

Digital Gazetteer Research and Practice: Position Paper

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Scotland and Gazetteers

"Next to a good dictionary, the most generally useful book is a good gazetteer"

-- W.G. Blackie (1855)

Through the 19th Century Scotland maintained a strong tradition of the production, and use, of quality gazetteers. These volumes described the geography of Scotland, Britain and indeed the World. In terms of Scotland itself, the culmination of the art was undoubtedly the *Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland* compiled in 1885 by Francis Groome, which still remains the standard geographic reference text to be found in major libraries on Scotland. This work was updated in the 1890s to reflect significant administrative changes, with a final edition published posthumously in 1903. Since then, the *descriptive gazetteer* has largely been replaced by the tourist guide and the place-name list (*short-form gazetteer*), the latter being the form which is most familiar to those of us involved in geographical information science (GIS). The tourist guide is no replacement however, in that they often introduce unacceptable bias, either in terms of selection of places described or what is actually said. Yet, with likes of Google Maps and Microsoft local.live are finding that basic mapping and vertical aerial photography have their limits and are clamouring for information. Thus, the need for a richer geographical description (through imagery, text and enriched databases) is becoming a focus of attention. Equally a broader community interests in heritage, local history and genealogy are developing apace. The importance of family history tourism to the Scottish economy is becoming significant, reflected by government resources being out into initiatives such as Scotland's People (www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk). Also initiatives such as the Millennium-lottery funded Scottish Cultural Archive Network (SCRAN) has given rise to the digitisation of a range of heritage resources, including papers, artefacts, art-works, books and maps held in a range of private and public collections. What connects all of these together is geography and place. Yet, in the United Kingdom, we have no authoritative source for place-names information and, worse, librarians and others without a geographical understanding are beginning to propose 'solutions' which range from the unworkable to the bizarre.

The Gazetteer for Scotland Project

Thus, while high quality geographic information in the form of maps and images have gained widespread acknowledgement as an important resource, descriptive information is becoming rare - largely because it needs expert collation, writing and editing - and texts on Scotland were becoming increasingly out-of-date. The only topographical directories for Scotland produced this Century have been place-name lists published, for example, by the Ordnance Survey and the Registrar General for Scotland and the Johnston's Gazetteer of Scotland (last updated 1973) which is limited in content and now out of print.

Against this background, David Munro (now Director of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society) and I created *The Gazetteer for Scotland* in 1995. Initially intended to be published as a book, the project was soon directed towards the Web, which was a new medium at the time. This decision has had a number of advantages. As the magnitude of the project became clear it was increasingly obvious that the amount of information produced would be well beyond the limits imposed by a modern-day publisher. Equally, the web permitted the incorporation of a large number of georeferenced photographs, allowed draft text to be modified following exposure to a critical public and the inclusion of a variety of interactive facilities which make the information more accessible. Thus the Gazetteer for Scotland has been built as a database based on Oracle, making use of its

relational features to create a web of interconnections between individual entries which are reflected on the web site. The database was extended well beyond settlements and geographical features, to include biographies of famous individuals and descriptions of families which recur through the places listed. The database now extends to 13400 entries, 1.2 millions words and 6500 photographs and has been built through novel geographical research as well as secondary sources. It has been further extended through the incorporation of the six-volumes of Groome's 1885 work to give historical context and now approaches 1 million hits per week. This work has given rise to considerable reflection on the changing face of Scotland over the last 120 years as well as a unique insight into the difficulties of connecting two quite different gazetteers using a combination of computer-matching algorithms and manual methods.

A Place Name Authority for Scotland

Within the United Kingdom, we have no Place Name Authority. We do have a body called the Permanent Committee for Geographic Names, sponsored by the Ministry of Defence and who liaise closely with the United Nations. However, perhaps in deference to our imperial past, this body looks at everyone else's place-names, explicitly not considering place-names in Britain. Along with many other countries, Scotland is in the process of building a SDI in the context of a GI Strategy which was published a year ago and is currently influencing an over-arching United Kingdom GI Strategy. Since 1997, Scotland has had a devolved government (within the UK) with broad powers over many areas and this has presented certain opportunities. Within this strategy, a National Place Names Gazetteer has been proposed, following considerable lobbying of government by myself. This will complement a Digital National Address Gazetteer (DNA), perhaps peculiarly, a project which is already well advanced and close to launch, encouraged by national security fears. The concept of a National Place Names Gazetteer is, however, not well advanced and, indeed, deprecated by some despite the United Nations encouraging all countries to have a place-name authority in place (Resolution IV of the UN Conference of Geographic Names). Thus, while postal towns will be incorporated within the DNA, this will deal with neither communities, nor non-addressable geographical features. All of these represent a significant problem in Scotland, where it is not at all unusual to see a different rendering of a name on the map, from the road sign on the way into a settlement and from that used on the village shop or post office. This confusion is further exacerbated by the policy of certainly local authorities, and now the Ordnance Survey, to adopt a policy on Gaelic names, which involves the translation of English names into Gaelic in those areas where Gaelic is still spoken. Even in the traditionally English-speaking parts of Scotland, it is not unusual to have the same place-name (river name or mountain name) repeating within a relatively small area. These issues make it extraordinarily difficult to distinguish one place from another. This is reported as being an issue for the emergency services amongst others, especially in a climate which means that emergency calls are now taken by a few large call centres, rather than at individual telephone exchanges where the local knowledge of the operator had value.

It is vital that not only is a Place Name Authority created, but that this gives rise to a free-to-use definitive interoperable gazetteer service that is properly resourced and maintained.

The Dangers of Non-Authoritative Sources

While there is a view that the Wikipedia model will solve all of these problems, I have significant concerns. Putting aside my seemingly constant battles against the plagiaristic tendencies of Wikipedia contributors, which I fear will discourage professional, fully-researched contributions and hence the value of the resource, experience has suggested it likely that a publicly-contributed database will be spatially incomplete, inaccurate, and often considerably biased. In Scotland, place can have political connotations, with those of a Nationalist disposition having a very different

interpretation of place based on historical events. To allow public input / revision is one thing, but at some point the professionals need to take over.