

# **The Field-Names of Cnoc a' Mhadain / Slidery Muir**

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## **1 Place and people**

*Cnoc a' Mhadain* is the Gaelic, and thus the original, name of the settlement and area now known as *Slidery Muir* in the south-west corner of the Isle of Arran (located at Grid Reference NR/16 935235) see Figures 1..

It has since time immemorial been the home of the local MacKinnon and Cook kindreds. It just about still is. At the time of the 1881 Census it was more populous than it is today, and was home to several families of these surnames, including my own, which were typically large, with numerous children. Nevertheless its scattered character was observed in a prefatory note by the census enumerator (Mr John Cook) on the tract booklet, which covered Slidery (in Gaelic, An t-Slaodraich) and adjacent areas (and which carried a heading for 'Town, village, or hamlet'), to the effect that, 'The dwellings in this district are so widely scattered that no part of it can be dignified by the title of Town, Village, or Hamlet.' In Slidery, including Slidery Muir, some 47 persons were enumerated of whom some 32 (68%) were Gaelic-speaking. There were two Cook families, three MacAlister families, and six households were MacKinnons.

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**Figure 1 – The Isle of Arran**

The Cooks and the MacKinnons have been commemorated in Arran folklore as the original heritors and families of the island. *The Book of Arran* (MacKenzie 1982 [1914]: 118) cites Thomas Pennant *Tour and Voyage of*



The surname MacKinnon is variously spelt in the Old Parish Records (OPR), but often in such a way as to indicate that it was pronounced as MacKennan. In Gaelic the name is often spelt in Arran Gaelic as MacEanain, with a similar pronunciation. Although when writing their surname in Gaelic, MacKinnon Gaelic-speakers in Arran often adopted the general spelling of their surname as 'MacFhionghuin', very frequently they have used the spelling 'Mac Eanain'. This suggests to me that our kindred was not of the same origin and ancestry as the rest of the clan in Mull, Skye and the other islands, but of a more local and indigenous Arran descent, perhaps from an ancestor who had such a name as Eònan.

Cook also gets variously spelt in the earlier OPR, as Couke, McCouke, McCourk, and in the case of women, NcCouke and nc Cuck. The final *-e* may be an attempt to indicate the Gaelic pronunciation of MacCuga. It is interesting also that the earlier records also give women's names with an initial Nc- (for *nic* = 'daughter of'). It seems to me a great pity that this practice of thus distinguishing female names which have been anglicised from Gaelic seems to have lapsed during the earlier eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

The earlier OPR give numerous examples of original Arran surnames in a quasi-Gaelic form, and some examples too of similarly-formulated forenames.<sup>5</sup> The earliest entries (e.g. baptisms for 1702) are written in an uncial hand similar to that of Gaelic manuscripts of an earlier period, suggesting that the clerk was traditionally literate in Gaelic.

## **2 Field-names and minor toponymy**

Field names may provide an insight into local land-use, husbandry, social history, and attitudes towards landscape, as may the names of minor

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<sup>4</sup> It is, of course illogical for a woman to be called 'Mac-'. I have encountered a present-day feminist who used a prefatory *Nic-* form in her surname in its English form.

<sup>5</sup> Examples include: Gorrie McAlister (1701): Gorrie from Goraidh (for Godfrey); ffinuala Callister (1701?): ffinuala from Fionnghuala (now generally anglicised= as Flora); McCoinnigh represents MacCoinnich (MacKenzie); McKlchattan (1702, MacGille Chatain – probably now Cattanach); McVurrough (1701, for MacMhuirich – now generally anglicised as Currie, Black p. 569); McKervigh (1702, probably for MacCearrbhaich, which Black (1946, 1993, p. 527) interprets as 'son of the gamester', and maybe now represented by MacKerrow); McInarginach (1702, for Mac-an-airgineach = 'son of the silversmith', and now generally anglicised as Sillars); Nc nifs (1702) and McNiece (1712, now generally anglicised as MacNeish); McKlgurm (for MacGilleGuirm = 'son of the blue lad', now represented by Blue; NcGraftan, NcGraffan (1703/8?, for *Nic/MacCreamhain / MacCrafin*, now generally anglicised as Crawford). Other Arran surnames which have altered with the shift from Gaelic to English include Kelso, which represents an original MacAlasdair; and McNucator (for Mac-an-fhucadair = 'son of the fuller', now probably represented by Fullarton, although Black (1993 [1946]: 553) has Walker – probably intended for 'waulker').

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landscape features. Together they constitute a record of the past, and maybe also valuable sociolinguistic data, especially in cases of rapid language shift. My own recent studies have attempted to apply John Murray's concept of '*the layered landscape*' (Murray 2014: 38) to Cornish toponymy.<sup>6</sup> The present study attempts to do so in the case of local toponymy in this particular instance in the Isle of Arran.

In September 1983 I visited the Isle of Arran for the first time, and took the opportunity to locate and visit relations in Sliderry. These were Jean (née MacKinnon) and Finlay Cook, and their son Charlie, at The Moor farm, Sliderry Muir (see Figure 2).



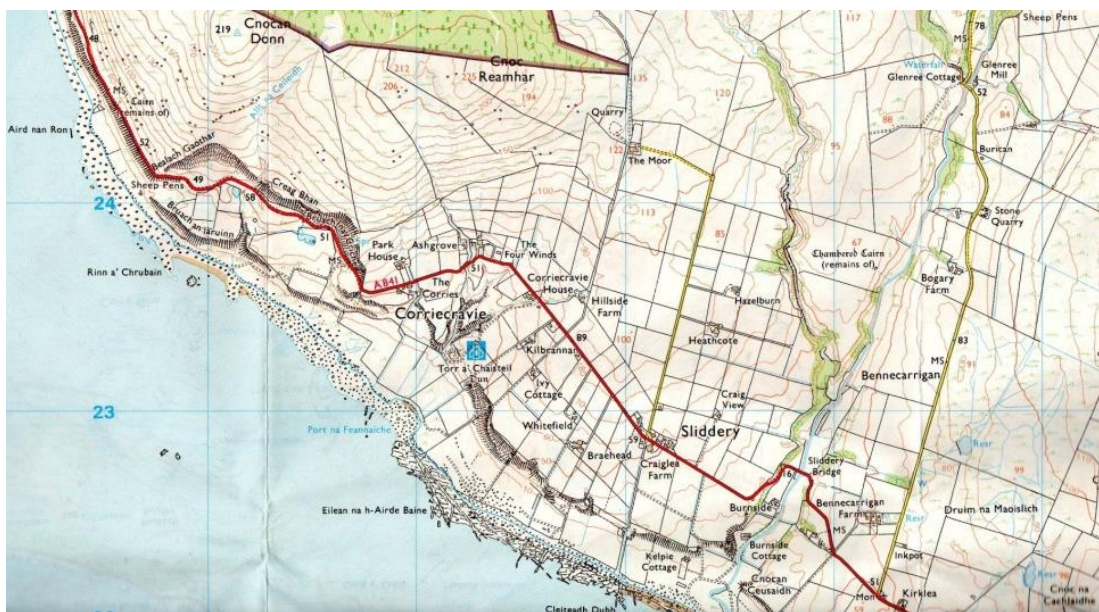
**Figure 2 - Sliderry Muir Farm / Cnoc a' Mhadain, Isle of Arran**

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<sup>6</sup> For example, my recent articles on Cornish place-names: MacKinnon (2014), (2015) and forthcoming.

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Jean was a cousin, in that we shared a common forebear, Duncan MacKinnon, customer weaver of Slidery Muir, who was our shared great-great-grandfather. On my journey to the ferry I listened, on my car radio, to *MacGregor's Gathering* on Radio Scotland. This programme included a feature on field names, and after my arrival at Slidery Muir, I enquired of my relations whether they were able to recall the traditional names of the fields on their farm. This proved to be no problem, and Finlay produced the six-inch OS sheet which showed the farm and its fields (see Figure 3).



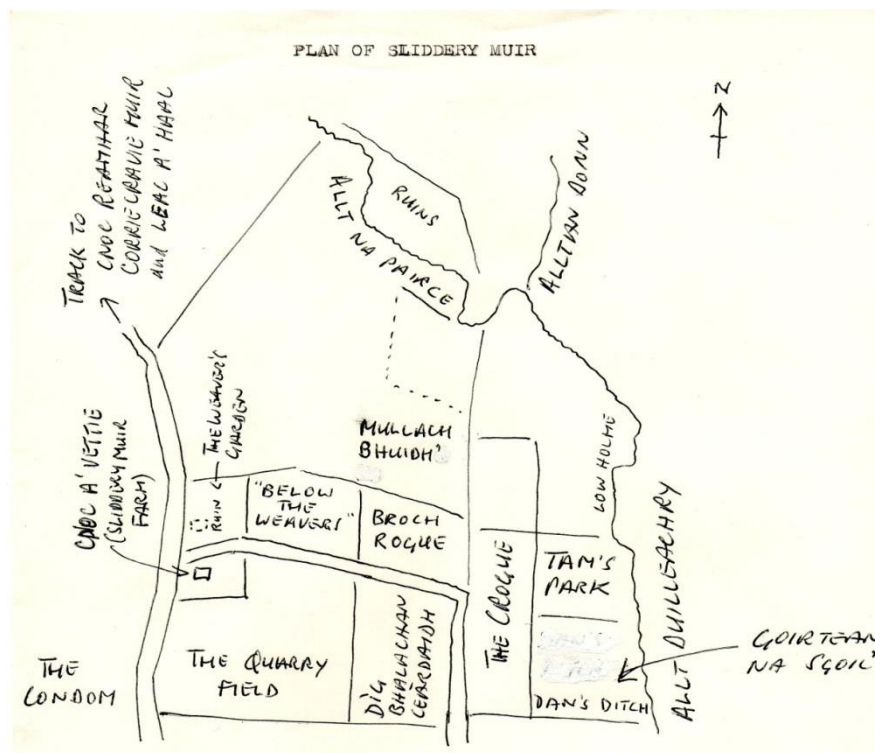
**Figure 3 – Slidery, Slidery Muir, and environs  
(from OS Explorer Sheet 361, 2001)**

In addition to Finlay naming all the fields, Jean asked ‘I have often heard of Cnoc a' Mhadain. Where was Cnoc a' Mhadain?’ Finlay replied, ‘This is Cnoc a' Mhadain.’ They pronounced the name like Cronk-a-Vettie, which corresponds to the pronunciation of the name as noted by Nils Holmer (1957: § 83, p. 37). This puzzled me, as I was unfamiliar with the characteristics of Arran Gaelic pronunciation, and I did not connect this with the item I had encountered in Nils Holmer. It took some unravelling, and it was only with the aid of Watson’s *Place-Names of Ross and Cromarty*, and a similarly

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named farm on the Black Isle that I cracked it.<sup>7</sup> Charlie asked me what my great-great grandfather's occupation was, and I answered, customer weaver. He mentioned that he had turned up an old foundation whilst laying an agricultural drain in the field opposite the farm, which was known as the Weaver's Garden. This was then the likely location of our forebear's cottage in the nineteenth century, by all accounts a typical two-room dwelling or 'but-and-ben' (I took a few stones as a memento).

Finlay gave me the names of all the fields, and I noted them on a sketch-plan (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4 – Sketch Plan of Sliderry Muir Farm / Cnoc a' Mhadain**

Jean asked me whether the Gaelic names meant anything to me, and in many cases I was able to explain them. For example, Dìg Bhalachan Chèardaidh was pretty transparent to me as the 'Tinker-boys' Dyke', and Finlay said that was where the tinkers used to camp in its shelter. Goirtean na Sgoil' was likewise pretty plain as, 'Small field / enclosure of the school', and Finlay

<sup>7</sup> See Watson (1976 [1904]): 108, entry for Balvatie – Dog's or Wolf's town. Now spelt Balvattie on OS Explorer sheet 432 at GR (NH/28) 541496.

said there used to be a 'side-school' there. Leck-a-Haal was most probably Leac a' Chàil (= 'shelf / ledge of the wild cabbage or colewort'). Mullach Bhuidh' was readily explicable as 'yellow summit', which is still its conspicuous feature.

The Condom was a scunner. Apart from the obvious, it meant nothing to me, but was subsequently elucidated by Professor Willie Gillies as 'dogs' hillock', and so explained in Dwelly (as con-tom, p. 251). Professor Gillies explained that these were small hillocks around which dogs were raced for sport in Arran and South West Argyll, a sort of Gaelic dog-track. Such a feature was close to the farm to the south-west, on the other side of the track. Broch Rogue was also unclear to me. Broch might be for 'bruach, bruthach', a bank, hillside, or brae, which would fit the situation here. Bruach, in anglicised place-names, does get pronounced as 'broch' in some areas. Rogue probably represents ròthadh, which Dwelly explains as '*Arran* for reòthadh' (2001 [1902-12]: 773), or reòdhadh, which he notes (2001 [1902-12]: 754) is, 'Used for ice as well as frost in *Arran*'. The Crogue is probably derived from cròthadh, explained by Dwelly (2001 [1902-12]: 279) as 'enclosing', or represents the diminutive of crò (Dwelly 2001 [1902-12]: 275), 'fold, pen'.

### **3 Informants and possible family connections**

In these searches, I was impressed that Dwelly's collection of Gaelic vocabulary extended to the Isle of Arran, and wondered whether he had personally collected there, or had incorporated the work of informants. As to this, I was enlightened by a presentation by the place-name scholar Jacob King at the Seventh Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig conference at Glasgow in 2012. King presented a paper on the life and work of the Gaelic scholar Charles Robertson (King forthcoming), in which he detailed how Robertson had assiduously collected Gaelic words and expressions, folklore, and information on Gaelic place-names in many areas of the Highlands and Islands, including Arran. He was one of Dwelly's principal informants, as he was for Watson.

Robertson was resident in Arran for at least two years. King noted that, 'On 7 November 1894, he married Catherine Cook, (the daughter of Donald Cook, a merchant) at Sunningbrae in Moffat. His wife's residence at this time was given as Kilmory, Buteshire. In his notebook on Arran place-names, he remarks against the name Cnoc a' Mhadain(n): 'where C. Cook lived'. Robertson also noted later, in a letter, that his wife 'spoke Gaelic like a native'. His voluminous correspondence and notebooks are now archived in the National Library of Scotland. They are a resource which could yet yield



considerable knowledge and insight into Gaelic and the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth century Gaidhealtachd. I believe that it would be possible for me to establish a family connection with Catherine Cook, and thus with Robertson, through one of the MacKinnon-Cook marriages in a previous generation. There was one such in 1703 in my own lineage, and there might well be a closer tie in a possible Cook-MacKinnon marriage later.

#### **4 The micro-toponymy of Cnoc a' Mhadain, and its significance**

My first attempts at interpreting what I had heard as 'Cronk-a-Vettie' were to derive it from meatachadh, -aidh, which Dwelly interprets as 'Enfeebling ... state of becoming weak ... damping the spirits, ....Starving with cold.' (p. 844). This would certainly fit the site, located as it is on the edge of the rough muirland, and probably reclaimed from it, and at an elevation of some 400 feet. However, '- a' mheatachaidh' has an extra syllable, which would perhaps argue against this Finlay's pronunciation did however suggest 'madadh' ('wolf, dog') as the qualifier of the generic, cnoc), rather than 'madain', its diminutive, as given in Holmer (1957: §83, p. 37, q.v.).

To the north of the farm, on the other side of the track, is the small field, named 'The Weaver's Garden'. It is the likely site of the cottage of Duncan MacKinnon, customer weaver, in the later nineteenth century. The field to the east is known as 'Below the Weaver's'. Whether it ever had a Gaelic name is now irrecoverable, but it is indicative of advanced language shift that the original language tends to give way to the new in micro-toponymy.

Further to the east, and down the slope is Broch Rogue. Although this small field faces the sunrise, its name suggests the persistence of frost and ice. It lies at an elevation of around 120 metres (or 395 feet) and at the limit of the cultivable farmland. Beyond its northern boundary extends the uncultivated muirland, known here as Mullach Buidh', 'the yellow summit', the colour seemingly denoting the dead bracken of winter, and still a conspicuous feature. Further east, and lying alongside the lane to Sliderry itself is the Crogue. If the derivation from the Gaelic crò, or its diminutive, is correct its location alongside an access road, and on lower ground, would be a convenient location for a fold or pen.

To the north-east of The Crogue is Tam's Park. Beyond its northern boundary and alongside the Allt Duilleachry is Low Holme. To the south is Goirtean na Sgoil', 'the School Enclosure', named from the 'side school' established here in the nineteenth century. Such temporary schools were

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needful in a period of large families, and in order to comply with the 1872 Education (Scotland) Act, which required public education to become compulsory, universal, and free. Dan's Ditch lies along the southern boundary. It was named after a Dan Macintyre. The Tam of Tam's Park was unknown.

To the south and south-east of the farmstead is The Quarry Field, and to the east of that is Dig Bhalachan Chèardaidh, 'the tinker-boys' dyke', where the itinerant tinkers made camp and took shelter.

To the south-west of the farm, and across the track is hillock known as The Condom, An Con-Tom or 'dogs' hillock'. This remembers rural sports of a bygone age, in this case dog-racing. Such features were extant in Arran and south Argyllshire. The track leads northwards to Cnoc Reamhar, 'the stout hillock' (located at Grid Reference (GR) 922246, and at a summit height of 737 feet/ 225 metres), Corriecravie Moor (located around GR 928250), and The Torr (located at GR 919253, and at a summit height of 728 feet/ 222 metres), to the east of which lies Leck-a-Haal / Leac a' Chàil, 'the ledge or shelf of the wild cabbage/colewort'. Here are located the peat 'binks' of Slidery Muir (located at GR 924254).

The toponymy is indicative of changing patterns of agriculture, local industries now superseded, changing population and social conditions, past rural sporting life, changing occupance and changing language. The layered nature of all these is reflected in the names themselves. The bedrock and the surface stone were once won for local building purposes, e.g. in the Quarry to the north-west of the farmstead, and possibly also in the Quarry Field. The soils supported farming: crops and livestock. The muirland grazed sheep, which provided food and wool for weaving.<sup>8</sup> The muirland also yielded peat as domestic fuel. The toponymy testifies to the harsh conditions, remembers local wildlife and flora, past inhabitants, and social institutions which have now passed without other trace.

Detailed analysis of the micro-toponymy of a specific and local area, often only recoverable from oral and traditional sources or from private documentation, can be most illuminating of recent social, economic, and linguistic change, and can reveal what was going on upon the ground in local studies. Furthermore, in areas like my present home, The Black Isle, the local

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<sup>8</sup> My great-great-grandfather was a 'customer weaver', and wove blankets of the wool. His daughter Catherine (who was simple-minded, and described as 'lunatic' in the census) had the task of collecting the domestic urine of the village which was used in the fulling or 'waulking' process. For this reason she was known in Gaelic as 'Céitidh Mhaighistir'. My relative, Jean Cook, reported that her mother had many amusing anecdotes about her. My second grand-daughter Adelaide has middle names named after her.

toponymy: the names of the surrounding fields, farmsteads and other countryside features, deserted crofting locations, as well as continuing smaller settlements were all originally named in Gaelic. The recovery and interpretation of their names opens up a whole buried landscape and a Gaelic world which we still inhabit. To a greater or lesser degree the same is true over much of Scotland. In some cases such survivals can occur in much of Lowland Scotland even in areas where local councillors and the press have categorically stated that, 'Gaelic was never spoken here.' In the Lothians original Gaelic names are still on record, for example for Arthur's Seat (Creag nam Marbh) and South Queensferry (Port na Banrìghinn).<sup>9</sup>

## **5 A few words of conclusion**

In Scotland today, if we but realise it, we continue to walk with a Gaelic world under our feet. The recovery of the local names of our own locality opens up an insight into its history and changing conditions – economic, social and linguistic – especially if a familiarity with the languages of Scotland can be applied. It is a form of linguistic archaeology which anyone with the interest and awareness of Scotland's languages can attempt.

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<sup>9</sup> I am obliged to Jake King, in personal correspondence earlier this year, for confirmation of these names.

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