

GLENELG: HISTORY OF A PALINDROME

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It lies in an obscure corner of Scotland, facing the Isle of Skye across the Sound of Sleat. It's accessible only by a single road across the steep Highland hills. It's a remote Highland town that would be totally uninteresting to anyone but its inhabitants except for the symmetry of its name: GLENELG.

The first part of the name is the Scottish place element *glen*, meaning a steep-sided valley. But where did the last part originate? Was it just happenstance or did some medieval logologist choose a palindromic spelling deliberately? It's likely we will never know, as the town is so unimportant as to very seldom be mentioned in the histories of Scotland.

The earliest reference of the town found in the history books is an undated note that it was once subject to the King of (the Isle of) Man. Another early reference is that a local leader was exiled there from Skye for having taken the wrong side in one of the Jacobite wars. A map of Scottish parishes in 1698 shows one in Glenelg, and later in the book it's mentioned that it was split up for better administration sometime in the early 1700s. A Glenelg minister reported sighting a sea serpent in the sound in 1872.

In 1773, Samuel Johnson and James Boswell stayed a night at Glenelg on their tour of the Hebrides. Neither mentions the palindromic nature of the name, but perhaps their thoughts were diverted by other concerns. It seems that the inn at Glenelg was bereft of victuals, its rooms stank, and the beds were filthy and wretched. After evicting a freeloader from their rooms, the travellers managed to scrape a meal together from food they had with them plus some rum and sugar provided by the local factor. They slept that night on fresh hay piled on the floor.

In 1835, Lord Melbourne became Prime Minister of Great Britain and appointed a Charles Grant as Secretary of the Colonial Office. Grant came from a prominent Scottish family whose ancestral home is in Inverness. Shortly after his appointment, Grant was elevated to the peerage and took the name of his estate: Glenelg. Lord Glenelg held the post of Colonial Secretary until 1839 when he resigned under severe criticism for his poor handling of several colonial crises. He then retired and held no other official posts. He never married and his title was not passed on to his heirs, so he was both the first and the last Baron Glenelg. (For more on his career, see the Dictionary of National Biography.)

Lord Glenelg appears once in the OED. An 1836 letter to him from Disraeli is used to illustrate the term **whiteface dinner**.

In 1836, Captain John Hindmarsh landed a colonizing expedition on the shores of the Gulf St. Vincent and proclaimed the founding of South Australia. A city was founded at his landing place and was named for Lord Glenelg. Glenelg, South Australia is now part of the metropolitan area of Adelaide. Glenelg River in the state of Victoria, Australia, about 280 miles long and flowing into Discovery Bay, was also named after Lord Glenelg. The Glenelg Highway in Victoria most likely runs along this river. There is also a Glenelg River in western Australia, which flows into Doubtful Bay, and a large rural station (ranch) with this name in Queensland. Glenelg was the early name for a northerly county in Western Australia.

Glenelg appears in several New Zealand placenames: a locality in Wallace County (now Southland Province), a street in Dunedin, and the Glenelg Health Camp and School in Christchurch (with a street called Glenelg Spur).

In Canada, Glenelg is the name of a Nova Scotia village (60 kilometers southeast of New Glasgow), on the shore of Lake Glenelg. Glenelg Center is a village in Ontario, and Glenelg is the former name of a bay on Victoria Island in the Arctic (now known as Wynniatt Bay).

There are only two Glenelgs in the United States, a town in Howard County MD and the Glenelg Medical Center in Summersville WV.

Are there any other Glenelgs of the world?