

**THE PLACE NAMES
OF FIFE
AND KINROSS**

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The place names of Fife and Kinross by W. J. N. Liddall

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W. J. N. LIDDALL

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BY
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M.A. EDIN., B.A. LOND., ADVOCATE

EDINBURGH
WILLIAM GREEN & SONS
1896

TO

Æ. J. G. MACKAY, M.A., LL.D., ADVOCATE,
SHERIFF OF FIFE AND KINROSS,

AN ACCOMPLISHED WORKER IN THE FIELD
OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH.

INTRODUCTION

THE following work has two objects in view. The first is to enable the general reader to acquire a knowledge of the significance of the names of places around him—names he is daily using. A greater interest is popularly taken in this subject than is apt to be supposed, and excellent proof of this is afforded by the existence of the strange corruptions which place names are wont to assume by reason of the effort on the part of people to give some meaning to words otherwise unintelligible to them. The other object of the book is to place the results of the writer's research at the disposal of students of the same subject, or of those sciences, such as history, to which it may be auxiliary.

The indisputable conclusion to which an analysis of Fife—and Kinross for this purpose may be considered a part of Fife—place names conducts is, that the nomenclature of the county may be described as purely of Goidelic origin, that is to say, as belonging to the Irish branch of the Celtic dialects, and as perfectly free from Brythonic admixture. There are a few names of Teutonic origin, but these are, so to speak, *accidental* to the topography of Fife. To put it briefly, in the interpretation of the place names of Fife the district may be treated as if it belonged to ancient Ireland. While this is true, there are two advantages which the student of Irish place names

possesses over the student of those of Fife: (1) In many parts of Ireland the names are still spoken by people using the original Celtic dialect, and (2) Even where this is not so, they are still preserved in literary and accurate form. For these reasons it is almost always possible with regard to Irish names to determine with certainty whether, for example, Kil- stands for the Celtic *coille* = a wood, or for a loan-word representing the Latin *cella* in the sense of a church. In Fife, on the other hand, the solution of such a case depends entirely on probability. But Fife has at least one counterbalancing advantage. There the Celtic dialect ceased to be spoken, and the names in consequence were stereotyped, at a period when the language existed in a much purer form and one less weakened by phonetic decay. The following is a simple illustration of what is meant. The Fife name Beath (or Beith as it is written in Ayrshire) is the ancient Gaelic word *beith* = birch tree. In modern Gaelic the final "th" of *beith* is quiescent, and hence in the English spelling of Irish names the term appears as -bay (e.g. in Ballybay). So again the Fife river name Leven, from *leamhan* = an elm, appears in Ireland in English form as Launc, a name which would have been difficult to trace to its origin had not its literary form been preserved in Irish.

The vowel changes, moreover, indicative of Celtic inflexion, are often preserved with remarkable fidelity in the earlier spellings of Fife names.¹ Thus in Ardros (now written Ardros), *rois* is an approximation to the correct genitive of *ros*. The phonetic spelling of the form appears in Portrush. So again in Burnturk, -turk represents *tuirc*, the genitive of *torc*; and in Drumnagoil, *goil* re-

¹ In reference to the Gaelic entries in the *Book of Deer*, Mr. Whitley Stokes says: "The declensional forms are scanty, but sufficient to show that the Highlanders declined their noun in the eleventh century as fully as the Irish."—*Goidelica*, p. 113.

presents the genitive of gall. Although there is no convenient name in English for this process of forming inflexions, it is illustrated by such formations as *feet* from *foot*.

A considerable proportion of Fife place names is thus capable of interpretation at sight, but a large number, comprising often names of the greatest interest, are to be solved only by patient searching for the earliest recorded forms, and by a careful comparative study of names similarly constructed existing elsewhere. The work is no doubt laborious, but the results are always interesting and often important. Take, for instance, the name Blebo; it is traced through Blabo, Blathbolg, till it is identified in origin, if not in locality, with the Blatum Bolgion of the Antonine Itinerary; and as this Blatum Bolgion is supposed to have been in Dumfriesshire, the inference arises that the cycles of Celtic legend repeated themselves in various and widely-separated localities. Or, take the Latin-looking word Ledlation. How easily it is read when it is found (and it is only once that it is found) written Ladglaschun. So, also, how hopeless is the explanation of Lizziewells till it is found written Latishoill; or the name Demons, unless the older spelling Demungis, and the parallel name Le Dymmyns in Cornwall, are noticed. Again, Rires would be hopeless of solution unless the old spelling Rerays, the parallel names Rywrayis, Bulwrayis in Renfrewshire, the Icelandic word *naefuaraitr*, and the term still used in Fife to indicate a cattle-court, were all studied comparatively. Nor would it be readily guessed that the name Chemises consisted of two old French words signifying the chief manor-house of an estate. Other strange disguises are Cotton, Bungs, Goat-milk, and Nakedfield. Thus the work calls for an accurate knowledge of the rules which have been ascertained by the science of Comparative Philology to apply with inflexible