



MARGARET JOY GELLING

Margaret Joy Gelling

1924–2009

MARGARET GELLING WAS A SCHOLAR OF ENGLISH PLACE-NAMES who published the material for two-and-a-half counties, played a leading role in two major reassessments of the discipline and was widely appreciated for her enthusiastic popularising of the subject in books, lectures and evening classes.

She was born Margaret Joy Midgley on 29 November 1924 in Gorton, Manchester, the youngest child (she had two older brothers) of William Albert Midgley, merchant buyer, and his wife Lucy (née Wallace). The family moved south to Sidcup when she was young, and she attended Chislehurst Grammar School; from 1942 to 1945 she read English at St Hilda's College, Oxford, the first member of her family to attend university. She was taught there by Helen Gardner, with whom she said once that she did not get on particularly well, presumably because of a difference in approach; and by Dorothy Whitelock, who taught her Old English. At that stage Gelling did not specialise in philological aspects of Old English, having no thoughts of a career in that area. After graduating she worked briefly for the civil service, but Dorothy Whitelock presciently recommended her as an assistant to Bruce Dickins, Director of the Survey of English Place-Names, in 1946–51; she worked in that position from 1946 to 1954, and later credited Whitelock with being 'entirely responsible for my involvement in place-name studies'.¹ In this post Gelling was expected to undertake general work for the Survey and for the English Place-Name Society (EPNS), including secretarial duties, but she also started work

¹ M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Berkshire*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1973–6), I, p. viii.

herself on collections of material, begun by Lady (Doris) Stenton, for the two counties of Oxfordshire and Berkshire. She went on to publish both counties for the Survey, Oxfordshire in 1953–4 (two volumes) and Berkshire in 1973–6 (three volumes); characteristically both publications incorporated innovations within the Survey series.

In 1952 Margaret married the archaeologist Peter Stanley Gelling (1925–83), a Manxman from Marown parish; his father was headmaster of the nearby school of Braddan.² Peter's broad interests were centred particularly on the early development of agriculture; to that end he conducted excavations in places as dispersed as Cyprus, Orkney and Peru, as well as England and his native island. Margaret accompanied him to these places, including regularly on training excavations on Orkney, where her motherly care for the team is said to have contributed greatly to overall morale. In later life she considered it a weakness that she preferred en-suite accommodation at a conference, having formerly lived for weeks in a cave high in the Andes. In 1953 Peter was appointed to a lectureship in the Department of Archaeology, University of Birmingham, and they moved to Harborne, where Margaret was to live for the rest of her life; in 1954 she resigned from her post as assistant for the EPNS, and she never held another full-time post. She used to say that her achievements illustrated the benefits of not needing to go out to work. Margaret was glad to learn from Peter's interests when considering agricultural aspects of place-names (including the interpretation of field-names, but not only those), and also in working across the interface between place-names and archaeology, for instance in considering place-name evidence for the Anglo-Saxon settlements in England, and in ensuring that the results of toponymic research were accessible to archaeologists.³

Peter Gelling's move to Birmingham was responsible for Margaret's lifelong association with that university, owing partly to the warm reception which she found in three departments there (History, Archaeology and English), and also to her devoted work for its Extramural Department. Margaret was a lifelong socialist, as a result of seeing the effects of deprivation when growing up in London in the 1930s; in the 1950s she switched from the Communist Party to the Labour Party, of which she remained a member. One consequence of her political views was a desire to make the results of scholarship available to people at all levels of education; her

²D. Kelly (ed.), *New Manx Worthies* (Douglas, 2006), pp. 188–90.

³M. Gelling, *Signposts to the Past* (London, 1978; and subsequent editions), Chapter 6, 'Place-Names and the Archaeologist', and *passim*.

commitment took concrete form both in her enduring extramural classes and lectures to local societies all around the country, and also in her books written for a general readership, in addition to her EPNS volumes and scholarly articles. Her experience in adult education not only prompted the writing of such works for wider audiences, but also informed it, by making her aware of the problems and potential misunderstandings that needed to be tackled, and of how to present complex and technical material to a lay readership. Her general introduction to the study of English place-names, *Signposts to the Past*, although it has been rather eclipsed by her later work on landscape and place-names, remains the best such work (among several good ones), both for the general reader and for the scholarly one in related disciplines.⁴

The main work of the Survey of English Place-Names, which has enjoyed the support of the British Academy since its inception in 1924, is to publish historical forms and analysis for the place-names of every English county, showing the development of those names, along with their derivations and the overall significance of the toponymy of the individual counties. In the 1920s and 1930s a county was published almost every year (a few taking two years), in cursory surveys covering the major names and some minor settlement-names, but with little treatment of lesser names. After the Second World War the approach changed significantly, with much more detailed coverage of minor names and field-names; counties therefore required multiple volumes for publication of their detailed material. Gelling's *Oxfordshire* was the second county to be published in this new form, the first having been Cumberland.⁵ In addition she characteristically made two innovations in publishing that county, incorporating in the introduction a section on the geology and its influence on the settlement (an innovation which has been generally followed in subsequent counties), and also printing the full texts of the Anglo-Saxon charter-boundaries of the county, though without comment or analysis.⁶

In the other counties which she edited for the Survey, Gelling was similarly innovative. She had worked on Berkshire, for which Lady Stenton had also collected material, in parallel with Oxfordshire, and was able to concentrate fully on it after completing the first county; in 1957 she was

⁴Gelling, *Signposts*.

⁵A. M. Armstrong et al., *The Place-Names of Cumberland*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1950–2); M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Oxfordshire*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1953–4).

⁶Gelling, *Place-Names of Oxfordshire*, I, pp. xi–xv (geology); II, pp. 483–90 (charter-boundaries).

awarded a PhD at the University of London for a thesis on the north-western part of that county. The whole county was effectively ready for publication by then, but it had to wait in a queue for volumes covering Derbyshire, the West Riding of Yorkshire, Gloucestershire, Westmorland and Cheshire to appear before it, year by year (twenty-one volumes in total). With characteristic acceptance of the facts, however unpalatable, Gelling set the completed county aside and began work on an entirely fresh one, Shropshire. When Berkshire eventually appeared twenty years later she included in the final volume, as well as the usual analysis of the county toponymy as a whole, a detailed edition and discussion of its Anglo-Saxon charter-boundaries, printing the texts in full and using her later place-name material as an essential aid to analysis and tracing their courses.⁷ Anglo-Saxon boundary-clauses have subsequently become a major field of study in their own right, with valuable results for a variety of related disciplines including landscape history and dialectology; Gelling's lead has been followed by others, notably Peter Kitson, Della Hooke and the volumes of the British Academy's series of Anglo-Saxon Charters.

Gelling's third county, Shropshire, had hitherto received very little attention from toponymists, partly because of the particular skills needed for working on it owing to the large numbers of Welsh names (down to the level of field-names) in some of its western parts. Although Gelling never learnt more than basic Welsh vocabulary, she was not afraid of facing difficulties squarely, nor of recognising when she needed advice and seeking help accordingly, so this aspect did not deter her from tackling the county. One of her innovations in collecting material for it was the use of a long-running extramural class, held latterly at Shrewsbury Public Library, for excerpting name-forms from medieval documents there. (She once began a lecture, 'This talk arises out of an adult class which has been running for twenty-five years.') When it came to begin publishing the material she took another new step, making the first volume of the Survey one which covered the whole county, but only its major names (parishes and Domesday manors), and listing them in alphabetical, not geographical, order.

In her introduction Gelling stated her reasons for this new approach. First, the result was a single book which covered the whole county, appealing to general readers in a way which the detailed post-war volumes cannot; and, second, Shropshire in particular has a large number of

⁷M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Berkshire*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1973–6), III, pp. 615–794.

repeated names (such as Aston, Bourton, Preston, sometimes with distinguishing affixes), and studying those names together as groups both makes it easier to assign the individual early spellings to the right places, and also provides a better opportunity to consider the overall significance of such repetition within the name-stock.⁸ A further advantage is that the presentation of the material of difficult names can open up discussion of them, which can then make possible further analysis or revision when they later arise in their geographical place in the subsequent volumes. However, there are also drawbacks to this format. The later volumes for the county necessarily have to refer back to Volume I for the full material and detailed treatment of many major names (since the alternative would be simply to repeat it), so those subsequent volumes are not self-contained for their particular geographical areas; and in terms of the total number of names *Shropshire* Volume I in fact provides considerably less depth of coverage for the county than the less-detailed pre-war volumes had done. It also contains much more detail concerning individual names (for example, in the number of early forms cited) than would be wanted by general readers, so such a volume does not altogether suit the broader readership at which it is partly aimed. An alternative approach which has been adopted by some editors has been to retain the older format for publishing the detailed material and discussion in the Survey volumes, but also to publish a separate book giving brief accounts of the names of the whole county, written specifically for a general readership.⁹ Such volumes can cover larger numbers of names, and of greater variety since some of those will be of different kinds from the (historically) major names treated in *Shropshire* Volume I.¹⁰ Both systems have advantages, and preference will depend partly upon the approach of the individual editor; the important aim of both, prompted partly by Gelling's innovation, is to make the results of the Survey accessible to a wider readership than that reached by the traditional volumes, which are necessarily detailed and technical.

Gelling did not live to complete the publication of the material for Shropshire—she died while the sixth volume was at press—but her

⁸M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Shropshire* (Cambridge, 1990), I, p. ix.

⁹Some of these volumes have from 1998 been published in a Popular Series by the English Place-Name Society (see footnote 10), while others had earlier been published elsewhere by the Society's county editors (Dorset, Cornwall, Hampshire, Isle of Wight).

¹⁰K. Cameron, *A Dictionary of Lincolnshire Place-Names* (Nottingham, 1998); V. Watts, *A Dictionary of County Durham Place-Names* (Nottingham, 2002); B. Cox, *A Dictionary of Leicestershire and Rutland Place-Names* (Nottingham, 2005). Gelling, *Shropshire*, vol. I treats about 470 separate names in 335 pages, whereas Watts's *Durham* treats about 1,200 names in 172 pages.

collections for the remainder of the county are being edited for publication by a team based at the Institute for Name-Studies, University of Nottingham, and at the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, Aberystwyth.

In parallel with her work for the Survey of English Place-Names, Gelling spent much effort in thinking more broadly about the subject, both within it and also in relation to other disciplines and its presentation to the wider public. In the late 1950s and early 1960s several younger scholars independently started to rethink the question of how place-name evidence can help our understanding of the Anglo-Saxon settlement of England, one of the most difficult but important topics in English history, and one to which it has always been hoped that place-names should be able to contribute significantly, since the toponymy of England changed so thoroughly as a result of that settlement. From the early days of the Survey it had been considered that place-names composed of an Old English personal name plus *-ingas*, *-inga-* ‘people (of)’ (as in Reading, Hastings) had a special significance, since they seemed to evoke leaders and their bands of followers, so these place-names were thought to refer to individual pioneer settlers and their retinues. Other habitative names (ones containing a word referring explicitly to the settlement itself, such as *tūn* ‘farmstead’ or *hām* ‘homestead’, as contrasted with topographical ones which refer primarily to its natural setting) had also been the focus of work which tried to relate place-names to the early settlements. The work of John Dodgson, Kenneth Cameron, Barrie Cox and Gelling herself in the 1960s questioned some of these long-standing assumptions, partly on the grounds of the distributions of the names, which in the case of names in *-ingas* did not seem to be in the same areas as the growing body of evidence for pagan Anglo-Saxon burials. Gelling’s chief contributions to this fresh assessment of the toponymic evidence for the Anglo-Saxon settlement were on the subject of names in *wīchām*, which she suggested did belong to a very early period and referred to sites close to settlements which the Anglo-Saxons recognised as Roman (Old English *wīc* being a Germanic loan-word from Latin *vicus*); and on the place-name evidence for Anglo-Saxon paganism (where the names by definition were created early within the Anglo-Saxon period), for which she regretfully made the corpus of such names rather smaller than had been thought, and also suggested that such names as did refer to pagan sites belonged to a slightly later period, after conversion had begun, rather than to the pre-Christian period itself.

One general result of this reconsideration of the evidence was that some types of name which had been thought to date from the earliest Anglo-Saxon period were no longer thought to do so, or not necessarily; leaving open the question of which names might actually be ascribed to that earliest period. Gelling's second reassessment, which was largely her own work to begin with, served partly to fill that newly recognised void. Rather than habitative names Gelling looked instead at topographical place-names, in which the generic term might refer to a hill, stream, valley or some other aspect of the landscape. These names had generally been considered of little chronological significance, since the landscape terms at their core were mostly in use over a long period; and they had been comparatively neglected as a group. Alongside the suggestion that some of these names might belong among the earliest names of the Anglo-Saxon settlement, she also began a detailed and far-reaching examination of the finer shades of meaning to be discerned in different topographical terms.

Neither of these developments was entirely new. Both John Dodgson, in demoting the significance of population-names for the settlement period, and Barrie Cox had suggested that topographical ones might be significant among the earliest English names.¹¹ And the possibility of subtle shades of meaning among the various Old English words broadly meaning 'hill', 'valley', and the like had been recognised from the earliest days of the Survey of English Place-Names: the existence of several words apparently having broadly the same meaning invites the speculation that they may have been differentiated, and Gelling herself pointed out that Sir Frank Stenton had suggested in 1924 that the Anglo-Saxons were 'remarkably sensitive to diversities of ground'.¹² This part of Gelling's rethink happened to chime with a broader and growing scholarly interest in landscape, especially its historical aspects, and this side of her work has probably been the one which has become best known, and has also

¹¹ J. McNeal Dodgson, 'The significance of the distribution of the English place-name in *-ingas*, *-inga-* in south-east England', *Medieval Archaeology*, 10 (1966), 1–29 (p. 5), reprinted in K. Cameron (ed.), *Place-Name Evidence for the Anglo-Saxon Invasion and Scandinavian Settlements* (Nottingham, 1975), pp. 27–54 (p. 29); B. Cox, 'The place-names of the earliest English records', *Journal of the English Place-Name Society*, 8 (1975–6), 12–66.

¹² F. M. Stenton, 'The English element', in A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton (eds.), *Introduction to the Survey of English Place-Names*, 1 (Cambridge, 1924), pp. 36–54 (p. 37); M. Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape* (London, 1984), p. 5.

inspired the greatest number of further studies.¹³ Subsequently she developed her work further with Ann Cole, a geographer who had attended a weekend class which she gave, and Cole's geographical eye produced much refinement of Gelling's original observations; Gelling's book was republished under a fresh title and dual authorship, with illustrative drawings by Cole which greatly enhanced its message.¹⁴

In this study Gelling wisely limited her corpus of names, rather than attempting to use the whole body of material to be found in the growing Survey of English Place-Names. She therefore considered only those names (about 19,000 in total) appearing in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* by Eilert Ekwall (1877–1964), a classic work which itself used Bartholomew's *Gazetteer* as its main corpus, and thus included the names of most parishes in England, plus those of some other major features; in most counties this corpus also included a high proportion of the manors named in Domesday Book. Gelling assumed, justifiably, that this corpus could be hoped to include a large number of 'ancient settlement-names'.¹⁵ She demonstrated convincingly, first, that names for settlements, probably from a very early period, were often based upon topographical generic words such as *dūn* 'hill' (as in Bredon, Faringdon, Clevedon), rather than incorporating any habitative element, and she suggested the term 'quasi-habitative' for such words, referring to natural features but used for settlements; and second, that many Old English words for 'valley', 'hill' and water features did indeed have precise meanings which could be identified by examining, even today, the landscape to which those names refer. One remarkable example of this topographical precision is Old English *snōr*, which is known in just eight place-names altogether, six in the south-east (London, Surrey and Kent) but also one in each of Cheshire and Lincolnshire. Gelling's analysis showed convincingly that this rare word (from a Germanic stem meaning 'twist') was used of 'a place where a road curves in order to negotiate a rise'.¹⁶ The further implication of Gelling's work on this and other topographical terms, as she realised herself, is that from a very early period the Anglo-Saxons

¹³Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape*; the Society for Landscape Studies, with its journal *Landscape History*, was founded in 1979; Oliver Rackham's *History of the Countryside* was published in 1986 (London).

¹⁴M. Gelling and A. Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stamford, 2000).

¹⁵E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Oxford, 1936; 4th edn, Oxford, 1960); Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape*, p. 4.

¹⁶M. Gelling, 'The hunting of the Snōr', in A. R. Rumble and A. D. Mills (eds.), *Names, Places and People: an Onomastic Miscellany in Memory of John McNeal Dodgson* (Stamford, 1997), pp. 93–5.

showed a surprising consistency in their linguistic usage across the whole of what was to become England, having arrived with a ready-made topographical vocabulary of great precision, or adapting their existing topographical vocabulary in a consistent way to suit the variety of landscapes which they encountered in this island.

Being based on a limited corpus of material, this work does not always tell a complete story. Gelling suggested that *dūn* 'hill' was not used in names for major settlements after about AD 800; however, the word itself continued to be used both within the language and for creating place-names, until modern times in its later form *down* or *downs* 'rough grazing'. Gelling herself was well aware that such qualifications were inherent in her chosen corpus,¹⁷ but they may risk being overlooked by workers less familiar with the later onomastic material.

These developments within English place-name study have been received with enthusiasm, and they have inspired other workers to look more closely at other topographical aspects of place-names, both within England and in other regions and languages. One lifelong characteristic of her work was her open-minded ability to acknowledge when a received opinion, perhaps held by herself as well as others, was poorly founded, and to see within fresh suggestions or developments the possibilities for future work by herself or others; another was her encouragement and support of younger workers in the field. Her collaboration with Ann Cole in the subsequent development of her own work on the landscape of place-names was only the most striking example of these long-standing habits. Conversely, she was swift to spot when an inquirer did really not want to learn, and she would not waste her time on such people.

Gelling's interest for wider aspects of her subject led her into several related areas of scholarship, not only to study Anglo-Saxon charter-boundaries but also to contribute *The West Midlands in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1992) to a series on the Early History of Britain, edited by Nicholas Brooks, her close colleague and friend at Birmingham; and through her marriage to Peter to examine the place-names of the Isle of Man, suggesting with characteristic iconoclasm that the evidence for Gaelic there before the Scandinavian settlements is much weaker than has generally been assumed.¹⁸ On this matter her arguments have been found

¹⁷The element *dūn* 'remained in use as a term for field-name and minor name formation, and for features of the landscape, however, till modern times', Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape*, p. 142.

¹⁸M. Gelling, 'The place-names of the Isle of Man', *Journal of the Manx Museum*, 7 (1970–1), 130–9 and 168–75; M. Gelling, 'Norse and Gaelic in medieval Man: the place-name evidence', in P. Davey (ed.), *Man and Environment in the Isle of Man*, 2 vols, British Archaeological Reports,

more persuasive outside Man than within it, where Gaelic is seen as having been the dominant language there since time immemorial.

Gelling's formal career after the move to Birmingham was uneventful, since she did not hold any paid position other than her part-time adult classes. However, her scholarly standing was recognised both nationally and internationally in the unpaid positions which she held: president of the English Place-Name Society, 1985–98; chairman of the Council for Name Studies (subsequently the Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland), 1976–9; and vice-president of the International Council for Onomastic Sciences, 1993–9. In 1993 she was made an Honorary Fellow of St Hilda's, her undergraduate college in Oxford; she was awarded the OBE in 1995 and became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1998; and she received honorary doctorates from the Universities of Nottingham (2002) and Leicester (2003). She died on 24 April 2009 and obituary notices for her appeared in the *Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Economist* (4 May, 9 May and 14 May 2009), as well as in scholarly journals.¹⁹ She and Peter did not have children, but they played an important role in the upbringing of her nephew Adrian Midgley, who remained close to her and cared for her in her final illness. Apart from her political activities, her main interest outside her scholarship was gardening, one that she shared with her close onomastic colleague Cecily Clark (1926–92); she regretted that her soil was unsuited to primroses but delighted in the flourishing alpine strawberries. In some ways Gelling was notably modest: while remaining well aware of her own scholarly eminence, she seemed to consider that her success was no more than could be achieved by anyone reasonably intelligent who devoted time and rigour to thinking about the material. Her reaction to the news of a Festschrift in her honour and also a plan for a collection of her own essays, many of which had typically been published in extremely obscure local journals, was a characteristic mixture of this modesty with recognition of her own eminence: she thought the collection of her own essays a 'much better idea'.²⁰ Her strong and enthusiastic sense of humour does not often appear on the page in

British Series, 54 (1978), II, 251–64 (alongside her husband Peter in the same book, and with his evident input into her own article); and M. Gelling, 'The place-names of the Isle of Man', in S. Ureland and G. Broderick (eds.), *Language Contact in the British Isles* (Tübingen, 1991), pp. 141–55.

¹⁹ *Journal of the English Place-Name Society*, 41 (2009), 134–9 (O.J.P.); *Nomina*, 32 (2009), 159–62 (Ann Cole).

²⁰ O. J. Padel and D. N. Parsons (eds.), *A Commodity of Good Names: Essays in Honour of Margaret Gelling* (Donington, 2008); the collected essays have not yet appeared at the time of writing.

her writings, but was frequently apparent in her dealings with colleagues. While waiting for her to collect her OBE at Buckingham Palace her party was reprovved by an official for the mirth emanating from it; those who knew her will suspect that Gelling herself was probably the chief culprit.

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