

VII.—THE RIVER-NAMES OF NORTHUMBER- LAND AND DURHAM.

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When the present writer ventured, now nearly ten years ago, to try to interpret the place-names of Northumberland and Durham he found himself greatly hampered by the lack at that time of comparative material. The place-names of a county cannot be studied in isolation. Their true significance is only realized when one can bring them into comparison with material from other areas and even from other countries. If this is true of the names of habitable places it is even truer of nature-names, of hill and still more of river-names, for these names are among the oldest and most tenacious in the land and if we want to interpret them we must be familiar, not only with the methods of nomenclature in use among our Teutonic forefathers but we must have a thorough knowledge of the place-names and methods of place-naming which prevailed among those who preceded them, more especially among the various branches of the Celtic race who at one time lived in these islands. These names, whether of British or Goidelic origin, can in their turn only be understood aright if we are familiar with the nomenclature prevailing among the Bretons, the Gauls, and the various other branches of the Celtic race to be found on the mainland of Europe. When the early forms of these names have been collected from sources early and late, of the most diverse and scattered kind, when all the comparative

material has been gathered we are only at the beginning of our task. For interpreting all this material, both native and foreign, a wide range of philological knowledge is needed and skill in handling the most difficult and delicate linguistic problems. Even then the task is not at an end. These are nature-names. Your linguistic evidence may suggest certain possible interpretations of the names. Do these accord with the facts? What is the river really like? What is the prevailing hue of its water? Is it slow or rapid in its current? Has it a stony, a sandy, or a muddy bottom? Is it liable to floods? Does it come down in spate? Is it liable to be dried up in summer? Does it abound in fish? These and a hundred and one other questions arise in connexion with many of the etymologies which one might be inclined to propose for our river-names.

The task is so large and varied, demanding so many different talents, that it might daunt the boldest, but during the last eight or ten years the Swedish scholar Ekwall has been engaged upon it, and the outcome is his book on *English River-names* recently published by the Oxford Press. Here we have the outcome of many months of study, not only of printed documents but of unpublished assize rolls, cartularies, documents of every kind, interpreted by a philological master who has himself travelled many hundreds of miles in every part of England in order to find just what the streams are like when one sees them for oneself.

It may be of interest to say something of his discoveries in the two northern counties with which the readers of this volume are particularly familiar. We may perhaps begin with some of the easier names, those which are of native English origin. Some of them are sufficiently obvious, e.g. *Blythe* and *Browney*. Others are less obvious but present no very great difficulty. The *Rede* is probably the "red" one, not from the colour of its waters but from the frequent patches of red sand on its banks and red or reddish gravel and stones in its bed.

College Burn probably contains as its second element the dialectal word *letch*, "water course," found also in *Cawledge* near Alnwick, earlier *Cauleche*. The first part of the name is obscure. *Learmouth* was interpreted in PN. Nb. Du. as from O.E. *Lefer-muth*, "estuary overgrown with *levers* or *livers*." Evidence has come to light showing that in the thirteenth century the river itself was called *Leure*, presumably from the frequency of some variety of the yellow flag by its banks. *Lear* is then really a lost river-name. *Wreighill* near Rothbury was interpreted "felon-hill" in PN. Nb. Du. Close by is *Wreigh Burn*. Ekwall agrees with the etymology of *Wreighill* and thinks that the river-name contains the same element, the stream-name reminding us that punishment by drowning was by no means uncommon in the Middle Ages. Personally I think that the river-name may have been formed direct from the hill as we have no early forms for the latter and do not know what age it is, but "felon burns" are not unknown elsewhere in England.

Forest Burn near Rothbury is a corruption of earlier *Farestey* or *Farestie Brooke*, which seems to contain as its first element a compound of O.E. *stig*, "path." The first part of the compound may be O.E. *fearr*, "bull."

One of the most interesting features of Ekwall's book as a whole is the way in which he has shown that far more of our river-names than we had hitherto suspected are really capable of interpretation upon an English basis. This is illustrated in our counties by his treatment of *Bowmont Water*, *Coquet* and *Maglin Burn*.

For *Coquet* the earliest forms are *Cocwuda*, *Cocwud* and, quite apart from the phonological difficulties involved, he believes that there is little ground for identifying it with the *Cocuneda* of the Ravenna Geographer, even if we take that to be an error of transcription for *Cocuneda*. The only Celtic word with which we might associate it is Welsh *coch*, "red," but it is not red either in itself or on its banks. He believes that *Cocwudu* is really an old name for Rothbury forest, which was early misunderstood

in such phrases as *Cocwuddale* and *Cocwudmor* (cf. *mora de Coket* in early records) and interpreted as the name of the river. It is a back-formation. For a forest-name of this type cf. *Cokwode* near Settle in the *Percy Cartulary*.

Maglin Burn, earlier *Magghild* pure and simple, he would interpret as being a quasi-personal-name formation from an O.E. woman's name in *-hild*, for which we possibly have parallels elsewhere, *Maggild* being short for earlier *Magghild Burn*. This seems to me somewhat doubtful, especially in view of the three examples quoted by Ekwall containing this rare element *Maggild*, in all of which it is quite possible we have a river-name. It does not seem very likely that so rare a type of river-name would thrice repeat itself.

Bowmont Water, with its early forms *Bolbende*, *Bolbent* and *Bowbent*, is not an easy name. Ekwall first shows on phonological and formal grounds how difficult it is to explain this name on a Celtic basis. He suggests that the first element is an O.E. *bol*, "eel," and that the second element is an O.E. word *bend*, referring here to the winding course of the river. He thinks it may mean "the winding eel-river," though he adds the caution "I have not had any opportunity of finding out if eels are or used to be common in this river."

Of river-names of Scandinavian origin we probably have two. Ekwall agrees with the suggestion that *Skerne* is of Scandinavian origin meaning "bright-stream," though he thinks it may be a Scandinavianizing of an earlier English name of similar meaning rather than pure Scandinavian. Very interesting is his suggestion for *Gawnless*. He thinks that this is a Scandinavian river-nickname if one can so describe it. It is from O.N. *gagnlauss*, "useless," applied to a river which has no fish or perhaps to one which turns no mill or turns it badly. He quotes another example of the use of this word in *Gawnlisker*, the old name of a piece of marshland near Lintz, which seems to mean "useless marshland."

We may now turn to the names of Celtic origin, which

are naturally, by far the most numerous. We may first note examples which have frequent parallels elsewhere. *Alne* and *Ayle* go with *Ellen* (Cu.) and *Allen* (Co.), *Allen* (Flint.) and two or three Welsh rivers named *Alun*. For all these we have to go back to some form such as the *Alaunos* of Ptolemy and the *Alauna* of the early geographers, which was the name of an old forest district in Britain. Ekwall is inclined to leave the etymology entirely open, partly because the main element is found in so many different names denoting a wide variety of objects.

Next we have the group *Alwent* Beck, *Alwin*, *Allen* (South Tyne), all going back to earlier *Al(e)went*. These he would connect with the stem of the Welsh *alaw*, "music," taking the suffix here as in *Derwent* to be a common Celtic adjectival suffix, and the whole name to mean "roaring stream" or the like.

Derwent goes with rivers of the same name in Yorkshire and Derbyshire and Cumberland and with the Lancashire *Darwen*. These all contain the stem of British *derua*, "oak"; the suffix is adjectival in character, and the whole name describes a stream where oaks grow or grew in abundance.

Devils Water, as noted in PN. Nb. Du., goes with *Douglas* (La.), *Dalch* and *Dawlish* (Dev.), *Devils Brook* and *Divelish* (Dor.), *Dowles Brook* (Wor.), *Dowlish* (So.), and *Dulas* (He.), all denoting "black stream," from British *dubo*, "dark, black," and a common Celtic word for stream.

Tyne has its well-known counterpart in Scotland and less well-known counterparts in *Tyne Brook* (He.) and a lost *Tynebec* in the Craven district of Yorkshire. It goes with the Gaulish *Tinea* and is to be associated with the Celtic root *ti-*, "to dissolve, flow," found also in *Till*.

Till is found also in Lincolnshire and in *Tillaybeck*, the lost name of a tributary of the Yorkshire *Derwent*. It is to be associated with the Gaulish name found in

Tille, a tributary of the Saône, and the meaning is as suggested under *Tyne*.

Kielder Burn probably goes with *Calder* (Y.), (La. 2), (Cu.) and a lost *Calter*, the old name of Wythburn by Thirlmere. All these go back to ultimate tri-syllabic forms corresponding to the Welsh stream-name *Calettwr*. This is a compound of Welsh *caled*, "hard," and *dwfr*, "stream," the primary sense of *caled* in these names probably being "violent, rapid." The *e* vowel of early *Kelder* and a good many forms of the *Calders* offers difficulties. Ekwall suggests that it may be due to lack of stress on the first vowel in the original British word.

In the case of *Don*, of which we have two other examples in England, Ekwall follows Max Förster's suggestion that these are to be associated with *Danube*, all coming from an old word for "water, river."

Glen and *Glendue*, like *Glen* in Lincolnshire and Leicestershire, probably take their names from the valleys through which they flow.

Team goes with the group *Thame*, *Tame* (3) and shows the same stem found in *Tamar*, *Teme*. It is identical with *Taff*, *Taf* (Wales). These are almost certainly Celtic, as is *Lyne*, but in both cases Ekwall hesitates as to what may be the ultimate sense of the root of these names.

Pont (Nb.) and *Pont* Burn (Du.), like *Pant*, the old name for the Blackwater (Essex), are to be associated with the familiar Welsh *pant*, "valley."

Low is a Celtic loan-word, still used in Northumberland, of a "shallow pool left in the sand by the retiring tide." We may compare Irish *loch*, "lake or arm of the sea."

Ouse Burn offers difficulties. It clearly has nothing to do with the common river-name *Ouse*, for the early forms show initial *j* or *y*. Ekwall hesitates between an English root denoting "gush" and a Celtic one with the sense "boiling, surging."

For *Wear* we have already in Ptolemy the form *Ouedra*. This is from an ancient root denoting "water."

Tweed offers many difficulties, but Ekwall thinks it may ultimately mean "the strong, powerful river," which, as he suggests, would be a "very apt name for the majestic Tweed with its strong current."

Tees he connects with a Celtic root denoting "heat, sunshine." The ultimate sense of the river-name may have been either "boiling, surging" or, less probably, "shining."

Among the minor streams, *Breamish* (O.E. *Bromic*) is one of the numerous old river-names in *ic* and is to be associated with a root which would suggest "roaring river" or the like; *Deerness* is of greater interest, seeming to be a compound of Welsh *dwfr*, "water," and *Ness*, the old name for the stream itself (cf. *Ness* in Scotland as a river-name); *Erring Burn* perhaps contains the same root *argant*, "silver," as is found in the Gaulish *Argentens*; *Font*, which at one time Ekwall was inclined to associate with Romano-British *fontana*, he now thinks is from a root denoting "foaming, frothy" or the like; *Irthing* is difficult but may ultimately contain the same stem as the Cumbrian *Irt*, of obscure significance.

Poltross (with its early forms *Poltros*, *Poltrosk*, *Poltresk*) Ekwall takes to be an example of British *poll*, "pool," followed by the British name *Trosset* to describe the area through which it flowed. *Trosset* would mean "across the wood," and analogies can be found for the loss of final *et*.

This brings us to the end of the river-names proper, except for *Halter Burn* and *Wansbeck*, which Ekwall frankly gives up. With regard to the latter, with its early forms *Wanespike* and the like, it is perhaps worth noticing that in an Old English charter belonging to the south country we have a word *spic*, M.E. *spiche*, of uncertain meaning, but possibly denoting marshland or the like. If used in the North Country this would take

the form *spike*, and it is just possible that this is found in *Wansbeck*.

Cong Burn, *Tipalt* Burn and *Turret* Burn are not really river-names, any more than *Hepden* Burn. They take their name from the country through which they flow. The first element in *Cong* Burn is really *Cunc-* or the like, and may be an old hill-name found also in *Consett*. *Tipalt* is earlier *Typwolde*, almost certainly an old forest-name from O.E. *we(a)ld*, while *Turret* Burn, earlier *Trivetbourne*, may take its name from a village on its banks, "*Trefryd*, the village of the ford."

Such, in the veriest outline, are some of the conclusions reached by Ekwall in his volume. One can only hope that it will encourage the readers of this paper to turn to the volume itself and find with what learning, with what skill and acumen, he discusses some of the most difficult problems to be found in the whole range of place-name study. We are dealing with such an early stratum of our names, often with wretchedly late and inadequate material, that much of the work is bound to be highly speculative in character, but that must not blind us to the fact that in many directions a definite advance has been made and that in other cases we do now at least know the size and character of the problem. Of things definitely learned it may be worth mentioning in conclusion that Ekwall leaves very little room for believing in any survival of pre-Celtic names.

