

**BRITISH PLACE-
NAMES IN THEIR
HISTORICAL SETTING**

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British Place-Names in Their Historical Setting by Edmund McClure

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EDMUND MCCLURE

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BY

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PREFACE

THE aim of this work is to present and discuss British Place-names as they occur chronologically in authentic historical documents from 54 B. C. till A. D. 1154. The documents used are for the most part such as exist in critical editions and have been printed from the best texts. In this way the errors of later copyists are excluded, and the changes which time has effected, in such forms as have come down to us, brought under more or less definite laws.

The consecutive narrative which this work presents serves the purpose of a history of Britain during the period under review, thus rendering the discussion of the place-names associated with this historic thread the more instructive and interesting. Such elucidation of these names as the writer ventures to offer is the result of studies in leisure hours extending over some thirty years and more. The nucleus of the work has already appeared in a serial, but the whole would probably never have seen the light in volume form if it had not been for the urgency of friends who were good enough to attach to them more value than they possess in the writer's mind. I have to acknowledge special help from one of these friends, my brother-in-law the Rev. George Herbert, who has been good enough to revise the proofs of the portion of the book dealing with the Roman Itineraries.

Nov. 1909.

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INTRODUCTION

IF there were no written histories of our country we should still be able to construct one from things as they are. The present is the inheritor of all the ages, and the whole past is summed up in the state of things of to-day. The language we speak, for instance, involves in it the record of the vicissitudes through which our race has passed throughout the ages. The progress of our civilization is to be traced in the *words* we now use, the history of the interminglings of our ancestors in past ages is to be found in our present *vocabulary*, as well as in the *physical* peculiarities which distinguish us as a nation. But it is especially from the words which are employed as denominations of the towns, villages, and physical features of our country that we may glean a knowledge of our past. All such words are, or were at one time, significant, and if we could determine their original form and meaning we should be able to recover some of the lost pages of our history. In the study of the origin and development of such words we are not left altogether to guess-work. The growth of language, the changes to which syllables, words, and combinations of words are subject in the process of time are not of an arbitrary character, but like everything in nature, the product of gradual evolution. We may not be able to follow always the chain of continuity, and the laws of sound-change may be overridden sometimes by the play of analogy and other influences, but there are principles to guide us in our researches to sound conclusions on the whole (see Note A).

On a superficial survey, *all* the names of places recorded in our Ordnance Maps of England would seem to be of English origin. A minute examination of these will show, however, that numerous elements involved in them are not to be traced to an English source. A further investigation of these "foreign" elements will enable us to class them roughly into Celtic, Latin, and Scandinavian. There is, if we take in the rest of Britain, probably also a number of them which belong to a pre-Celtic language; that is to say, designations handed down from a race which was in possession of these islands when the first Celtic invaders entered them. Some of our linguistic experts think that these pre-Celtic peoples were represented by the Picts, who appear to have occupied certain parts of Scotland and of Ireland when our first great English historian—the Venerable Bede—was writing his *History*, nearly twelve hundred years ago. In his time, Bede says, and the *Saxon Chronicle* adopts the statement, the following races, as represented by languages, were known in Britain: English, British, Scot-ish (i.e. Irish), Pictish, and Book-Latin (i.e. the language of the Romanized Britons).

The Celtic languages to which Bede here refers under the designations British, Scot-ish, and Pictish, have been scientifically classified of late according to their local survivals into *Goidelic*, (which embraces Irish, Manx, and Scottish Gaelic), and *Brythonic* which includes Ancient British (and Gaulish), Cornish, Breton, Cymric (i.e. Welsh), and probably Pictish.

The ancient Continental home of the Celtic-speaking people was, according to latest authorities, the territory lying between the Rhine, the Main, and the Danube, whence according to D'Arbois de Jubainville they spread into North-West Germany, the Goidelic branch about 800 B.C. passing into the British Islands. These were followed, the same writer alleges, about 630 B.C. by a Brythonic (?) people called Belgae, who, driven by Germanic tribes out of the region between the Elbe and the Rhine, occupied North-Eastern Gaul, from whence some passed into Britain. According to Julius Caesar (*De Bell. Gal. i*) the

Belgae differed from the Gauls (called *Galli*, he says, in Latin, *Cellae*, in their own speech) in language and customs, and were divided from them by the Marne and Seine. Caesar tells us, moreover (*ibid.* v. 12), that the maritime parts of Britain were occupied by those Belgae who, passing over for booty, had settled there, and that they were there known by the names of the states whence they had sprung. This is confirmed by the names *Venta Belgarum* (Winchester) and *Calleva* (or Galleva) *Atrebatum* (Silchester), the Atrebates¹ occupying at this period the region round Arras in which their name is still preserved. According to D'Arbois de Jubainville, Celtic invasions of Spain (500 B.C.) and of Bohemia and Italy (400 B.C.) followed. Greece and Galatia in Asia Minor were invaded by the Celts, in the third century B.C.

As to the Belgae being the *first* Brythonic invaders of Britain, it is clearly against the statement of Caesar, and otherwise not credible.

A tribe called Scots belonging to the Goidels are known to have passed from Ireland into Alban (Scotland) in the fourth century of our era, the latter country being then occupied by Brythons and Picts.² In the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. a southern Brythonic people, under pressure from invading Teutonic tribes, passed over to Armorica in Gaul, in which Gallic speech had then died out, and gave their name to the country—Brittany.

The influence of each of these Celtic peoples is still to be traced in our place-names.

A few native territorial and Celtic tribe-names were familiar to the Romans before our era. Kent, with its white cliffs, was known to Julius Caesar in 54 B.C. by the name *Cantium* (*Cant-io-n*), a Latinized form of the native appellation. The

¹ Ptolemy (*ii.* 3. 13) places among the Belgae the towns *Isbalis*, *Hydata* *Therma* (i. e. "Hot Waters" = Bath) and *Venta* (= Winchester). See later on the Summary of Ptolemy's *Geography of Albion*.

² But see later on Sir John Rhys's view that Goidels were in Alban much earlier.