

## Ian A. Fraser, 1941–2025

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Ian Alasdair Fraser (27 November 1941 – 11 June 2025) was for many years head of the Scottish Place-Name Survey in the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, and played a central role in the development of Scottish toponymy.

Ian was born in Inverness in sad circumstances, with his mother, Lexi, dying on the day he was born. He was brought up in a croft on Mihol Hill, Gairloch, by his father Murdo and his two aunts, Mary and Johann (after whom he would name his two daughters). This was a Gaelic-speaking household and community. His early life gave him a deep familiarity with both the landscape of the west Highlands and the everyday use of Gaelic in naming and describing that landscape. At the age of twelve he went to Dingwall academy as a boarder, spending his summers in Strontian. At eighteen he went to study geography at the University of Edinburgh.



Ian Fraser, School of Scottish Studies, 1980. (Photo: Virginia Blankenhorn)

After graduating, Ian taught briefly in a high school, but in 1965 he took up duties as a lecturer and research assistant at the School of Scottish Studies, where he was attached to the Scottish Place-Name Survey. Ian was well-qualified for this task, not only for his native fluency in Gaelic and his geography degree, but also for his warm and modest demeanour and ability to put those he talked to at ease. At that time the Survey, directed by WFH (Bill) Nicolaisen, was concentrating on recording names from oral tradition in areas where Gaelic was close to extinction. Ian joined Nicolaisen on extensive fieldwork, beginning with Lewis in 1966. Over the years Ian would cover much of Highland Scotland, most notably Lewis, Wester Ross and Arran. In 1968 became assistant lecturer; and following Nicolaisen's departure in 1969, he became Director of the Survey. In 1976, Ian and his new wife Jean spent six months in Nova Scotia under the Commonwealth Scholarship programme, where Ian researched place-names in the Gaelic community of Antigonish, Nova Scotia.

Ian's work was defined by rigorous field methodology. He believed that the most reliable way to collect place-names was to begin with places immediately surrounding an informant's home and work gradually outward. Ian's method was to record an interview on a reel-to-reel tape machine as he and his informant sat in front of an Ordnance Survey map. As the informant named a particular place or geographical feature, Ian would announce a number which he would then write on the map itself. Thus it is possible today, if one has the map and tape, to follow the place-name identifications in the conversation. This practice led not only to detailed repertoires of place-names but also to stories, folklore, songs and memories of traditional life. Many of these interviews can be accessed online through the Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches website, which contains some 500 of Ian's recordings.

In addition to his own collecting, Ian sent maps and exercise books out to individuals to do their own field research. Much of this concerned field-names, not just in the Highlands but in the Lowlands too. Some of this work, such as that by Nancy Dorian, is of the utmost importance, with Gaelic forms

of settlement names of the northeast coast not recorded elsewhere. Neither the maps nor the notebooks are available online, but both can be accessed in person in the School of Scottish Studies Archives at Edinburgh University.

Beyond the university, Ian promoted awareness of place-names through frequent media appearances. In the 1980s he was a regular contributor to the Gaelic radio series *Cò Cuin Càite*, and later he appeared on the BBC Alba television programme *Tir is Teanga*, bringing scholarly insight to a wide audience.

Ian was also active in the institutional life of onomastics. He served as an early secretary of the Council for Name Studies, which later became the Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland, and he was deeply involved in the Scottish Place-Name Society from its foundation in 1996, acting as its first convenor and later as editor of *Scottish Place-Name News*. He also supported the establishment of the *Journal of Scottish Name Studies* as a member of its editorial advisory board. In addition, he played a central part in the Scottish Society for Northern Studies, serving as secretary, president, and editor of its journal, *Northern Studies*.

Ian's own publications reflect both detailed local work and broader historical analysis. They include studies of place-names in Gairloch, Illeray, and Eilean nan Ròn, as well as influential articles on Pictish and Norse elements, agricultural vocabulary, and the historical geography of Argyll. Most notably, in 1999 Ian worked up the research he had done in and about Arran into a short book called simply *The Place-Names of Arran* (Arran Society of Glasgow), and it is hoped that this book will one day provide the foundation of a full survey of that island. A full bibliography of Ian's output will be published in due course on the Scottish Place-name Survey website.

Ian was a dedicated teacher and mentor. He was instrumental in introducing place-name studies into the undergraduate degree in Scottish Ethnology at Edinburgh and supervised most of the postgraduate research in the subject in Scotland during the later twentieth century. His students, among them Simon Taylor, Anke-Beate Stahl, the late Doreen Waugh and myself, have gone on to make valuable contributions to the field. For a long period, Ian was the only university teacher of Scottish toponymy, and his role in nurturing a new generation of scholars was decisive.

I first met Ian in 1993, when I was eighteen. Ian was my director of studies, and his world view, his knowledge, and his understanding of the natural and linguistic landscape helped kindle my emerging interest in the riches of onomastics. I am grateful to Ian for infecting me with the place-name bug and setting my professional life on its current course.

Ian's scholarship was inseparable from his character. He possessed the Highlander's love of anecdote: he once told me of an ancestor of his who, having killed someone in a theological argument, went on the run for many years. Colleagues and students alike recall his patience, his intellectual generosity, his quiet humour – and his love of light aircraft. His ability to listen, his respect for his informants, and his encouragement of students created an atmosphere in which knowledge could be shared freely and warmly.

With Ian's passing, Scottish name-studies has lost a figure who not only safeguarded a vast body of oral tradition but also ensured that the subject became a recognised academic discipline in Scotland. His legacy endures in the archives he helped to build, in the students he guided, and in the flourishing of toponymy as an academic discipline to which he devoted his life.

A chuid do Phàrras dha.

## SOURCES

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- Waugh, Doreen. ‘Collection of Place-Names from Oral Sources’. In *The Carrying Stream Flows On*, edited by Bob Chambers, 155–164. South Lochs, Isle of Lewis: The Islands Book Trust, 2013.
- The author gratefully acknowledges the generosity of Ian’s daughters Màiri and Joanne in allowing him to incorporate material from their tribute to their father, given by them at his funeral.