

The Origin of the name “Moffat” by Colin Moffat

An updated text of the article that first appeared in the Newsletter of the Clan Moffat
UK & Eire October 2006

The origin of the name “Moffat” seems to depend on whom you ask. The first stop is in the Black Bull Inn in Moffat. An elderly Moffatonian is leaning on the bar, so let’s ask him. Well, he said, it was a dark and stormy night, and evil was about. The Devil himself, thirsty after having reived his neighbours’ cattle and hidden them in the recesses of the Beef-Tub, was passing through Annandale on his way to the Black Bull. “Who goes there?” cried the Publican. About to answer, but not watching where he was walking, the Devil stubbed his toe on a protruding rock. “Och!” he shouted, using the local dialect, “Mah fit!” The drinkers in the pub heard the cry, and the family has been Moffat ever since. Is it possible that this sketch may prove to be of ancient origin?



The origin of the name Moffat is not obvious, nor is it immediately clear from which language it is derived. George Chalmers, in his great study “*Caledonia*”, published 1807-1824, divided Scottish place-names into those deriving from Scoto-saxon, and those derived from Gaelic. For those not obviously scoto-saxon, he looked for a Celtic equivalent. In many cases he found a clear Celtic epithet. In this way, he made a major contribution by charting the expansion of scoto-saxon, but preserving traces of Celtic underneath.

Chalmers wrote: “The parish of MOFFAT derived its Gaelic name from Irish Mai-Fad, signifying long plain, and this name is descriptive of the site of the Kirktown on a narrow plain that extends along the east side of the Annan for several miles.” Writing in 1871, W. Robertson Turnbull “*History of Moffat*” wrote “It is a matter of some difficulty to arrive at a conclusion regarding the derivation and signification of the word Moffat. Chalmers holds that it derived its Gaelic name from the Irish Mai-fad signifying the “long plain” while another writer demanding attention (Harry A. Long “*The names we bear*”) holds tenaciously to the belief that it came from the word

“oua vat” in the Gaelic language signifying “a long deep mountain hollow” having in truth a greater resemblance to the form it has at present.” Turnbull summarised: “With so much conflicting evidence, we prefer accepting the signification advanced by the learned and venerable Chalmers.”

That seemed to settle the matter, and this verdict was repeated by John Brown “*Moffat Past and Present*”, 1873, and copied by James Johnston, *Place names of Scotland*, 1892; W. C. Mackenzie, *Scottish Place Names*, London, 1931; Mike Darton, *Dictionary of Scottish Place Names*; Peter Gardiner, “*Moffat Handbook*”, 1980. But constant repetition does not disguise the fact that this theory arose solely from Chalmers, who, despite being meticulous in quoting sources throughout his magnum opus, does not cite any earlier references for “mai-fad”. We can assume that Chalmers could see that Moffat is not a scoto-saxon word, so he himself looked for a Gaelic equivalent. He came up with “Mai-fad”, and convinced himself that this described the situation of Moffat. Although from Corehead to Moffat, the valley of the River Annan runs more-or-less straight north-south, being 7.5 kilometers (4½ miles) long and consistently 300 meters wide, “long plain” is hardly the most apt description of the location of the town of Moffat. Long saw the weakness in Chalmers’ theory, but his offered Gaelic, “oua vat” is even less plausible, in that he would need to offer an explanation of how the initial “M” came to be added. Initial consonants may mutate, but are very tenacious and don’t just appear out of thin air.

In his work *History of the Celtic Place names of Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1926, which concentrated on northern Scotland, William J. Watson devoted several pages to names with “magh” – meaning “plain”. If coupled with a descriptive adjective, the magh element would occur second, and would become weakened. Examples are: Drum Muighe became Drummuie near Dornoch (ridged plain); Ro-mhaigh became Rovie in Sutherland (excellent plain); Multa-mhaigh became Moultaivie near Alness (wedder plain); Muca-maigh became Muckovie near Inverness (swine plain); Fossadh mhagh became Fossoway (firm plain); Cinn fhinnh-mhuighe became Kininvie in Banffshire (at the head of the white plain). If the settlement in Annandale was indeed a long plain, it would be “fadh mhaigh” and now have the form something like “Fammuie”. Adrian Grant, *Clan Moffat UK & Eire Newsletter*, Oct 2005, suggests that the most obvious Gaelic-derived name would have been simply “Strathannan”.

“No, it’s not Gaelic at all – it’s Anglo-Saxon English, and all very prosaic”, said Alistair Moffat, TV producer, and a noted student of the Scottish Borders as well as author of several very readable books on the subject. The name is obviously derived from “Moor foot”. It is both apt and appropriate. Travelling south from Edinburgh, after descending from the moors, the first settlement reached is the town of Moffat.

The controversy may never have arisen had Chalmers considered a different linguistic origin for Moffat – Norman-French. He was nearly there, in that he described the activities of the Montealt family, writing “A cadet of the English family of Montealt, who derived his name from a place in Flintshire came into Scotland in the twelfth century. Robert de Montealt is a witness to some of the charters of David I. This family obtained from William the Lion a grant of the manor of Fern in Forfarshire. ... William de Montealt was one of the Scottish barons who, in their famous epistle to the Pope, said they would never submit to England while one of them remained. Montealt has been vulgarised into Mowat, as the English family of Montefichet has

transformed into Muschet.” This section of Chalmers’ work is full of references to the original charters, and other primary sources. It is curious that Chalmers overlooked the possibility that Montealt could have transformed into Moffat, just as easily as Mowat.

The theory that the name of the town Moffat derives from the family is implicit in the Monymusk Text, a history of the Clan Grant, dating from circa 1710, but clearly relying on sources very much earlier. This text states that Colobella, the youngest daughter of Patrick Grant of Freuchy and Balachastle, was married to the Progenitor of the Moffatts in Scotland, and ties the date to that of the marriage of Patrick’s eldest daughter to Duncan II, i.e. 1094. The Cromdale Text, a later history, written by James Chapman in 1797, but deriving its information from the Monymusk Text, named Colobella’s husband as “William de Monte, The Progenitor of The Movats alias Moffatts”, and summarised the events of 1094. The information in these texts has been related to known Scottish history by Adrian Grant in his article “*The Establishment of the Clan Moffat*”, Clan Moffat UK & Eire Newsletter, Oct 2004. According to Grant, it was indeed a younger son, William fitzRalph, of a Norman-French family from Flintshire, who participated in the English expedition, instigated by William Rufus, to Scotland in 1094 that succeeded in setting Duncan II on the Scottish throne. As a reward, William was awarded lands in Annandale. It is about this time that he assumed the name William Montealt (in Latin “de Monte Alto”; in English “of the Great Hill”). According to Grant, the eponymous Great Hill should be sought in Scotland, and there is a very prominent candidate in the Great Hill overlooking Annandale, with a superlative view southwards down the valley.



(Photo: Author)

The Great Hill at the head of Annandale

Grant continues that William may well have lived in Annandale, and built and fortified a residence there for himself. A candidate for this residence is the Auldton in Moffat. William was married to a Viking heiress, Gunhilda (the Colobella of the Monymusk and Cromdale Texts), and may well have had sons who, instead of being confined to Annandale, sought their future elsewhere. One may have returned to the original family home in Flintshire, but now bearing the surname Montealt. Another may have offered service in the royal entourage, and acquired land in Forfarshire – this branch evolved the surname into Mowat. Another son stayed in Annandale – this branch evolved the surname into Moffat, and the settlement that grew up around his residence took its name from the family.

In his book, *The Moffats*, 1987, Francis Moffat of that Ilk marshalled the evidence, and showed that the Montealt family was active in Scotland in the 13th century, and figured as “Willielmus de Monte Alto” in the Ragman Roll of 1296. He believed it reasonable to connect this person with “William de Monte” of the Cromdale Text, who arrived in Scotland in 1094. Francis Moffat also showed that Mowat in Aberdeenshire and Moffat in Langholm, Dumfries, had identical coats-of-arms, both derived from the Monte Alto seals dated 1300.

This article summarises four theories of the origin of the name “Moffat”. There is no conclusive proof for any of them. The theory of a Celtic or Gaelic origin would be substantiated if an authentic early document significantly pre-dating Chalmers were to be found that refers to *mai-fad* (or *oua vat*). Another indirect substantiation of a celtic or anglo-saxon origin to the name would be an authentic reference to Moffat prior to 1094. Alternatively, there may be a charter awaiting discovery that refers to “Moorfoot”, or unambiguously states that Moffat is indeed named after the family of Montealt. Or was the Moffatonian in the bar of the Black Bull right after all?

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Acknowledgements: Cartoon: George W. Moffat.
Thanks to Adrian Grant for most of the inspiration.