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Abeen the Big Tree: place-names on the periphery

The starting-point for this paper was Bill Patterson's editorial in the Spring 2014 issue of *Scottish Place-Name News*, where he draws attention to the website on Ghana place-names, and to names found there with a quite different structure from those common in Europe, such as 'all will be well' or 'the slaves died'. As Patterson points out, these names are found alongside structures more familiar to Scottish toponymists, such as 'river-name + mouth' or 'at a hill'.

Prototype theory, based on the principle that 'some category members are better examples of the category than others' (Croft and Cruse 2004: 77), holds that categories include both more and less prototypical members, and are variable across time and space. Items on the periphery of a category in one culture may be prototypical in another, and vice versa. In this context, it is interesting to note that although place-names from noun phrases are prototypical in Scotland, other types of formation also appear, including some from verb phrases. Simon Taylor (2008: 275–6) identifies no fewer than five separate syntactic structures for verbal place-names in Scotland. Examples drawn from *The Place-Names of Fife* (Taylor with Márkus 2006–2012) include Cuffabout (verb + adverb), Pilkembare (verb + direct object + adjective) and Pluck the Crow (verb + direct object). As in Ghana, different types of structures occur alongside each other, but those characteristic of one country are more unusual in the other.

A second axis of comparison is the type of entity denoted by the name. Grammatical structures may not only be culture specific, but specific to individual categories of referent. Some of the examples discussed by Taylor are names of small settlements, buildings or landscape features. Others are names of fields, a category associated with idiosyncratic naming strategies. As John Field points out in connection with the toponymicon of England, ‘Field-names of all periods differ in structure from major place-names’ (1993: 3). A corpus of Aberdeenshire field-names recently collected and analysed by Alison Burns (2015) reveals a particularly wide range of structures, including noun phrases such as Lang Park, verb phrases such as Never Plowed, adjective phrases such as Rough, prepositional phrases such as Abeen the Big Tree, and genitive phrases such as Gamekeepers. Again these may be paralleled in other types of names, but structural variety is in itself a prototypical feature of field-names.

An important sub-group of settlement names also comprises genitive phrases, usually metonymic from the name of a church. Examples include St Andrews (Fife), St Monans (Fife) and St Quivox (Ayrshire). Many more can be traced through the Database of Scottish Hagiotoponyms made available by the *Commemorations of Saints in Scottish Place-Names* project at Glasgow University, as can others without a genitive inflection, such as St Cyrus (Angus), St Helena (Angus) and St Salvador (Orkney). Nevertheless there is a long established tradition of inserting a parenthetical generic within the interpretation of such names. Thus Mills (2011: 400) explains St Andrews as ‘(Place with the shrine of) St Andrew’, and Grant (2010: 78) explains St Cyrus as ‘(church of) Saint Cyricius’. In both instances, the parenthetical generic can be supported by early spellings referring to the eponymous church, but it is less clearly applicable to the place-name itself.

Turning to personal names, the introduction to Black’s dictionary of Scottish surnames lists a selection of lost bynames (or ‘curious descriptions’) including such non-standard structures as Aydrunken, Luggespick, Spurnecurtoys and Sorex (1946: lii). Others can be traced through the People of Medieval Scotland 1093–1314 database resulting from *The Paradox of Medieval Scotland* and *The Breaking of Britain* projects at Glasgow University. It may be significant that these bynames did not survive as surnames, since non-standard structures within other types of names also seem to be prone to attrition. As regards the hagiotoponyms discussed above, Taylor with Márkus (2006–2012, iii: 558–9) note that

‘In the seventeenth century the final *s* of St Monans, a possessive ending, began to be re-interpreted as an organic part of the name, Monance’, with different forms of the name appearing on the Ordnance Survey Pathfinder and Explorer maps: respectively St Monance and St Monans. Moreover, 18 out of the 32 verbal formations listed in the appendix to Taylor’s article (2008: 277–83) are lost names.

According to the Ghana place-name website with which this paper began, there are reportedly dozens of places with the verbal name Mayera ‘I have gone astray, I am lost’, as well as many village names that are devotional or inspirational in meaning, as with Ampedwae ‘you should not boast’, Jukwa ‘nothing but peace’ and Obeyeyie ‘it shall be well’. Such structures are therefore more prototypical of place-names in Ghana than in Scotland. At the same time, however, they exist alongside other, more peripheral structures. This paper has drawn attention to the range of grammatical formations also found in different types of Scottish names, and to the relationship between syntactic structures and types of referent. It has also suggested that non-standard structures may stand a lower chance of survival over time.

Carole Hough (summarising her paper at the Linlithgow conference)

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