John Stuart to Thomas Pennant, on the mountains of Skye

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Killin March 30th. 1773

Dear Sir

Yours of the 9th. of this month has come safe to my hands, inclosing two of the Prints intended for *your late Tour*, for which I return you thanks. You may believe it must give me no small satisfaction to see from the Press a lively representation of some of these objects, which in your company, I had last summer the pleasure of visiting.

The View of the hills of [illegible]y is I suppose that which was taken from the top of Ben-na-callich,*[1] which you ascended above M^c^Kinnon's of Coire-chattachan. In such a group of mountains I am sorry I cannot pretend to let you know the particular names of all that you have marked.[1]In order to do that with accuracy it was necessary to have gone about it in the spot. I cannot see however that the omission is of much consequence. — The principal hills of this island lie in one continued chain betwixt Loch-Eynord and Strath-suardal, and rise from the S.shore. On the East hand, the high romantick hill of Blà-ven, with it's serrated tops, the inclosed draught marked 2, fixes the attention of [illegible] Beholder. On the West hand the lofty mountain, [illegible] rather cluster of mountains, called Quillin, is no less remarkable, being in height perhaps but little inferior to any in the Highlands of Scotland. The proper Galic name of it is Cuil-fhionn, probably given it from the grey appearance of it's summits which are mostly covered with stones, cùl signifying the back of any thing, and fionn grey or whitish. The intermediate mountains, though some of them are likewise very high, have nothing singular in their appearance, being mostly shaped like a Sugar-loaf.

The mountains above M^c^Kinnon's castle, on the side of which Mr Lightfoot first observed the arbutus Alpina, is called Glash-ven.*[2]

The hill on the East side of Kil-christ or Christ's church, in Strath, the limerocks of which were from the foot to it's very summit almost covered with Dryas' octopetala, is called Ben-huardal.†[3]

The mountain joined by a small low ridge to the East side of Ben-na-callich, is called Ben-na-greean.‡[4] The perpendicular height of it above the level of the sea I found by [illegible] of the Barometer to be 1710 feet. I was computing Ben-na-callich to be at least 5 or 600 feet higher.

The hill which rises immediately to the East of the end of that small loch or arm of the sea, which lies next to Sconsar on the East hand and North shore, is called Mal-more i.e. the great round mountain. About part of it's basis is still visible the remain of an old stone-dyke or fence called Pàraic-nam-fiadh i.e. the inclosure of the deer. In one place another dyke appears to have run up the hills perpendicular to it; and in one of the angles there is still a small pit or cavity. The tradition of the inhabitants is that in the days of Ossian, when men lived by the chace, the whole island was much under wood and abounded in deer; that the design of this, as well as of similar fences still retaining the same name in other parts of Sky was to facilitate the destruction of these animals; that the pit in the corner was at first deep and [illegible] [illegible]overed with branches of trees, so that when they were forced towards it by dogs from

all the more distant parts of the hill, they unwarily fell into it, and found it out of their power to recover themselves. — If you remember we saw in some of the moors of Ilay vestiges of inclosures of the same kind. The opinion there with regard to them seems to be that they were intended for defending the heather from cattle in these early days in which beer is said to have been made of it's tops by the ancient Caledonians.

The round romantick hill above Talisker is called Preeshal;*[5] the highest hill immediately behind it Stocca-mall.[† 6]

The steep abrupt hill above Dun-tuilm is called Sgor-more i.e. the great projecting rock. Dun-tuilm derives it's name from Dùn a fort or castle, and tolm a round grassy eminence. The small island hard by it, near which the vessel anchored, is called elan-tuilm.

The isle of Sky probably derives it's name from the norse word Ski,[‡ 7]which signifies mist. That the names of almost all the other Western isles can only be derived from that language, renders this etymology preferable to any other. It must be owned indeed that this is not a little surprizing, when it is certain that the Islanders have at present hardly the smallest mixture of that Northern tongue in the pure dialect of the Galic language which the greatest part of them speak. It is not unlikely however that the Norwegians might have translated the old expressive Galic names rather than have given them ones altogether different. Some of the natives of Sky observe that their island might at first with great propriety have been denominated eilean-a-cheo i.e. the isle of mist, for that there is at least one of their hills which was hardly ever observed to have wanted a cloud. As their mountains are considerably higher than those of S. and N. Uist, the clouds which come fraught with rain from the bosom of the Atlantick break not till they reach their craggy and barren tops; so that there is often vapour and rain in Sky even when it is fair in those more Western islands. There are however no rivers in it of any consequence. Though it is an island of considerable extent, being fourty computed miles long, yet it is penetrated in so many parts with arms of the sea that water can no where run any way till it is discharged into it. This is so remarkably the case that many derive it's name from the Galic word Sgiathanach i.e. winged.

The only arms of the sea which you had occasion to cross, when in this island, were Loch-Bracadale betwixt Talisker and Dun-vegan being in that place four mile broad; and Loch-grisernis betwixt Dun-vegan and Kingsburgh, being part of Loch-snisort.

The small lakes, which abound in some of the moors of Quillin. merit in a particular manner the attention of the Botanist. Three of them which lie about a mile West of Loch-Sligachan, and particularly that called Loch-na-caiplich, close to the side of which the road passes betwixt Sligachan and Drynoch abound so much with the Eriocaulon Decang: that the beautiful white fibres of it's roots are thrown out upon its sides, in some places to the thickness of ten or twelve inches, like wreck upon the sea-shore. — Almost directly S. from those lakes rise the high mountain of Loch-grisernis

A small loch in the hill above Talisker, called Loch-Laydail, has it's bottom so closely covered with the Plantago uniflora that from its bank it appears entirely green.

A small lake near Duntuilm, by the side of which the Veronica scutilata was observed to grow, is called Loch-cliata.

In the foregoing remarks I have written the names of mountains &c. as agreeably as I could to their common English pronunciation, but wherever there was any considerable difference have likewise written them at the foot of the page according to their true Galic orthography. — Other particulars with regard to Sky I must refer to another occasion. If in this however or any other of the W. isles I omitted to take down any names that you have marked yourself, which I believe was often the case, upon your sending me a list of them, with the day of your journal added on which you have occasion to use them, I shall be sure to send you them back again properly spelt, together with their etymology, when it can be clearly ascertained.

A Clergyman of my acquaintance lives in the island of Mull near the so much famed Staffa. I intend to write him, begging of him to visit it if possible, some time this ensuing summer and send me a description, together with any other particulars he knows with regard to it.

I am

Dear Sir
with much regard
Your most obliged
and most humble Servant

John Stuart

P.S. In your letter you make no mention of one which according to your desire I directed for you at London, but I hope it has come to your hands.

JS—

To

Thomas Pennant Esq.

Downing

Flintshire

S. Britain

83

M[r] Stuart Killin.

on Skie.

Editorial Notes

[1] A copy of the'View from Beinn Na Caillich in Skie' taken by Moses Griffith (presumably one of the two prints referred to above) is enclosed with this letter, with numbers written above the various mountains in the scene.

Authorial Notes

[1] * Or according to the orthography of the Galic language Beinn-na-caillich i.e. the hill of the carline or old wife, said to be called so from a remarkable Gigantic woman which in Fingal's days was ~~buried~~ on it's top. The cairn or heap of stones said to be raised upon her grave is still pointed out, and near it a stone in which there is a hollow 2 or 3 inches deep resembling the human foot. This is the account which Young M[r.] M[c] Innon gave me. Whether the cairn spoken of has the appearance of having been raised by art, or is purely natural, you can probably best judge. ———

[2] *Glais-bheinn i.e. the grey mountain.

[3] †Beinn-shuardal.

[4] ‡Beinn-na-grian i.e. the mountain of the sun. —

[5] *Priseal.

[6] † Stoca-meall.

[7] ‡ *D[r.] M[c]Pherson's Dissert.*