

Contemporary and Antiquarian Views as Evidence for Toponymic Research: A Comparative Study of the Bass Rock and Greendykes Bing

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Abstract

Toponymic literature is often focussed on the historic landscape, yet it is most often concerned with cartographic source material, rather than pictorial representations of place, or ‘views’, considering the former as more ‘accurate’ descriptions of place. This paper considers two forms of viewing: antiquarian and artistic to explore their place as supplementary to toponymic fieldwork. The topographical features compared in this study are the Bass Rock, a small island off the East Lothian coast and Greendykes Bing, a post-industrial slag heap in West Lothian.

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This paper investigates the value of views and viewing for toponymic studies. The focus will be on one feature, the Bass Rock, which was of interest to the Early Modern antiquarian and the Greendykes Bing in West Lothian, viewed and reinterpreted by the artist John Latham in the mid-1970s. By comparing two methods of viewing: that of the antiquarian and the contemporary artist, and the practices of each used in order to evaluate these landscape features, this study will investigate how viewing can influence naming and how renaming can change long held perspectives on landscape features.

In recent years, fieldwork has become increasingly important to toponymy, and viewing features from different perspectives is a vital part of a toponymist’s fieldwork. For example, Gelling and Cole (2000) have made an extensive study of English topographical features and Drummond (2007) has pioneered the study of Scottish hill names, with a focus on the importance of viewing the landscape feature. This interest in viewing, however, has rarely been extended to historic views of places. This paper, therefore, will consider the geographic and historic context of two landscape features, with a focus on methods of viewing and the reasons for viewing.

Over the 17th century, and emerging from older chorographical traditions of place-making, antiquarian enquiry in Britain was increasingly concerned with the making of pictorial representation, or views, alongside written and cartographic descriptions of place (Todman 2013). Increasingly, views of single landscape features were produced, for example Roman or Gothic ruins, or views of and from specific hills.

The Bass Rock, situated in the Forth Estuary off the coast of East Lothian, is a landscape feature well-described by British antiquarians during this period. This section, therefore, looks at the ways in which histories of viewing have influenced ideas of the Bass Rock over time, and primarily, how it is viewed as a single topographical feature. Changes to perceptions of the Bass Rock over time are attested in cartographic and topographic evidence and it has several names which contribute to the way that it is seen. Over the 17th and 18th centuries names for the Bass Rock were interchangeable, including Bass, The Bass, Bass Island, and Bass Rock. A view of the Bass Rock produced in the early 1700s, to which we will return, was titled ‘Bass Island’. In Roy’s survey of the 1750s, the feature was called ‘Bass’, shifted to ‘The Bass’ on the first series OS map, then to ‘Bass Rock’ on the one-inch OS map of 1945. The island is no longer inhabited by people and has lost precedence since the 1800s. Due to the physical attributes, as discussed above, as well as it now being uninhabited, this topographical feature is now seen as, and is named, a rock, rather than an island. In the present day Ordnance Survey Explorer map, it is called ‘Bass Rock’.

The Bass Rock was an important topographical feature for the early British antiquarian, Francis Place, as well as others including the author of the Atlas of Scotland, Robert Sibbald.



Fig. 1. Francis Place and Francis Barlow, *The Bass Island*, c. 1686 (image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum)

The image (Fig.1) shows the late-17th-century print of the Bass Rock engraved by the noted antiquarians Francis Place and Francis Barlow. As well as this print, Place and others made a number of drawings of the Bass Rock, its shoreline and nearby antiquities, taken from different vantage points along the coast. Place's views were produced during extensive angling and sketching tours around England, Scotland and Wales from the 1680s through the 1710s. As evidenced by the many views that exist of it, the Bass Rock has long been valued for its rich history, distinct wildlife, and human habitation; both as a prison and earlier as a monastery. Reasons for such antiquarian interests in pictorial depictions of the Bass Rock might include its distinction from other landmass, as an island set apart from all other features, as well as being a well-known geological curiosity, a volcanic plug, and with a rich and vibrant community of flora and fauna. The Bass Rock was also known for its human occupants, and the island holds a chapel and a garrison, used as a prison in the late 17th century, for covenantors.

In apposition to the Bass Rock, on the coast, is North Berwick Law, another well-known topographical feature of the area. It is also a volcanic plug and, like the Bass Rock, is easily seen from a distance due to its flat surrounding. In the photograph (Fig.2), the Bass Rock and North Berwick Law look equally outstanding and impressive against the rolling countryside. North Berwick Law was the site of an Iron Age hill fort and has been steeped in cultural heritage ever since. Despite this, perhaps tellingly, there are no 17th-century views of North Berwick Law by Place, nor by his contemporaries. The Bass Rock appears to have been singled out for visual depiction for its rich and diverse interplay of human, animal and plant life, as well as its sharp contrast to the sea which surrounds it. This example indicates the impact of situation on the history of landscape and viewing.



Fig.2. North Berwick Law (left) and the Bass Rock (right) in the distance; taken from White Castle Hill Fort, 2013 (photo by Amy Todman)



Fig. 3. Greendykes bing, West Lothian, 2013 (photo by Amy Todman)

This paper will now turn to a very different, more recent landscape feature, Greendykes Bing. This feature was created as a by-product of the shale gas industry of the 19th century. As such it provides a more recent example of a feature for which both viewing and naming have been significant. During the 1970s the West Lothian shale bings were seen as an eyesore and a marker of the area's industrial past. During an artist's residency, undertaken with the Scottish Office in 1975-1976, and using the power of viewing and renaming, the artist John Latham consciously changed perceptions of the bings (Richardson 2012). These features continue to exert a powerful visual presence on the landscape and are part of the area's identity, once despised, now embraced as part of the cultural heritage of the place.

Latham took to a new aerial perspective in order to reimagine a landscape feature which had a problematic history. By reinterpreting the bings, he aimed to alter their perceived history and align them with other, older and more respected, landscape features. As part of his residency, Latham looked through a number of aerial surveys of the region, a technology then in its infancy. His resulting artworks placed much importance on viewing, on how seeing a landmark from a different perspective had allowed him to re-imagine its origins, and to see it as something new. Seeing the bings from the air allowed him to see them differently, and he imbued them with an ancient goddess mythology, connecting them with ancient Celtic traditions, far removed from their industrial heritage. Richardson notes Latham's naming process: the bings were collectively named 'Niddrie Woman', a 'modern variant of a Celtic legend', anthropomorphising the landscape features: Greendykes, the largest shale bing, was viewed as the torso, Faucheldean as the limb, Niddry as the heart, and Albyn as the head. With this named landscape, Latham created the narrative of a torn female, having a heart too large for her body (Richardson 2012). This allows a starting point for further imagining, inviting more interpretation of the place. As the Bass Rock was being reinterpreted through

new uses and its name being altered accordingly, the bings were being renamed in order to create a change in outlook. Indeed, the Bass Rock and the bings also share some physical attributes: both are protrusions in otherwise fairly flat landscapes, both are created from material that differs to the landscape surrounding them.

For the purposes of toponymic research, all names come from interpreting and imagining a place or feature. When a toponymist begins to understand the processes of viewing, they can understand a place in a new manner. The bings and the Bass Rock both have had considerable change in their uses, which have been documented. Importantly for toponymy, these changes in use have seen changes in naming practices. The Bass Rock has a well documented history with antiquarian views and early maps recording it. The bings came to have a similar history as they were viewed, reimagined, and reinterpreted. Views help us to visualize the landscape and understand how it was observed in the past. Early Modern views might not inform us of many more name forms, but they do provide us with information on which attributes a place was recognised for and how, at this point in time, the past and present attributes of this place were perceived. These are the fundamental attributes of the topographical feature which relate to naming practices.

All toponymists are aware of how useful, necessary even, fieldwork is. Toponymists know the importance of seeing a feature for themselves; having the opportunity to walk or sail round it, and understanding how climbing up it or standing beside it can prove vital in understanding an etymology. Early topographical views and more recent attempts to use viewing to change the perception of a place provide an insight into formal attempts to describe this important way of coming to an understanding of a place. While it is doubtful that views can tell us more about the origin of a name, they can tell us something about the way people reflect on the history of individual landscape features in their multitudinous contexts. The forms of viewing explored in this short article provide another perspective on individual landscape features, pictorial representation of landscape features, and their associated practices of viewing. Viewing, both contemporary and historical, gives a variety of perspectives which can enrich the place name researcher's understanding of a place.

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