III

Gaelic Elements in Early Northumberland: the Place-Name *Tarset* and *Cumeman* ("Serf")

Andrew Breeze

What follows discusses two Gaelic elements from early Northumberland. The first is the name of Tarset, a lonely place in the valley of the North Tyne. The second is *cumeman*, an obscure word (apparently meaning "serf") in a writ of Henry I. It is argued that *Tarset* and *cumeman* are of Gaelic origin, and date probably from the eleventh century, when Gaelic influence in Scotland was at its height. As such they are of both historical and linguistic interest. They provide evidence for Scottish political power in the Borders region, and also mark the high tide of the Gaelic language in North Britain.

1. THE NAME OF TARSET CASTLE, NEAR BELLINGHAM

Tarset Castle is now merely a large mound three miles from Bellingham (at NY 788855), where Tarset Burn meets the North Tyne. Ekwall recorded the name as *Tyreset* in 1244 and *Tyrsete* in 1267, and explained it as of English origin, perhaps meaning "Tir's Fold" or "Tir's Dwelling-Place".[1]

Yet the evidence suggests that the name is not English, but Gaelic. This can be argued as follows. Watson cites three forms from Scotland, which seem exact parallels. Ten miles south-west of Peterhead is Tarset Hill, a farm (at NK 009334) marked on the modern map as "Tassatshill". Eleven miles west-south-west of Aberdeen in the parish of Drumoak (at NO 779989) is the hamlet of Tersets (with English plural). Further west in the Highlands, near Fort Augustus and east of Loch Ness, is Meall an Tarsáid (at NH 491132), a flat-topped hill of over 1500 feet.[2]

Watson explained these Scottish names as compositions of *tar* "across", "over", and *séad* "path", "road", meaning "the path across", with *Meall an Tarsáid* being "Knoll of the Path Across", "Hill of the Road Over". All three places are associated with roads passing over a rise or hump. Such an explanation makes good sense for Tarset in Northumberland, where the unclassified road from Falstone to Bellingham crosses a small hill at Lanehead, just by Tarset Castle.

If the above reasoning is correct, Tarset provides a rare example of a Gaelic place-name in England. Presumably it dates from the eleventh century. After 960 the King of Scots gained territory between Forth and Tweed, leading to a Gaelicization of south-east Scotland, a process strengthened by the Scots victory at Carham (near Coldstream) in 1018.[3] But by the late eleventh century Gaelic was in decline, so that the name of Tarset cannot be as late as this. The initial vowel of the spellings *Tyreset* and *Tyrsete* is presumably due to "raising" or harmony with the second vowel (the name of Tersets near Aberdeen shows the same feature).

The name of Tarset thus provides evidence for Gaelic ascendancy in pre-Norman Scotland, which has left its mark in place-names as far south as the Roxburgh region (*Bonjedward* "Jedward Foot", *Eildrig* "Deer Trap") and even Tynedale, now in England, but long subject to influence from the Scots.[4] The possibility that Gaelic influence spread even beyond Tynedale is suggested by the word *cumeman*, to which we now turn.

2. *CUMEMAN* ("SERF") IN A WRIT OF HENRY I FOR RANULF FLAMBARD

Nearly seventy years ago, Sir Edmund Craster published in this journal some new documents on the career of Ranulf Flambard (d. 1128), Bishop of Durham 1099-1128.[5] One of these apparently provides evidence for Celtic legal custom in Northumberland. Between 1114 and 1118, Henry I of England issued a writ on behalf of Ranulf, commanding the sheriff of York to go into Northumberland and restore to Ranulf all the men who had fled from their land when the king had fined him. The sheriff was to see that "all others, i.e. Cumemans, with their chattels, who left their land, and also others whom the sheriff has in his jurisdiction, wherever they may be discovered, are restored to the bishop justly and without delay."[6] Here, "i.e. Cumemans" is exactly what the original text says. It is a clarification of those men and women the sheriff must hunt down and take.

The etymology of *cumeman* has puzzled scholars. Forty years ago, Professor Geoffrey Barrow consulted three historians of English (Hans Kurath, A. Hugh Smith, Angus McIntosh) and a Celticist (D.A. Binchy) for their views. The three Anglicists all thought it unEnglish; Binchy thought that, if not a corruption, it might be a Welsh or Cumbric form and not Gaelic. The matter still rests there. Barrow, who regards corruption of the word as unlikely, observes that the matter is more than a philological one. If the word is Celtic, it is surely a technical term resembling *cumelache* ("serf") and *cumherba* ("tenant") used north of the Forth. These last two words, figuring in Scottish brieves or writs, and familiar to all historians of early Scotland, are certainly of Gaelic origin. If *cumeman*, like them, derives from Celtic, Henry I's writ provides us with valuable evidence for an institution shared by Gaelic Scotland and Anglian Northumbria.[7]

A closer look at *cumelache* and *cumherba* brings out the importance of this. These words are respectively from Gaelic *cumalach* ("slave woman") and *comarbae* ("heir", "successor").[8] The first seems to be used of any serf, female

or not; the second has developed the sense of "hereditarily servile tenant". Although Scottish brieves describe these serfs as fugitives, it has been argued that they are not runaways but men and women whose ownership was disputed, just as the land they were tied to might be disputed.[9] *Cumerlache* are mentioned in a brieve of David I (1124-1153) for the church at Dunfermline, as also Dunfermline Abbey documents of *ca.* 1150 and 1154 × 1159.[10] Malcolm IV, in a brieve of 1161 × 1162, commanded that the church at Restenneth (near Forfar) should possess all *cumelagas* and *cumherbas* who had fled from its lands.[11] A document of 1165 × 1171 orders that the abbot of Scone should have without delay *cumlawes* and *cumherbes* of Scone Abbey; brieves of *ca.* 1166 and 1165 × 1171 make similar statements as regards Dunfermline Abbey.[12]

The context of *cumeman* in Henry I's writ thus resembles that of *cumelache* and *cumherba*. If it is a Celtic term, it is of special interest, because (occurring in a document of 1114 × 1118) it long predates its Scottish equivalents. But can we prove that *cumeman* is Celtic? It seems we can. What follows argues that *cumeman* corresponds to Irish *coloman* ("husbandman", "tiller of the soil", "farmer"), which is used of a serf in the early Irish text *Tochmarc Becfhola* ("The Wooing of Becfhola"). This is a legendary tale of the seventh-century Irish king Diarmait. While he was at Trim in the plains of Meath, Becfhola came to him in a chariot from the Other World, wearing a gold-embroidered smock and a crimson cloak held by a precious brooch. They marry and have various adventures. The tale closes when four clerics approach Diarmait to tell him of "a certain one of the familia of Devenish (*colamhan do mhuintir Daiminnsi*) that early rose to turn out his kine" only to witness a battle (they bring Diarmait plunder from it).[13]

Devenish is an island on Lower Lough Erne (north of Enniskillen in Northern Ireland), and is famous for its monastic ruins.[14] The *coloman* of this Irish tale was thus a monastic serf, who apparently owned cattle; the *cumemans* of

Henry I's writ were also church property, and possessed chattels. This suggests we are dealing with the same class of person. Does the history of the Irish text accord with this?

Tochmarc Becfhola was written before the tenth century and survives in two recensions. The earlier and better is in two manuscripts at Trinity College, Dublin: a part (dated to 1391) of MS H.2.16 (the "Yellow Book of Lecan"), and the sixteenth-century MS H.3.18. The later and shorter recension, perhaps of the twelfth or thirteenth century, is in the fifteenth-century British Library (London) MS Egerton 1781.[15]

What matters here is that the same word occurs in both texts, as *coloman* and *colamhan* respectively.[16] Since the Irish tale was written down before the tenth century, there seems no difficulty in identifying *coloman* in it with the *cumeman* of Henry I's writ. The coincidence of meaning and suffix –*man* leave little doubt. *Coloman* probably represents the original form of the word, *cumeman* perhaps being due to what philologists call "distant assimilation" (as with Latin *quinque* ("five") from **penkwe*, or *quercus* ("oak") from **perkwus*).[17] This linguistic change may have been aided by the fact that the "*l*" of *coloman* was a velarized sound produced with the tip of the tongue on the ridge behind the teeth, which perhaps sounded like an "*m*" to non-Irish ears.[18] We can in any case rule out T.F. O'Rahilly's derivation of *coloman* from Anglo-French *colloun*, which is not acceptable formally or historically.[19] *Coloman* is either a native word or (more probably) a borrowing from Latin.

If the above conclusions are correct and *cumeman* in Henry I's writ is a Gaelic word, we have new evidence for Celtic influence in Northumbrian society. The word may have reached England via the Irish mission of the seventh century (*Tochmarc Becfhola* shows the word used in a monastic context); or thanks to the Norse-Irish settlements in the tenth century; or (which seems by far the likeliest) by the Gaelicization of southern Scotland in the eleventh, which might have produced social change within northern England. In any case, the use of the word in a writ of Henry I is striking evidence for Celtic survival in north-ern England. It is a rare clue to the ordering of society between Tweed and Tees in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries.

NOTES

[1] Eilert Ekwall, *The concise Oxford dictionary of English place-names*, 4th ed. (Oxford, 1960), p. 461.

[2] W.J. Watson, *The Celtic place-names of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1926), p. 505.

[3] K.H. Jackson, "The Britons in southern Scotland", in *Antiquity*, 39 (1955), pp. 77-88, at p. 87; A.A.M. Duncan, *Scotland: the making of the kingdom.* (Edinburgh, 1975), pp. 98-100; G.W.S. Barrow, *The Anglo-Norman era in Scottish history.* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 33-4.

[4] Watson, p. 137; Duncan, p. 101; Barrow, p. 51.

[5] H.H.E. Craster, "A contemporary record of the pontificate of Ranulf Flambard", in *AA⁴*, 7 (1930), pp. 33-56.

[6] Craster, p. 55.

[7] *The acts of Malcolm IV, King of Scots 1153-1165*, ed. G.W.S. Barrow (Edinburgh, 1960), pp. 63-4.

[8] Barrow, p. 63.

[9] Duncan, pp. 328-9; W. Croft Dickinson, *A history of Scotland to 1603*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1977), pp. 89-90.

[10] Barrow, pp. 62, 183.

[11] Barrow, pp. 62-3, 232.

[12] *The acts of William I, King of Scots 1165-1214*, ed. G.W.S. Barrow (Edinburgh, 1971), pp. 71, 134-5, 141-2.

[13] *Silva Gadelica*, ed. S.H. O'Grady (London, 1892), vol. 1, p. 87, vol. 2, p. 93; cf. Myles Dillon, *The cycles of the Kings* (London, 1946), pp. 75-8.

[14] E.R. Norman and J.K.S. St. Joseph, *The early development of Irish society* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 116-17.

[15] Dillon, p. 75.

[16] *Dictionary of the Irish language* (Dublin, 1913-76), s.v. *coloman*.

[17] Cf. H.H. Hock, *Principles of historical linguistics*, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1991), pp. 63-4.

[18] Cf. Gearóid Mac Eoin, "Irish", in *The Celtic languages*, ed. M.J. Ball (London, 1991), pp. 101-44, at pp. 110-11.

[19] Joseph Vendryes, *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien: Lettre C* (Paris, 1987), pp. 159.