CELTS AND THEIR CULTURES
AT HOME AND ABROAD
A FESTSCHRIFT FOR
MALCOLM BROUN

EDITED BY
ANDERS AHLQVIST & PAMELA O’NEILL
CELTIC AND THEIR CULTURES
AT HOME AND ABROAD

A FESTSCHRIFT FOR
MALCOLM BROUN
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Preface

ANDERS AHLQVIST & PAMELA O’NEILL
The University of Sydney

This collection of scholarly articles is offered to Malcolm Broun OAM QC in recognition of his sustained support for our discipline. Malcolm Broun, one of Australia’s foremost practitioners and authors in family law, graduated from The University of Sydney in 1958 with a Bachelor of Arts and in 1959 with a Bachelor of Laws. He was called to the New South Wales Bar in 1959, invested as a Queen’s Counsel in 1982 and awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in 1999. He has long been a stalwart of various Celtic community groups in Australia, including as a member of the executive of the Scottish Australian Heritage Council, continuously since 1982, which was the year following its founding in 1981, and President of the Sydney Society for Scottish History, continuously since its founding in 1982.

Our honorand has done an enormous amount for Celtic scholarship and learning in Sydney: he arranged for Duncan MacLeod to teach Scottish Gaelic in his chambers in the 1980s and ’90s; he has sponsored many visits from international scholars; together with his friend Peter Alexander, he was one of the founders of the Geoffrey Ferrow Chair of Celtic Studies Appeal which ultimately led to the establishment of the Sir Warwick Fairfax Chair of Celtic Studies at the University of Sydney.

Having spent much of his life amassing a valuable collection of books on Scottish history and Gaelic language, Mr Broun generously gifted the bulk of his collection to the University of Sydney’s Fisher Library upon his retirement from the Bar in 2010; much of the remainder he has given to individual scholars whose work has been enriched by his kindly interest.

* 

In the main, this book is based on papers given at the Eighth Australian Conference of Celtic Studies, which was held at The University of Sydney on 11–14 June 2013. However, it is not a conference proceedings volume. Some contributions are by authors
who were present at the conference, but did not give papers. All of them have been rigorously peer-reviewed, and most of them considerably modified, as a consequence of that process.

The conference differed from previous Australian Conferences of Celtic Studies in one important way. Thanks to a splendid initiative taken by our colleague Dr Lynette Olson, it included a special two-day session, held on 12–13 June 2013, which was devoted to the first *Life of St Samson of Dol*. Apart from Lyn Olson herself, the speakers were Caroline Brett, Constant Mews, Karen Jankulak, Joseph-Claude Poulin and Jonathan Wooding. Their contributions will soon be available in another publication, which is being edited by Dr Olson.

We are very grateful to all our contributors for their patient cooperation while the volume was being prepared. Likewise, we wish to thank our peer-reviewers, all of whom responded very generously indeed to our requests for help. We also thank Mrs Wendy Broun for Malcolm Broun’s coat of arms and photograph which appear as front cover and frontispiece, as well as Professor Brian Taylor for suggesting such a fine title. Furthermore, we wish to put on record how much we are indebted to Professor Neil McLeod, for his wise counsel, before and during the conference, as well as afterwards, as the book gradually took shape.
The Meaning of *Muirbolc*
A Gaelic Toponymic Mystery

PAMELA O’NEILL
*The University of Sydney*

DOMNÁN, in his *Vita Columbae*, refers to two places with the toponymic element *muirbolc* (literally ‘sea-bag’). One, *Muirbolc Paradisi*, was in Ardnamurchan. The other, *Muirbolc Már*, was on Columba’s unidentified island retreat of *Hinba*. The place-name has apparently not survived in either place, although W. J. Watson lists ten other instances of *muirbolc* occurring in modern place-names in Scotland. These ten instances show some notable differences from the two early medieval instances in the way the place-name element is applied, suggesting that there may have been a chronological break between the discontinuation of the earlier names and the introduction of the newer ones. By contrast, there appear to be places in Ireland which have had the name in both the early medieval and the modern periods (Joyce 1871, 255).¹

Watson and others have generally assumed that *muirbolc* refers to a topographical feature (e.g. *CPNS*, 79; Sharpe 1995, 273⁹³; Reeves 1874, 254). This paper reports on research into whether such a feature can be found to be common amongst the ten known sites in Scotland. It describes the topography and toponymic history of each site and

¹ Murlough, Co Antrim is apparently the place referred to in *Cath Ruis na Ríg*, where a banquet is held *ac carraic Murbuilg* (Hogan 1892, 14 § 9): the place-name element is thus present in both the early medieval and the modern periods.
canvasses other possible referents for the place-name element *muirbolc* and further avenues of research.

Adomnán’s two references to *muirbolc* are as follows:

> Quod venerabilis viri vaticinium eadem die de Hibernia navigatores, ad locum qui dicitur Muirbolc Paradisi pervenientes, supra scriptis ejus binis comitibus, et in eadem navi cum Sancto navigantibus, de iisdem interfectis regibus expletum retulerunt.

> On the same day, voyagers from Ireland landed at a place called Paradise Bay and they confirmed to the men sailing in St Columba’s boat that the saint’s prophecy about the dead kings was fulfilled. (*Vita Columbae*, i.12: Reeves 1874, 122; Sharpe 1995, 121–122)

> Qui uidelicet Virgnous, post multos in subiectione inter fratres irreprehensibiliter expletos annos, alios duodecim in loco anachoretarum in Muirbulcmar, vitam ducens anachoreticam, Christi victor miles, explevit.

> Fergnae remained for many years in obedience among the brethren [at Hinba] and lived faultlessly. For a further twelve years he withdrew to live in isolation at the place of the anchorites in Muirbolc Már, and died a victorious soldier of Christ. (*Vita Columbae*, iii.23: Reeves 1874, 215; Sharpe 1995, 230)

Watson (*CPNS*, 79) says of the element *muirbolc* in this context that

*Muirbolc* is from *muir*, sea, and *bolc*, now *bolg*, *balg*, ‘a bag,’ and means ‘sea-bag,’ applied primarily to a rounded sea-inlet. In Ireland a small bay is often called *murbholg*.\(^1\)

\(^1\) Joyce, *Irish Names of Places*, ii. p. 255.

Richard Sharpe, in the notes accompanying his translation of *Vita Columbae*, commented:

> *Muirbolc* ‘sea bag’ means a bay; the term also occurs in *Muirbolc Már* on Hinba and in northern Ireland (Annals of Ulster, 731). [...] The context in Adomnán, as Watson realized, suggests that Paradise Bay is in Ardmurcharan, where the obvious candidate is the beautiful, enclosed Kentra Bay: its shape, and the fact that at low tide it is almost empty of water, make it fit the term *muirbolc*; it is not clear what *Paradisus* would imply in a place-name. (Sharpe 1995, 275\(^93\))

and:
Between Colonsay and Oronsay there is a substantial dry anchorage; in another passage I have suggested that the emptying out of the sea at low tide may be the characteristic of a *muirbolc* (see n. 93), and so I suggest that here is Adomnán’s *Muirbolc Már*. (Sharpe 1995, 308194)

Sharpe’s proposal that a *muirbolc* may be characterised by ‘the emptying out of the sea at low tide’ appears to be based solely on his premises that *Muirbolc Már* is on the island of Oronsay, and that *Muirbolc Paradisi* is Kentra Bay in Ardnamurchan, both of which are tidal. Since neither of the premises is established, Sharpe’s characterisation of *muirbolc* may be far from conclusive, and may even be a somewhat circular argument.

In 2008, in an article about Hinba, I commented on the importance (and difficulty) of identifying the *muirbolc* element:

> The description of a ‘sea-bag’ is generally interpreted as referring to the shape of a body of water, as seen from above, or on a map. This may be a problematic interpretation, as the early medieval mind is unlikely to have perceived topographical features in this way. There are no maps from the period which attempt a realistic representation of the landscape as seen from above. Rather, schematic maps such as T-O maps were current.55 [...] It certainly seems clear that the usual interpretation of Muirbolc Már as representing an enclosed bay should be treated with caution until further investigation of the placename is carried out. (O’Neill 2008, 38–39)

At that time, I was inclined to think that *muirbolc* must refer to a topographical feature, and tentatively suggested an alternative topographical interpretation of the ‘sea-bag’. I am now cautious about such an assumption, and about the relationship between Adomnán’s two *muirbolc* place-names and the modern instances of the element.

One significant difference between Adomnán’s two examples and the modern ones is that in Adomnán’s account, both places have an added adjectival or genitival element to the name, that is *Muirbolc Már* and *Muirbolc Paradisi*. By contrast, all of the modern examples of *muirbolc* in Scotland are unelaborated in this way, only having a diminutive suffix added, or being used to form other names in the vicinity such as *Ben Vorlich*, ‘the hill or mountain of *Morlich*’. This
distinction suggests that the element was understood, and applied, slightly differently in the early medieval and the early modern contexts. The Irish situation again contrasts with the Scottish, with early medieval references to places apparently named *Muirbolc* with no adjectival or genitival addition. The *Annals of Ulster* lists a battle *in Murbuilg* in 731 (AU 730.5 recte 731) and *Cath Ruis na Ríg* mentions a banquet *ac carraic Murbuilg* (Hogan 1892, 14 § 9). This difference may represent merely an urge for precision on Adomnán’s part, adding *Már* and *Paradisi* as descriptive notes to ensure that his meaning was clear, while the other references may have relied on context to identify the intended *muirbolc*. However, that Adomnán’s forms represent established place-names cannot be discounted.

Figure 1A: Ardvorlich and Loch Earn

In 2012, I had the opportunity of viewing the ten modern Scottish instances of the place-name element *muirbolc*, some of them in the company of Simon Taylor of Glasgow University, and of discussing them all with him. It now seems to me that there is no visible topographical feature common to the sites, as the following discussion will show. The ten sites will be discussed individually, summarising
the documentary evidence for the place-name and my observations on the site. For convenience, the sites are presented in the same order as in Watson’s *Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*.

![Figure 1B: Ardvorlich House from Ardvorlich](image)

**Figure 1B: Ardvorlich House from Ardvorlich**

![Figure 1C: Ardvorlich House](image)

**Figure 1C: Ardvorlich House**
1. Ardvorlich House, Comrie Parish, Perthshire, NN631229 OS Explorer 348; Glen Vorlich, NN632215; Ardvorlich Burn, NN631220; Ardvorlich Cottage, NN619229

On Loch Earn in Perthshire there is Ard-mhur'laig, ‘promontory of the sea-bag,’ in English Ardvorlich. The promontory is small and so, by consequence, is the bay. Behind it is Beinn Mhur’laig, ‘peak of the sea-bag’; in Blaeu’s MS. maps they are Ardvouirlig and Bin Vouirlyg.1 (CPNS, 80)

1 The Gaelic form given above was given me some years ago by all the older people of the district; among the younger people Beinn Mhurlaich was common.

Angus Watson has recorded the known toponymic history of this site in detail:

**Ardvorlich House** NN631229 (1) S 348 COM<RIE Parish> [Glen Vorlich NN632215 (1), Ardvorlich Burn NN631220, Ardvorlich Cottage NN619229, the Ardvorlich dykes (a good fishing spot on the southern shore of Loch Earn – Porteous 1929, 41)] [ard’vorlıx] Ardvouirlig <recte Ardvouirlig>, Bin Vouirlyg la<te> 16<th> c<century> (Pont 21)

Ardvorlich 1650 (*Perthshire Rent Book*),
Ardvorlich 1751 (*Dumb. Tests.*),

Ardvorlich and Mill 1781 (*Perthshire Sasines*)

Ardvorlich Hill and Dunans [Farms], Ardvorlich House, Home Farm, Croft at Ardvorlich 1855–6 (*Perthshire Valuation Roll*)

*CPNS* 80 explains Ardvouirlig ‘in Blaeu’s MS maps’, mid 17c, based here on la16c Pont 21, as G<aelic> Ard-mhur’laig, the second part, mhur’laig, deriving from Earlier Irish muirbolc, ‘sea-bag’, that is, a small bay (in Loch Earn); cf Muirlaggan BQR <Balquidder>, and Ardvorlich and Ben Vorlich on Loch Lomond-side.

Stewart of Ardvorlich (1975, 103) reports that when he was a boy his older relatives always pronounced Ardverlich, and ‘the indigenous inhabitants of the lochside Ardverlich and Ardverlich’, which leads him to suggest that G meirleach, ‘thief, robber’, giving àird (&c) a’ mheirlich, may be the etymology. The subsidiarity of these lands in the middle ages, coupled with their unsuitability for cultivation and high-status settlement, means that we have no record of them before their acquisition by the Stewarts in la16c, and thus no particularly early forms. Watson’s suggestion quoted above is more consistent with the forms we have than is Stewart’s.
In 15c all the land in COM to the east of Edinample and between the southern shore of Loch Earn and the march COM/TEX <TEX=Tullichettle, a medieval parish> was part of Dundurn (Stewart of Ardvorlich 1964, 72). From c1582 Alexander Stewart, bailie of Balquhidder and son of James Stewart last of Baldorran, was tenant of Ardvorlich. His son James bought Ardvorlich, Dunans, Ballienault, Balimeanach and Easter and Wester Finglen in 1627 (op. cit., 5, 72, 139). (Watson 2002)2

To this may be added:

Ardvorlich
Benvorlich (Adair 1720)

Ardverlich
Benvorloch (Moll 1745)

Ardvorlich
Benvorlich (Stobie 1783)

Benvourlich (OSA XI 180)

Ardvorlich
Benvorlich (Thomson 1832)

One might also highlight the presence of the Ardvorlich dykes, a popular fishing spot, and note that Ardvorlich Cottage is located within Coille Chriche, ‘march wood’, the other side of the bay from the promontory. The promontory is a small and relatively level piece of low-lying ground between the loch and the foot of the mountains, and the bay is virtually imperceptible now (see figure 2). One further reference may be added, to the bathymetrical survey map of 1902 (Murray & Pullar 1908 III pl. 22), which clearly shows Ardvorlich House, Cottage and Burn. It also shows that the deepest part of the loch is adjacent to Ardvorlich, and marks the quite shallow bay with the words Achadh Rainich ‘fern meadow’.

2 I have only had access to an electronic copy of this material, so am unable to provide page numbers. The square brackets in this extract are Watson’s own. My interpolations are within angle brackets, to avoid confusion.
2. Ardvorlich and Allt Ardvorlich, Arrochar Parish, Dunbartonshire, NN232712 OS Explorer 364; Ben Vorlich, NN229712

Figure 2: Allt Ardvorlich, Ardvorlich and Loch Lomond

Both names are repeated on the western side of Loch Lomond—Ardvorlich, Ben Vorlich. The former is Ardiŭŭrlik in 1543,2 Ardvurlig in a MS. list of names in Arrochar, c. 1800: there is no doubt that the names are the same as those on Loch Earn. There is a small bag-like bay at the western Ardvorlich. (CPNS, 80)

2 Fraser’s Chartulary of Colquhoun 391, where the name is printed ‘Ardmurlik,’ but the MS. reads as above.

Bin Vouyrlig (Pont, map 17)

Ardvurlig
Bin Vurly (Ross 1777)

Ardvorlich
Ben Vorlich [marked ‘Robert Ferguson Esq. of Raith’] (Thomson 1832)
The Bathymetrical Survey (Murray & Pullar 1908 vi pl. 124) shows that the bay, here very pronounced, is again very shallow. There is also a small island in the loch near the opposite end of the bay from
the promontory. Overall, the topography of this site is very similar to that of Ardvorlich on Loch Earn, and here, too, one may observe much fishing along the bank of the loch nearby.

3. Morelloggan and High Morlagan (obsolete), Arrochar Parish, Dunbartonshire, NN227701 OS Explorer 364

The only instance of its occurrence on the sea coast is Murlaggan on the eastern side of Loch Long. (CPNS, 80)

*Morlagan* [late 16th century] (Pont, map 16)

*Morlichan* [c. 1750] (Roy)

*Morlagan Toll* (Thomson 1834)

*Morlagan*

*High Morlagan* (OS 1864)

Morelloggan House is beside the eastern shore of Loch Long, a short distance from a disused ferry crossing. There is a slight promontory and resulting very slight bay adjacent to the site. A short distance uphill on a terrace behind the house is the abandoned settlement of High Morlagan. A grant-aided community-based archaeological investigation of High Morlagan was carried out in 2009 and 2011, and revealed some evidence for woodland management, including coppicing (Regan 2011; Quelch 2011).

4. Murlagan (obsolete) and Murligan Hill, Boleskine and Abertarff Parish, Inverness-shire, NH241810 OS Landranger 34 (2008)

At the south end of Loch Ness, 'half a myl from Glendo Beg is Mourvalgan upon the said burn of Do'; it is Murvalgan in 1770; now Murlagan. (CPNS, 80)


4 *Forfeited Estates Papers* (Scot. Hist. Soc.).

*Murvalgane* [1466 x 1494 amongst lands in lordship of Lochaber granted by lord of the Isles to Duncan MacIntosh (*Makkintoiische*) chief of Clan Chattan (*Clanchattane*)] (RMS ii no. 2191)

3 I thank Thomas Wilson for help in reading the Latin charters mentioned herein.
Murvalgane [1476 royal grant to Duncan MacIntosh of lands in lordship of Lochaber sheriffdom of Inverness, forfeited by Earl of Ross, Lord of the Isles] \((RMS\ II\ no.\ 1243)\)

Mourvalgane [1555 royal grant of lands in sheriffdom of Inverness to Alexander Fraser of Lovet and his wife Janet Campbell] \((RMS\ IV\ no.\ 987)\)

Moirvalgan [1621 royal grant to Lachlan MacIntosh of lands in lordship of Lochaber sheriffdom of Inverness] \((RMS\ VIII\ no.\ 121)\)

Murlagan (Thomson 1832)

Figure 4: Murligan Hill

In Thomson’s 1832 map, Murlagan appears to be a settlement on the bank of Loch Ness, adjacent to a small bay, but as the relationship between Glendoe Burn and Murligan Hill differs from that shown on the current Ordnance Survey map the site of Murlagan cannot be precisely located from Thomson’s map. In the Bathymetrical Survey of 1903, Murlagan is not marked, while Murligan Hill remains (Murray & Pullar 1908 IV pl. 91). The hill is a prominent landmark from the east side (viewed across Loch Tarff) but much more difficult to distinguish from the west side (viewed across Loch Ness). Other features of possible interest in the vicinity include a crannog on Loch
Ness near Fort Augustus, and the fact that the area is, at the present day, a popular fishing destination.


Another instance is on the right bank of Spean above Roy Bridge; Murvalgane 1476 (RMS), Moirvalagane 1574, ib., Murlagoun 1552, ib. (CPNS, 80)\(^4\)

*Murlagoun* [1552 royal grant to Alexander Gordon of lands in lordship of Lochaber sherrifdom of Inverness] (*RMS* IV no. 704)

*Moirlagane* [1553 royal grant to George Gordon of lands in lordship of Lochaber sherrifdom of Inverness] (*RMS* IV no. 824)

*Moir-valgane* [1568 x 1574 amongst lands in lordship of Lochaber sherrifdom of Inverness granted to Lachlan MacIntosh of Dunnachtan] (*RMS* IV no. 2348)

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\(^4\) I have taken the 1476 grant as referring to the previous site (4. Murlagan).
This site is near the bank of the river Spean, and the name appears on the gate of a farmhouse, without the diacritic which appears on the Ordnance Survey map. It is quite near the large Laggan Dam and Loch Laggan, which are part of the hydro-electric scheme. The river is some distance from the Mùrlaggan site and quite narrow at this point. This is probably attributable in part to the dam, and one could postulate that the site was once closer to a rather larger river. The landscape has been altered in connection with the hydro-electric scheme, but the early modern maps show the shape of the river as broadly similar to its current shape, including the marked bend adjacent to the site. Behind the site is Creag Dubh, which forms part of a ridge. Notable features in the vicinity are a crannog further up-river and a waterfall a few miles away.

6. Murlagan and Allt Mhurlagain, Kilmallie Parish, Inverness-shire, NN201792 OS Explorer 399; Sgùrr Mhurlagain, NN201794

Murlagan on Loch Arkaig is Murlagen 1552 (RMS), Moirvalagane 1574, ib. (CPNS, 80–81)
Murlagen [1552 royal grant to Alexander Gordon of lands in lordship of Lochaber sheriffdom of Inverness] *(RMS iv no. 704)*

Figure 6A: Loch Arkaig and Murlaggan (dwelling)

Figure 6B: Murlaggan
Murlagen [1553 royal grant to George Gordon of lands in lordship of Lochaber sheriffdom of Inverness] (RMS IV no. 824)

Moir-valgane [1568 x 1574 amongst lands in lordship of Lochaber sheriffdom of Inverness granted to Lachlan MacIntosh of Dunnachtton] (RMS IV no. 2348)

Murlaggan
Scour Murlaggan (Thomson 1832)

This locality is on the north shore of Loch Arkaig. The sgùrr appears from Thomson’s map to be a long ridge running approximately east-west. The ridge is almost universally steep and in this locality there is an almost flat area adjacent to the loch at its foot. On the opposite side of the loch the side seems to be steep right to the water. The loch shoreline is fairly straight and regular at this site, although there is a bay so slight as to be virtually indiscernable, where Allt Mhurlagain enters the loch. The name Murlaggan is now applied to a dwelling and the current Ordnance Survey map indicates a sheep stead nearby. This area is also a popular fishing destination at the present day.


In Rannoch there was Murlagan 1597. [RMS], Murelagane 1619, ib., Murrullagan in Macfarlane, a spelling which reflects the Gaelic pronunciation as well; ‘Mount Alexander or Murlagan c. 1751.’ The name is now Dun Alastair, just opposite a bag-like bend of the Tummel. (CPNS 81)

1 Geog. Coll., ii. 597.

Murlagan [1597 royal grant to John Robertson, Edinburgh merchant, of lands in barony of Strowan sheriffdom of Perth] (RMS VI no. 596)

Murlagan [1599 royal confirmation of grant by John Robertson to Robert Robertson of lands in barony of Strowan sheriffdom of Perth] (RMS VI no. 1001)

5 These three references mirror those for the previous site (5. Mùrlagan): in each charter, the place-name occurs twice, once associated with Glen Spean and once with Loch Arkaig.
**Murelagane** [1618 x 1619 royal confirmation of grant to James Campbell of Lawers of lands in sherrifdom of Perth formerly held by Robert Robertson of Strowan] (RMS VII no. 1961)

**Murlagan** [1630 royal confirmation of grant of lands in sherrifdom of Perth by Robert Robertson of Strowan to his son Alexander Robertson] (RMS VIII no. 1515)

This site is adjacent to the present Dunalastair Water, in a landscape that has been considerably altered by the hydro-electric scheme. The precise location to which the place-name adhered is not certain, but it is likely to refer to a bay-like widening in the River Tummel. The charter of 1618 x 1619 lists a millhouse which appears to be attached to the lands of Murlagan. *Lie Tome de Murelagane*, mentioned in the same charter, is presumably the same hill feature as the *Dun/Mount of Dun Alastair/Mount Alexander* shown on later maps.


![Murlaganmore](image)

**Figure 8: Murlaganmore**

In Glen Lochy, near Killin, there is Murloganemore, 1528, [RMS]; in Macfarlane it is Murrulagan (ii. p. 536), now Murlagan, on a bend of the river Lochy. (*CPNS*, 81)

**Murlagane** [1513 royal confirmation of grant to Duncan Campbell of Glenorchy of lands in sherrifdom of Perth: ‘the western half of Murlagane with the millhouse’] (RMS II no. 3487)
Murloganmore [1528 royal grant of legitimacy to John Dow Duncanson McGregor of Murloganmore in Glenlochy sheriffdom of Perth, illegitimate son of Duncan McGregor] (RMS III no. 591)

Murlagane [1551 royal confirmation of grant of lands in sheriffdom of Perth to Colin Campbell and his wife Katherine Ruthven of lands in the sheriffdom of Perth: ‘the western half of Murlagane with the millhouse’] (RMS IV no. 616)

Murullagan (Blaeu 1654)

Murullagan [1732 or earlier] (Moll 1745)

Morlaganmore
Morlaganbeg (Stobie 1783)

Morlagan's (Stobie 1805)

Morlaganmore
Morlaganbeg (Thomson 1832)

This site is located adjacent to the River Lochay, within a bend, although there is no widening of the river to suggest a bay. The cartulary references to the western part of Murlagane should probably be taken as referring to Murloganmore, which is located to the west of Morlaganbeg as indicated on the early maps, and is ideally located for a mill.

9. Muirlagan, Balquidder Parish, Perthshire, NN251719 OS Landranger 56

In Balquhidder there is Murlagan on Loch Voil; Murlagane, 1587. (CPNS, 81)

Murlagane [1587 x 1591 royal grant to John Murray of Tullibardine of lands in the lordship of Balquidder sheriffdom of Perth] (RMS V no. 1325, 1939)

Murlagane [1613 royal grant to David lord of Scone of lands in the lordship of Balquidder sheriffdom of Perth] (RMS VII no. 858)
Figure 9: Loch Voil and Murlagan

*Murlagane* [1619 royal grant to Kentigern and Anne Murray of lands in the lordship of Balquidder sheriffdom of Perth] (*RMS* VII no. 1968)

*Muirlagane* [1627 confirmation of 1619 grant above] (*RMS* VIII no. 1167)

*Murlagan* (Stobie 1783)

*Murlagan* (Thomson 1834)

The Bathymetrical Survey (Murray & Pattison 1908 III pl. 7) shows a very slight bay in the lochside adjacent to the settlement marked Murlagan. The loch is relatively shallow, and the site is adjacent to one of the shallower parts of the loch.

10. Murlagan (obsolete), Aberfoyle Parish, Perthshire ?NN486077 OS Explorer 365

In the Trossachs district a writer in Macfarlane says, ‘half a myl from Murlagan is Achrai, and 3 myl therfra Keandrochart upon the southeast end of Ardkeanknoken Loch’ (ii. p. 567); [...] This
Murlagan seems to be now obsolete; it was probably the name of the bay at the north-west end of Loch Achray, as the loch is now called. (CPNS, 81)

Figure 10: Loch Katrine and Murlagan

According to Dr Peter McNiven of the University of Glasgow (pers. comm. 2012), this site is located on the southern shore of Loch Katrine. Presumably Macfarlane’s source was inaccurate as to distances and Watson was therefore unsuccessful in his attempt to locate the site described.⁶

Murlagan [Monteith rental records 1769: Forest (without Murlagan) let to Walter Mcfarlane; Murlagan let to James Stewart] (NAS GD220/6/70, 29)

Murlagan [Monteith rental records 1779: Murlagan with part forest let to James Stewart] (NAS GD220/6/70, 73)

⁶ I am grateful to Peter McNiven for information concerning this site, including the Menteith references.
Loch Katrine has been enlarged to act as a water supply reservoir, so the shoreline has presumably altered somewhat. However, the site is in an area of very irregular shoreline, many parts of which may be interpreted as bay-like forms. The Menteith records make clear the site’s location within land used for forestry.

**DISCUSSION**

While there are some attributes common to several sites, there are none that can be said to be sufficiently similar across all ten to be diagnostic of the place-name element *muirbolc*. It is clear that all sites are located adjacent to a loch or river; however, of the ten, one is on a sea-loch, seven are on fresh-water lochs and two are on rivers. All are situated near some bend or bay, but in some cases this is a bay whose indentation is so shallow as to be barely recognisable while in others it is a looping bend in a river: the shape of land or of water is not particularly similar. There is no uniformity to the water-depth at the sites: some of the bays are quite shallow, while others are deep. Several, but not all, of the sites are recognised at the present day as productive fishing waters. A few of the sites are recorded as being used for forestry activities, such as coppicing, and others for milling.

In short, then, the precise meaning of *muirbolc* remains a mystery. The element may, as Watson suggested, refer to a bay, but bays are plentiful in Scotland, and there is nothing common to these sites to encourage a belief that they are named merely topographically for the bay or river-bend they occupy. It seems highly unlikely that the name is based solely on a common topographical feature. I would tentatively suggest that *muirbolc* is more likely to refer to a human aspect of the site—either to some sufficiently distinctive human-made feature that may in the past have occupied all ten sites, or to some particular activity that was carried out at all ten sites, at the time when *muirbolc* became established as the place-name.

Further avenues of exploration are suggested by the Irish sites. Indeed, these may be the key to solving the mystery, as they have the interesting attribute of continuity of the place-name element from the early medieval period into the modern day. An additional avenue for further research is the possible occurrence of the *bolc* element in
isolation from the *muir* element. One of the land grants referred to above refers also to an Inverloye-valagane (*RMS* IV no. 2348), and there may be other similar instances to be found. There is an early medieval instance of *Dun Bolg* (*AU* 598.2). Simon Taylor (2012, 301) identifies *Balbougie, Bogie, Blebo* and *Dunbog*, all in Fife, noting the possibility of their origin in a Pictish cognate for *bolc*. *Blebo* is of particular interest:

In Blebo KMB [Kemback Parish], earlier *Bladebolg* etc. (Vol. 2), probably a Pictish name, it combines with a word for ‘meal, flour’ (see *bláth* and *blawd* above), thus meaning ‘meal-sack’. It is the same name as the Romano-British name *Blatobulgium* for the Roman fort at Birrens DMF [Dumfriesshire], for which see Rivet and Smith, 1979, 268–9; and also as Blelack ABD [Aberdeenshire] and Blelock PER[thshire] (Barrow 2003 [1973], 49). The reference may be to Blebo’s own early milling connections and its status as the centre of an early shire. However, *bolg* can also be used topographically to describe a rounded, bag- or belly-like hill, and this is just as likely to be the case in the name Blebo ... (Taylor 2012, 301–302)

The possible connection with milling is tantalising: we have noted above several instances where *muirbolc* toponyms are colocated with mills. It is tempting to postulate some meaning that incorporates the *bolc* element as signifying milling. This is, though, highly speculative, and the absence of the *bláth* element from our ten examples argues against it.

The other potentially productive suggestion in Taylor’s discussion is the notion of *bolc* as a rounded hill. It calls to mind the *Tome* or *Dun* at site 7, and Murligan Hill at site 4. There is not a similar hill at most of the sites, though. It may be that the element *bolc* refers in some of our cases to a hill and in others to an aquatic feature.

It is reasonable to suggest that, if a *bolc* is in itself some recognisable feature, whether natural or human-made, then the ten sites considered in this chapter may have attracted the name *muirbolc* because of having that feature in combination with being located by the water. This would hold true if either of the meanings ‘milling

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7 Watson (*CPNS*, 441) suggests that, used adjectivally, *bolc* gives *Linne Bhalgaidh, Strathbogie* and *Balgaidh*, which may also shed some light on its meaning.
centre’ or ‘rounded hill’ were applicable. It contrasts to the assumption hitherto followed in discussions of *muirbolc*, that the elements *muir* and *bolc* joined to describe a single feature.

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