

Lundy's Lost Name

Charles Thomas

Within the broader field of toponymy, the scientific study and analysis of place-names, the names of islands always present special problems. Around the coast of mainland Britain there are hundreds of islands large and small, some constituting proper archipelagoes like Orkney, Shetland and Scilly, but a great many hardly known beyond the nearest parish. All, of course, possess names. Many have, or have had, more than one name, and not necessarily at successive times. The names of a few extremely isolated islands come to us only from post-medieval records; that of Rockall, which is 191 miles west from St Kilda, first appears as 'Rocol' in Willem Janson's map of 1606. At the other end of the scale we have those large islands continuously inhabited since prehistory, where a single name has long been fixed. It is beyond serious dispute that the Isle of Wight is the *Vectis* of Pliny's "Natural History" and Ptolemy's "Geography", and the *Vecta* of Bede around AD 700; and it is highly probable that Ptolemy's *Malaios* or *Maleos* (in Greek) and Adamnán's *Malea* in the late 7th century is the island of Mull.

So what of Lundy? On the testimony of archaeology – but not history – Lundy was inhabited within the last

few centuries BC and the first few AD by (at most) a couple of peasant families farming part of the plateau; remains of field-systems point to some kind of settled agriculture and there is no reason to deny them livestock. Unless these folk were exotic beyond all probability, they spoke British, the Celtic language ancestral to Welsh and Cornish, and people living (sparsely) in the nearest part of what is now north Devon would have spoken the same. It is inconceivable that the latter would not have had (at any given time during this period) a fixed indicative name for so large a feature, visible out to sea for most of the year and from a long stretch of the coastline; just as it is inconceivable that British-speakers in the southern parts of counties Pembroke and Carmarthen, where Lundy can also be seen if slightly less often, lacked an appropriate name. But this by no means implies that it must have been the *same* name. As for the handful of Lundy inhabitants, we can suppose that in the early centuries AD they might well have had the odd small boat; inadequate for crossings to the mainland except in the best of conditions, but perfectly suitable for offshore fishing. We can picture two such folk, out long-lining in dodgy weather, with a mist coming down, and one saying to the other, "Let's get back to the island" (in British **sindan iníssan*, accus sing fem). In the same fashion how often do we say, "I'm just popping into town" or, "Let's drive over to Fred's place", without using a place-name at all? We might also picture, on Lundy in AD 250, the excitement – the wary reception

– of a larger, strange boat arriving, to buy (or steal) a sheep, and the visitors asking, “What’s this place called, then?” To which the answer might be, “Well, we just call it The Island”, or then “But some people over there call it X” and, “There were some people here a while back, they came from [Wales], and *they* called it Y”.

The defectiveness of the island-name record, insular toponymy, is linked to all these factors: a muddle between *internal* names (those used – especially on small islands – by, probably discontinuous, inhabitants), and *external* names (those used by groups at one or more mainland viewpoints, let alone quite separate labels applied by seafarers from afar); and the fragility of the written record in respect of small or remote island properties with little value, and limited appeal as residences. Add to this a well-documented Western British propensity for name *replacement*, and the search becomes even harder. The many islands, ranging from the medium-sized to the tiny, within the Severn Sea exemplify this in abundant detail. Caldey, which is about the same size as Lundy, is easily reached by a short boat-trip from Tenby and is visited annually by thousands. It actually has two names; Caldey (or Caldý – both are used) is recorded as *Caldea* in the early 12th century, *Kaldey* and *Caldey* in 1291 (Norse *kald*, *ey* ‘cold island’), but an alternative Welsh name is Ynys Byr (‘kaldey yw ynys pyr’, 15th cent., ‘Caldey is Ynys Byr’). A supposed saint Piro was abbot of a small monastery here around 500,

according to the early 7th-century Life of St Samson, and it is perfectly possible that in archaic Old Welsh (6th-7th cents.) the island was locally known as ‘Enis Pir[ol]’. It is equally clear that before Piro’s day, when this part of coastal Wales was fully inhabited, the island must have had some other name altogether.

The generic, non-locative nature of internal names can also be demonstrated from the small archipelago of Scilly. The full story of Scilly’s place-names is of extreme complexity but the oldest stratum is British. There was apparently a general place-name used in west Cornwall, bearing in mind that Scilly is often visible from high ground in several parishes of the Land’s End peninsula; it last appears (in Cornish) at the end of the 17th century as Sillan, Zillan, and as with *Vectis* and ‘Wight’ it represents some continuation of the *Silinna* – *Sillina* – *Sylina* forms of Classical authors (‘Scilly’ and the French *Sorlingues* are from English and Scandinavian forms). However until the Middle Ages, when rising sea-levels and erosion began to produce the separate islands we see today, much of Scilly was one large block, not much smaller than modern Guernsey, centred on the present St Mary’s. A few years ago, I showed that this had an internal name – ie. what the several hundreds of inhabitants called it – which just survives as a modern label for the odd road and house, Ennor. This is Old Cornish *en-Noer* (12th cent., *Enor*; 13th, *Inoer*; 14th, *Enoer*, *Enor*), meaning ‘The Land’, and there is no reason to exclude the strong chance that it was as old as the Roman period

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and began as British **sindos dítaros*, same meaning. And here again we have a very fine example of multiple naming in the present Old Town, St Mary's, a pleasant deep inlet and beach flanked by the 12th-century parish Church of the Blessed Virgin and an originally-small fishing village. The internal medieval name for this locality was Porthenor, 'landing place of En(n)or'; Scandinavian visitors about 1150 called it *Maríuhöfn*, 'Mary's Haven' from the new church; because the village was in a natural dip, Norman-French churchmen re-named it in the 13th century as *La Val*, 'the Down-there place'; and when a new main settlement grew up at present Hugh Town in Tudor times, the village (before c.1600, probably an *Dre* 'the town' to its inhabitants, *Enor* to others in Scilly) became 'Old Town' and Porthenor became 'Old Town Bay'. In saying that, happily, sufficient dated records have survived to permit this muddle to be sorted out. I would add that the Old Town story almost certainly typifies a great many other, less well recorded, cases along similar lines.

The present name 'Lundy', as we all know, surfaces in the 14th-century texts of the mid-12th century *Orkneyingasaga*; it may have been quite widely used after c.1100 (1199, *Lundela*, Charter Rolls) and it represents Old Norse *lundi* 'puffin' and *-ey* 'island'. We must assume puffin in the sense of the bright little bird *Fratercula arctica* and not *Puffinus puffinus*, the Manx Shearwater, though in medieval sources 'puffin, pophin' etc., sometimes means the latter. Lundy goes with all the other Severn Sea island names ending in

-ey, *-y*, and *-holm* (*hølmr*, 'islet', generally small) as evidence to the dominating currency or names used by people whose constant sea-traffic required precise identifications, and in their own Scandinavian tongue. The history of the Pacific Ocean in recent centuries, dotted as it is with Midway, Christmas, Easter, Society, Norfolk, Marshall, Fanning, Lord Howe, Three Kings, Henderson, Washington (etc.) islands – all of them ousting perfectly good internal and external names of Polynesian or Melanesian character – somewhat precludes us from criticising the Norse seafarers.

These Norse names are by and large simple and descriptive; they are what might be expected from people whose perceptions were from passing ships. To Lundy and Caldey we could add those in Pembroke, Skomer and Skokholm (which Dr B G Charles has explained as *skálm-ey*, 'Cleft Island' and *stokkr-hólmr* 'island in the sound'); and this has been carried over into English with names like Flat Holm and Steep Holm. Appearance of such, originally alien, labels during the 10th to 12th centuries, does not mean that others ceased to use older names; merely that records of the latter have not always survived. Because Caldey happens to lie offshore from that part of Pembroke containing some of the royal seats (Narberth, probably Carew, possibly Tenby Castle) and because it has been, since the 500s, more or less continuously home to successive religious establishments, the Welsh preference for (and retention of) *Ynys Byr* is quite explicable. In the Severn estuary-mouth, it happened to be

the religious associations of Steep Holm and Flat Holm that led to historical records of their non-Germanic names (non-Germanic, because both had Old English names as well as Norse ones: *Steopan-reolice* and *Bradán-reolice*. 'Steep' and 'Broad' (= 'Flat') plus *re(o)lice* 'Christian burial-ground(?)', like Old Irish *reilig* 'cemetery, cemetery with chapel', Late Latin *reliquiae*). Production in the late 11th to 13th centuries of (Latin) Lives of several major Welsh saints gives us however *Ronech* as the British (Old Welsh) name of Steep Holm, and *Echni* for Flat Holm.

Because of intervisibility with parts of Wales, we might expect some record, even an oblique one, of a Welsh name for Lundy. In fact we have two, though both are oblique indeed. The remarkable collection of early Welsh tales lumped together in modern times as 'The Mabinogion' represents selective transmission of oral recitations with heroic, royal and mythological themes committed to literary form in the Middle Welsh period. They are exceptionally difficult to understand and to analyse, but the material is plainly pre-Norman and some of the stories may have originated in the court circles of *Demetia* (Dyfed, or the former south-western counties of Pembroke and Carmarthen). Linked to them are what survives of a body of ancient poetry; and in the Book of Taliesin there is a poem *Preiddeu Annwn* which, as Professor Roger Loomis showed, must mean 'The Spoils (or Plunder) of the Other-World', and whose language, despite the medieval recension, Sir Ifor Williams would compare to

composition of c.900.

The poem's contents need not concern us, except that the Welsh concept of the otherworld preferably embraced, not the subterranean regions or the sky but mysterious islands; and it begins with mention of *karchar gweir ygkaer sidi* 'the prison of Gweir, in the Fairy Castle'. Of this, Sir John Rhys had commented, "It is not improbable that the legend about Gweir located his prison on Lundy, as the Welsh name of that island appears to have been Ynys Wair, 'Gwair's Isle'". The italics are mine, because there is an implication we cannot now check, that in the last century Rhys had encountered this name, somewhere in Dyfed, still known as a name for Lundy. In her vast study of another collection of Welsh sources, the *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* or 'Triads', Dr Rachel Bromwich drew attention, first to a triad naming 'Three Exalted Prisoners of the Island of Britain' of which the third is Gweir, son of Geirioedd, again; and second, from what is admittedly a late text (The Names of the Islands of Britain), a reference to Britain's 'Three Adjacent Islands', and twenty-seven subordinate ones. Only the former, *teir prif rac ynys* ('three prime (chief) fore-islands' – cf. the same usage in Cornish, where *Raginnis* is the real name of the little St Clements Isle, the 'adjacent-isle' just off Mousehole) are named. The first two are Môn and Manaw, Anglesey and the Isle of Man. The third should of course be the Isle of Wight, the Roman-period *Vectis* or *Vecta*, whose name in Old Welsh was *inis Gueth* (Nennius), and later Ynys Weith. In fact the

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triad has 'Ynys Weir'. One disagrees reluctantly with Dr Bromwich's authority in her own field, but it strikes me as inherently more likely that this – for some reason we cannot recover, connected with the composition of the tract – is the name of Lundy, and not an alternative label for Wight at all.

If Ynys Wair (or Weir) is a name for Lundy originating in pre-Norman times and still dimly recalled in Sir John Rhys's lifetime (1840-1915; his *Celtic Folk-Lore: Welsh and Manx* appeared in 1901), I think it probable that it arose in that region of south-west Wales where Lundy can be seen on the horizon, and was indeed confined to that region. There is a rather similar case in Scilly, where the scatter of high rocks and islets called 'the Eastern Isles' can be just seen from, and is closest to, Land's End. All the components now have their own names but until rising sea-level separated them they formed a tract whose British (Old Cornish) name we might reconstruct as **Guenhyly* (possibly 'briny waste; unenclosed salt-sprayed area'; the name partly survives in (Great and Little) Ganilly, two of the islets). Some of these once-hillocks exhibit large and prominent megalithic cairns with passage tombs, visible from a boat. The role of distantly-seen islands all over the Celtic-speaking world as 'Isles of the Blessed' or 'of the Dead', quite apart from acting as Prisons, needs little comment. The present 'Great Arthur', which has about ten such cairns, was *Arthurs Ile* in 1570 (a Godolphin lease). How far back this ascription may be pushed we cannot tell, possibly not before the

Arthurian 'revival' of Geoffrey of Monmouth's mid-12th century writings; but we can suppose that, among west Cornish stories, one of them regarded this tomb-studded ridge in the nearest and just visible, *Guenhyly*, part of *Sillan* as a local claimant to the site of 'Avalon' and Arthur's resting-place.

The second potential Welsh name for Lundy is peculiar, perhaps unique, in that it must be an invention and not a genuine 'organic' place-name at all. I have previously given a re-assessment of the results of the work in 1969 at the Beacon Hill cemetery, Lundy's main Early Christian site, and suggested that the burial-ground's focus – probably in the latter half of the 6th century – was the elaborate special grave in a rectangular setting of granite slabs, filled with a mound or cairn, where the primary cist-burial had been exposed and emptied in a secondary (7th-century?) phase (Thomas 1992). Rather fuller discussion appeared in my book *And Shall These Mute Stones Speak? Post-Roman Inscriptions in Western Britain* (Cardiff, 1994, especially chaps.8 to 10), where the person so entombed is identified as Brachan or 'Brychan', the eponymous ruler of the early Welsh Brycheiniog (roughly, the northern part of the county of Brecon or Brecknock). Assuming that, towards the end of his life, Brachan retreated to what was then a small Christian community, a monastery, on Lundy – implied by the oldest inscribed stones and by the archaeology of Beacon Hill – I argued (and would still argue) that his remains were exhumed and enshrined at the nearest

mainland British monastery, now represented by the church and surrounds at Stoke (St Nectan), Hartland; and furthermore that the 'Saint Nectan' of subsequent (10th-12th cents.) writings and a medieval cult is none other than Brachan under his name assumed as a monk.

The earliest source for the history of Brycheiniog is an internal writing, a compendium now called *De Situ Brecheniauc* 'About the region Of Brycheiniog', surviving (in Latin) in a sole and late, c.1200, manuscript (British Library Cotton Vespasian A, xiv). In yet another book, too intricate in content to be summarised here, I want to show that *DSB* contains a genuine, shorter historical tract probably written in the later 7th century, to which other items were added; the whole then being paraphrased (in the 10th century) in a second compendium, *Cognacio Brychan*, which we know only from a transcript made after 1500. Those added items include a statement about the graves of four men from the royal house of Brycheiniog; Brachan's father Anlach, who was an aristocrat of Irish descent from Pembroke, Brachan himself, his first son *Canauc* ('Cynog') who became the patron saint of Brecon, and his second son Rein, who succeeded him as king. The little list must post-date the deaths and burials of Cynog and Rein, both of whom cannot have lived later than 565-575, and I am inclined to see it as not necessarily much later than 600. The graves of Anlach, Cynog and Rein were all at known Early Christian locations in Brycheiniog (now Llansbyddyd,

Merthyr Cynog and Llandefaelogfach). Brachan's was not. It was not even within his kingdom, and the admission of so unusual a fact alone implies that this must have been common knowledge at the time of writing, and therefore presumably true.

The original Latin text of *DSB* can, apart from the several-times updated spellings of proper names, be reconstructed with a good deal of confidence. The entry for Brachan was: *sepulchrum Brachan est in insula que vocatur Enis Brachan que est iuxta Manniam*, 'The grave of Brachan is in the island which is called 'Island of Brachan', which is next to *Mannia*.' The last word, which occurs in another item in the compendium, is the result of two miscopyings by later hands who no longer recognised what it was meant to be. The context makes it plain that it almost certainly began as *Damnoniam* or even *Damnaniam*, and we can see how continuous script, *iuxtadamnaniam*, might carelessly yield *iuxtamanniam*. It is a post-Roman version of the general, Roman-period, term for the south-west peninsula; Gildas in the 6th century wrote it as *Damnonia*. We have an 'adjacent island', and the Latin *iuxta Damnaniam*, if it had ever been turned into written Old Welsh, might have appeared as **rac Divnein(t)*.

The whole of the county of Brecon, and early Brycheiniog as a small kingdom centred on the upper Usk Valleys, is land-locked. If Brachan, who may have lived from c.490 to 550, planned to end his days in Christian retreat on Lundy, his most likely route would have taken him down the Usk to its mouth at Newport,

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where (under the present St Wooloo's Cathedral) there may have been a royal seat overlooking the mouth of the Usk, a seat of the Prince Gwynllw who in medieval sources is said to have married Brachan's daughter Guladis. In a direct line, and because of the Glamorgan bulge it is a curve, Lundy is 86 miles from Newport and certainly not visible from the Usk mouth. Alternatively, from Brycheiniog, one can travel down the river Neath to its outflow, which is about 46 miles from Lundy (and, skirting the Mumbles, a direct line). Lundy is sometimes visible from the high ground, the southern spurs of Fforest Fawr or the Brecon Beacons. Possibly in the 6th century AD it had a name, though there is no reason to think that (as in Dyfed) the name was necessarily Ynys Wair.

The most, by way of information, that may have trickled back to Brycheiniog was that their elderly king, having reached the coast, went by boat to an island known to lie offshore from Damnonia, as Devon-and-Cornwall; where, at this period, any small monastic house is likely to have been an offshoot of one of the many major late 5th-century establishments in south-east Wales. By definition, as with Piro and Ynys Byr, it cannot have been called 'Enis Brachan' until Brachan had been buried there. Nor can one see, with any persuasion, why those few persons on the Glamorgan coast who had any reason ever to use the name of so small and distant a feature should adopt a fresh name involving the dead ruler of another, inland, kingdom. We have to see Enis Brachan as a pious

invention, a literary figure, supplied by a writer who knew that the island existed but had absolutely no idea of its actual contemporary name, or names.

Turning, at last, to what the British-speaking inhabitants of north-west Devon and north Cornwall, the viewers-from-land *en masse* as opposed to a tiny minority of indigenous mariners, may have called Lundy, there is not much left to say. It is curious that none of the Classical geographers seems to have named Lundy. Ptolemy's 2nd century Geography gives certain island names around Britain and Ireland, though none of the few unlocated names can be identified as Lundy. Cornish *enys* 'island' (it has other meanings, like 'isolated place, land beside waters') is found in Innis Pruen (Mullion Island), the *-innis* of St Clements Isle, Mousehole, and only a few among the hundred-odd isles and rocks of Scilly. The last mentioned includes Innisidgen - 'Ox Isle', Innisvrack - 'Frenchman's Isle', Illiswilgic or Inniswilsack - 'Grassy Isle', and Innisvouls - meaning uncertain, which are all pretty small and uninhabitable. Around the coasts of Devon and Cornwall are larger islands, like St George's Isle off Looe, whose pre-English names have simply not survived. It is therefore no better than a guess to suggest that, from the relevant stretches of Devon and Cornwall in pre-Norman times, Lundy's name may have involved *enis* 'island'; on its own, or with an adjective (like the Irish 'High Island'; Ardoileán, Co. Galway), or a personal name (like 'Ynys Wair'). It may on the other hand have been of the same

type as *Ronech* for Steep Holm and *Echni* for Flat Holm; both of very uncertain meaning (*Echni* may be a personal name). I offer one last suggestion. The place-names of North Devon have not been exhaustively studied (what area in Britain has been?) and one can never be sure that extremely localised names will not be found in unpublished early documents of private origin, like grants and leases. The vast parish of Hartland does have a very few surviving names of British, not Old and Middle English, origin; *Trellick*, in 1249 *Trevelak*, is an instance. As far as I know, the place-name 'Hartland Quay' is entirely modern. Some few years ago, for West Cornwall, Peter Pool's careful examination of the obscure Penheleg Manuscript of 1580 (the rights of the Arundells of Lanherne, as lords of Penwith hundred) brought to light correct readings of scores of place-names whose significance had never been observed. They included the hitherto-unknown *Gonhellye under Meen*, and *Porth Gone Hollye*, both for the 'porth' or landing-place at the southern end of Whitesand Bay, Sennen, which faces Scilly. Subsequently I was able to show that the forgotten 'Porth Goonhilly' (or similar) was so-called because it was the beach for 'Goonhilly', the Eastern Isles of Scilly as the nearest landfall across; as if Millbay at Plymouth was now re-named 'Roscoff Dock'. It is at least possible that, even as late as the foundation of Hartland Abbey, the difficult but convenient landing-place at Hartland Quay retained the element *porth* (if so, as Port-) and this may even have been followed by

the name of Lundy in its pre-Norse guise. Hartland parish has 18,000 acres. Down to the lowest level of field, cliff and rock names, it must have possessed thousands of place-names, only a fraction of which have been collected and published. Most such place-names will remain in obscure, and private, manuscript settings. Here is a real challenge to another generation of Lundy enthusiasts.

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