

The foulmart: what's in a name?

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One of the Medieval English names for the Polecat (*Mustela putorius*) was ‘foulmart’, a name that dates back at least to the 14th century (Onions, 1966). The species is considered to be native to Wales and to the rest of Britain, or at least its native status does not appear to be in question. However, it is one of three long-established and well-recognized mammal species in Wales whose Welsh name does not have a Celtic origin. The Rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*), the Fallow Deer (*Dama dama*) and the Polecat all have Welsh names of English or French derivation, respectively, cwningen, danas and ffwlbart. The first seems to derive from the Middle English (14th century) konyng, the second from the Old French (pre-13th century) dain, whilst the last appears to derive from foulmart (Thomas, 1966).

Aybes & Yalden (1995) used British place name evidence to substantiate a number of claims regarding the past status of the Wolf (*Canis lupus*) and Beaver (*Castor fiber*). Since Celtic British, or its daughter language Welsh, has been in continuous use in the British Isles from the beginning of Iron Age times to the present day, whereas the earliest form of English only appeared in the 5th century, the provenance and derivations of Welsh words for our fauna and flora should reveal more about the status within these islands of the organisms that they represent than their English counterparts.

The nomenclature of the Polecat has intrigued me for some years. How could a supposedly native mammal have acquired a Welsh name of English origin, especially in view of the fact that the Welsh words for the other small mustelids, Weasel (*Mustela nivalis*) (*gwenci*), Stoat (*Mustela erminea*) (*carlwm*) and Pine Marten (*Martes martes*) (*bele*), are all Celtic in origin, or of obscure origin? Could the fact that the other two introduced species have borrowed names indicate that the Polecat is also introduced (or at least reintroduced after a prolonged absence)?

There could be a simple linguistic explanation for the adoption of a new name, such as the ambiguity of an earlier name. Or it may be by a purely sociolinguistic process that the name changed under foreign influence, just as modern Breton, for example, has lost the Celtic plural *kon* ‘dogs’ and uses instead the loanword *chas* (containing the same base as the French word for hunting).

There could, however, be an ecological explanation for the change. Was the Polecat present in Britain at all during the first millennium? Could the Polecat have been a late Medieval introduction, perhaps either for harvesting Rabbits or for its pelt? Could our modern wild Polecat be in fact a feral reversion-to-type from introduced early ferret-type stock?

The answers to these questions must hinge not only on linguistic inferences, but also on documentary or subfossil evidence that might show that the Polecat is both a natural post-glacial colonist and has enjoyed continuous and unbroken occupation of some part of the

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British Isles, or at least Wales, ever since. If there is such evidence, then we need to explain why Welsh speakers sometime during or before the 14th century decided to call a familiar animal by a foreign name at the expense of whatever Celtic name (now lost) they must have given to it previously.

THE EVIDENCE IN FAVOUR OF THE POLECAT'S NATIVE STATUS

1. There is a prehistoric subfossil record. The remains of nine subfossil Polecats (*Mu. putorius*) are recorded from allegedly Pleistocene deposits in the British Isles, three from Wales (Gower peninsula) and six from England (Reynolds, 1912). Three Giant Polecats (*Mustela robusta*) have also been found in such deposits, all in England. (*Mu. putorius* may have evolved from the larger *Mu. robusta* as an adaptive response to a warming climate before Britain became isolated from the continent.)
2. A truly non-native name for an animal in either Welsh or English does not necessarily imply that the animal itself is not native, although historic examples are few. For example, the Anglo-Saxon *erne* was replaced by *eagle* under the influence of Norman French (Potter & Sargent, 1973), perhaps by dint of the mythic or symbolic resonance of the latter name. Similarly, the Old English word *heafoc* (hawk) gave *hebog* in Welsh (R. Hincks, in litt.), perhaps for reasons associated with the social status of falconry.
3. The present European distribution of the Polecat (Mitchell-Jones *et al.*, 2000) is such as to suggest that it could easily have arrived in Britain by natural northward spread from southern Europe before Britain became isolated from the continent (as did the similarly distributed Pine Marten, but not the more southerly Beech Marten *Martes foina*).
4. The Polecat and ferret appear to be genuinely distinct forms, and it has even been argued that the ferret might represent a cross between *Mu. putorius* and *Mu. eversmanni* (Clutton-Brock, 1987). Recent molecular studies have confirmed that all three are very similar, at least in the DNA sequences studied, but suggest that the ferret is simply a domesticated *Mu. putorius* (Davison *et al.*, 1999). Welsh Polecats exhibit the lowest levels of ferret characteristics (Birks & Kitchener, 1999), suggesting that they are the descendants of a long-standing or indigenous population.
5. The word *ffuret*, from Middle English or Old French, had infiltrated the Welsh language by the 14th century (Thomas, 1966), implying that both Polecats and ferrets were present in Wales by late medieval times, obviating the need to invoke the harvesting of Rabbits as the motivation for introducing Polecats.

THE EVIDENCE AGAINST THE POLECAT'S NATIVE STATUS

1. The subfossil record is poorly dated or even undated (Reynolds, 1912; D. Yalden, in litt.)
2. Subfossil *Mu. robusta* appears to be taxonomically distinct from *Mu. putorius*, having no intermediate forms in Britain or Europe (Reynolds, 1912). This suggests a clear temporal and/or spatial separation between them in Britain, allowing the assumption that prehistoric *Mu. robusta* became extinct and that *Mu. putorius* appeared later by whatever means, possibly by introduction.
3. Breton is a language derived largely or entirely from British or Brittonic, which also gave rise to Welsh and Cornish, by demographic translocation to modern Brittany from south and west Britain between the 5th and 7th centuries. On arrival it possibly supplanted or assimilated what was left of the now extinct Celtic language Gaulish (Price, 2000). Breton likewise has non-Celtic names for Polecat, namely *pudask*, *putoask* and *puteos*, all being derived from the French *putois* or from an earlier form of the same word (R. Hincks, in litt.). This

suggests that no linguistic 'memory' of the British Polecat was taken to, or preserved in, Brittany following the translocation.

4. Most English names for 'native' English mammals are Teutonic in origin but most introduced mammal species names are Norman French. This supports the proposition that, in general, 'native' animals tend to have 'native' names. Possible exceptions to this amongst the native animals are Badger and Stoat, whose origins are obscure, while squirrel from the Anglo-Norman esquirel displaced Anglo-Saxon *acwern*, and Anglo-Saxon *sizemus* was replaced by Norman dormouse (Yalden, 1999). These appear to be the only anomalous English examples in the same sense as is suggested for Welsh *ffwl bart*. It is interesting to note here the possible Latin derivation of the Welsh for squirrel, *gwiwer* (Latin *vivera*).

5. The name Polecat is of obscure origin but the first element may derive from Old French *pole* or *poule*, meaning a chicken, or even from *Pollutus catus* (Walton, personal communication). Foulmart is a composite name of mixed origin, with a Norman-French element, the *foul-* being a contrasting epithet to sweet- in sweetmart (an alternative name for the Pine Marten). The word mart(en) is of unclear provenance, said to have origins in Middle Dutch and, perhaps secondarily, in French (Onions, 1966). The word originally referred to the pelt alone and there is thus no old English word for this animal to compare with the native Celtic form *bele* for Pine Marten in Welsh. These two English mammal names are remarkable, perhaps significantly, for their composite nature. Comparisons of martens with cats are a feature; even *bele* is said to be cognate with (but not necessarily derived from) the Latin *felis*, which by transference also means Marten, ferret or Polecat (Lewis & Short, 1879).

6. There are no Welsh place names in Wales referring to Polecat that are of known antiquity. In contrast, there are a number of Welsh place names referring to Pine Marten, although their age remains to be determined. Webster (2001) referred to a number of mart place names in Cumbria. (By way of support for the positive proposition, and as Webster points out, these names, unlike *bele* names in Wales, could equally refer to Polecat in the event that this species was present in the area when their names were first applied.) It should be noted that, until at least the 7th century, the dominant language of northern and western Britain from Loch Lomond-side southwards, was a variety of Welsh (Davies, 1990), thus extending the present field of enquiry well beyond Offa's Dyke.

7. There are no references to Polecats in either pre-Conquest Welsh (Thomas, 1966) or Anglo-Saxon sources (D. Yalden, in litt.), the earliest Welsh one occurring in the 14th century's *Llyfr Coch Hergest* (*The Red Book of Hergest*) (in Thomas, 1966) and in English in Chaucer's *The Pardoners Tale* (1383) (K. C. Walton, pers. comm.). In comparison, attestations of the Welsh word for Pine Marten, *bele*, date back at least to the 10th century Welsh Laws (Jenkins, 1986) and purportedly (in northern England) much earlier (Williams, 1980).

8. The Polecat (and possibly the Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*) is the only supposedly native long-established and well-recognized Welsh mammal whose Welsh name has a foreign derivation.

9. The loose coincidence in timing between the Welsh nomenclature of the modern Rabbit and the Polecat on the one hand, and the history of the Rabbit and the practice of ferreting in Britain on the other, suggests a post-Norman anthropogenic origin for the two species. As a point of further interest, the Welsh idiom *drewi fel ffwlbart* (stinking like a polecat), first attested in 1605 (Thomas, 1966) and still in use today, suggests a sympathy for the original meaning of the English form foulmart. Its adoption into Welsh may have been initially in respect of the pelt, later to mean the animal. Fitchet (Norman *fétide chat?*) seems to have supplanted foulmart in English as the name for the pelt.

10. The Chaucerian reference to *polcat* (Chaucer, 1383) at a time when foulmart was also in use indicates a clear separation of meaning, namely of polecat for the animal and foulmart for the pelt.
11. While there may be stable phenotypic differences between ‘true’ Polecats and ‘ferrets’ (Birks & Kitchener, 1999) the first may not necessarily have been wild compared with the domesticated ferret. Both Polecat and ferret could have been introduced for harvesting Rabbits in the Middle Ages, perhaps from genetically different ancestral stocks, although the lethargic behaviour of the ferret compared with that of the Polecat lends itself much more to human manipulation (J.D.S. Birks, personal communication).
12. Amongst the historical motivations for the introduction of wild animals into new areas listed by Matheson (1932), namely for pelts, food, pest control, sport, beauty and novelty, the first of these seems most obviously to apply to the Polecat. Ritchie (1920), for instance, records them in fur fairs in Dumfries.

CONCLUSIONS

Proving a negative proposition (something like ‘Polecats were absent from Britain in the first millennium’) is fraught with difficulty and may be ultimately impossible. But the circumstantial evidence assembled here could be strengthened to support either case. Radio-carbon dates of all the subfossil material could be obtained. Well-dated specimens of Neolithic, Iron Age or Roman times would certainly disprove Norman introduction. Historic DNA material might become available to establish more strongly the taxonomic relationship between the modern Polecat and (i) its possible forebear *Mu. robusta* and (ii) its possible domesticated descendent the ferret.

While the evidence presented here is obviously insufficient to demonstrate that the Polecat is not native, there is enough of a case from linguistic evidence at least to challenge the assumption of its native status. Environmental historians, environmental archaeologists and students of the history of language should be alert to the wider sociological and ecological significance of the data that they collect and manage, and make the products of their studies as accessible as possible to those with an interest in such questions as those raised here.

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