

# Collection of Place-Names from Oral Sources

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*Doreen Waugh completed a PhD in 1984 at the Scottish Place-Name Survey, School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh. The two supervisors for this PhD (on the place-names of six parishes of the former county of Caithness) were Ian Fraser and Professor John MacQueen. Since 2002, she has been Honorary Fellow in Celtic and Scottish Studies, School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures. Following retirement from her post as Assistant Head at The Mary Erskine School, Edinburgh, Doreen has devoted her time to research on the place-names of the Northern Isles and Caithness. Recently, she has also become particularly interested in the dialect of Shetland and is a member of the Shetland ForWirds committee, based in Lerwick, Shetland.*

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It seems appropriate to begin with a snapshot from the history of place-name collection by staff of the Scottish Place-Name Survey, based at the School of Scottish Studies. Thereafter, Eileen Brooke-Freeman (Shetland Place-Names Project Officer) will provide information about the ongoing work of collection from oral sources which is being done in Shetland as part of the extensive work of the Shetland Amenity Trust, managed by Jimmy Moncrieff. The Scottish Place-Name Survey is very pleased to have been associated with this work from its inception.

The expression 'oral sources' rather than 'people' may seem a little pedantic but it has been carefully chosen to indicate that while place-names can be recorded directly from an informant by the researcher, they are sometimes collected from an intermediate person who does not actually use the name but who heard an older person mention it and made a mental note of it at the time. The ultimate oral source is, therefore, the person who actively used the name, although it may have come to the collector through the written notes of someone like John Stewart in Shetland<sup>1</sup>. The

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1 Stewart, J., *Shetland Place-Names*. Lerwick, Shetland, 1987. There is additional Stewart material in the Shetland Archives which has now been recorded and mapped by the staff of the Shetland Place-Names Project.

work of collecting, from oral tradition, place-names which have not been deemed sufficiently 'important' to be included on any printed map of an area is absolutely essential to building up a picture of life in the last century or so. All place-names are 'important'! Readers are already likely to be aware of the significance of names in an ethnological context but the amazing retentiveness of folk memory in a rural community where, until very recently, the way of life has kept people close to the sea and land which supported them is worth noting again and again. All is now changing at a very great rate as people Twitter and Skype in front of their computer screens and action does need to be taken before memory of direct contact between people and the land is lost. The internet does, of course, have its merits with its vast capacity for storage and dissemination of information and there is no intention of denigrating its usefulness here. The Kist o Riches (Tobar an Dualchais), for example, is a wonderful web-based resource.

### **Interview with Informant, Ian Fraser**

It seemed that the best way of approaching the subject of collection of place-names from oral sources was to engage in some direct collection from an oral source and, having identified the best possible informant, Ian Fraser, former Director of the Scottish Place-Name Survey, he agreed to be interviewed informally on 9 June 2011 in the University of Edinburgh Scottish Place-Name Survey, 29 George Square, Edinburgh, surrounded by some of the archive material which he had helped to assemble and with the interviewer, one of his former PhD students, taking notes rather than using a tape recorder of the type mentioned later in this introductory section.

Ian Fraser is from Gairloch on the west coast of Scotland and is a native Gaelic speaker, which served him well in his collection of previously unrecorded place-names, although he has lived in Edinburgh since he came to the city as a student in 1959. The other members of staff in the photograph are (on Ian's right) Neil MacQueen and (on Ian's left) Fred Kent, both sadly deceased, and also Morag MacLeod, an expert in Gaelic song now retired from the department and living in her native Scalpay.



*Neil MacQueen, Ian Fraser, Fred Kent and Morag MacLeod<sup>2</sup>*

Ian started with the date of establishment of the Scottish Place-Name Survey which was 1953, a couple of years after the establishment of the School of Scottish Studies itself in 1951. The first Head of the Place-Name Survey (and I have this information from Professor W.F.H. Nicolaisen) was Winifred M. Temple, who left the School in 1955. Ian Fraser did not mention Winifred Temple but he did mention various other scholars who supported place-name research in these early years, including Basil Megaw, who had an interest in Scandinavian place-names in Scotland and in the Isle of Man and was always very willing to share his knowledge and academic expertise. I owe him a particular debt of gratitude for the many discussions we had about Caithness place-names after I joined the department as a postgraduate student in 1980. Hamish Henderson, likewise, took a helpful interest in my work on Caithness place-names and shared many of the travellers' tales he had himself collected from informants in Caithness.

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the School of Scottish Studies Archives for permission to use this and the other illustrations included in the first part of this paper.

Professor W.F.H. (Bill) Nicolaisen was appointed as Director of the Scottish Place-Name Survey in 1956, after a very informal interview which began with an application for a lectureship and ended with the offer of the post of Director. According to Ian Fraser, events developed as follows: a lectureship in the Scottish Place-Name Survey was advertised in 1956, and W.F.H. Nicolaisen applied, although still working towards completion of his Ph.D. at Glasgow University. His interview went very well and before it came to an end he was offered the Directorship of the Survey which, after consulting his supervisors in Glasgow, he accepted. His subsequent international recognition as one of the best onomasticians of his generation fully repaid the confidence of the interviewers, although Professor Nicolaisen did not stay in Scotland throughout his academic career.

The collection of material (both place-names and folklore) from oral tradition really began in 1960. Bill Nicolaisen focused on collecting material from areas where the Gaelic language was on the verge of extinction, such as Perthshire, Arran, Aberdeenshire, Banffshire, the Great Glen (from Fort Augustus south, where there were still one or two fluent speakers and carriers of Highland oral tradition), and other areas as well. Clearly, this was not a one-man job and Ian Fraser was appointed as a lecturer in the department in 1965 to give support to Bill in the mammoth task ahead. Their first joint trip was to the island of Lewis in 1966.

The next picture illustrates Bill Nicolaisen in typical pose with Mr Alexander Rattray, an informant from Banffshire. The date is July, 1960. Ian particularly asked me to note the recording equipment that Bill is using in this photograph along with the 6" map. He has a large Sennheiser microphone in his right hand and a reel-to-reel recorder on the ground. The tapes from these field interviews are now a valuable resource available in the School of Scottish Studies Sound Archives.

Similar equipment to that illustrated in the photograph of W.F.H. Nicolaisen and Mr Rattray was used during Ian Fraser's first field trip with Bill Nicolaisen to Lewis in 1966. To be precise, as Ian was in interview, they used a Butoba recorder which had the advantage of being quite light to carry. It was battery-operated and could be used with 3- or 5-inch tape



*Professor WFH  
Nicolaisen and Mr  
Alexander Rattray, 1960*

(5-inch was the preferred size). The Butoba was eventually replaced by the UHER 4000 which was standard for the BBC and, although it was heavier, it had the huge advantage of being able to run on power from battery or mains which greatly simplified the lives of the two interviewers. Ian also noted the welcome invention of the more versatile multi-plug (15-, 13- and 5-amp). The Sennheiser microphone was chosen by the technician Fred Kent (see photos above and below) who had great influence on the method of collection, thanks to his vast technical knowledge and understanding of the needs of the field worker. By comparison with modern technology,

*Fred Kent in his sound laboratory  
at the School of Scottish Studies*



however, this equipment was not easy to carry around and Ian commented that he mostly used notebooks, all of which are now filed in the office of the Scottish Place-Name Survey.

In addition to collection of material from mainland Scotland, Ian Fraser noted that interviewing of informants in the Hebrides was undertaken by students from Jordanhill College of Education, where there was a good Gaelic Department at the time (late 1950s and 1960s), staffed by fluent speakers with contacts in the west. Ian said, and I quote his exact words, “*A man in North Lewis was very good and, **therefore**, an extensive collection of names from the west side of Lewis was made.*” (The emphasis is mine.) That,

of course, is something which affects all collection of material from oral tradition – one is totally dependent on the informant. I have so often heard variants of the following statement about old people who have just died: “*Of course, if so and so had still been alive, he/she knew all these names ...*”. At the other end of the age spectrum, Ian noted that there was particularly good school contact through head teachers of primary schools in Lewis, Harris and Islay. It is excellent to encourage the young to listen to and acquire the names used by their parents and grandparents. Jakob Jakobsen, in the introduction to his collection of dialect and place-name material from Shetland, also made the comment that younger people made very good informants because they were more forthcoming and had a good understanding of what he was trying to do and “*had better opportunity than I had to question the old people, and, in general, could more easily obtain information from them*”.<sup>3</sup> John Stewart and, in turn, Eileen Brooke-Freeman also made use of the young in their collection of place-names.

In the 1960s, the paper record, backed up by pronunciation of place-names and information about their localities, was seen to be of paramount importance. 6-inch OS maps (given free to the Scottish Place-Name Survey by the Ordnance Survey, in return for occasional consultancy work) were sent out to selected individuals in the target areas, with instructions that they should mark numbers in red on the map to correspond to the numbers in red in jotters or notebooks. Chosen collectors were asked to record all information available from willing informants and to make note of any written information available locally but not necessarily known about beyond the immediate vicinity of the research area. Lists of field-names for each site were encouraged and these were noted in green on the map and in the jotter. Field-names are particularly subject to change with change in ownership or agricultural practice, but they do sometimes tenaciously outlive their owners. Collectors often apologized for the state of the maps which they returned to the Place-Name Survey, because they had been enthusiastically handled by the owners or tenants of the land.

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3 Jakobsen, J., 1985 reprint, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland*. Lerwick, Shetland, p.xxviii.



The resultant record is thorough although a little haphazard in coverage of the country and is totally dependent on the capabilities and enthusiasm of the informants and collectors. Central and western Scotland fared rather better than other parts.

Ian Fraser concentrated on North Argyll, sometimes working with Donald Archie MacDonald in that area. He also worked with him in Kiltarlity between Inverness and the Muir of Ord – an area where Gaelic was nearly extinct. Ian thought that Donald Archie had an incredible ability to relate to informants and make them feel at ease, which is always an initial difficulty in recording. Ian's exact words were that, "*Donald Archie was the perfect interviewer. He made everybody his friend.*" Ian's technique with informants was to work outwards on the map (or in conversation) about one mile in radius from the person's own house. He commented incidentally on the very knowledgeable but modest people he met who wouldn't think their information useful but who were often the most reliable sources of new information.

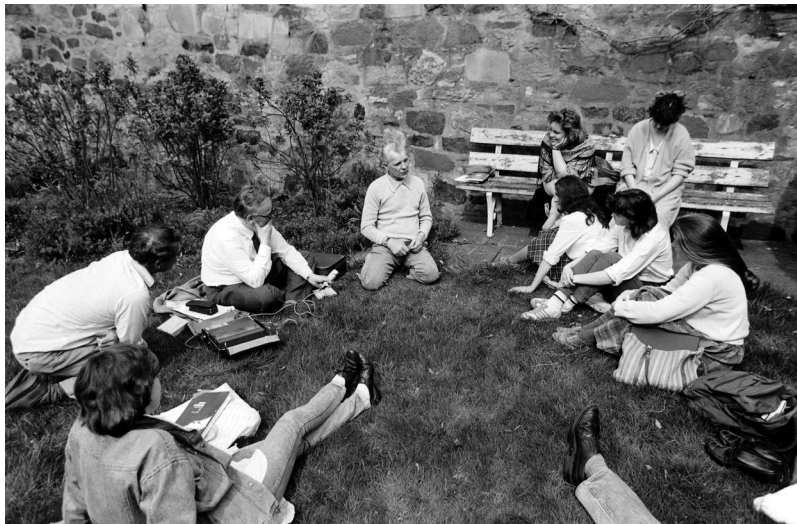


*Donald Archie MacDonald interviewing Alan MacQueen, May 1988*



Ian was able to make a good collection of coastal names from a fisherman on the north coast, between Bettyhill and Durness, who knew his local territory very well. Gaelic was spoken in this coastal region at the time and Ian worked with Donald Archie MacDonald on this trip. Ian would start with place-names and then conversation would broaden out to include other types of information, as already described.

Sometimes Ian Fraser worked with Alan Bruford, seen here with Duncan Williamson and students in the back garden of the School of Scottish Studies. Some readers will know Alan Bruford, sadly now deceased, from his collection of the folklore of Shetland. Ian Fraser also did a recording session in Orkney in 1974 and, in the early 1970s he came to Shetland – staying with Tom Anderson, or Tammie Anderson, the ‘eartkent’ Shetland fiddler and composer of fiddle tunes. Ian says that he also stayed in a haunted cottage in Yell where he couldn’t get the fire going. The memory was chilling in all respects!



*Alan Bruford and Duncan Williamson with students*

These three members of staff – Fraser, Bruford and MacDonald – worked in tandem to collect ethnological material. Place-names were frequently used as the entry into the whole process of collection. People would locate their minds in a landscape and then go on to give a huge amount of information, fleshing out the linguistic and cultural background of the place. Ian remembered one place (Elness) where he and the other two men collected information about witchcraft and had to put a red mark on the tape with a note to say that it should only be listened to by the recording team!

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the following is a summary of what Ian Fraser said about place-names and language in Lewis and it is entirely relevant to include it here because there are so many parallels between Shetland and the Western Isles:

*Lewis has one of the highest densities of minor names Ian Fraser recorded, apart from North Uist. Lewis had little disruption of population from the Norse period onwards – little in the way of Clearances – the population was conservative in its use of language and place-names and kept using the place-names without knowing their derivation, thus preserving Norse elements coined during the period of Norse occupation. The Leodhasachs may have been insular in their attitudes but some of them were also very far-travelled – Valparaiso was just over the horizon for some sailors – but they came back to an unchanged land and liked it to stay that way. Many Shetlanders must have felt exactly the same longing for the stability and unchanging quality of the place which they regarded as home.*

Ian Fraser made some sound recordings while he was in Shetland in the early 1970s and these are available in the Sound Archives of the School and are well worth the effort of a visit to the department. Eileen Brooke-Freeman has been engaged in more recent place-name recording in Shetland, using similar principles and yet very different methods of collection, with the advantages of modern technology to pinpoint place-names on the map and make them widely available. Her account of this impressive work follows.