

INSIDE TRACK: Gaelic landscape names tell us lie of the land



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Wednesday 4 June 2014

THERE has been a recent welcome addition to the literature on the Gaels' relationship with the physical geography of Scotland.

Reading *The Gaelic Landscape* (Leughadh Aghaidh Na Tìre) is published by Whittles, an independent publishing house based in Dunbeath on the east coast of Caithness, priced £16.99.

The book does not set out to challenge the considerable existing scholarship on Gaelic placenames. The early 20th century work by William J Watson, Professor of Celtic at Edinburgh University, is still acknowledged by any serious student of the subject. His *The Celtic Placenames Of Scotland*, first published in 1926, remains the bible to most.

Reading *The Gaelic Landscape* has been written by John Murray, director of Landscape Architecture at Edinburgh University. He is a Gaelic learner who has long been fascinated by the map of the Gaidhealtachd - the Highlands and Islands - yet, at the same time, felt excluded by the wealth and strangeness of the place names recorded.

He argues Scotland must be one of the few countries where the majority of the inhabitants are forced to navigate using maps written in what might as well be a foreign language.

He rather elegantly describes his book's function: "What is being attempted is a semantic reclamation of a lost domain. An attempt to recapture a poetry of place, enshrined in the identifying labels that have been given to the landscape by Gaelic speakers."

In particular he wants to enrich the experience of walkers, climbers, sailors, bird watchers and anglers. But he does more.

He provides a brief history of Gaelic in Scotland and of mapping the Highlands as well as a basic guide to Gaelic grammar and pronunciation.

He examines how Gaelic poets use the Highland landscape symbolically in their work. He deals with how ecology, wildlife and the culture appear, almost as a homage to the people who gave the places their names and the society which used them.

And what names, from *Sruth nam Fear Gorm* - the Current Of The Blue Green Men, a fierce tidal stream running over a submerged reef that connects the Shiant Islands to Lewis; to *Loch Bealach an Cornaidh* - Small Loch Of The Pass Of The Folding Of Cloth in Sutherland. Their description and narrative are now hidden to most.

Murray's book reminds us how deep the natural environment is within Gaelic's soul; how virtually every hillock, stream and bay in the Gael's place will have been named at some point. These names windows allowing glimpses of our forebears. But they have long been frosting over, as those who know of them get fewer.

Murray recalls that in 1896 Mrs Carnegie of Stronvar collected 231 names from her gamekeeper Duncan Lamont and older folk in the parish of Balquhiddy. Of these 131 never made it on to the OS map.

More than 100 years on serious Gaelic scholars are still trying. But their sources versed in the oral tradition of the different communities, get fewer by the year.