

The Place-Names of a Deserted Island:

Eilean nan Ròn

IAN A. FRASER

Of all the deserted islands lying off the coasts of northern Scotland, few can be more attractively situated than Eilean nan Ròn. It lies half a mile off the coast of Tongue parish in Sutherland, and for an island that boasts an area of less than one square mile, it bore a surprisingly large population in the last century—some 80 persons—although this figure dropped to about 60 by the second decade of this century.

There are few early accounts of the island. Typical of them is the *New Statistical Account* (NSA 1845 : 167) which offers only the most sparse description:

Eilean nan roan is of considerable size, and has the appearance of two islands, particularly at high water. Part of it is scooped out into the form of a basin, in which the soil is very fertile, and cultivated by a few small tenants . . .

It seems likely, however, that human occupation goes back a number of centuries, despite popular belief that the first settlers were a few families settled there during the early nineteenth century. Blaeu's map of 1654 refers to the island as *Ylen Ronn*, and the presence of a circular symbol indicates some form of settlement. The neighbouring island of *Ylen Isell or ye plan yle* is clearly Eilean Iosal 'nearby. Although the Mercator Map of 1595 marks three islands off the north Sutherland coast, it names them *Ilen Marin*, *Hyp iland* and *Shyp iland*. These may well refer to Eilean Iosal, Eilean nan Ròn and Eilean nan Naomh respectively (Taylor and Fortune 1968). The isles of 'Handa, Choarie, Gyld, Rone and Coline' are mentioned in a charter of Queen Mary in 1570 (OPS 1855 : ii. 713).

According to several sources, including Mackay (1962), three young couples were settled in Eilean nan Ròn by the Duke of Sutherland in 1820. Their descendants were to remain until the island was evacuated in December 1938 after a period which saw the decline of the population to twelve, of whom eight were elderly. Clearly, the emigrations of families to the mainland as well as to Australia and Canada, after the Great War, were of such an effect that it was no longer possible to maintain the island as a viable community.

Most people in the Tongue and Skerry areas of Sutherland refer to the island as 'Island Roan'. Even fluent Gaelic speakers do this occasionally. This form of name

was widespread, although the actual derivation, 'seal-island', was generally understood.

The place-names of an island such as this are naturally of immense interest. Not only do they reflect the economy of an island community which was highly self-sufficient, but they reveal some of the more unusual aspects of its life, customs and traditions. The natural resources of the island and its surrounding seas were clearly exploited to the full. Fishing was the main occupation, and seems to have been profitable up till the end of the Great War, when two steam drifters were operated. However, the fertility of the soil of the island must have been a very real incentive to settlement, since it provided most of the islanders' grain, roots and vegetables. The substantial nature of the ruins of the houses is testimony to a fairly prosperous community (see Fig. 1).

The place-names of the island were recorded by the present writer in 1976 and again in the spring of 1977 from Mr Donald Mackay, who was born on the island in 1911, and who now lives in Tubeg, Skerray, having been among the last to leave Eilean nan Ròn in 1938. Mr Mackay's parents and grandparents were natives of the island, so that as a tradition-bearer he is well qualified. As a lobster-fisherman, his knowledge of the island and the adjoining coasts was immense, and he was able to provide us with a mass of information not only on place-names, but also on the various aspects of the way of life of this island community. Since this article is concerned mainly with place-name information, however, fuller details of the agricultural practices, fishing, fowling and sealing must await future publication.

It will be seen from an examination of the list on page 87 that there are few place-names which have uncertain derivations. The Norse content is sparse, with the usual Gaelic borrowings such as *sgeir*, *geodha* and *mol*. The ON *holmr*, islet, occurs in Meall Thuilm (30), but these apart, there is surprisingly little in the way of old Norse material. This contrasts strongly with areas such as Lewis, where we might expect a much wider variety of terms to occur in minor names. Clearly, the majority of place-names are of no great antiquity. Some of the descriptive names refer to domestic animals, e.g., sheep, stirk, bull and dog. Others obviously reflect the islanders' involvement with marine wild-life. There are two seal caves, and porpoises and whales are also referred to. The occurrence of *Cnoc an Loisgein*, 'Toad Hillock', is a problem and must be a doubtful rendering, since the informant was clear enough in stating that it was now called *Cnoc Loisgte*. *Losgann*, however, has the alternative meaning of 'drag' or 'sledge', according to Dwelly (1901).

A few of the names are connected with agriculture and husbandry. These include *Cnoc a' Chorrain* (48) and *Carn Talmhainn* (14), and the names referring to domestic animals already mentioned. However, the coastal names offer the most interesting material. Of these, the standard coastal terms are in the majority, such as *gob* and *rubha*, *port*, *uamh* and *poll*. The latter, however, is shown in two instances to



FIG. 1 The small crofting area of Eilean nan Ròn, looking from the side of *Cnoc na Caillich* (11). The gully in the foreground is *Port na h-Uaille* (5), and in the background, the crofts of Melness, across the Kyle of Tongue, with Ben Hope to the left. (Photograph by kind permission of Mr Tom Werr)

describe a fishing bank. The occurrence of *cladhan* to describe a narrow channel between islands is noteworthy. *Cladhan na h-Innis* (28) is illustrated as being about a hundred feet deep and only a few yards wide, while the other two examples (55 and 56) fulfil roughly the same conditions.

The occurrence of quite small reefs and submerged rocks in a place-name list of this kind is not surprising, since they tend to be important coastal features, often to be carefully avoided and therefore intensely nameworthy. These usually adopt the term *bogha*, 'submerged rock', or *sgeir* which applies to a number of rock features ranging from those which are attached to the shore to isolated rocks which are visible at most states of the tide. The presence of *àigeach*, normally the Gaelic for 'stallion' is an unusual feature here. The fact that it appears twice in Eilean nan Ròn for very similar features may point to the use of *àigeach* as a partial replacement for *bogha* along this part of the north coast of Sutherland. Although it is not a common term, we do have an example *An t-Aigeach* from Portskerra, to the east. The use of animal names applied to skerries and off-shore rocks is, of course, by no means uncommon. *Mult*, wether, *tarbh*, bull, and *gamhainn*, stirk, are all found in the western seaboard, and *àigeach* itself appears in the Outer Isles, usually in the form of a rock feature on a cliff.

The lack of 'incident' or 'commemorative' names is surprising in the list. Only two personal names appear—*Toll Hendry* (37), a geo, and *Uamh Fbearchair* (54) which is a seal cave on the eastern shore of Eilean Iosal. The latter may commemorate an individual who was a good seal-hunter, but this is entirely speculative. *Aigeach nam Boireannach* (57) refers to a boating incident involving a group of island women.

The descriptive place-names are almost all in very simple form and frequently involve but a single element. *An Gluta* (20), *Am Mol-lochan* (4), *An Innis* (27), *Am Buaile* (44) and *Am Morbhan* (13) are all examples of this. But this is not surprising in a small, self-contained community where the total number of place-names in daily use was fairly limited, and where there was no necessity for complex names of three elements or more, as in the case of mainland communities where descriptive names must often be highly complex in order to provide accurate identification. The two-element names, similarly, are often simple, using straightforward descriptive terms. *Mol Mòr* (3), *Carn Bàn* (16), *Sgeir Leathann* (26), *Meall Glas* (31), *Bidean Beag* and *Bidean Mòr* (32 and 33) and *Blar Mòr* (41) are typical. *Mòr* is in fact used as a qualitative term in seven of the place-names in the list.

All this evidence points to a fairly recent granting of place-names on Eilean nan Ròn. The lack of Old Norse material, and that of obsolete Gaelic terms, suggests that most of the present name coverage does in fact date from the early nineteenth century. However, with the data available, we cannot be absolutely certain about this, although examination of charter material may help to build a clearer picture of the history of this island.

List of Eilean nan Ròn Place-Names

(numbers are shown on the map, fig. 2)

1	<i>Port Muir Coinnle</i>	Port of the Candle-lit Sea (so called because of the brightness of the water at night.)
2*	<i>Mol na Coinnle</i>	Candle-lit Beach
3	<i>Mol Mòr</i>	Big Beach
4*	<i>Am Mol-lochan</i>	The Beach Lochan
5*	<i>Por na h-Uaille</i>	(derivation not clear)
6	<i>Port Mol Sgaiteach</i>	Port of the Cutting (or Sharp-pebbled) Beach
7	<i>Toll Mol-lochain</i>	Hole of the Beach Lochan
8*	<i>Leathad Ballach</i>	Speckled Hill-Slope
9	<i>Gob a' Bhallaich</i>	(?) Point of the Speckled Place
10	<i>A' Chailleach</i>	The Hag
11*	<i>Cnoc na Caillich</i>	The Hag's Hillock
12	<i>Goban na Morbhan</i>	Little Point of the Shingly Place
13	<i>Am Morbhan</i>	(from <i>morbhan</i> , 'grave' or 'shingle', although Dwelly gives <i>morbhan</i> 'murmuring')
14*	<i>Carn Talmhuinn</i>	Earth Cairn (normally <i>talmhainn</i> .)
15	<i>Geodha na Gambhainn</i>	Stirk's Geo
16	<i>Carn Bàn</i>	White Cairn
17*	<i>Rubh' an Losgainn</i>	(see 40.)
18	<i>Uamb nan Ròn</i>	Seal Cave
19	<i>Uamb nam Pèileag</i>	Porpoise Cave
20	<i>An Gluta</i>	The Gullet
21	<i>Geodha Grannnda</i>	Dirty Geo
22	<i>Na Malannan</i>	(derivation uncertain, but possibly from <i>meall</i> , hill, and may be <i>meallain</i> , hillocks; alternatively <i>mala</i> , brow of a hill.)
23*	<i>Uamb na h-Oidhche</i>	Night Cave (reputed to stretch right across the island.)
24*	<i>Uamb an Latha</i>	Day Cave (very bright and well-lit, containing a clay that was 'as good as cement, still to be seen in the masonry of some of the island houses'—D. McK.).
25*	<i>Port na h-Innse</i>	Island Port
26	<i>Sgeir Leathann</i>	Broad Skerry
27*	<i>An Innis</i>	The Island (separated from the main island by a deep channel, 28)
28	<i>Cladhan na h-Innis</i>	Channel of the Island
29*	<i>Eilean Iosal</i>	Low Island
30*	<i>Meall Thuilm</i>	Hill of the Islet (from ON <i>holmr</i>)
31*	<i>Meall Glas</i>	Grey Hill
32	<i>Bidean Beag</i>	Little Peak
33	<i>Bidean Mòr</i>	Big Peak
34	<i>Mol nan Caorach</i>	Sheep Beach (this contained a natural arch which collapsed at the seaward end.)
35*	<i>Uamb nan Ròn</i>	Seal Cave
36	<i>Sgeir Leathann</i>	Broad Skerry

* Names which appear on the 6" OS Map NC 66 NW

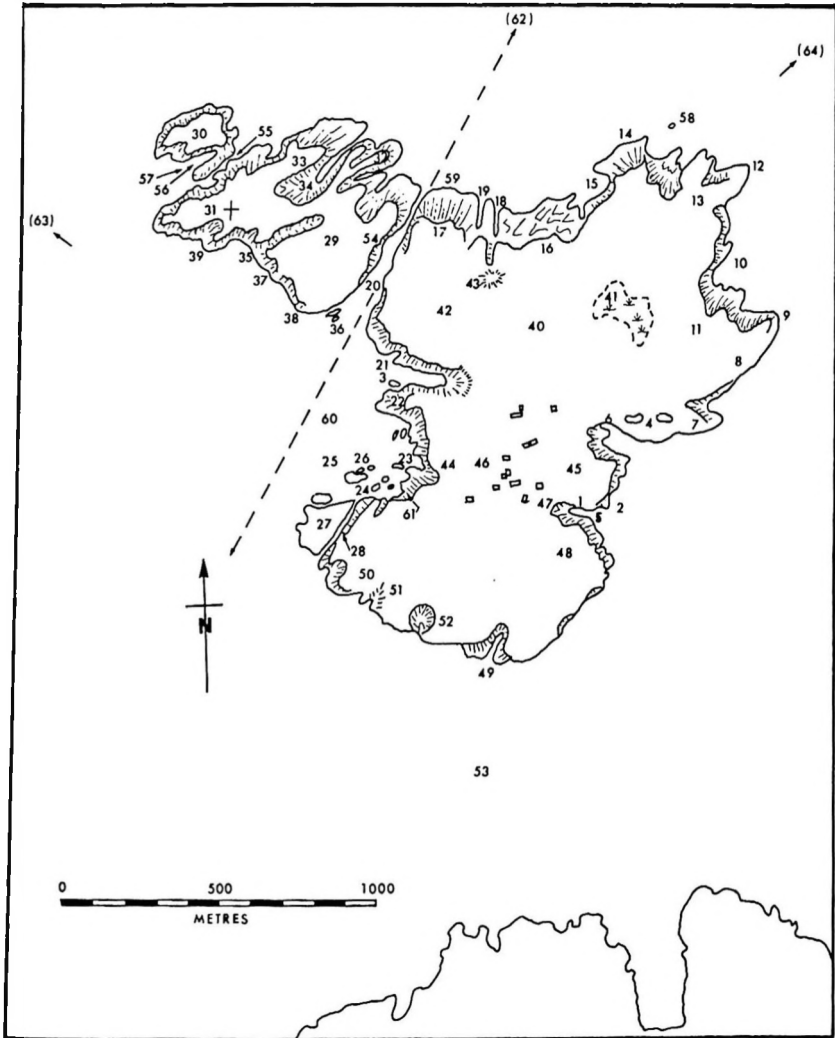


FIG. 2 Map of Eilean nan Ròn (numbers refer to place-name list, pp. 87-89).

- | | | |
|----|------------------------|---|
| 37 | <i>Toll Hendry</i> | Hendry's Hole (a geo) |
| 38 | <i>Tollan</i> | Little Hole |
| 39 | <i>Sgeir an Tairbh</i> | Bull Skerry (seals lie here in summer.) |

- 40* *Cnoc an Loisgein* (Although *losgann* is the usual Gaelic for 'frog' or 'toad' it is masculine, and the map form shown here is puzzling, since the genitive would be *losgainn*. The alternative meaning is *losgann* (fem.) 'drag' or 'sledge' according to Dwelly (1901). However Donald Mackay called the place *Cnoc Loisgte* 'burnt hillock'. This and 'sledge-hillock' are possible. The nearby *Rubh' an Losgainn*, 17, '(?) Sledge Point', is clearly connected.)
- 41 *Blàr Mòr* Big Plain
- 42 *Cnoc a' Ghluta* Knoll of the Gullet
- 43 *An Toll Dubh* The Black Hole (a sink hole inland from *Uamh nan Ròn*.)
- 44 *Am Buaille* The Fold (the arable land to the west of the houses.)
- 45 *Am Bail'* The Village (or Village Land: arable land between the houses and the port. The arable land seemed to have been of two soil types, one dark and peaty, to the east, and the other, to the west, a sandy loam. No horses were used. All tillage was done by hand.)
- 46 *Baca a' Choin* Dog's Bank
- 47 *Fuaran Mol Coinnle* Well of the Candle-lit Beach
- 48 *Cnoc a' Chorrain* Sickle Hill
- 49 *Geodha Mòr* Big Geo
- 50 *Ceann a' Chnuic Mhòr* Head of the Big Hillock
- 51 *Geodha an Uisge* Watery Geo
- 52 *Geodha na Muice* Pig Geo (probably refers to *mùc-mara*, 'whale'.)
- 53 *Caol Raineach* Bracken Sound
- 54 *Uamh Fhearchair* Farquhar's Cave
- 55 *An Cladhan Deas* The South Channel
- 56 *An Cladhan Tuath* The North Channel (impassable for boats.)
- 57 *Aigeach nam Boireannach* The Women's Submerged Rock (A boat carrying five women grounded on this rock when the men of the island were away at the fishing.)
- 58 *Aigeach Charn Talmhainn* The Submerged Rock of the Earth Cairn
- 59 *Carn Bàn Tuath* North White Cairn. (Stone from this area was quarried and used for building purposes.)
- 60 *Sgeir Mhòr* Big Skerry
- 61 *Geodha Dearg* Red Geo
- 62 *Poll na Clach Mòir* Pool of the Big Stone (a fishing mark. *An Gluta*, 20, was lined up with *Cnoc an Fhreiceadain*, 'Watch Hill', the high hill which lies to the E. of the village of Tongue on the mainland.)
- 63 *Geodha Brat* Meaning not known (fishing place off Talmine.)
- 64 *Poll a' Chriadhaich* The Clay Pool. (This had a clay bottom, and on a stormy day it was frequently calm when the surrounding seas were rough, and the water 'had an oily look about it' Fish caught here in winter had a fat, oily appearance.—D. McK.)

(Recorded by Ian A. Fraser from Donald Mackay, Tuberg, Skerry on PN 1976/6, 7 and PN1977/1.)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Mr Donald Mackay, Tubeg, Skerryay for providing most of the information in the list of place-names and also my colleague, Mr D. A. Macdonald, for scrutinising the list. The photograph of Eilean nan Ròn is by Mr Tom Weir, and I am indebted to him for permission to include it.

REFERENCES

- DWELLY, E
1901 *Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary*. Glasgow.
- MACKAY, J. G
1962 *The Story of Eilean nam Ròn*. Reprinted from 'The Northern Times'. Thurso.
- NSA
1845 *New Statistical Account* vol xv. Edinburgh.
- OPS
1851-55 *Origines Parochiales Scotiae*, ed. C. Innes. Vol II. Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh.
- TAYLOR, A. B. and FORTUNE, G.
1968 Names in Mercator's Map of Scotland, 1595. Unpublished MS in Place Names Survey, School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh.