Reading the road-signs

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

I LOVE to see Gaelic road-signs when I'm driving, because they make me think and keep me alert. If Gaelic education were more widespread and bilingual road-signs went up all over Scotland, I'm sure the toll of road accidents would be reduced.

These things can't be got right overnight. They need thinking, research, fieldwork, debate. But you can't always wait for that to happen before you put the signs up.

A few months ago I passed one on the A861 near Acharacle. It declared: "Dalilea. Dail an Leigh." I immediately felt guilty, because I knew I had been the unwitting cause of the good people of Moidart being informed that the name of this place in their midst meant "The Physician's Meadow".

What happened was this. Back in 1986 I published a wee book called "Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair: The Ardnamurchan Years". (I still have a few copies left if anyone wants one for £3.) Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair – Alexander MacDonald the poet – was born at Dalilea but never mentioned it in his work, nor had I ever found anyone who could tell me what it meant.

So, to my shame, I guessed. I wrote about the poet's father: "*Maighstir Alasdair* lived (as his predecessors had done) on the Moidart shore of Loch Shiel at Dalilea – *Dail an Léigh*, the Physician's Meadow."

It seemed a good idea at the time, and my excuse is that the book wasn't about place-names but history and poetry. Unfortunately (as I found out later from the person who had supplied the Highland Council's roads department with their list of Gaelic place-names) it was taken as gospel.

You know, it could actually be right. But I doubt it. For one thing, I've never heard any tradition that connects the place with physicians (even though it's quite near Caisteal Tioram where Clanranald lived, and Clanranald would have needed physicians). For another, I subsequently discovered the word *eilgheadh*.

If you look up Dwelly you'll find what *eilgheadh* means. "Levelling a field for sowing. Fallow ground. First ploughing of land that requires a second to prepare it for seed. Ploughing of stubble. Burial, interment."

This describes Dalilea pretty well – a place that could be ploughed and levelled and made to grow things, but not without elbow grease. That would make it *Dail Eilghidh* or *Eilghe*, "Hard-Ploughed Meadow". And you begin to realise that the English spelling isn't "Dalilea" for no reason. The final "e" and "a" both count.

I'm pretty sure that Fernilea on Loch Harport in Skye contains the same element. It would be *Fearann Eilghidh* or *Eilghe*, "Hard-Ploughed Land".

This goes against the opinion of Alexander Forbes in his book "Place-Names of Skye". He has it as *fearann liath*, "grey land, possibly unploughed or poor soil". *Liath* is the grey of grey hair, the blue of the sky and the colour of mildew, but I've never heard it used of land in the way that Forbes suggests. I think he (or his informant) got it wrong.

That's an example of the hazards. Here's one of the rewards. Simon Taylor's new book "The Place-Names of Fife: Volume One", published by Shaun Tyas of Donington, is an absolute delight. Fife is bristling with Gaelic place-names, because Gaelic was spoken there for five hundred years, from about 800 to 1300.

But since there aren't any Gaelic road-signs in Fife, it never occurred to me until I read Taylor's book that Donibristle on Dalgety Bay contains the Gaelic name I devoted several articles to at the back end of last year – Breasal.

I argued that the mythical Atlantic isle of St Breasal is one of the elements that went into the name "Brazil". Taylor argues that Donibristle is the *dùnadh* (enclosure) of Breasal or the *dùn* (fort) of a tribe called the *Uí Breasail*, "Breasal's Descendants". But he backs it up by pointing out that the parish church of Dalgety was dedicated to St Bridget, whose tribe were the Uí Breasail. That suggests to me that the first element is *dòmhnach* "church" and that the second may be St Breasal himself.

I look forward to a sign "Donibristle: Dòmhnach Breasail" going up some day. Maybe the citizens will find a wee town in Brazil to twin with.

My third example is one of the biggest Gaelic road-signs you'll find anywhere. I refer to "Skye Bridge: Drochaid an Eilein Sgitheanaich".

Every time I pass it on the A87 I marvel at how one of the shortest of Gaelic place-names, *Scí*, has turned itself into one of the longest, *An t-Eilean Sgitheanach*, while remaining much the

same in English – “Skye”. It puts me in mind of countless other examples I’ve come across in the Gaelic translation industry of translators choosing the longest rather than the shortest option. Maybe it’s because they’re paid by the number of words in the “target” language rather than the “source” language. I’m not surprised they didn’t call it *Drochaid Scí*. But is there any good reason for not calling it *An Drochaid Sgitheanach* or *Drochaid an Eilein*?

We’re used to Gaelic translations being a bit longer than English originals. But nearly *three* times as long! That’s ridiculous.

Let’s see how it happened. In the time of Christ the island was *Sci*. Ptolemy of Alexandria, writing in Greek, gave it in the genitive case as the island of *Skitis* or *Sketis*. In medieval Gaelic writings from Ireland we find what underlay these spellings. In the nominative there’s *Scí* or *Scia*. In the genitive there’s *Scí*, *Scith*, *Sciadh*, *Scéth* or *Scetha*, for example *inis Scith* “the island of Skye”, *plebs Scéth* “the people of Skye”, *cath for feraibh Sciadh* “a battle against the men of Skye”. And in the dative there’s *Sci*, *Scí* or *Scii*, for example *ó Sci* “from Skye”, *do Scí* “to Skye”, *i Scii* “in Skye”.

Professor Watson reckoned that the name indicated the island’s shape and meant the “cut” or “winged” place – *sci-* or *sgi-* as in English “scissors”, Gaelic *sgian* “knife”, *sgiath* “wing, shield”.

Alexander Macbain pointed out in his book on Highland place-names that when the Norsemen came they called it *Skith*, and that in their language this meant “tablet, log, firewood”. He says: “It is interesting to note that the Dean of Lismore refers to the island as ‘Clar Skeith’ – the Board of Skith, thus showing that the Norse name of the island was remembered and translated by Clàr.”

It’s certainly true that for centuries our Gaelic poets routinely referred to the island as *Clàr Sgìthe*. A *clàr* is a flat board, and Skye is anything but flat. So Macbain may have a point.

In English, meanwhile, the name was being written as “Skey” (in 1292), “Sky” (in 1336) or “Skye” (1498). All the letters count (remember Dalilea). So “Skey” will have two syllables, reflecting *Scetha* (like *sgéithe*). “Sky” will have one syllable, reflecting *Scí* (like *sgìth*). And “Skye” will have one or two syllables, reflecting *Scia* (like *sgiath* or *sgìthe*). Do you know the Ballad of Otterbourne?

Last night I dream’d a dreary dream
Beyond the isle of Skye,
I saw a dead man win a fight
And I think that man was I.

I suspect that in its earliest version the last word was not “I” but “me”.

As far as I can make out, both the Gaelic and the English forms of the name became twisted by the existence of particular words. In English it was “sky”. I imagine the change took place in the eighteenth century when the name became familiar to English-speakers through the cattle trade and the Jacobite rebellions. By 1773 the change was so complete that Johnson and Boswell both wrote “Sky” in preference to “Skye”. The final “e” is an antiquarian flourish, like writing “olde” for “old”.

In Gaelic the name was affected by *sgìth* meaning “tired”. This wasn’t a common word in the middle ages, when *tuirseach* or *tùirseach* was generally used, as in Irish. When *sgìth* became common it knocked the name of the island off its perch. We can see this happening. The northern Minch was *Cuan Scí*, “the Sea of Skye”. But when *sgìth* came to mean “tired”, it turned into *an Cuan Sgìth*, “the Tired Sea”.

Seas are allowed to be tired but islands aren’t. During the 1690s the blind poet and harper Roderick Morison referred three times to Skye in his songs as *Clàr Sgìthe* (*on a thréig sibh Clàr Sgìthe*, for example, “since you forsook the Land of Skye”). But on a fourth and final occasion, about 1700, he admits there’s a problem of ambiguity: *Se ’n Clàr Sgìth an clàr rosgìth*, he says, “the Tired Land is the truly tired land”.

A century later, when Donald MacLeod refers to the island four times as *an t-Eilan Sciathanach* in his song collection of 1811, it’s clear that the change is complete.

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