Review


*The Vikings in Islay* is a study of place-names on the Inner Hebridean island of Islay. It has been well received in Scottish literary circles, having been shortlisted for a Saltire Society Literary Award in 2016. It is easy to see why. Macniven's writing is fluent and informative and the book's accessibility will appeal to place-name scholars and lay readers alike.

The book's accessibility is thanks in no small part to its considered structure. It is divided into two parts: an extended prose investigation of context and analysis (Part 1), and the place-name survey (Part 2). Part 1, which is helpfully presented in chapters which themselves are divided into sections under useful subheadings, has two main objectives. Initially, Macniven discusses the scope and limitations of place-names as tools for historians in general terms. Thereafter, the place-names of Islay are employed as evidence to support the main thesis: that there was an intense, large-scale and culturally transformative plantation of Norse settlers in Islay during the Viking Age. Readers of this journal will no doubt be familiar with this view, which was presented in the author's 2006 doctoral thesis, awarded by the University of Edinburgh, where he is now a senior lecturer and Head of Scandinavian Studies.\(^1\)

The book has many strengths, besides the fluent and accessible writing style. In chapter 1, Macniven laudably stresses the importance of local toponymic research, highlighting that textual sources provide only one surviving reference to Islay between the mid-eighth century and the mid-12th century. The accessible and informative discussion of onomastic theory in chapter 2 will be appreciated by the uninitiated and by place-name scholars alike, particularly given its engagement with the recent work of Scandinavian academics in this field. Islay's known history is comprehensively covered in chapter 3, a chapter which also includes a useful historiographical section. This leads Macniven into a critique of Captain F. W. L. Thomas's toponymic analysis of Islay published in 1881–82.\(^2\) Also in chapter 3, Macniven identifies the centrality of Stephen MacDougall's 'Map of the Island of Islay', produced in 1749–51, to his study. Chapter 4 provides

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further insight into Macniven’s methodology, including his innovative use of MacDougall’s map, and this chapter acts as a key to the place-name survey in Part 2. Macniven’s analysis of MacDougall’s map and the author’s own distribution maps – for which MacDougall’s map frequently provides the matrix – are outstanding features of the book. Maps are complemented by detailed statistical analysis and illustrative tables. In chapter 6, there is innovative use of Thiessen polygons in plotting areal extents of units based on *cill*-names and Macniven’s analysis of the island’s idiosyncratic and complicated land-assessment structures is both commendable and insightful. Macniven draws his conclusions and proposes his model for local Norse settlement in chapter 7, within the context of language contact and local archaeology.

The place-name survey in Part 2 is as accessible as the prose which precedes it and it constitutes an important new resource for lay readers and place-name scholars wishing to engage with etymological analysis of individual place-names in Islay. Macniven’s key to the survey is a helpful inclusion, particularly given that the survey’s layout is based on a number of different models. The maps which depict the location of each individual settlement in the survey are an excellent inclusion. Pronunciations are recorded from oral forms collected in a series of interviews with local informants and, besides being invaluable to Macniven’s etymological analysis, these transcriptions will be of interest to readers wishing to engage with local dialects. Analysis of the names themselves is generally well-informed.

The glossary of place-name elements which follows the survey is another worthwhile inclusion; as is the chronologically-ordered list of sources for early forms. The latter provides the reader with a sense of the period spanned by these sources at a glance. Also useful is the index of place-names which precedes the general index.

While the book has many strengths, there are some features which might be improved. The place-name index itself would benefit from clearer cross-referencing to the main sections of analysis for individual names in the place-name survey. This could easily be achieved by emboldening the font of relevant page numbers.

The glossary of elements, too, would benefit from cross-referencing to the place-name survey. Without these cross-references, the reader cannot navigate from the glossary to place-names in the survey in which any given individual element is proposed. If included, these cross-references would also provide the reader with a sense of the frequency of each element at a glance.

Macniven’s analysis of Gaelic place-names and Gaelic elements is frequently insecure. There are a number of orthographic issues which should be highlighted here. There is a general lack of attention to detail as regards Gaelic terms and
there are some inaccuracies. For example, *Ìlich* ‘people from Islay’ (p. 2) should be *Ìlich*. *Miniugud* (p. 2) is correctly *Míniugud*. ‘the dynasty of Gábrain’ (p. 82) is correctly ‘the dynasty of Gabrán’. The non-standardised spelling *tigh* (p. 71) for *taigh* should be avoided.

Macniven’s analysis of the Gaelic element *baile* betrays a lack of engagement with the relevant literature. The statement that pre-Norse use of Old Gaelic *baile* was ‘limited in meaning to the concept of “wall” or “enclosure”’ (p. 67) is inaccurate and misleading. *Baile* is principally defined as ‘place; settlement; farm, farmstead’ in the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* and, as Simon Taylor has pointed out, application as ‘(main) dwelling-place, place of habitation’ is ‘certainly the meaning of *baile* which can be gleaned from OG [Old Gaelic] sources’.

Macniven’s definition appears to relate to Old Gaelic *balla*, defined as ‘wall, rampart’, which is in fact an English loan-word.

There are other fundamental issues in the glossary which are potentially misleading. Macniven’s inclusion of alternative spellings of elements is useful but there is a lack of clarity as regards the categorisation of these alternatives; in other words, whether they are alternative spellings, i.e. variants, or scotticised/anglicised forms. *Auch*, for example, is a scotticised/anglicised form of the Gaelic element *achadh*, rather than an alternative spelling of the Gaelic element, as it is presented (p. 360). Similarly, *eabric* is a scotticised/anglicised form of Gaelic *eabarach* (p. 361). There is a need for clarification here.

Some lenited forms of nouns are presented as nominatives in the glossary; e.g. ‘rhubha’ (p. 363), correctly *rubha*. *Caillich* is defined as ‘old woman’ (p. 361) but this is in fact an oblique case-form of the Gaelic term which is in the nominative singular *cailleach*. Gaelic *caistel* (p. 361) is better *caisteal*.

There is a degree of carelessness, too, as regards personal names and other proper nouns of Gaelic origin. *Choman* (p. 361), for example, is a lenited, anglicised form of the hagionym best recorded in the nominative as Comán. In analysis of Kilchoman (p. 330), it is inaccurate to propose the name’s specific element as ‘Choman’, as Macniven does, rather than recording the nominative form of the personal name in Gaelic orthography.

It seems insufficient to state in the introduction to the glossary that there is a ‘certain amount of inconsistency in spelling’ due to the fact that ‘forms of place-names and etymological suggestions recorded in the survey have been

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6 See, for example, Comán in the Database of Scottish Hagiotoponyms: <http://saintsplaces.gla.ac.uk/saint.php?id=741> – accessed 29/12/16.
drawn from a range of different sources’ (p. 357). This statement in fact betrays an over-reliance on previous toponymic surveys of Islay as regards the Gaelic names analysed in the survey. In many cases, Macniven relies on the work of H. Cameron Gillies whose *The Place-Names of Argyll*, published in 1906, has been subject to damning critiques from the likes of Alexander Macbain and, more recently, Ian A. Fraser. One particularly unstable etymology is that proposed by Macniven, following Gillies, for Eacharnach in Kilmeny parish (p. 262). The proposed etymology is Gaelic *each* ‘horse’ + Gaelic suffix *ar(n)ach*, giving a proposed meaning of ‘Place of the Horses’. A combination of the three place-name-forming suffixes -ar, -an and -ach has been proposed in other names by the likes of Watson but, besides the fact that the construction of the proposed suffix is unexplained, the putative etymology does not account for the consistent v/w recorded in each of the historical forms. Over-reliance on previous studies means that Macniven’s analysis of Gaelic names tends to fall short.

Macniven’s analysis of Islay’s Old Norse names is more secure and a particularly strong aspect of this analysis is his discussion of parallel names in Norway and Iceland. Nevertheless, some interpretations are less convincing than others. The consistent -still, -stoll and -stole recorded in the earliest forms of Scanistle in Kilmeny parish, for example, suggest that the name’s generic is Old Norse *stǫðul(l)*, probably best defined as ‘(cattle-)milking-place’, rather than the proposed Old Norse *staðir* (p. 279). Variation in later historical forms and in recorded modern pronunciations may reflect the influence of Scottish Standard English *town*, or Scots *toun*, as Macniven suggests, but Old Norse *stǫðul(l)* is a more convincing generic, on the basis of the name’s earliest forms and, indeed, the name’s modern orthography.

In more general terms, Macniven’s approach to etymological analysis might also be controversial for place-name scholars. In outlining his approach in chapter 4, Macniven identifies the three stages of his analytical process (p. 35–41). The first stage is that the body of linguistic evidence is collated and scrutinised. The second involves corroboration through comparison with parallels. The third stage is consideration of topographical context. Surprisingly, Macniven considers only the first of these to be prerequisite, stating that ‘the next two are only employed if the result of the first stage is considered ambiguous’ (p. 41).

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Consideration of topographical context is surely prerequisite in analysis of all place-names.

Macniven’s overarching thesis is controversial and it will no doubt be the subject of debate, as it has been since it was presented in his doctoral thesis. Specific aspects of Macniven’s analysis might be questioned here. For example, Macniven concludes that ‘none of the Gaelic settlement names on MacDougall’s map can be proved to be pre-Norse’ and that ‘there are strong grounds for dating many, if not all of them, to the 11th or 12th centuries or even later’ (p. 80). As such, in discussion of ecclesiastical sites and cill-names in localities identified as having the greatest proportions of Gaelic names on the island (pp. 55–60), Macniven concentrates on the fact that none of the chapels appear to predate the Viking Age (p. 61). Conspicuous in their absence from this discussion, however, are the Early Christian monuments in these localities which might be viewed as potential indicators of local cultural and linguistic continuity from the Early Christian period through the Norse period, in light of supporting toponymic evidence. For example, the ‘two supposedly early Christian cross slabs’ situated near the parish church at Kilchoman, which is located within the first locality discussed in this section of the book, are referred to in the place-name survey in the entry for Kilchoman (p. 331); they are not, however, considered in the discursive analysis of the locality’s toponymy in the relevant section in Part 1.

In the same chapter, Macniven sets a dangerous precedent in suggesting that, because many of the Gaelic names containing the most common Gaelic generics are ‘simple and self-evident references to the landscape … it must be wondered whether they are not in fact translations of Old Norse predecessors’ (p. 63); i.e. rather than being Gaelic names coined independently of any pre-existing Norse tradition. Without supporting evidence, this suggestion appears rather tendentious.

There is a tendency, too, to a Norse-centric view of linguistic development in Scottish Gaelic in chapter 7. Macniven’s proposal that post-medieval Gaelic in the West Highlands represents ‘a language which has been learned by native-speakers of Old Norse’ (p. 106–07) is controversial. While Macniven refers to Pavel Iosad’s recent work on pitch accent and prosodic structure in Scottish Gaelic— it is cited in an endnote removed from the main discussion (p. 378) — there is no acknowledgement of the view of several Ireland- and Scotland-based commentators that preaspiration, for example, could have been a Northern

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Gaelic innovation; i.e. an internal development. Indeed, Iosad has recently cogently argued that there is little evidence that Norse preaspiration can have been a source for Gaelic preaspiration and that both preaspiration and tonal accents in Gaelic are pan-Northern Gaelic innovations. Macniven's analysis betrays a lack of engagement with the wider literature on the topic.

Nevertheless, *The Vikings in Islay* undoubtedly increases our understanding of Islay's history through analysis of the island's place-names. The 600-plus names which are analysed in total in the volume – around half of which are examined 'in fine detail' (p. vi) – represent a marked increase from the 162 non-English names analysed in the aforementioned 1881–82 study by Thomas which, as Macniven points out, is the only other systematic, island-wide survey of Islay's place-names previously published. Macniven's objective – to provide valuable clues to the nature of settlement and societal development by way of a contextualised appraisal of local place-names (p. 120) – is laudable and this objective is met, particularly in the analysis of Old Norse names. The book's accessibility for the lay reader is a notable accomplishment. It will be a disappointment for Gaelic-speaking readers, however, that analysis of Islay's Gaelic names falls short. Macniven all too often reiterates the insecure etymologies of previous studies. Nevertheless, *The Vikings in Islay* is a valuable contribution to Hebridean place-name studies and it provides an important new resource for place-name scholars. Macniven has developed a thesis in relation to Islay's history in the Norse period which may now be compared and contrasted in future toponymic analysis of neighbouring islands and mainland regions. The £25 price-tag is reasonable for a paperback volume of this size.

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