Local Placenames

Seán Mac Labhraí

People at home and visitors to Ireland are frequently amused at the names of certain places e.g. Tannyoky, Ballymacaratty, Knocknamuckly, Lisnacroppin etc. but regrettably their amusement is seldom matched by their curiosity, for if they were to inquire further, in almost every case they would discover that the names derive originally from Gaelic, and that possibly some local scholar might be knowledgeable regarding their meanings. The aim of this brief article is to stimulate interest in the meanings of placenames in Ireland by (1) giving a brief introduction to the study and (2) by illustrating with an attempt to explain a selection of local placenames.

INTRODUCTION

History holds the explanation as to why the majority of placenames in Ireland cannot be immediately understood nowadays. Celtic peoples expanding their influence across the continent finally arrived in the British Isles some time around 500 B.C. and soon after the Celtic invasion, the language and culture of the Celts was dominant in these islands. From this period the Celtic speaking people began to give names to the various physical features in their new environment mountains, hills, lakes, grasslands, rivers, bogs, fords, swamps, valleys and plains, names which (a) were connected to characteristics which they identified in those places (e.g. Lisnacroppin [Lios na gcnapán] the fort of the boulders; Knocknamuckly [Cnoc na Muc Liath) the hill of the grey pigs) or (b) which related to an historical incident which occurred in the place (e.g. Lisnabrague [Lios na bréige] the fort of the lie; Lissummon [Lios Iomána] the fort of the football) or (c) which recalled someone who had been associated with the place (e.g. Tannyoky (Tamhnach Eochaidh) Eochaidh's grassy upland; Ballymacaratty [Baile Mag Oireachtaigh] McGarrity's townland).

While further invasions of England by Romans, Angles, Saxons and Normans meant that many of the original Celtic names were substituted by names from the language of the new inhabitants, the modern placenames of almost all of Ireland, Scotland and Wales and a considerable part of England derive from the tongue of the Celt. Perhaps, the most memorable example of a Celtic placename in England is that of Dover [Dobhar] pronounced either "dover" or "door" meaning water, a name which suits the coastal location of the town ideally. The same word appears in two Donegal towns, Bundoran [Bun Dobhráin] and Gweedore [Gaoth Dobhair] both of which are again located on the seaboard. Shakespeare once wrote that ".... a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet" and while he rightly pointed out that the names of things and places are arbitrary and could thus be changed at will without affecting the things or the places, the great author's love of and fascination with language must have made him wonder at the meaning of the title of his place of birth - Stratford-on-Avon, the shallow crossing at the river in the glen. The element avon (Abhainn) appears in the name Craigavon (Creag abhann) the rock by the river, and in Avonmore [Abhainn Mhór] the big river, while the element Strath or Srath (Srath) is found in the town of Strabane (An tSraith Bán) the white river-valley and in the Scottish town of Strathclyde (Sraith Claidhe) the river-valley of the Clyde.

Hence the naming of almost every place and feature in the landscape was a gradual process which evolved over centuries and which has ultimately given to Ireland one of the richest and most varied repetoires of placenames in the world. Indeed as we learn from the writings of Dr. Robin Flower, former curator of Gaelic manuscripts in the British Museum, the acquisition of knowledge of the meanings of placenames formed a fundamental part of the training of the Irish classical poets (c.1200 - 1600 A.D.) and it was this body which earned for Ireland the second half of the reputation of being "a land of saints and scholars."

"For the poets of Ireland cultivated with an unremitting assiduity a study to which they gave the name "dindshenchas," the lore of the high places, until by the accretion of centuries there came into existence a large body of literature in prose and verse, forming a kind of Dictionary of National Topography, which fitted the famous sites of the country each with its appropriate legend. It was one of the obligations of a poet to have this knowledge ready at call, and if faced by a demand to relate the associations of some deserted rath or lonely pillar-stone he failed to render an exact and credible account, he was shamed to the very roots of his being." (*The Irish Tradition* 1979, 1)

We should not conclude however that the Celts were the only civilization to develop an elaborate naming system for places in their habitat — we read an interesting reference in the Bible to the place where lesus was crucified, 'Golgotha, which means the place of the skull'' (Mat. 27:33) thus proving that the Jewish peoples developed placenames. We also know that it was the North American Indians who gave the names to several of the 52 of the United States and to Niagara which means "thundering waters."

The major problem remains however, that in the last 150 years a majority of the population of Ireland has changed from speaking Irish to speaking English and nowadays only a small minority speak the former language daily. As such we no longer understand the language of our native placenames which tradition has handed down to us and we must therefore look to scholars of Irish to assist us in our understanding of placenames.

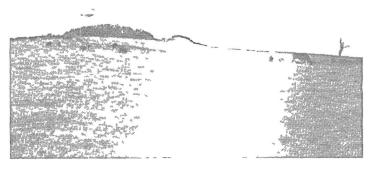
SOURCES

Even before the Gaelic Literary renaissance at the end of the last century, much important work had been completed by the likes of John O' Donovan and Eugene Curry both of whom assisted the Ordinance Survey which was commenced in 1836. They travelled around Ireland at a time when Irish was still generally spoken and gleaned valuable information regarding the meanings of placenames from local oral tradition. Unfortunately however, this research was never directly published and remains even today in the form of letters and notes among the manuscripts of the Royal Irish Academy.

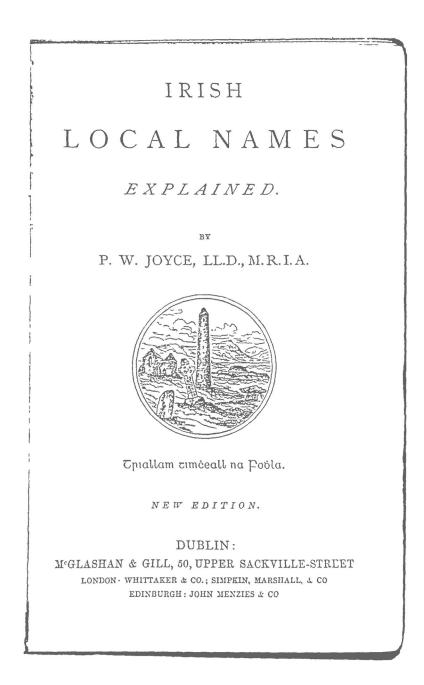
The first major publication on this subject in 1869 The Origin and History of Irish Names of Places volumes I - III by the Limerick schoolteacher Patrick Weston Joyce, remains until today as the major reference work for students of this field of study. Volumes I and II deal with the primary elements in Irish placenames while Volume III is a gazateer of placenames with their original Gaelic forms and translations. Yet not even as monumental a work as that of Joyce could hope to provide a comprehensive and accurate list of all the placenames of Ireland, so research into this field was commissioned by the Dublin Government and ever since a team of scholars, whose headquarters are in the Phoenix Park, are actively engaged in researching Irish placenames.

In Ulster the Celtic Department of Queen's University has made a major contribution to the study having had 3 periodicals whose sole concern was with placenames. The first of these Dindshenchas was succeeded by the Bulletin of the Ulster Placename Society and since 1986 the current publication is entitled Aimn.

These latter works tend to be geared towards the academic student however and are therefore not really suited to the needs of the casual reader for whom Joyce still has a much more rapid appeal. While Joyce's original work is long since out of print an abridged pocket edition is available from the Appletree Press since 1984. One work which is to be avoided however on account of its lack of authority is The Meaning of Irish Placenames by James O' Connell published by the Blackstaff Press in 1979. The attempted translations make no reference to the original Gaelic nor to the geographical location of the places mentioned and indeed are frequently far-fetched and erroneous. The author has volunteered up to 3,000 meanings and given the impression that research into placenames is a simple and exact discipline, but we will presently discover that such is far from being the truth as the search to unveil the authentic meanings of Irish placenames is fraught with many difficulties and dangers.



Lisraw-The fort which gave its name to a townland, now the site of a water tower.



The Title Page of one of P. W. Joyce's books on the subject.

Local Placenames

Linguistic corruption is what renders the study of placenames a rather inexact science. This corruption is two-fold — oral and written. The first cartographers (makers of maps) who recorded placenames in the various surveys were almost invariably of English planter extraction. As such they had a poor ear for the exact Gaelic pronunciation of a placename and often wrote down an approximate rendering of the sounds in phonetic English. This initial inaccuracy was frequently compounded when the first written form was further corrupted by mistaken transcription or perhaps by a desire to simplify the pronunciation for English speakers who had difficulty with the Irish names. A good illustration of this is the case of the townland Monclone, near Scarva. In attempting to arrive at the original Gaelic form of the townland I worked for a long time on the assumption that the first element in the word "mon" was the Gaelic word, 'móin" meaning turf. This working hypothesis appeared to have

been supported by a local tradition that there are coal deposits in the townland which some locals remembered having been mined. Not until I discovered the early written form of the word "minclointy" was I in any doubt that my original assumption was correct. In actual fact the prefix "mion" simply means small and has nothing whatsoever to do with either coal or turf! The lesson, of course, is caution and openmindedness and indeed between presenting this study as a talk and later preparing it for print I have altered on my suggestions for the meanings of a number of names on the list where continued research has brought fresh evidence to light. Indeed it is quite likely that some of my readers will be able to clarify certain doubts that still exist on the list, as it is now presented, but in the meanwhile I hope I have not been too inaccurate in my attempts to offer meanings to lcoal placenames.



Cattle graze on what was formerly a lake-Loughadian.

Below is a selection of local placenames with their meanings. The list is arranged alphabetically and the criterion for selection is purely random choice. As such the list is incomplete so I must apologise for this shortcoming and hope that the list nevertheless satisfies the readers' curiosity regarding at least some of our local placenames. Where the meaning of the placename is uncertain this is indicated by an asterisk * and in such

> ACTON AGHADERG ANNACLONE AUGHANTARRAGHAN*

AUGHLISH BALLYARGAN BALLYDOHERTY BALLYGOWAN

BALLYMACARATTY BALLYMORE BALLYNAGREAGH BALLYNALECK

BALLYNASKEAGH

BALLYREAGH BALLYSHIEL BALLYVARLEY*

BARR BALLYNABECK BRANNOCK CARGANS CARNBANE CARNMEEN CARRICKBRACK CARRICKDRUMMAN CARRICKROVADDY CLOGHOGUE COOLNACRANN CORLUST

CORRERNAGH

CRANKEY CREEVY CREWBEG/CREWMORE Currach a' toir Achadh dearg Eanach cluain Achadh an tsoracháin Achadh an toracháin Each Laisc Baile Argana Baile Dochartaigh Baile gabhann

Baile Mag oireachtaigh Baile mór Baile na gcríoch Baile na Leac/Leice

Baile na sceach

Baile réidh Baile Siadhail Baile a' mharlaigh

Barr

Baile na bpeacach Breathnach Carraigín Carn Bán Carn Mín Carraig breac Carraig dromán Carraig re mhadaigh Clochóg Cúl na (g)crann Corr lust(an)

Corr Aircheannach

Crannachaidh Craobhaigh Cruach beag/mór

cases more than one meaning may be volunteered. I would gladly welcome any information readers could supply to amend or extend this small effort to begin research into a very interesting topic of local history.

To conclude this introductory article I supply a list of basic elements or root words which may assist interested readers in their efforts to unveil the meanings of other townlands, local and further afield.

> The swamp of the tall rock. The red field The meadow marsh The field of the miser The field of the strong man The horse enclosure The townland of the plunder The townland of Doherty The townland of the blacksmith The townland of McGarrity The big townland The townland of the boundary The townland of the flat stone(s) The townland of the whitethorn bushes The level/smooth townland The townland of Shields The townland of the clay, limestone soil. The townland of the weakling The summit The townland of the sinners The Englishman's land The small rock The white mound / cairn area The smooth cairn The speckled rock The rock on the small ridge The rock of the dogs The stony patch The nook of the tree(s) The projecting rock of the weeds The projecting rock of the church-farmer The branchy place The wooded place The Big/small stack

CULLENTRAGH

DONAGHMORE **DROMANTINE*** DRUMBANAGHER DRUMHORC DRUMILLER DRUMINARGLE DRUMINURE DRUMNAMETHER DRUMSALLAGH DUNBOY EDENDERRY FEDERNAGH GLASSDRUMMAN GLEN **GLENLOUGHAN** GORAGHWOOD GREENAN **KEADYMORE KILLYBODAGH KILLYSAVAN KILREA KNOCKDUFF KNOCKNAMUCKLEY** LEGANANNY LESH

LISBANE LISNABRAGUE LISNAGADE

LISNAGREE LISNALEE LISRAW LISSUMMON LOUGHADIAN LOUGHBRICKLAND LOUGHORNE* MAGHERADOUGHERTY MAVEMACULLEN MEENAN MONCLONE

MULLABRACK MULLAGHGLASS MULLINARY SAVALBEG/-MORE SCARVA SHANECRACKEN

Domhnach mór Drom na tine ? Drom beannachar Drom a' choirce Drom iolair Drom an airgil Drom an iúir Drom na meadar Drom Saileach Dún buí Éadán daire Fiodharnach Glasdromán Gleann Gleann lochán Gabharach Grianán Ceideadh mór Coilleadh Bodach Coilleadh sabhán Coill réidh Cnoc dubh Cnoc na muc liath Liag an Fhánaidh Lís

Coll an Trá

Lios bán Lios na bréige Lios na gcéad

lios na gcríoch Lios na lao Lios ratha Luos Iomána Loch a' daingin Loch Bricreann Loch amhrán Machaire Dochartaigh Maigh a' Mhuilinn Mínán Mionchluainte

Mullach breac Mullach glas Mull an áirí Sabhall beag/mór Scairbheach Seanchreagán

The hazel tree at the shallow water? The big churchland The hillock of the fire The ridge of the peaks The ridge of the oats The ridge of the eagle The ridge of the oratory The ridge of the yew The ridge of the churns The ridge of the sally trees The yellow fort The face of the wood The wooded place The small green hill A Vallev The valley of the small lakes The place abounding in goats The high sunny spot The big flat-topped hill The wood of the rude persons Wood of the smallrods The flat wood The black hill The hill of the grey swine The flat stone on the slope Holder of land by feudal tenure A White fort The fort of the lie The fort of the hundred (forts 2) The fort of the boundary The fort of the claves The ringed fort The fort of the football The lake of the fortress The lake of King Bricriu The lake of the songs Doherty's lake The plain of the mill A small level place Small strips of grassland in a wooded area A speckled hill A green hill The milking hill A small/big barn A shallow rugged ford An old rock

SHANEGLISH TANDERAGEE TANNYOKEY TERRYHOOGAN

TULLYMACANN TULLYNACROSS Seaneaglais Tóin re gaoith Tamhnach Eochaidh Doire shúgán

Tulaigh Mac Catháin Tulach na croise An old church Ass-to-the-wind Eochaidh's green field The oak-grove of the straw ropes Mac Catháin's hill The hill of the crosses



Poyntzpass village viewed from the townland of Lisnabrague, with Tullynacross townland in the background.



A general view of Brannock townland-Acton House is on the right.

ROOT WORDS

Abhainn (owen), a river; owen, avon, and in the end of words with the h of the article, hown, hone, howna, hivnia

Achadh (aha), a field; it is generally represented in modern names by *agha*, *agh*, or *augh*, but these also often stand for *ath*, a ford

Alt, a height, a cliff, a glen side

Ard, high, a height

Baile (bally), a town, a townland; *bally, balli, vally* and in the eastern counties *bal.*

Bán (bawn), white or fair coloured; *bane, baun, bawn, vane, vaun.*

Barr (baur), the top, the highest point; *bar, baur*. The *Bar* of a townland (used in the north) is the high or hilly part

Beag (beg), little Beannchar (banaher), horns, gables, peaks; banagher, bangor.

Bearn, bearna, bearnas (barn, barna, barnas), a gap, a gap in a mountain; *barna, barny, varna, varny, barnis, varnis,* and often in the north *barnet.*

Bél, béal (bale), the mouth, an entrance, a ford; often joined to *ath* in the compond *bél-atha* (bellaha, bella), a ford-mouth or ford entrance.

Bo, a cow; bo, boe, and by eclipse, moe (mbo).

Brocach (bruckagh), a badger warren; *brochagh, brocky*.

Bun, the end or bottom of anything; the mouth of a river

Cabhan (cavan), a hollow; in some parts of Ulster it signifies a round hill; *cavan*.

Caiseal (cashel), a circular stone fort; cashel, castle,

Carn, a monumental heap of stones; carn; carna

EXAMPLE

Craigavon (Creag abhann) The rock of the river

Finaghy (Fionnachadh) The fair-coloured field (Belfast)

Altnamackin (Alt na meacan) The glenside of the carrots

Ardglas (Ard glas) The green height (Co. Down)

Ballyjamesduff (Baile Shéamais Dhuibh) The town of black-haired James. (Co. Cavan)

Mullaghbawn (Mullach bán) The long white hill

Barr (Barr) The summit

Savalbeg (Sabhall beag) A small barn Drumbanagher (Droim beannchar) The ridge of the peaks

Lisdoonvarna (Lios Dubh an Bhearna) The black fort in the gap (Co. Clare)

Ballybay (Béal Átha Beithe) the mouth of the ford of the birch trees. (Co. Monaghan)

Ardboe (Ard Bó) The height of the cows. (Co. Tyrone)

Artabrackagh (Aird an bhrocaigh) The height of the badger's warren.

(Between Tandragee and Portadown)

Bundoran (Bun Dobhráin) The mouth of the stream. (Co. Donegal)

Cavanakeeny (Cabhán an chaonaigh) The hollow of the moss.

(A townland comprising three fields formerly owned by John Lynch from Acton)

Drumcashel (Droim Caisil) The fort on the ridge

(Townland off Rathfriland Road, Newry) Carnmeen (Carn mín) The flat mound of stones Carrag (corrig), a rock; carrig, carrick, carriga

Ceann (can), the head, front, or highest part of anything; *kan*, *can*, *kim*, *ken*

Ceide (keady), a hillock, a hill level and smooth at top; *keady, keadew, keadagh, cady, caddagh.*

Ceis (kesh), a wicker basket, a wickerwork causeway; kish, kesh.

Cill (kill), a church; kill, kil, kyle, keel, cal, kille, killa

Cloch, a stone, a stone castle; *clogh*, *clough*, *clo*, *clohy*, *cloy*, *naglogh*.

Cluain (cloon), a meadow, a fertile piece of land among bogs, marches, or woods; *cloon, clon, clin, cloony*.

Cnoc (knock), a hill; *knock, knick, nick, crock, cruck*

Coill, a wood; *kil, kyle, cuill, cullia* **Cor,** a round hill, etc.

Craebh (crave), a branch, a large braunchy tree; creeva, crew, creevy, nagreeve

Cruach, cruachán (cruagh, cruhaun), a rick, a round stacked up hill; crogh, cruagh, croagh, croghan, croaghan

Cuillionn (culion), holly; cullion, cullen

Dair (dar), an oak; dar, der, dara, darra, darraigh

Dearg (derg), red; derg, derrig, darrig

Domhnach (downagh), Sunday, a church; donagh, donna, donny, don, dun

Droichead (drohed), a bridge; *droghed*, *drehid*, *drought*, *drait*

Druim (*drum*), the back, a ridge or long hill; *drum*, *drom*, *drim*.

Eaglais (aglish), a church; aglish, eglish, heagles, eglis

Carrickasticken (Carraig an Stoicín) The rock by the small tree-stump.

(Forkhill, Co. Armagh)

Kintyre (Ceann Tíre) The head of the land. (Scotland)

Keady (Ceide)

Kesh (Ceis) A wickerwork causeway, trees, strewn criss-cross over soft ground to permit transport.

(According to Miss M. Savage this name was given to an area on the Armagh railway track in Lissummon)

Killeavey (Cill Shléibhe) The church on the mountainside.

Cloghogue (Clochóg) A stony place (near Tandragee, Co. Armagh)

Clontarf (Cluain Tairbh). The meadow of the bull (Suburb of Dublin)

The "knocks". The hills, (There's such a name in almost every county in Ireland)

Killylea (Coilleadh Liath) The grey wood Corcrum (Cor Crom) The stooped round hill (Townland near Poyntzpass, Co. Armagh).

Creevy (Craobhach) An area shaded with overhanging branches.

(Townland near Loughbrickland, Co. Down)

Crewmore (Cruach Mór) A large stacked-up hill (Townland near Tandragee, Co. Armagh)

Sieve Gullion (Sliabh gCuilinn) The mountin of the holly tree.

Derrybeg (Doire beag) A small copse of oak trees.

Castlederg (Caisleán Dearg) The red castle. (Co. Tyrone)

Donaghmore (Domhnach Mór) The big church.

Dundrod (Dún Droichid) The fort by the bridge.

Dromore (An Droim Mór) The large ridge

Eglish (Eaglais) A church. (Co. Tyrone)

Eanach (annagh), a marsh; annagh, anna, anny Fidh (fih), a wood; free, fi, feigh, feth, fith, fid

Fuinnse, fuinnseann, fuinnseóg (funsha, funshan, funshoge), the ash tree; funcheon, funshin, funshinagh, funchoge. The f is omitted in the north, giving rise to such forms as unshin, unshinagh, inshinagh, unshog, hinchoge

Gabhar (gour), a goat; gower, gour, gore

Glas, green; glass Gort, a tilled field; gort, gurt, gart.

Grian (greean), the sun; green, gren, greany Iolar (iller), an eagle; *iller, uller, ilra, ulra, illard*

Iubhar (yure), a yew tree; ure

Leac, lic, liag (lack, lick, leeg), a flagstone; *lack, leck, lick, leek, leege.*

Leitir (letter), a wet side of a hill, plural leatracha (latraha); letter, lattera, lettera, letteragh

Liath (leea), grey; *lea* Machaire (mahera), a plain; *maghera, maghery*

Madadh, madradh (madda, maddra), a dog; maddy, maddoo, maddra, vaddy, vaddoo, vaddra

Magh (maw), a plain; moy, ma, may, moigh, moig, muff, mo.

Min (meen), smooth, fine, small; meen.

Muileann (mullen), a mill; mullen, mullin, willin

Muine (money), a shrubbery; money

Mullach (mullagh), a summit; *mullagh, mulla, mully, mul*

Rath (raw), a circular fort; *rath, raw, rah, ray, ra, raha*

Reidh (ray), a coarse mountain flat; rea, rc, rcy

Ros, generally means a wood in the south, and a peninsula in the north; ross, rus, rush

Annaghmore (Eanach Mór) A large marsh

Federnagh (Fiodharnach). A wooded place

Correnshigo (Cor Fhuinnseoige) The hill of the ash tree (Townland near Newry)

Goraghwood (Gabharach "wood") A wood abounding with goats (?)

Mullaglass (Mullach glas). The green hill. Gortahork (Gort an choirce) The corn-field. (Co. Donegal) Greenan (Grianán) A high sunny spot

Drummillar (Droim Iolair) The ridge of the kestral.

Newry (An tIúr) The yew tree.

Lack (An Leac) The flagstone. (Co. Fermanagh)

Lettermacaward (Leitir Mhic an Bhaird) Ward's wet hillside.

Leitrim (Liath - Droim) The Grey ridge. Magheradougherty (machaire Dochartaigh) Doherty's plain. (Townland near Markethill) Limavaddy (Léim an mhadaidh) The dog's leap. (Co. Derry)

Moyallen (Magh álainn) The fair plain. (village near Gilford)

Meenaclady (Mín an chladaigh) The smooth land on the seashore (Co. Donegal).

Castlewellan (Caisleán an Mhuilinn) The castle near the mill.

Ballymoney (Baile an mhuine) The townland of the shrubs. (Co. Antrim)

Mullaghmore (An mullach mór) The great hilltop. (Co. Sligo)

Rathfriland (Rath Faoilinn) Freelan's fort.

Cloughrea (Cloch réidh) A flat stone Roslea (Ros Liath) A grey wood (Co. Fermanagh) Saileach (saulagh), a sallow; sillagh, sallagh, sill

Scairbh (scarriff), a shallow rugged ford; *Skarriff, scarry, scarva, scarvy, scarragh*

Sceach (skagh), a whitethorn bush; skeagh, skehy, skey, ske, skeha, skew

Sean (shan), old; shan, shanna Seiscenn (skeskin), a marsh, a quagmire; sheskin, seskin teskin

Sliabh (sleeve), a mountain; *slieve, slie, sle, lieve, lie;* and by an eclipse of *s. tleva, tlieve, tlea*

Tamhnach (tawnagh), a green field; tawnagh, tawny, tonagh, tamnagh, tamny

Tate, tath, a measure of land; tat, tate

Tobar, tipra (gen, tioprad), a well; tober, tubber, tipper, tubbrid, tibret

Tor, a tower-like rock; tor.

Traigh (tra), a strand; tra, traw, tray

Tulach (tulla), a little hill; *tulla, tullow, tullagh, tully, tul*

Uisce (iska), water; iska, isky, isk

Drumsallach (Droim Saileach) The ridge of the sally tree.

Scarva (Scairbheach) A shallow stoney ford

Lisnaskea (Lios na Sceach) The fort of the whitethorns (Co. Fermanagh)

Shankill (Seanchill) An old churchyard (Belfast) Siskinore (Seisceann an óir) The marsh of the gold. (Co. Tyrone)

Slieve Comedagh (Sliabh Coimhéadach) The mountain of the lookout post (Mournes)

Fintona (Fionntamhnach) A fair green field (Co. Tyrone)

Tattyreagh (Tátaí réidh) A flat stretch of land (Co. Fermanagh)

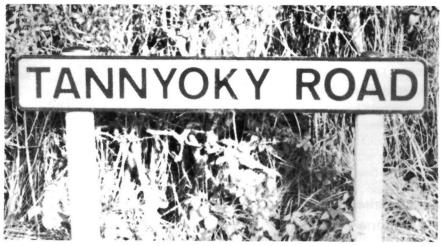
Tobermore (Tobar Mór) A large well (Co. Derry)

Tormore (An Tor Mór) The large towering rock (Townland near Saval)

Tramore (Trá Mór) A large beach. (Co. Waterford)

Tullynacross (Tulach na croise) The hill of the cross

Lisanisk (Lios an Uisce) The fort of the water.



"Tannyoky" Road-a modern attempt at spelling a townland name.