

Southern Scottish Hill Generics: Testing the Gelling and Cole Hypothesis

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Gelling and Cole have argued for English hill-names (specifically those incorporated into settlements) that the different generics represent different topographies or shapes all across the land. Their hypothesis is important enough to quote in detail:

... groups of words which can be translated by a single modern English word such as 'hill' or 'valley' do not contain synonyms. Each of the terms is used for a different kind of hill, valley or whatever ... The key to Anglo-Saxon topographical naming lies in the precise choice of one of the many available words for ... hills ... these names represent a system which operated over most of England ... [except] the south-west peninsula, where English speech arrived several centuries later ...¹

Is this true of Scots hill-generics too? Can we have a valid typology of hill-generics applying across southern Scotland, in the way that Gelling and Cole have done for most of England—although their work is on hill toponyms that have been taken into settlement names, by definition lower hills?² Pratt has attempted a small-scale application of Gelling and Cole's methodology to settlements in southern Scotland, and her tentative conclusion, on this limited sample, was that their interpretation of six of the nine elements might be supported in this area.³ The nine elements she chose to explore were limited to Old English,⁴ and

¹ M. Gelling and A. Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stamford, 2000), pp. xiii, xiv and xv.

² It might be objected that comparing Gelling and Cole's toponyms that underlie settlements in England, with non-habitative hill oronyms in Scotland, is inequitable, but as the extract quoted from page xiii makes clear, they entered no such codicil themselves.

³ S. Pratt, 'Summer landscapes: investigating Scottish topographical place-names', *Nomina*, 28 (2005), 93–114.

⁴ *Clif, dūn, denu, heafod, hōh, ness, ofer/ufer, scelf and scēot.*

to lower hills, relatively diminutive in the landscape of the region; however, linguistically Scotland between the Forth–Clyde line and the English border is not homogenous, Old English being only part of its onomastic layering: Gaelic, Cumbric, Scandinavian and Scots are also major toponymic players.

A brief note of caution is necessary on older forms of the names. Not only is England better served in old forms of names—a point explored by Nicolaisen⁵—but hill-toponyms are invariably attested much later than settlement names, for reasons such as their unimportance for taxation and land transfer recording. In consequence Gelling and Cole’s work can furnish much earlier forms of their considered names, which are settlement names incorporating toponyms, than can be done for most of the higher hills of Scotland.⁶

Gaelic and Scots hill-generics

Gaelic hill-generics in southern Scotland are confined mainly to Galloway, south and west of the River Nith, where all the ‘usual suspects’, so common in the Highlands, may be found.⁷ Whilst Gaelic in this south-west area dominates the hill-generics, especially of the highest hills (e.g. Merrick, Benyellary, Craiglee and Mulldonoch⁸), it does not have exclusivity, as names like Cairnsmore, Windy Standard, and Fell of Fleet demonstrate. (Some of these may be names replacing earlier Gaelic hill-names, Gaelic having died out by the sixteenth century.⁹)

⁵ W. F. H. Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names*, new edn (Edinburgh, 2001), pp. 22ff.

⁶ In the RMS (Register of the Great Seal, records of land transfer for 1306 on), only five hills in southern Scotland appear in nearly as many centuries (Criffel, Tinto, Queensberry, Cairn Table and Hart Fell).

⁷ *Beinn*, *beinnan*, *bàrr*, *càrn*, *cnoc*, *creag*, *druim*, *dùn*, *lurg*, *meall* (usually as *mill* or *mull*), *sròn* and *torr*.

⁸ The earliest records of these (J. Blaeu, *Atlas Novus*, vol. 5 (1654)) are respectively *Bin Maerack* (beinn meurach ‘branched hill’), *Bennellury* (beinn na h- iolair, eagle hill), *Kraigluy* (creag liath ‘grey crag’) and *Mealdanach* (meall donach, ‘? hill’). H. Maxwell, *The Place-Names of Galloway* (Glasgow, 1930) contains a full discussion of the Gaelic place-names of Galloway.

⁹ J. MacQueen, ‘The Gaelic speakers of Galloway and Carrick’, *Scottish Studies*, 17 (1973), 17–34.

Figure 1 outlines the distribution of Gaelic oronyms (hill-toponyms) in the south-west. The high ground east and north-east of the Nith, all the way to the North Sea, bears by contrast virtually no trace of Gaelic, and might fairly be considered as a monolingual zone of Scots generics.

Of course there are several hill toponyms in use in southern Scotland: *hill* is widespread, with 30% to 40% of all hill-names bearing it; whilst *dod*, *knowe*, *rig* and *pen* (this last from Cumbric) are among the commoner generics found in varying percentages in different parts of the area: but I want to focus for the moment on two very important hill-generics in this central and eastern area, *law* and *fell*.

Law

Law, the ubiquitous south-eastern Scots toponym for a hill, apparently began its northward journey from southern England as *hlāw*, a West Saxon term “primarily ... used for artificial mounds” and “generally preferred by the Anglo-Saxons for their own barrow burials”, although they also raised such mounds for meeting-place markers.¹⁰ Gelling goes on to state that north of the Mersey–Humber line however:

hlāw is commonly used of natural hills, and sometimes of mountains ... in such L[ancashire] names as Horelaw and Pike Law, and this is common in southern Scotland. In N[orthumberland] *hlāw* is one of the commonest terms for a natural hill ...¹¹

While it certainly is a northern English word, nevertheless there are only forty-five *law* hills on 1:50,000 maps in England (almost all in northern Northumberland, within a few miles of the Scottish border),¹² but over four times as many in Scotland (196), as well as being more geographically extensive, and many of these are mapped in Figure 2. It is thus in Scotland that the toponym came fully into its own. The word *law* (also *lawe*, *lau(e)* or *la*) is attested in Scots as early as the twelfth century,¹³ although it may of course have been coined in the preceding

¹⁰ Gelling and Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names*, p. 178.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹² Digimap data: Durham has two, Lancashire has one.

¹³ *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, edited by W. Craigie *et al.*

Old English period. It was used for settlement names for farms especially in the Tweed basin, built on gentle *law* hills (e.g. *Lempedlawe*, c.1190, now Lempitlaw hamlet).¹⁴ Figure 3 maps the distribution of extant *law* farm names in the south-east.

Probably at a later stage, the term was transferred, as in Northumberland, to identify larger hills beyond the farmland.¹⁵ Some of these *laws* are very distinctive, especially those rising out of coastal lowland like a shark's fin cutting the fields, their names and shapes being far more familiar to the urban Scot than those in the Borders ranges. One does not need Latin to grasp the essence of this:

Montes parvo intervallo circumscripti quidam singulares sunt qui nostratibus a Law dictatur, quales varii per Scotiam inuversam, ut North Berwick Law, Drumpender Law [old name of Traprain Law], Largo Law, Dundee Law ...¹⁶

In reality these four are unusual laws: most of the remaining couple of hundred are part of the southern hill ranges and would not startle any horizon, being as Hogg said: "The common green dumpling-looking hills ... generally named Laws".¹⁷ But even with such undistinguished silhouettes, *law* has made an impression on Scottish hills that it did not make in England, for it is found not only in numbers but also in extent,

(Edinburgh, 1931–2002); also available at www.dsl.ac.uk (hereafter *DOST*): *Law*, n²; 1150 *Raperlau*, 1147–52 *Wythelawe*; 1159 *Grenlaw*, *Grenelau*, *et alia*.

¹⁴ M. G. Williamson, 'The Non-Celtic Place-Names of the Scottish Border Counties' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1942), pp. 119–29, lists fifty-three instances of *law* for which she had found a historic form, in the counties of Berwickshire, Dumfriesshire, Roxburghshire and Selkirk. Six of these are apparently purely hill-names, and eight have the name applying both to a settlement and an adjacent (as opposed to underlying) hill.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: while most of Williamson's forty-seven listed farm names are attested from the twelfth to the mid-sixteenth century, all the purely hill-names are first attested in Blaeu, *Atlas Novus* (e.g. *Mosyla Hill*, now *Mozie Law*), which is based on Timothy Pont's late sixteenth-century mapping.

¹⁶ R. Sibbald, *Scotia Illustrata* (Edinburgh, 1684).

¹⁷ James Hogg, *Transactions of the Highland Society* (1882, p. 285), quoted in *Scottish National Dictionary*, edited by W. Grant and D. Murison (Edinburgh, 1929–1976); also available at www.dsl.ac.uk (hereafter *SND*).

right up the east coast to Aberdeenshire, across to the Renfrew Heights in the west, and into the Ochils north of the Forth.

Fell

Fell is a word of Scandinavian origin from Old Norse *fell* or *ffjall*.¹⁸ The mountains of Cumbria are usually called the Lakeland Fells,¹⁹ and it was there that the word *fell* entered Northern Middle English as a loan word, c.1300.²⁰ As with several northern English hill-words, it straddles the Scottish border and is found widely in Dumfriesshire, Kirkcudbrightshire and Wigtownshire; it is attested in Scots from the mid-fifteenth century onwards.²¹ As Figure 2 shows, it is found in Dumfries and Galloway,²² with two main groupings: a western group on the lower hills in Wigtownshire and on the coasts of Kirkcudbrightshire, and an eastern group in the high hills of north Dumfriesshire, this disparate distribution suggesting at least two centres of diffusion. This suggestion is strengthened when we examine the two groups more closely. The eastern group (several are listed in Figure 6 below) are high, many over 400m. and bear Scots or English specifics (e.g. Hart Fell, Dod Fell, Scaw'd Fell), and appear to be stable names with no older alternative forms. The western group are low, often below 250m., some with Scots specifics (e.g. Quarter Fell): many however appear to have accreted the specific *fell* as a late epexegetic (or tautology) for the benefit of non-Gaelic speakers, for names like Knock Fell, Cairnerzean Fell, Barskeoch Fell, Changue Fell and Craigmoddie Fell contain a Gaelic hill-generic (respectively *cnoc*,

¹⁸ D. Whaley, *A Dictionary of Lake District Place-Names* (Nottingham, 2006), p. 397, says that the two words referred respectively to a single hill and mountainous country, though not exclusively or consistently, but both resulted in *fell*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 397, contains a good definition in the glossary.

²⁰ *DOST*, s.v. *fell*, n¹. The first two attestations in H. Kurath and S. M. Kuhn, *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1952–2001), are for 1300 and 1325.

²¹ *DOST*, s.v. *fell*, n¹. "... on the fell above the Dowlwerk and ane on the watchfell" (1448).

²² Galloway is historically (since 1186) composed of the counties of Wigtownshire and Kirkcudbrightshire: prior to this it also contained part of southern Ayrshire (Carrick) and western Dumfriesshire.

càrn, *bàrr*, *teanga* and *creag*).²³ We know from *SND* that *fell* continued to be a productive word in Scots into the twentieth century: and the maps of Blaeu and Roy, early seventeenth and mid-eighteenth century respectively,²⁴ record nine and fourteen hills whose generics were *hill*, *craig*, etc. then, but are now *fells*. They are mainly in this western group, as shown in Figure 4.

Law / fell distribution

Given that *law* and *fell* are two of the most important hill-generics, one striking feature of their distribution is their almost complete mutual exclusivity, the former in the north-east Borders, the latter in the south-west.²⁵ The watersheds between the Teviot, Tweed and Clyde to the north, and the Esk and Annan to the south, form a weaving line from east to west, north of which lie *laws*, south of which lie *fells*, with very few onomastic erratics.

There are indeed a few exceptions on either side where isolated *laws* and *fells* cross into the other's territory, but most are minor tops. The most substantial one is Culter Fell, Lanarkshire (748m.), some 15km. north of the watershed and indeed of any other *fell*: formerly known as *Fiends Fell*, and with stream generics *beck* and *gill* on its slopes, it may well be an imported name from Cumbria, perhaps with a landowner or farmer.²⁶ Figure 5 focuses in on an area of the water-

²³ Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names*, p. 139, wrote of fell names in Galloway thus: "The great majority of this group of names cannot be called Scandinavian as they have obviously been coined by English speakers, mainly using other geographical names as first elements although not exclusively so". My own research indicates that of extant hill-names in *fell*, only Criffel may be of authentic Scandinavian origin, being mapped as *Crafel* in c.1330, prior to its first attestation in Scots.

²⁴ Blaeu, *Atlas Novus*, vol. 5; W. Roy, *Military Survey of Scotland, 1747–1755* (sheets 1–10); also available at www.nls.uk/maps.

²⁵ I. M. Matley, 'Topographic terms of southern Scotland: their distribution and significance', *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 106 (1990), 108–12 (p. 109), has briefly drawn attention to this, but did not investigate it in depth.

²⁶ P. Drummond, 'A fiendish puzzle', *Scottish Place-Name Society Newsletter*, 21 (2006), 11–12. Possibly related to Cross Fell, also formerly *Fiends Fell*, in the north Pennines.

Figure 4. OS-mapped fells with earlier differing names

Modern OS fell name	County²⁷	Blaeu map	Roy map
Artfield Fell	WIG	Artfield	—
Balmurrie Fell	WIG	—	Balmurrie Hill
Barskeoch Fell	WIG	Hill of Kraichlaw	Barskeoch Hill
Cairnerzean Fell	WIG	—	Carn of Carnearn
Carter Fell	ROX	—	The Carter
Cooms Fell	ROX	Coumms	—
Craig Airie Fell	WIG	Hill of Kraigary	—
Craigenlee Fell	WIG	Kraigluy Hill	Craigluy
Culvennan Fell	WIG	—	Benan Hill
Eldrick Fell	WIG	—	Hill of Eldrick
Fell of Barhullion	WIG	—	Barrullian Hill
Fell of Pingerrach ²⁸	AYR	Bingerrach Hill	—
Garrock Fell	DMF	—	Garroch Hill
Gleniron Fell	WIG	—	Craig Dow
Knock Fell	WIG	Knockglass Hill	Knock of Luce
Mochrum Fell	WIG	Kairn of Mochrum	Mochrum Hill
Raeshaw Fell	ROX	—	Bushy Hill
Scaesburgh Fell	ROX	—	Black How
Whitegrain Fell	DMF	Cleopp Hill	—

²⁷ AYR = Ayrshire; DMF = Dumfriesshire; ROX = Roxburghshire; WIG = Wigtownshire.

²⁸ Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names*, pp. 74ff., has argued that many ‘X of Y’ names in Scotland represent a translation of the generic from Gaelic to Scots. However, this example indicates that this does not apply here, since Pingerrach is probably from *peighinn*, a land measure, and *fell* is therefore not a translation of an oronym. Only two of the eleven instances of *Fell of* could possibly be translations of an oronym—Fell of Barhullion and Fell of Craigcaffie.

shed where there are, on either side, a few ‘strays’ of generally lesser significance than Culter Fell: *fells* in Upper Teviotdale (north of the watershed) include the considerable Skelfhill Fell and the insubstantial Byehass Fell, both just over the watershed line, and Dryden Fell and Pike Fell and a few others nearer Hawick.²⁹ Significantly the few *fell* hills further to the north-east of this, in Roxburghshire nearer The Cheviot, were not *fells* in Roy’s 1755 map: the current Carter Fell was *The Carter*,³⁰ Raeshaw Fell was *Bushy Hill*, and Scraesburgh Fell was *Black How*—which suggests they were late re-namings using the generic. Similarly, of the three fells on the upper Nith, two appear to be late re-namings, Garroch Fell originally being *Garroch Hill* (or *Meikle Hill* on Roy), and Cruffel appearing as *Whame Hill* on the same map. Meanwhile, south of the watershed in *fell* terrain, Cauld, Spots, Mood and Wether Laws are all very minor tops on shoulders, of little distinction.

Law / fell topography

Could the separation between *law* and *fell* reflect topographical differences?

Geologically there is little to distinguish *fells* and *laws*: most of both groups are in an area of sedimentary rocks of the Paleozoic era;³¹ three major granitic intrusions account for The Cheviot (mainly *laws*), as well as the Fell of Fleet area and the Criffel massif in Galloway (both mainly *fells*). In terms of surface features, glaciation in this area was centred in the Moffat and Tweedsmuir hills (i.e. an area with many important *fells* and *laws*), the glaciers moving east from there.³² No obvious differentiating clues in the geology or geomorphology

²⁹ Cold Fell and Philhope Fell (see Fig. 15b) are very minor tops, the latter an alternative name for Calfshaw Head.

³⁰ And Carterhill in M. Stobie, *A Map of Roxburghshire or Tiviotdale* (London, 1770), also available at www.nls.uk/maps.

³¹ Ordovician in the Lammermuir / Moorfoot / Broughton Heights area, Silurian for most of the Southern Upland area, and Devonian sandstone in eastern Roxburghshire.

³² C. Gillen, ‘The physical landscape’, in *The Borders Book*, edited by D. Omand (Edinburgh 1995), pp. 11–20 (p. 14).

then, but it is worth examining whether erosion has given them distinct topographic ‘personalities’. Figure 6 is a table taking into account, from Ordnance Survey maps and personal observation on the ground, various characteristics that might be relevant.³³

I found that no matter what criterion was used (e.g. nature of summit area, absolute or relative height, steep slopes), there was nothing to distinguish one set of oronyms from the other. The two highest, and the only two with sizeable cliffs, are one *law* and one *fell*—Broad Law has a slightly broader plateau top than Hart Fell, while the latter has more extensive cliffs: similar matching pairs can be found for any criterion through the sample. I have to conclude that there are no apparent topographical distinctions between the two, and that their distribution reflects linguistic or dialect patterns, name-givers choosing from their ‘local’ generic.

Conclusion

The area of southern Scotland under consideration is a lot less extensive than the Anglo-Saxon England considered by Gelling and Cole, and in which they found uniformity in the application of hill toponyms. I have argued in this article that the higher ground of Galloway in the south-west has its own set of Gaelic toponyms, that do not occur over the bulk of southern Scotland, although there are some Scots oronyms mainly round its fringes. Leaving aside the Gaelic group, there is a division within the Scots-speaking areas, into the south-west where *fell* is a common generic, and the north-east and beyond where *law* is common. Further, even within these two broad divisions, there are significant sub-divisions. *Fells* are, in Wigtownshire and coastal Kirkcudbrightshire, generally lower hills, often apparently late coinages or epexegetics, and they fail to be represented in the large number of hill-names in the higher ground of the Galloway hill massif; whereas in Dumfriesshire, *fells* form the generic for many of the highest hills

³³ The ten *laws* and eight *fells* from A. Dawson, *The Relative Hills of Britain* (Milnthorpe, 1992), section 28, were selected, they—with their 150m.+ drop on all sides—being the highest and most relatively distinct ones: two other fells (Loch Fell and Arnton Fell) were added to produce equal numbers. Consideration of other *laws* and *fells* outwith the sample indicated that it is representative.

along the northern watershed (listed in Figure 6, several being over 500m.). *Laws*, as Figure 6 demonstrates, can match the highest *fells* in height and ruggedness: but, as the quotations from *SND* indicate, the generic also applies to the isolated—although not especially high—hills, prominent on the coastal plains, like North Berwick and Dundee Laws (187m. and 174m. respectively), and additionally to the “common green dumpling-looking hills” that make up much of the lower ranges (c.300–450m.) such as the Cheviots and Lammermuirs. Further, as noted earlier, this generic seems originally to have applied to the gentle low rises, suitable for farm sites, in the Tweed basin, at heights 10–30m. above the surrounding land: it is difficult to compare these early forms with those of northern England, since the quotation from Gelling and Cole above (p. 89) is all they say on the element in the north.³⁴ A study has still to be done on the relationship between *law* settlement names and topography (both those on which the settlements stand, those adjacent, and those on the horizon), for both sides of the border, which may shed more light on this generic’s process of transfer.

In conclusion, although the Gelling and Cole hypothesis is valid for oronyms (*within* settlement names) in Anglo-Saxon England, it is difficult to detect such a universal standard for hills in the non-Gaelic parts of southern Scotland

³⁴ Gelling and Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names*, p. 180: “This impressionistic treatment of *hlāw/hlΣw* compounds has been included here instead of a thorough analysis in a reference section because only a small proportion of the material is contained in settlement-names.”

Figure 6. A comparison of law and fell hills

Specific	Fell / Law	g.r.	m.	Steep slopes?	Crags, cliffs?	Summit area?	Drop to col
Broad	Law	NT 1423	840	3 sides	north corrie	broad plateau	150
Hart	Fell	NT 1113	808	4 sides	east corrie	broad plateau	200
Culter	Fell	NT 0529	748	1 side	No	assymetric	270
Loch	Fell	NT 1704	688	1 side	No	rounded	124
Capel	Fell	NT 1606	678	2 sides	outcrop low down	conical	60
Windlestraw	Law	NT 3743	659	1 side	No	flattened cone	180
Ward	Law	NT 2615	594	1 side	No	assymetric	95
Scald	Law	NT 1961	579	2 sides	No	narrow plateau	100
Roan	Fell	NY 4593	568	1 side	No	wide plateau	70
Turner Cleuch	Law	NT 2820	551	1 side	No	narrow plateau	50
Scaw'd	Fell	NT 1402	550	2 sides	no	narrow plateau	150
Deuchar	Law	NT 2829	543	no	No	rounded	100
Ellson	Fell	NY 4198	537	3 sides	No	narrow ridge	100
Larriston	Fell	NY 5692	512	no	No	large plateau	300
Wether	Law	NT 1948	479	2 sides	No	narrow ridge	80
Broomy	Law	NT 0842	426	1 side	No	rounded	105
Arnton	Fell	NY 5294	405	3 sides	No	narrow plateau	140
Dirrington Gt	Law	NT 6954	398	3 sides	No	conical	145
Grange	Fell	NY 2481	319	no	No	rounded	60
North Berwick	Law	NT 5584	187	4 sides	No	conical	130