V

A Celtic etymology for *Ouse Burn*, Newcastle

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THE Ouse Burn runs into the Tyne in the vicinity of Newcastle. Ekwall gives attestations of the name as (in) *Jhesam*, in a thirteenth-century document, and *Yese*, in a document of 1293. He suggests two possible etymologies for the name: one Germanic, one Celtic. The Germanic one relates the name to a hypothetical Old English verb **geosan* "to gush", with the meaning "the gusher". The Celtic one would relate the name of the Ouse Burn to the Welsh word *ias* "boiling, seething".[1]

It seems no advance has been made on the name of this Northumberland stream since Ekwall's days. Yet there is clear evidence to suggest a Celtic derivation for the name of the Ouse Burn, developing the suggestion made by Ekwall. The arguments for this are as follows. First, all the important tributaries of the lower Tyne have Celtic names, as does the Tyne itself. This is brought out clearly by the map for the early Anglo-Saxon period, which shows the name of the Don, Team, Pont, Derwent, Devils Water, and Erring Burn as of Celtic origin.[2] If this is true of all these tributaries of the Tyne, the same is likely to hold for the Ouse Burn.

If we look at derivatives of Ekwall's form *ias*, we find *Nant Iesin*, the name of a stream near Aberdyfi in south Gwynedd. This small but rapid stream drops over 600 feet in less than a mile to enter the Dyfi estuary between Aberdyfi and Penhelig. R. J. Thomas in his study of Welsh river-names quotes the phrase *dwfyr neud yessin* "lovely the water" from a famous poem on Gwynedd by Gwalchmai ap Meilyr (fl. 1130–80).[3] This shows the adjective *iesin* was applied to streams at an early date.

The word *iesin* "fine, fair, beautiful, handsome; radiant, sparkling, shimmering, bright, gleaming" is given full treatment by the University of Wales dictionary. It notes a possible link with *ias* "boiling"; cites the cognate Gaulish personal name *Iestinus*; and mentions that *iesin* occurs in the name of the famous sixth-century North British bard *Taliesin* "fair brow" (a name also figuring in Old Breton as *Taliesin, Talgesin*).[4] As Taliesin was poet to Urien of Rheged, who held court at Carlisle, it is certain that *iesin* was a known form about 600 in the region of the Roman Wall. The latter legends of Taliesin show that the literal meaning of his name was not forgotten.[5] As regards the meaning of *iesin*, fifteenth-century bards often used it of female beauty. Dafydd ab Edmwnd calls one girl, *lloer ddiseml llariedd iessin* "noble moon of radiant meekness". Bedo Aerddrem calls another, *vn bennes o bryd iessin* "queen of shining aspect".[6] So *iesin* clearly conveyed a dazzling kind of beauty, which would suit running water in sunlight, or the looks of a pretty woman.

If the Ouse Burn of Northumberland took its name from a Celtic form giving Welsh *iesin*, how do we explain the loss of final *n*? This is due to a change in Old English. The loss of final *n* is a familiar feature of Old Northumbrian. It occurs intermittently in such early texts as Caedmon's *Hymn* and the Ruthwell Cross inscription, and becomes very common in later Old Northumbrian.[7] Hence, it seems, the thirteenth-century forms (in) *Jhesam* and *Yese* as names of the Ouse Burn.

If the above arguments are correct, we provide another piece of evidence for Celtic survival in the Newcastle region during the middle of the sixth century, when the English occupied the lower Tyne valley. We also learn

that the British men and women who then lived there were not as indifferent to natural beauty as one might think.

NOTES

[1] Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Oxford, 1960), 353.

[2] *Map of Britain in the Dark Ages*, 2nd edn (Southampton, 1966).

[3] R. J. Thomas, *Enwau Afonydd a Nentydd Cymru* (Caerdydd, 1938), 212; for translations see D. M. and E. M. Lloyd, *A Book of Wales* (London, 1953), 310; Anthony Conran, *The Penguin Book of Welsh Verse* (Harmondsworth, 1967), 104; J. P. Clancy, *The Earliest Welsh Poetry* (London, 1970), 120; for the poet, A. C. Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature* (Dublin, 1997), 36–8.

[4] *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (Caerdydd, 1950–   ), 2012.

[5] Ifor Williams, *Lectures on Early Welsh Poetry* (Dublin, 1944), 62.

[6] *Geiriadur*, 2012.

[7] *Three Northumbrian Poems*, ed. A. H. Smith (London, 1933), 33; Alistair Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford, 1959), 189; *The Dream of the Rood*, ed. M. J. Swanton (Manchester, 1970), 36.