A NOTE ON THE CELTIC ELEMENT IN ENGLISH PLACE-NAMES.

By KENNETH CAMERON.

THE meaning of an English place-name is, basically, deduced from the evidence provided by a collection of the earlier forms of that name, as represented by their spellings. From such a collection the linguistic development of the name from the time of the earliest recorded spelling can be seen. By using our knowledge of the changes undergone by the English language from the Old English period to the present its probable original form can be deduced, and from this the etymology. Sometimes it is necessary to examine other types of evidence in order to check the suggested etymology, or to obtain a more precise meaning. But the problem is essentially linguistic.

Apart from some names of places which were Roman towns or stations and which are found in Romano-British forms, the earliest recorded place-names are written in Old English. The actual number of these, however, is comparatively small, and the vast majority of the names of our towns, villages and hamlets do not occur in written sources before Domesday Book in 1086. The probable original form of most of these can be deduced by linguistic analysis, and in all but a small number of cases an Old English or Scandinavian etymology is indicated. The Celtic element in our place-names is comparatively slight, though it is stronger in some areas than in others.[1]

The student of English place-names is usually a trained Germanic philologist, and has rarely any detailed knowledge of the philology of the Celtic languages. No student with such a training would propose a Celtic etymology for a place-name unless he were supported by a trained

[1] K. H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain,* particularly 234-41.

Celticist. For this reason Kenneth H. Jackson, Professor of Celtic Languages, Literature, History and Antiquities in the University of Edinburgh read the whole of *The Place-Names of Derbyshire,* and such Celtic, or possibly Celtic, etymologies as are suggested there were written from the notes he provided. It will be seen that certain "Celtic" etymologies previously proposed by Ekwall have been rejected, e.g. Amber (p. 2), Etherow (p. 7), Goyt (p. 8), Wye (p. 19). Amber, Goyt and Wye may well be pre-English river-names, but they *cannot,* at present, be explained from known or suspected Celtic roots, and must therefore be left unexplained.

It is not, of course, claimed that a definitive collection of Derbyshire names of Celtic origin has been made in *The Place-Names of Derbyshire.* On the other hand, that collection is as complete as is possible with our present knowledge of the early history of the Celtic languages in Britain. Professor Jackson would, one imagines, have noted other names of possible Celtic origin had he considered this to be the case. For example, he added a note on *Bannockhill* (p. 420 and Addenda p. vii), but his cautionary "possibly Celtic" is a warning to those who would see an abundance of Celtic names in Derbyshire.

No one today would attempt to deduce the meaning of a place-name of Old English origin by referring to the modern forms of the words quoted in a modern English dictionary. Similarly, reference to a modern Welsh dictionary, or for that matter to some of the dictionaries of the earlier Welsh language, is of no value in the interpretation of *Celtic* place-names in England. Indeed, some of the words often quoted from such dictionaries to explain English place-names have been shown to be ghosts — they have never existed. Examples of such ghost-words include *caint* "plain, open country", which some have thought to be the source of Kent, *cader* "hill-fort", adduced for a number of names such as Chadder and Chadderton, and *cuno-* "high", formerly a popular "Celtic" place-name element, supposedly occurring in Cannock, Conock, etc. It is perfectly clear that a detailed knowledge of the early history of the *Celtic* languages in Britain is needed to interpret the evidence of the early

spellings of names of possible Celtic origin. This is a highly specialized field of study, one in which the *Celtic* scholar alone is qualified to pronounce judgements.

A significant point in the most recent work of Celticists in this aspect of English place-names is their criticism of many of the supposed Celtic etymologies which have found their way into the text-books. They are far more critical of such etymologies than was Ekwall in either his *English River-Names* or his *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names,* where in fact many are first found. Jackson in his *Language and History in Early Britain,* as well as in papers published elsewhere, has marked as doubtful or has rejected as wrong many of Ekwall's "Celtic" names. Although a few new Celtic etymologies have been proposed, these are outnumbered by these earlier suggestions now assessed as doubtful or erroneous. There has certainly been no rash of new Celtic place-names as a result of recent work, rather the opposite. A reasoned examination of earlier proposals in the light of modern scholarship has taken place, and those which do not stand up to scholarly scrutiny have been rejected. Jackson's book deserves a wider currency among local historians and antiquarians than it seems at present to have received. It is the outstanding post-war work in this field, and it corrects many of the serious misconceptions at present widely held concerning the relations between Briton and Anglo-Saxon in the centuries following the English settlement of Britain.

In spite of these facts, it has sometimes been argued that the Celtic element must be greater than appears in the volumes of the English Place-Name Society — that the Society has been too Germanic in its approach to place-names in England. Particularly it has been suggested that, while the Old English forms of certain names suggest an Old English etymology, these forms may rather represent an anglicization of earlier Celtic names. In other words, it is implied that the Anglo-Saxons altered many Celtic names, which were passed on to them, in order to make unintelligible names intelligible. Apart from York, the name of an important Roman centre, the evidence for such Old English "popular etymologies" is,

so far as I am aware, non-existent. This process of popular etymology must be very carefully distinguished from the sound-substitution which has taken place in a number of names of Celtic origin. Sound-substitution is a well-understood linguistic phenomenon. The sound-systems of Celtic and Old English differed in some respects — certain sounds which occurred in the one were not found in the other. Sound-substitution has taken place in some Celtic names which contained a sound which was not found in an equivalent position in Old English. The name then continued to develop, however, as if it were a native English one. An excellent example of this is Eccles (p. 62 and p. 120), where Celtic *eglēs* became *ecles,* which has given modern Eccles.

To argue, however, that popular etymology is responsible for the Old English or early Middle English forms of a large number of place-names, because of the supposed similarity between an Old English and a Celtic form, is to leap blindly into the unknown. At best it can be purely hypothetical, at worst it is sheer guess-work. To take a single example — Ashford is recorded as (*æt*) *Æscforda* in a good 13th century copy of a charter dated 926, and this form and the subsequent excellent run of later forms clearly indicate a derivation from Old English *æsc* "ash tree" and Old English *ford* "ford", hence "ash tree ford". To suggest that such an interpretation is suspect on general grounds — for example, that to name a ford from a prominent ash tree or ash trees is *a priori* unlikely — does not accord with the overwhelming evidence of English place-names. One of the outstanding features of our place-names is precisely the large number named from ordinary everyday things. The large number which contain, for example, a word for a tree or other plant, an animal or a bird can be judged from the examples quoted by Smith in his *English Place-Name Elements,* let alone by a detailed search through the pages of Ekwall's *Dictionary.* Moreover, it would show a complete lack of appreciation of our knowledge of the relations between the Britons and the Anglo-Saxons, as demonstrated by Jackson, to suggest that many, or even a few, of these common names were Old English popular

etymologies of earlier Celtic names. Also, to find a similarity between Old English *æsc* and some Welsh word, presumably supposedly Celtic, for "river" is contrary to the opinion of Celticists, for Jackson does not accept the derivation of the river-name Axe, suggested by Ekwall. It cannot be too often emphasized that to demonstrate a Celtic etymology for a name the early forms of that name must be explained from *Celtic* (not Welsh) forms, and we have already seen that modern Celtic scholars now reject on precisely these grounds many etymologies formerly proposed. To take this a stage further and to suggest that some names, English in origin on the evidence of the early forms, are really Celtic ones, changed by Anglo-Saxons because they were unintelligible, is to take a dangerous leap into the dark. It is a theory without any supporting evidence; of its very nature highly improbable; and furthermore, as I see it, incapable ever of proof.

Modern Celticists have been at pains to combat the tendency to explain a name as British or Celtic simply because, as Jackson has put it, Germanic scholars "could not bring themselves to treat the name as Germanic (knowing that nothing like it existed there)". He continues logically, "In all such cases the Celticists might claim with equal justice that it must have been Germanic".[2] There are in fact, as Celtic scholars repeatedly warn us, numerous names supposedly derived from Celtic, though no word or words like them exist in any *Celtic* language. It is no exaggeration to say that the vocabulary of supposed Celtic names in England is now crammed with ghosts; and such ghosts are exceedingly difficult to lay. These statements, it should be remembered, refer to names for which Celtic etymologies have been proposed on the evidence of the *recorded* spellings. It is easy, therefore, to imagine the attitude of the Celtic scholar presented with imagined Celtic etymologies, which go beyond the recorded spellings, and seek to establish an original Celtic form — a form which had been altered by the Anglo-Saxons because they did not understand the Celtic name which had been passed on to them.

[2] Jackson, 195.