

# P. W. Joyce's Published Work on Irish Placenames

by Pat Feeley

**P**atrick Weston Joyce was born near the village of Glensheen, Co. Limerick, in 1827. His early education was in local hedge-schools. In later life he became a teacher and subsequently principal of the Model School in Clonmel. In 1856 he was one of fifteen teachers selected and trained to reorganise the national school system. As a mature man, he entered Trinity College, Dublin, as a student and graduated with a B.A. in 1861 and an M.A. in 1864. In 1874 he became the principal of the teachers training college in Marlborough Street, Dublin, a post he held until 1893. He was a member of the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language and published an Irish grammar in 1878. He was a collector of Irish music and was an adjudicator at the first Oireachtas organised by the Gaelic League. In 1906 he became president of the Royal Society of Antiquaries. He died in November 1914 in his home in Rathmines. Joyce wrote a number of books, *Old Celtic Romances* (1879), *A Child's History of Ireland* (1898), *A Social History of Ancient Ireland* (1903), *English as we Speak it in Ireland* (1910) and *Irish Names of Places*, the subject of this essay. The history of the publication of this last work is of interest. The first volume was published in 1869, volume III forty-four years later, in 1913. Joyce's interest in toponymy spanned fifty years and in that period he put together a vast body of material on the subject in small notebooks.

In the first volume of *Irish Names of Places*, Joyce tells us about his work methods and gives us his sources. He mentions as his sources the pronunciation of Irish names by natives, mostly Irish speakers, taken down by himself and by his students in the training college, Irish forms and meanings as written by John O'Donovan in the *Field-Name Books* and in his editions of the *Four Masters* and other works of Irish literature that he edited and old forms and interpretations of the names as given in written authorities, either printed or manuscript, from the earliest times that such writings occur until to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He also consulted early historical and ecclesiastical writings in Latin to try and arrive at the original forms of different placenames. He recognised that it was this, the discovery of the ancient orthography and the working out of the original meaning, that presented the major task for the scholar. The corruption of the orthography was a serious problem. Commenting on his methods of working

out the original meaning of a placename, Joyce said that the original Irish word sometimes may be discovered from an old form of the anglicised name, that in some cases original forms may be discovered by causing the names to be pronounced in Irish by the locals and he maintained that a vast number of local names are perfectly intelligible to anyone with a knowledge of Irish. This last assertion indicates one of the weaknesses in Joyce's work, an unjustified confidence in interpreting what might seem, but are not, straightforward placenames. Breandán Ó Ciobháin, a higher placenames officer with the Ordnance Survey, a recognised expert in the field, says that 80% of placenames can, sure enough, be understood by a person with a knowledge of Irish on a first look, but that the other 20% are open to misrepresentation. The problem is to know when a particular word falls not into the 80 but into the 20% category. The only scientific way to guard against error is to marshal all the available knowledge on each particular name and having assessed and weighed this, come to a conclusion.

Joyce explains the systematic changes that occurred in Irish words with the arrival of the Cambro-Normans and the introduction of the English language into Ireland. Writers tried to transfer the Irish pronunciation into English as well as they could. This accounts for the alteration in spelling. The aspiration and eclipsis of consonants in Irish are the most common reasons for changes in the words in their anglicised form. Aspiration changes different consonants in different ways, eclipsis is the suppression of sounds of certain radical consonants. Both aspiration and eclipsis are to be clearly seen in writing, but in speech, aspiration substantially changes the sound of consonants and after eclipsis only the sound of the eclipsing letter is heard. Joyce also drew attention to changes in words under the influence of the article, provincial differences in pronunciation, Irish names with English plurals (e.g. raths) and the transmission of oblique forms. This is where the new word is not formed from the nominative case of the old one, but from another case, often the dative or genitive. For instance, 'túlach' means a hill, but Tullyallen near Drogheda ('tulaigh álainn' - beautiful hill) is formed not from the nominative case of the noun but from the genitive. Irish names were also translated directly into English, e.g.

'Cnoc na Seamhar' in Co. Sligo becoming Cloverhill. There was also a tendency to translate strange Irish words into English words that were understood, for example a placename like 'Cúl Choill' becoming Coolhill, with a complete change of meaning. Joyce was well aware of the many placenames that were given false etymologies by imaginative and fanciful Irish country people. Some of these were recognisable as exercises in imagination, but others were less so and seemed plausible enough. While large numbers of Irish names were corrupted in translation, the greatest majority were anglicised correctly, or nearly so.

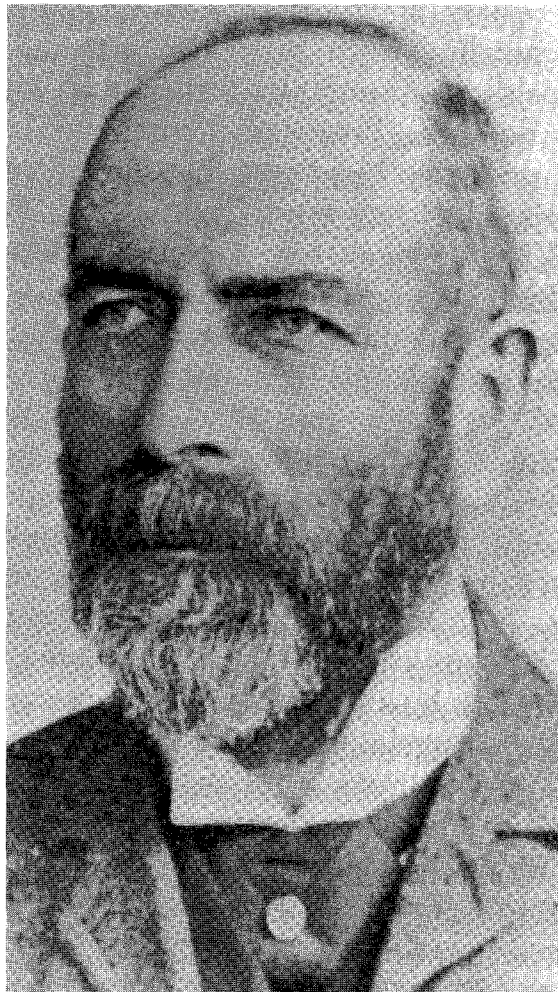
As already said, Joyce's work on placenames is in three volumes. The first volume is in four parts: part I deals with the Irish local name system (some of which we have touched on), part II is titled "Names of Historical and Legendary Origin", the third part considers names commemorating artificial structures and part IV is on the names descriptive of physical features. Volume II is basically a continuation of volume I, though laid out differently. It consists of 26 chapters, the first three dealing with the growth, formation and borrowing of words, the other 23 with the different fields of activity and aspects of life from which names are formed, e.g. offices and trades, the sun, the sea, the animal kingdom, the vegetable kingdom, etc. Volume III is quite different from the other two. It consists of a preface, a short section on the laws of anglicisation and then the rest of the volume, over 570 pages, is made up of lists of Irish placenames, most of which are not to be found in the other two volumes.

P.W. Joyce, in volume I part II, prefaced his investigation into the origin and sources of Irish placenames in the following manner. He wrote: "The face of the country is a book, which if it be deciphered correctly, and read attentively, will unfold more than ever did the cuneiform inscriptions of Persia, or the hieroglyphics of Egypt. Not only are historical events and the names of innumerable remarkable persons recorded, but the whole social life of our ancestors - their customs, their superstitions, their battles, their amusements, their religious fervour, and their crimes - are depicted in vivid and everlasting colours. Their characters are often obscure, and the page defaced by time, but enough remains to repay with a rich reward the toil of the investigator. Let us hold up the scroll to the light and decipher some of those interesting records" (Vol. I, p.86). This is

Joyce's clear statement of the reasons for, and the knowledge to be gained from, the study of placenames, and it remains just as true today as it did over a hundred years ago.

It is not possible or feasible to deal at length or in general with the many and diverse origins and sources of Irish placenames as set out by Joyce in his three bulky volumes. What we propose to do is pick out at random some placenames from different parts of the country which for one reason or another have taken our fancy. There is a village in Roscommon called Knockcroghery, which comes from 'cnoc crocaire', the hangman's hill. Skreen in the neighbouring county of Mayo is said both by Joyce and by Pádraig Dinneen, in his dictionary, to have taken its name from 'Scrín Adamnáin', Adamnán's shrine (Adamnán was a seventh century abbot of Iona). The mellifluous sounding Tooreenablaaha, the name of a townland near Brosna in east Kerry, means the little bleach-green of the flowers. The English-sounding Farside in Cork harbour is in its origins the Irish word 'fearsad', a sandbank near the mouth of a river. Laracor in Co. Kildare, associated in the minds of some with Jonathan Swift and the second woman in his life, Esther Vanhomrigh, comes from 'láithreach cora' – the site of a weir. Drumcliff in Sligo, where W.B. Yeats is buried, is in Irish 'druim cliabh', the hill-ridge of the baskets. Timoleague in Co. Cork was originally 'Teach Molaga', St. Molaga's house. Coolnashinagh in Co. Tipperary is formed from the Irish 'cúl na sionnach', the foxes corner. Ballyboghill in north Co. Dublin is an anglicising of 'baile bachall', the town of the crozier. It is of passing interest that this name still retains its Irish pronunciation in an area where English influence has predominated since the early thirteenth century. Youghal, one of the principal towns in Co. Cork, takes its name from 'eo choill', the wood of the yew trees. The vowel-rich Milleenahorna, the name of townlands in different parts of the country, means the hillock of the barley (eorna). Donnycarney, now a populous district in Dublin's north-side, was originally 'domhnach Cearnach', Cearnach's church, and the innocuous-sounding Clounalour, now a suburb of Tralee, Co. Kerry, comes from 'cluain a' Lohhair', the leper's meadow.

Even from the small random sample that we have taken, the scope and sweep of Joyce's work can be seen. He spread a wide net and his work took in the whole country. This is now considered to be one of the mistakes that he made. He took on too much. He explained the origins of names in parts of the country where he had never been. It is now considered unthinkable for a serious worker in the field of toponymy to attempt to decipher placenames without actually going to the places and becoming familiar with them. Today's experts in the field consider the



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general gist of what Joyce wrote on the subject as sound, but they would not consider his work on particular names as reliable. It is also said that he tended to treat placenames like lexical words and was inclined to attribute the same interpretation to similar-sounding names without being fully knowledgeable of the individual context or without doing the requisite fieldwork. In today's world his work is not considered to be of true academic worth and those engaged in work on Irish placenames, like Breandán Ó Ciobháin, do not consult Joyce. In contrast to this, the Field Notebooks of John O'Donovan, based on his fieldwork and on his studies of Irish manuscripts, continue to be highly regarded and are consulted all the time. Joyce is seen as depending on O'Donovan and on his students, who had no training in the field, for much of his information. He did not consult the English State Papers, nor in any thorough fashion ecclesiastical documents, neither did he go to family papers, like the Ormond deeds, to seek out early documentation of placenames in their anglicised form. Most of the research that he did was in the realm of Irish cultural documents and he largely neglected English documentation, which dealt in a factual, prosaic way with the land of Ireland. Also his fieldwork, which so-to-speak rounds off the circle, was insufficient for the wide-ranging, ambitious project that he attempted. However, all

that said, I have to confess that I spent some time going through the placenames and comparing the interpretations with other sources in an attempt to unearth errors, but I failed to discover anything of significance. But then, of course, I am not an expert in this field.

Such an expert is Breandán Ó Ciobháin, and it might be of some interest to compare and contrast his work methods with those of Joyce. Ó Ciobháin has published four volumes of an estimated twenty-five on Irish placenames. The scope of his work is much more limited and particular than that of Joyce and the work is more clearly sourced. Individual volumes deal only with the placenames of single parishes. Ó Ciobháin's *Toponomia Hiberniae III* is devoted to the placenames of the parish of Kilcrohane in the barony of Dunkerron South in Kerry and volume IV with Templehoe in the same parish. Fieldwork is an important part of Ó Ciobháin's work methodology and he gives all the oral versions of a particular placename which he records on a cassette or on a reel-to-reel tape. He also records from the local people a description of the location, lore, practices or events associated with the place and the informants' interpretation or perception of the name. His principal written sources are the survey carried out by John O'Donovan around 1841, the revision of that in 1896 and the 6-

inch Ordnance Survey maps based on this work. When he is working on the placenames of a particular area, Ó Ciobháin also does studies of the following: the geology, climate, soil, sea level, peat and vegetation of the area, the culture of the people, the standard of spoken Irish of informants and human settlement in the area from the earliest times to post-Famine years. These are the work practices of a modern specialist in this field.

It would not be right or proper to expect that such methods would be found or mirrored in the work of P.W. Joyce, who lived and worked in an earlier period when standards and demands were different. Joyce's work is a popular contribution written for the general public and is infused with passion and feeling for the subject. There is a romantic strain running through it and it is really a product of the Gaelic revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Its importance rests in the fact that it helped to open the minds and eyes of ordinary Irish people to the history, lore, customs and traditions that were around them in their local placenames. Joyce's work also had considerable influence outside this country on people who were studying the placenames of their own countries. This was notably true of Scotland and Wales. It is in these ways and for these reasons that the work is considered to be of seminal importance.