his own pocket, stating that he had heard that these shells were used as currency in olden times.

- 22 *Sgeir Fhaoiteag* (see 21).
- 23 *Leabaidh nan Carn*, The Bed of the Cairns.
- 24 *Sgeir Ghorm*, Blue Skerry.
- 25 *Talamh nan Treineachan*, The Ground of the Drains. Some drainage had been carried out here in the late nineteenth century. Little remains visible.
- 26 *Reidhlean*, The Green or Meadow. No article is used.
- 27 *Bruthach an t-Samsain*, Samson's Brae. A very strong man lived on this site in the past.
- 28 *Tobhta Mhic Idheagain*, MacKiegan's Ruined House.<sup>3</sup>
- 29 *Sgeir nan Laogh*, The Calves' Rock.
- 30 *Clach Dubh an t-Slugain*, The Black Stone of the Gullet.
- 31 *Sgeir Liath*, Grey Skerry.
- 32 *Sgeir 'Ic Caoilte*, MacCaoilte's Skerry.<sup>4</sup>
- 33 *Faodhail an t-Slugain*, The Gullet Sands.
- 34 *Oitir an t-Slugain*, The Gullet Shoals.
- 35 *Oitir Fhiadhaich*, The Wild Shoals. This name also occurs a mile to the north on the west side of Kirkibost Island.
- 36 *Sgeir na h-Aona Chloiche*, One Stone Skerry.
- 37 *Bàgh an Rubha Bhàin*, White Point Bay.
- 38 *Bruthach a' Ghuail*, Coal Brae. So called after a ship laden with coal foundered here, some time in the eighteenth century.
- 39 *Ceardach Ruadh*, The Red Smithy. The soil is red sand. The informant states that sherds of ancient pottery are frequently unearthed here.
- 40 *Lag nam Bòcan*, Hobgoblin or Apparition Hollow. According to tradition, a ghostly place. There are the remains of an old cemetery here, of unknown date.
- 41 *A' Choileag Loisgte*, The Burnt Sand-Dune.
- 42 *An Teang*, The Tongue (signifying a narrow strip of land between two lochs).
- 43 *Tobhta a' Bhuachaille*, The Shepherd's Ruined House. This may well have been where the township shepherd lived.
- 44 *Balilleray*, now called *A' Bhuaile*, The Fold.
- 45 *Raona Mhór*, Big Meadow.
- 46 *Dùnan Mór*, Big Little Dun. It contains a cattle-fold, now long disused, and is apparently another place with supernatural associations (Beveridge 1911:185).
- 47 *Lòn Bàn*, White Bog or Marsh. Also called *Na Fidean*. *Fidean* is a term for a green islet or tidal flat, usually covered by the sea at high tide.
- 48 *Baile na Creige*, Rock-town. This is the name given to a small group of houses in the extreme north of the island.
- 49 *Lag Beag*, Little Hollow.
- 50 *Cnoc a' Pheursa*, Signal-pole Hillock. *Peursa* is a term locally used to describe a signal of some kind which is hoisted on a pole. In this instance, it signified that the men of the community should gather there to arrange the distribution of seaweed. However, according to tradition in Tigharry, further north, *Cnoc a' Phearsa* was where the men met for any assembly of importance, e.g. to discuss township business, or in time of emergency such as war or invasion.

- 51 *Rubha Chaluum Fhidhir*, Calum Fidhir's Point.
- 52 *Leaba Mhór*, Big Bed or Hollow.
- 53 This was the site of the birthplace of Roderick MacKay, the Uist Bard.
- 54 *An Cnoc Loisgte*, The Burnt Hillock.
- 55 *Eilean Seonaid*, Janet's Island.
- 56 *An t-Oban Uaine*, The Green Pool.
- 57 *An Gearraidh Buidhe*, Yellow Pasture-land.
- 58 *Cùl Burdaig—cùl*, nook. *Burdaig* is a minnow or shrimp.
- 59 *An Gearraidh Leathann*, Broad Pasture-land.
- 60 *Cnoc Mannaig—cnoc*, hillock. *Mannaig* is obscure.
- 61 *A' Chuidhe Ghorm*, The Blue Fold.
- 62 *Rubha a' Bhodaich*, The Old Man's Point (on Vorogay).
- 63 *Traigh a' Rubha Bhàin*, The Shore of the White Point.
- 64 *Ceann Iochdrach*, Lower End.
- 65 *Ceann Uachdrach*, Upper End.
- 66 *Port a' Bhàta*, The Boat Port.
- 67 *Port na Luing*, The Ship Port.
- 68 *Linne a' Cheann Iochdraich*, Lower End Pool.
- 69 *Sgeir Ruadh*, Red Skerry.
- 70 *Faodhail a' Chinn Aird*, High End Sands.
- 71 *Sgeir a' Chàise*, Cheese Skerry.
- 72 *Sgeir Husabost*, Husabost Skerry.
- 73 *Sgeir nan Cnapach*, Young Lads' Skerry. Two boys walked out to this rock, were cut off by the ebb and were in danger of drowning. The local schoolmaster, who was apparently the only swimmer in the place, swam out and rescued them both. The term *cnapach* here describes a growing boy, aged about ten.
- 74 *Sgeir a' Bhuachaille*, Shepherd's Skerry.
- 75 *Linne Dubh*, Black Pool.
- 76 *Cùl na Ceardaich*, The Smithy Corner.
- 77 *Stalla Bheag*, *Stalla* usually means an overhanging rock or crag, but in this case is derived from the English *stall* and the name really means 'little fold or pen'.
- 78 *Sgeir a' Ghailcein*. A submerged rock off *Sgeir a' Chàise*.
- 79 *Aird a' Mhachair*, Height of the Machair. A fishing mark which uses the houses at *An t-Seana Mhachair* as a landmark.
- 80 *Rubha an Nighdearachd*, Washing Point. Women used to wash clothes in *Loch Mhic Coain* at this point.
- 81 *Cuidhe Caol*, Narrow Fold.
- 82 *Cotan nan Uan*, The Lambs' Little Cot.
- 83 *Cnoc an t-Sagairt*, The Priest's Hillock. This is locally regarded as having been a religious site, a not unlikely supposition when one considers the proximity of *Teampull Chrìosd* in Baleshare.

## NOTES

- 1 A mis-spelling for Eastertoun.
- 2 'le Terung de Yllera' (RMS 1505).
- 3 MacKiegan or McKiggan were an old Uist family, some of whom still survive. They also settled in Lewis, where they changed their name to MacKenzie.
- 4 'Clann Mhic Caoilte were an old race in North Uist. There are none of them now,' (Carmichael MSS No. 116, p. 97). A number of place-names in North Uist commemorate this family, including Aird Mhic Caoilt on the south side of Vallay (O.S. Grid Ref. NF784755) and Eilean Mhic Caoilte, an island in the North Ford, about a mile north of Gramisdale in Benbecula (NF818571).

## REFERENCES

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## ORDNANCE SURVEY MAP

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## RETOURS

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## RMS

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## SSS

School of Scottish Studies (Archives).