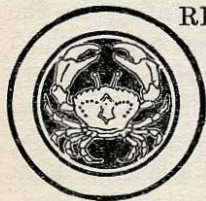


## THE PLACE-NAMES OF ORKNEY.



ORKNEY place-names form an attractive subject of study. There is always some reason why a certain place received its own particular name, though that reason may often be difficult to discover. The use of a name is, of course, to distinguish one place from other places of a similar class, and the most obvious way of doing so is to refer to some special feature or peculiarity of the place. In this way arise such names as the Red Head, the North Sea, the Muckle Water, and Green Holm. Houses and farms and islands are often named after the owner

When people of a different race and language settle in a country, or when the language changes, as happened in Orkney after its annexation to Scotland, the old names may still be used, although when their meaning is unknown or has been forgotten they are apt to be changed in various ways. People rarely take the trouble of inventing a new name for a place if they can find out the name already given to it. Thus if there had been any Celtic or Pictish inhabitants left in Orkney when the Norsemen settled there, the Celtic

names of the islands and hills and bays would have been handed down from them to us. But all the old place-names in Orkney are Norse, and the only Celtic elements found in them refer to the settlements and churches of the Culdees, as we have already mentioned.

The Norse place-names are usually descriptive, based either on the appearance or the situation of the place, or on the name of its occupier. Such names have an interest which is entirely wanting in the modern names given to farms or houses, names which are often selected for absurd or trivial reasons. There is little need for inventing any new names in a land which has been so fully supplied with them already. For it is not only the various islands and their most prominent physical features that bear descriptive Norse names; hillock and meadow, field and spring, rock, geo, and skerry—all have been named by our forefathers with names of which the form as well as the meaning is now in many cases forgotten. Those names should be regarded as relics entrusted to our care, and we ought to learn them from the old people by whom they are still remembered, and preserve them from alteration or oblivion, as the material relics of our romantic history are now being preserved from destruction and decay.

*Orkney*, the general name of the island group, is partly Celtic and partly Norse. Pliny, the Roman geographer, mentions *Cape Orcas*, probably Duncansby Head in Caithness, and calls the islands *Orcades*. The Celtic Scots called them the *Orc Islands*, and southern writers use the form *Orcanig*. The root of the name is supposed to be *orc*, which meant

the bottle-nose whale. The Norse visitors added the termination *-ey*, meaning "island."

When the Norsemen settled in these islands, they gave to each a name in their own language, and these names have been preserved with little alteration, though their meaning has generally been forgotten. Some were named from their configuration or appearance, as Hoy (*Ha-ey*), the high island; Flotta (*Flat-ey*), the flat island; Sanday, the sand island; Eday, the island of the *eith* or isthmus; Burray (*Borgar-ey*), the islands of the "brochs." Some were named from their position, as Westray, the west island; Auskerry, the east skerry. Some were named after persons as Rousay, Rolf's island; Gairsay (*Gareksey*), Garek's island; Graemsay (*Grimsey*), Grim's island; Copinsay, Kolbein's island. The name *Rinanse*y, the island of St. Ninian, often called Ringan, was afterwards changed to Ronaldsay, with "North" prefixed to distinguish it from the original Rognvald's island, now South Ronaldsay. A few were named from their uses, as Faray, the sheep island; and Hrossey, the horse island, an old name for the Mainland (*Meginland*), or principal island of the group.

It is very odd to find in books and on maps the Latin name *Pomona* applied to this last island—*Pomona*, the Roman goddess of harvest-plenty, whose name was also used to indicate the fruits of the earth. The explanation seems to be that a mistake was made by George Buchanan, the greatest Latin scholar whom Scotland ever produced, in quoting a passage from Solinus, an old Latin writer. Solinus, speaking of some island which he calls Thylé or Thulé, says that it is five days' sail from the Orcades, and that it



is large and rich in the constant yield of its harvests (*pomona*). Buchanan, who knew much of Latin but little of either Thulé or the Orcades, takes this to mean that "Thulé is large and Pomona is rich and fertile," and he concludes from this that Pomona must be the chief island of the Orcades. Thus by a mere blunder the name "Pomona" was given to the Mainland; but there is no good reason why we should perpetuate this blunder. "Mainland" is the name which every intelligent Orcadian should use. It is believed by some that the use of the word *pomona* itself is due to another blunder, the mistake of a copyist, and that what Solinus really wrote was a contracted form of a word which simply meant fruit.

Our place-names have suffered much from the blunders of surveyors and map-makers who knew nothing of the Norse language. Whenever they found a name which bore some resemblance to an English word, they immediately changed it into what they supposed to be its correct English form. A good example of a name thus "corrected" for us is that of the place now called "Walls." The proper name of the district is *Waas*, and this is the name which it should bear on the map. But the intelligent surveyors no doubt knew that there is an English word "walls" which is pronounced "wa's" in Scotland, and so they assumed that the Norse place-name "Waas" ought to be written and pronounced "Walls." This is of course an absurd error. "Waas" is a form of "Voes," a name which is admirably suited to the district, the land of the voes or bays.

The name of our county town, Kirkwall, has been similarly disguised by the well-meaning reforms of

Ignorant persons. Old people in the islands still call it "Kirkwaa," and this is the correct form of the name. The Peerie Sea was called the "Kirk-voe" long before St. Magnus Cathedral was built, the name being derived from the old church of St. Olaf, whose doorway still exists, and this name, applied to the town, naturally changed into "Kirkwaa." It would probably be impossible now to restore the old name; we can only be grateful that our map-makers did not also turn "kirk" into the English form "church." We may suspect that the parish name Holm has been similarly tampered with. The local pronunciation, which is "Ham," indicates that the name may be derived from *hafn*, a harbour, as in "Hamnavoe" (*Hafnarvagr*) and other cases, but has no connection with *holm*, which means a small island. When the meaning of *hafn* had been forgotten, and the local pronunciation was ignored, the name was naturally supposed to be connected with the *holms* which lie off the shore.

A similar intrusion of the letter *l* is found in *Pierowall*, and also in *Noltland*, in Westray. The latter is sometimes, and more correctly, written as "Notland." The Norse name was *Nautaland*, the pasture for "nowt" or cattle. The word *Pentland* must be our last example of such blunders. To the Norsemen the Scottish mainland was *Pettland*, the land of the Picts; and even at the present day Orcadians, who have not been misled by books and maps, still speak of the "Pettland Firth."

The names of farms or small districts are often very interesting. A common termination in these is *-bister*, which represents the Norse *bolstadr*, a farmstead, the first part of the name usually being



derived from the name of the original owner, as in "Grimbister" and "Swanbister," the farm of Grim and of Sweyn. The word is connected with *bol*, a dwelling, which still exists in our local dialect in the form "beul," meaning a stall in a byre or stable. Two Norse words, *bu* and *bær*, meaning a home or a household, give rise respectively to the common farm name Bu, and to several names ending in -by, as Houseby and Dounby.

The termination *-ster* or *-setter*, which is also very common, represents the Norse word *setr*; the name *sæter* is still used in Norway for a summer pasture among the hills at some distance from the farm. Several of our farms bear the name of Seatter, and the number of compounds of this word is too large to need illustration.

*Garth*, which meant an enclosure, is akin to the English words *yard* and *garden*, and is found in numerous farm names, sometimes alone, but more frequently in compounds, where it appears as the termination *-ger*, the *g* being sounded hard. Other names for enclosed land were *quoy* (*levi*) and *town* (*tun*), and in almost every district we find farm names in which these words appear. The Norse *skali*, a hall, appears as *skail*, either alone or as an element in compound names. There are other common terminations which might be mentioned, all of them significant and worthy of study, but these may suffice to illustrate how full of meaning and interest our common place-names really are.

We have said that the Norse word for "island" now appears as the termination *-ay* or *-a*. This termination, however, has in some cases a different

origin, especially where the name does not refer to an island. Thus in the names Scapa and Hoxa the *-a* is a contraction of *eith*, meaning an isthmus. Scapa was *Skalpeith*, the ship-isthmus, and Hoxa was *Haugseith*, the isthmus of the haug or howe. In the name of the island of Sanday, the termination means "island;" in the name Sanday applied to several places round Deer Sound, the reference is to the "Sand aith" or isthmus already mentioned. In names of places such as Birsay and Swannay, where a large burn is found, we may conclude that the *-ay* represents the Norse *-a*, meaning a river, as the *o* does in Thurso.

As we should expect from a seafaring race, the Norsemen have left us a very liberal heritage of names for the various natural features of our shores. Projecting points of land are called "ness" or "moul" or "taing," according to their configuration, and even the less prominent rocks are still known as "clett" or "skerry," or bear other names which were originally simple descriptions of their peculiar forms. In the same way descriptive names were applied to the water features, and every "voe" and "sound," every "hope" and "geo" have names which offer us a fine field for study.

In dealing with this last class of names, there are two Norse words which may cause us some trouble—*hella*, a flat rock, and *hellir*, a cave, both of which appear in place-names as *hellya*, while a third word *helgr*, holy, sometimes assumes the same form. It is impossible to determine what the original form and meaning of a name have been unless we examine the place as well as its name.



In studying our place-names, we ought to remember that the correct names are those that are used by the old people who live in the district, not those that are found on the map, or are used by people who adopt the pronunciation suggested by the spelling. By means of the knowledge of a few dozen common Norse roots, and a careful examination of the places to which the names belong, most of our old-fashioned place-names may be made to yield up their ancient meanings, and to throw some light upon the past condition of the islands. When studied in this way, our place-names are seen to be fragments of fossil history, organic remains of an early stratum of society, as eloquent of the past as are the geological fossils of the early ages of plant and animal life.



*At the quern.*