

**Watson, William J, *The Celtic Place-names of Scotland* (introduction by Simon Taylor)**

(Edinburgh, Birlinn, 2004) paperback; xl + 558 pages; RRP £14.99; ISBN 1 84158 323 5

This reissue of W J Watson's 1926 toponymic masterpiece must be welcomed by any scholar of early medieval Scotland. It differs from the 1926 edition in two vital ways: it is readily available at £14.99, and it features an introduction by Dr Simon Taylor, who shows potential to rival the great Watson in his contribution to the study of place-names in Scotland.

Watson's book, published 80 years ago, is, as Taylor points out, still an essential reference work for the study of toponymics in Scotland. It is based on the series of Rhind Lectures which Watson delivered for the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1916. Watson held that to 'deal exhaustively with our Celtic names of places is beyond the power of any one man, and I have not attempted anything of that sort' (xxxix). Nonetheless, his work was broad in scope and laid valuable groundwork for virtually all the work in the field that has come after him.

The first two chapters deal with 'early names', concentrating on placenames recorded in Roman texts and other early sources. A third chapter is justifiably devoted to names in Adamnán's *Life of Columba*: this is one of our richest sources for the placenames of early medieval Scotland. There follows a chapter on 'territorial divisions', in which Watson looks at the names of provinces and peoples. Four chapters are devoted to a 'general survey' of the placenames of particular regions, and it is our loss that Watson's project did not have the capacity to cover the entirety of Scotland in this way. Further chapters deal with ecclesiastical terms, saints' names, British names and the names of rivers.

The final chapter, 'some general terms', and an 'additional notes' section, allowed Watson to accommodate a wealth of further information that he had not included in the main body of the work. One gets the impression of a hasty compilation of a wealth of research which had originally been presented in a different format, which is precisely what the book is.

Some of Watson's introductory remarks might strike the twenty-first-century scholar as a little more definite than is justified: 'no Gael ever set his foot on British soil save from a vessel that had put out from Ireland' (xxxix), 'that the pre-Celtic population was by no means wiped out is proved by the fact that their descendants are still plentiful' (1) or 'at the synod held at Whitby in 664 an Anglic king took upon himself the position of arbiter between the Gaelic and the Roman clerics, and in consequence of his decision the former had to leave Northumbria' (xxxix). But these are

well and truly overshadowed by the value of the information in the book proper.

Watson's indexes are definitely substandard, arguably close to useless, but this deficiency is easily addressed by using the excellent index on the Scottish Place-Name Society's website at:

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/institutes/sassi/spns/WatsIndex2.htm>

This website is the work of several scholars, including Simon Taylor.

In his introduction to the book, Taylor gives a potted history of the study of placenames in Scotland, the career of Watson, and the book itself. This is replete with fascinating details, such as the fact that the first attempt at a supplementary index was made by an 'entomologist [sic]'. Taylor's 'fullest bibliography of W. J. Watson yet attempted in print' runs to five pages, showing the breathtaking scope of Watson's contribution to scholarship: not merely books and articles, but contributions to others' works, including Dwelly's well-known Gaelic-English dictionary.

Taylor informs us engagingly that the publishers 'considered a revised edition, but to be frank there is not enough new material to warrant this' (viii). While this is doubtless true, the ten pages of useful and interesting corrigenda and addenda which Taylor lays out will be most useful if they are transcribed onto the pages to which they refer, or at least cross-referenced there. Surely the publishers' decision was primarily motivated by economy: a not altogether bad thing, as reproducing the original page layouts is undoubtedly responsible for the user-friendly price of the new edition. I cannot think of a better use for \$40.

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