

What's in a Name?

© Bruce McFarlin, Elan Vow Preservation Fund.

"**Omnibus hanc cartam visuris ... cum insulis Elanvow, ...**"¹ reads the charter (circa 1354²) where Donald, Earl of Lennox, grants lands to Malcolm, ancestral chief of the Macfarlanes. The charter explicitly includes the grant of the island of "Elanvow". This name appears again in 1395 as Duncan, then Earl of Lennox, grants lands to Duncan Makfarlane³. "Elanvow or Elan Vow" is currently the oldest known written name for the island.

There is much discussion and speculation about the possible Gaelic origins of this name, Vow. It is important to note that this name is recorded even before the name MacPharlane or Macfarlane was in use⁴. The island seems to have been known by several names over the years, but is most consistently referred to as the island Vow.

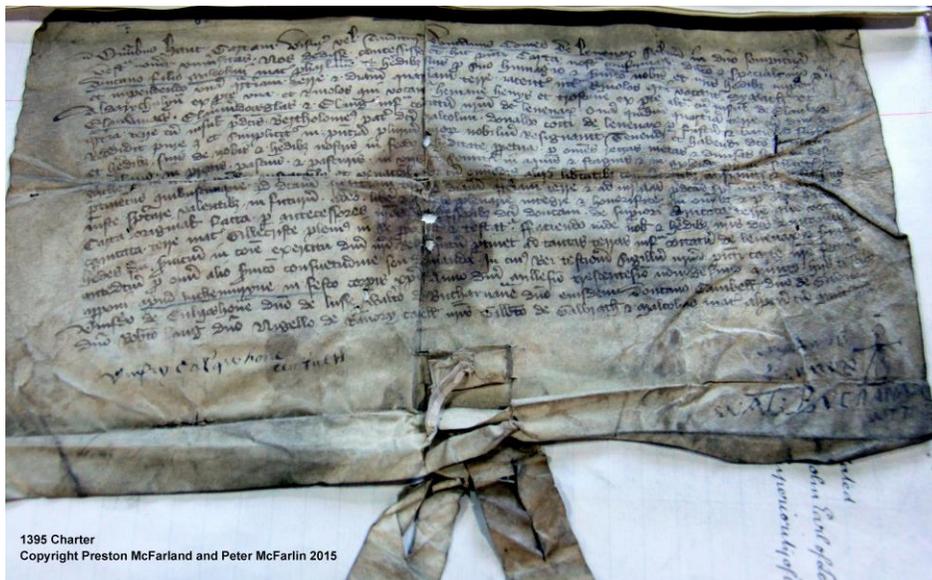


Figure 1 Charter (1395) to Duncan Macpharlane, (c) 2015 Preston McFarland and Peter McFarlin

¹ *Cartularium Comitatus de Levenax* (Maitland Club, 1833), 62:

² See <http://ellanvow.org/whats-in-a-name.html#Elanvow1354McKay>

³ *Cartularium Comitatus de Levenax* (Maitland Club, 1833), 64

⁴ An earlier charter existed as early as 1225 from Malduin, Earl of Lennox, to Gilchrist. Alexander Nisbet (*A System of Heraldry, Speculative and Practical: with the True Art of Blazon*, ..., 2nd ed., Alexander Nisbet. Published 1804) indicates that this earlier charter also explicitly read "cum insulis Elanvow...". Robert Douglas (1798) further indicated that the earlier charter referenced Elanvow, but Douglas may be referencing Nisbet. Nisbet's Volume II includes "Historical and Critical Comments .. on the Ragman Roll" (perhaps by Crawford?) and the reference to the Malduin-Gilchrist charter there has a footnote suggesting it was referencing copies of the charter in Walter Macfarlane's personal possession and in public archives. "Elanvow" likely was referenced explicitly in that earlier charter. See [Elanvow.org](http://ellanvow.org) for references.



Figure 2 ElanVow from the 1395 Charter

The 1395 charter has been reviewed by experts in paleography from the University of Glasgow and the University of Edinburgh and have they confirmed the "Elanvow" spelling. In addition, several experts have given expert opinions on the possible origins of the name.

Dr. Simon Taylor of the University of Glasgow and Royal Scottish Geographical Society writes: *"The first element [elan] is clearly Gaelic eilean 'island'. For the second element, see [The Place-Names of Fife, Vol. 5], 524-5:*

VOW [...] While I can still offer no satisfactory explanation, the word may be connected in some way with ON boði (m.). The basic meaning of this word, cognate with English 'bode' (as in 'that does not bode well') and 'foreboding', is 'messenger'. However, it is commonly used in a nautical context as "a breaker 'boding' hidden rocks" (Cleasby-Vigfusson), and as such it was borrowed into Hebridean Gaelic, as bodha (m.) 'rock over which the waves break; breaker over sunken rocks' (Dwelly), and has generated many names of such tidal rocks and skerries along the west coast from Kintyre northwards (appearing on older maps frequently as Bogha as well as Bodha). [...].

A quite different derivation is suggested by the following remark by W. J. Watson: "A malicious water sprite or hag is called a 'vow' in Easter Ross English" (2002 [1930], 235, cited in SND under vow). SND states that the origin of this word is obscure, but in an earlier work Watson himself derives it from G baobh or baogh (f.) 'hag' (OG badb), adding that the Easter Ross word 'vow' 'specialised into the meaning of water-sprite, or possibly mermaid; in any case a malicious spirit' (Watson 1904, 37). [...]. It is just possible that the word was borrowed into east coast maritime Scots to refer to dangerous coastal reefs, and survives in the names of the two sets of skerries off the Fife coast."⁵

At minimum, these interpretations would seem in common to refer some sort of nautical hazard or warning.

Edward Dwelly also translates "Ellanvow" into Scottish Gaelic as "Eilean a' bhogha" in his well-known Scottish Gaelic dictionary⁶. This translates roughly to The Island of the Sunken Rock. Bhogha would be pronounced with a long "o" like "vō'wah" in this context with a strong accent on the first syllable. See the [Elanvow Preservation Fund](http://elanvow.org/index.html) site to hear a pronunciation.⁷

⁵ Taylor, Simon, with Gilbert Márkus, 2012, *The Place-Names of Fife* Vol. 5 (Discussion, Glossaries and Edited Texts, with Addenda and Corrigenda of Volumes 1–4) (Donington), 524-5

⁶ Dwelly, Edward, *Faclair gaidhlig : a Gaelic dictionary, specially designed for beginners*, (1864), v5, 1012

⁷ Hear pronunciation at <http://elanvow.org/index.html>

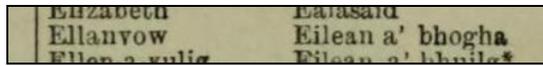


Figure 3 Edward Dwelly's Scots Gaelic translation of Ellanvow

James Macfarlane also provides a story of a raid by the MacGregors on "Eilean a' Bhogha" in unpublished draft for Volume II of his History of the Clan Macfarlane.⁸

Dr. Jacob King of Ainmean-Àite na h-Alba and the University of Edinburgh writes:
Well 'vow' is simply a scribe trying to write either Gaelic bhogha or bhùth in orthography he understands (in this case most likely Scots, even if the charter was in Latin). If the island is Eilean a' Bhogha it would be perfectly acceptable to write it as thus. Bogh or Bogha is a Gaelic word for a sunken island that was borrowed from Norse into Gaelic.

[...] I would agree that the submerged rock theory does have credence, and it is perfectly possible the name started out as one thing and changed over time. It seems to have been understood in 1701 as bhùth at least. [...] I would say if there is a tradition of a tolbooth in the area that would lean to bhùth, but if there is a definite sunken rock right next to the island, that possibly made it dangerous for sailors to pass too closely then that would go towards bogha, but as I say it could have been both at different times."

The admiralty chart of 1861 provides important evidence. In the "Clearing Marks" at the lower left of the map, Note A. clearly says "To clear Guy Rock bring Ardleish Barn just open to the East of the Island I Vow". There is, in fact, a sunken rock just to the south of Elanvow and Elanvow was used by mariners to avoid that sunken rock. Current water levels are known to be several feet higher now than in 1861, but Guy Rock was clearly recognized as a nautical hazard at 1861 loch levels and some accounts that suggest the water levels were even lower in earlier centuries.

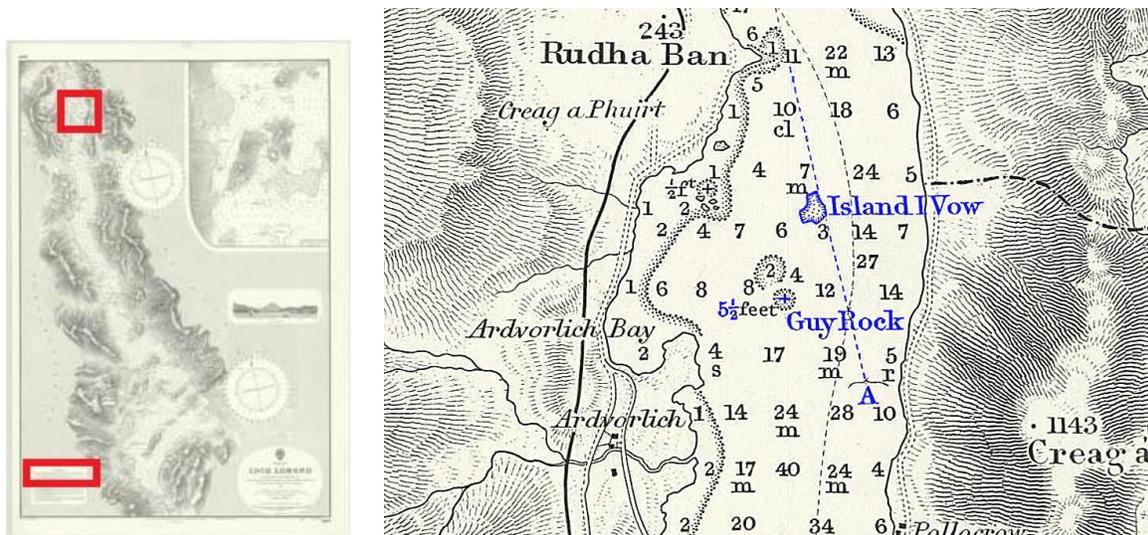


Figure 4 Section of Admiralty Chart 5077 (1861)

⁸ MacFarlane, J. Unpublished Notes. <http://ellanhov.org/whats-in-a-name.html#Bhogda>

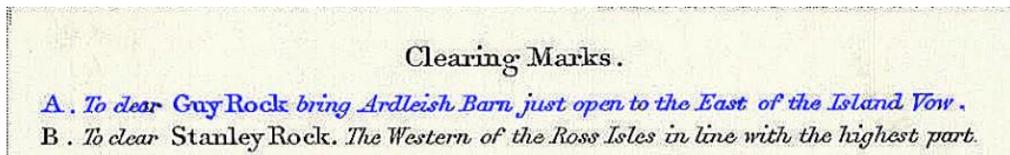


Figure 5 Clearing Marks from Admiralty Chart 5077

The island has certainly gone by several other names over the centuries, but "Eilean Vow", "Eilean a Vow" or similar variants have been commonly used throughout.^{9 10}

The island has been called "The New Island" in Gaelic, Eilean Ur. This name was most probably used after the new castle was built there in 1577 or, possibly, when the seat of the Clan Macfarlane moved to the island in the mid 17th century.¹¹

The island was also later called The Island of the Shop or The Island of the Booth, Eilean a' Bhùth, after the chief had moved his residence to the mainland in about 1697. This name was first documented in handwritten correspondence from Robert Wodrow, likely to Edward Lhuyd, in 1701¹². This name has been attributed to accounts that a certain Andrew Macfarlane used the island as a store or shop after the chiefs had left the island for the mainland and he had provided goods to locals via boat.

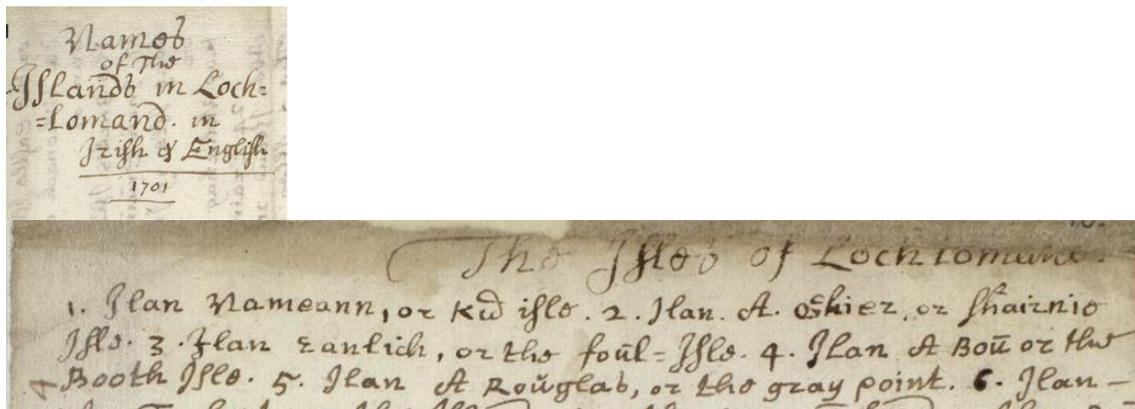


Figure 6 "Ilan a Bou" in Robert Wodrow's "Names of the Islands of Loch Lomond in Irish and English" (1701)

The Reverend H.S. Winchester writes:

⁹ MacFarlane, J. History of the Clan MacFarlane, p15 "The island referred to is manifestly Kilean-a-vow, or Eilean-a-bhuth (the island of the shop or store) as it was called later."

¹⁰ Transactions of the Scottish Ecclesiological Society, Volume 5 (1916) page 152 "Eilean-a-bhuth also called "Elenore" - "Eilean UR," the New Island"

¹¹ Add References

¹² Names of the Islands in Loch Lomond in Irish and English attributed to Robert Wodrow per Dr. Jacob King's research. Analecta Scotica: Collections Illustrative of the Civil, Ecclesiastical and Literal History of Scotland, James Maidment, 1834, p. 116

Another was the very substantial and for that time even elegant castle on “Eilan-a-bhuth” – the “Island of the shop or store”, about two miles from the top of Loch Lomond. The name of this picturesque island is comparatively recent; the kitchen of the old castle was used by a certain Andrew Macfarlane as a sort of store in which he kept the goods which he sold to the inhabitants on both sides of the loch: hence the name Eilan-a-bhuth; the older name was “Eilan-ure”, the new island, given probably at the time when the chief built his new house upon it.¹³

Note that the pronunciation of Bhùth is more like the short "oo" sound in "soot" for a *short* "voo" sound. (See Elanvow.org to hear an expert pronunciation.) Some have suggested that the text "Elanvow" might have been a transcription of Eilean a' Bhùth, but this name is commonly attributed to events that occurred long after "Elanvow" was already written in the 14th century and there must have been a different, earlier name ... even before Eilean Ur.

"Elanvow" may have been a transcription of Eilean a' Bhogha (The island of the Sunken Rock) where Bhogha is pronounced with a long "o" (vō) and a soft "wah" sound on the end. The latter (“wah”) sound may have reinforced the inclusion of the "w" in the transcription.

Sir Walter Scott included a note in his historical novel, *The Monastery*, where the visit by King James VI to the island is recounted. There the island is referred to as "Inch Tavoe". "Inch" refers to "island" (for the Gaelic *Innis*) and the "voe" is clearly a "long o" pronunciation.

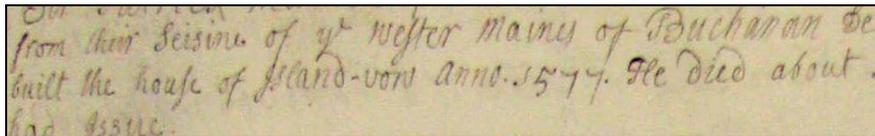


Figure 7 "Island-vow" in (Chief) Walter Macfarlane's hand

A handwritten 18th century note¹⁴ by Walter Macfarlane simply writes "Island-vow". Even though Eilean a' Bhuth does seem to have been in use in the 18th century, it is interesting that a chief of the clan did not refer to this name and that, so far, we have not found written use of this name by Macfarlanes in their legal documents.

Cartographer Timothy Pont writes "ylina vow" with a castle symbol shown on the island in his ca.1590 map of the area. Elsewhere in Pont's texts, he refers to the island as "ylen-ow".

¹³ Traditions of Arrochar and Tarbet and the Macfarlanes, Winchester, Hugh Sinclair [Glasgow, 1914]

¹⁴ Genealogical Account of Macfarlane of that Ilk, Walter Macfarlane, Muniments of the W.H.Hill Collection. Royal Faculty of Procurators in Glasgow,



Figure 8 "yl:na vow" by Timothy Pont (ca. 1590)

No discussion of the names of Island I Vow should go without comment on the more recent suggestions that Vow refers to the lenited form of Bò (Cow) and that Elan Vow might translate to Eilean a' Bhò. At the time of this writing, there are several internet references listing Eilean a' Bhò uniquely as a Scottish Gaelic form for Island I Vow. These entries often have very similar wording and seem to derive from either the then current Wikipedia content (2008) or from the nice little book, *The islands of Loch Lomond* by Calder and Lindsay (1992)¹⁵. The latter seems to be the first writing suggesting that the island might have been called The Island of the Cow because the Macfarlanes were noted cattle rustlers. In recent personal correspondence, Ms. Lindsay writes "the cattle rustling derivation of the name certainly doesn't stand anymore" [in light of the use of the name ElanVow in the early charters ...even before the Macfarlane name existed as such.]

Ms. Lindsay's preceding graduate school dissertation (1983) included I.M.M. McPhail's "A Short History of Dumbartonshire" (1962)¹⁶ and this is the earliest known reference suggesting Eilean a' Bhò, writing that the island is "today called Island I Vow, but originally probably Eilean a' Bho (island of the cow)". No references were provided. Several learned scholars have pointed out that Eilean a' Bho is grammatically incorrect and/or not possible in Scottish Gaelic. Dr. Jacob King of Ainmean-Àite na h-Alba (the Scottish national advisory partnership to research and establish the correct and appropriate Gaelic forms of place-names for maps, signage and general use) writes:

"Eilean a' Bhò is definitely wrong, in the genitive it would be either singular Eilean na Bà or plural Eilean nam Bò. I don't see how with the "vow" you could get a cow meaning. As you say below it's possible that those with marginal Gaelic knowledge might make this interpretation [...]."

We conclude that, although The "Island of the Cow" interpretation is romantically appealing, it is not credible and is not a potential translation for Eilean a' Vow.

In the 19th century, references to The Hermit's Island can be found that reasonably clearly refer to reports that a lone recluse took refuge in the cellar of Eilean a' Vow sometime between 1814 and 1831. This was the subject of William Wordsworth's poem "The Brownie's Cell". This is clearly an event-based, later and colloquial name.

¹⁵ "The Islands of Loch Lomond: An Island by Island Guide", Clair Calder, Lynn Lindsay (1992)

¹⁶ "A Short History of Dumbartonshire", I.M.M. McPhail, (1962)

Calder and Lindsay's book suggests "Elengavahana" as an "old" name for the island. A web search on this name leads to a 19th century reference¹⁷ where an island, referred to there as Elengavahana, marks the northernmost point where Loch Lomond is the eastern boundary of Dumbartonshire. This is, in fact, where Eilean a' Vow is located. It is not clear if that name was actually in use or if this was a confusion with another, different island "Elan- vanaw" that also appeared in the early charters.

¹⁷ "The New Statistical Account of Scotland: Dunbarton, Sterling, Clackmannan", V III, W. Blackwood and Sons (1845)

A selected survey of names and references follows.

Name	Date	Document	Reference
Elanvow	1225?	Charter: Malduin to Gilchrist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MacFarlane, J. (1922). History of the Clan MacFarlane. Glasgow, p.27. (No references) Douglas, R. (1798). The Baronage of Scotland. Edinburgh: Bell & Bradfute; [etc., etc], p.93 (References Nisbet, [...], and original charters in Macfarlane possession) Nisbet, A. (1804). A System of heraldry, speculative and practical. Edinburgh: Printed by and for Alex. Lawrie and Company, p.59. (Originally 1742+)
Elanvow	1344?	Charter: Donald to Malcolm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cartularium Comitatus de Levenax (Maitland Club, 1833), P. 62 MacKay (F. Mary Culquhoun Account) p. 158
Elanvow	1395	Charter: Duncan to Duncan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Original and Digital Image from the W.H. Hill Collection, Royal Faculty of Procurators in Glasgow, 12 Nelson Mandela Place, Glasgow Cartularium Comitatus de Levenax (Maitland Club, 1833), P. 64
Illinwow	1585	Text of Decree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MacFarlane, J. (1922). History of the Clan MacFarlane. Glasgow, p. 69.
ylina Vow	1591	Map	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pont, Timothy NLS Adv.MS.70.2.9 (Pont 17) http://maps.nls.uk/view/00002311 Link to Zoomed NLS Map
Ylen-ow	1591	Map Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pont Maps of Scotland, ca. 1583-1614 - Pont texts, p 150-151 http://maps.nls.uk/pont/texts/transcripts/ponttext150v-151r.html
yl. na vow	1640?	Map	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NLS Gordon, Robert, 1580-1661 Loch Lomond. 1640 http://maps.nls.uk/view/00000670#zoom=5&lat=3877&lon=1483&layers=BT
llan a Boū	1701	Handwritten Correspondence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wodrow, R. (1701) "Names of the Islands of Lochlomond in Irish and English" in Maidment, J. (1837). Analecta scotica. Edinburgh: T.G. Stevenson, p.116., p. 116 Wod.Lett.Qu.II
Islandvow	1725	Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nisbet, A. (1804). A System of heraldry, speculative and practical. Edinburgh: Printed by and for Alex. Lawrie and Company, p.61. (ca. 1725)
Island Vow	1767	Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publications of the Scottish History Society, Volume 51, Geographical Collections, Walter MacFarlane, Volume 1, p.345 (1904)
Elan Avow	1745		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Edgar, William, Map
Elan-a-vow, Eilean-a-Mhou	1804	Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fraser, W. (1804) The Chiefs of Culquhoun and their country
Inch Tavoe	1822	Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scott, W. (1822). Historical romances of the author of Waverley. (Ivanhoe. - The Monastery. - The Abbot. - Kenilworth.). Edinburgh: For A. Constable & Co., pp.p. 154 and Note E p. 415.
Elengavahana	1845	Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The NEW statistical account of Scotland. Volume 8: Dunbarton - Stirling - Clackmannan. (1845). Edinburgh: Blackwood, p.p. 230.
Ellan Vhou	1863	Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bradley, E. (1863) A Tour of Tartan-land, by Cuthbert Bede, P. 193
Eilean-a-Vhow, Ellan Vhow	1879	Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Irving, J. (1860). The History of Dumbartonshire, civil, ecclesiastical, and territorial. ... Second edition. Dumbarton: Printed for the author, pp.402. Irving, J. (1879) The Book of Dumbarton, p.348.
Eilan Bhuth, Eilan a Vhu, Eilan Vow	1884	Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Patterson, W. (1884) The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Volume 6, p. 29-30
Island I Vow -	1861	Admiralty Chart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NLS 101962640 (1953) 1861 Admiralty Chart 5077, Great Britain. Hydrographic Office, Loch Lomond, National Library of Scotland
Eilean a' Bhogha, Ellanvow	1911	Gaelic Dictionary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dwelly, E. (1911). The illustrated Gaelic dictionary, specially designed for beginners and for use in schools, including every Gaelic word in all the other Gaelic dictionaries and printed books, as well as an immense number never in print before. Herne Bay: [E. Macdonald & Co.?], p.p. 1013.
Eilan-Ure, Eilan-a-bhuth	1916	Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Winchester, H. (1916). Traditions of Arrochar and Tarbet and the Macfarlanes. [Glasgow].
Eilean Ur, Eilean a bhuth Eillean-a-vow	1916	Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transactions of the Scottish Ecclesiological Society, Volume 5 (1916) p. 152
Eilean-a-Bhuth, Eilean-a-Vow	1922	Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MacFarlane, J. (1922). History of the Clan MacFarlane. Glasgow, p. 15.
Eilean a Bhogda	1923+	Typewritten Draft	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MacFarlane, J. (unknown) Typewritten draft for a second volume of the History of the Clan MacFarlane provided by Andrew MacFarlane
Eilean A' Bho	1962	Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MacPhail, I. (1962). A short history of Dumbartonshire. [With illustrations, including portraits, facsimiles and maps, and a bibliography.]. Dumbarton, p.29.
Eilean a' Bhùth	1999	Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Newton, M. (1999) Bho Chluaidh gu Calasraid, Acair 1999 ISBN 0-86152 265 62008

As several others before have concluded, we conclude that the island has gone by several names over the centuries. We suggest these are:

Eilean a' Bhogha (ElanVow), The Island of The Sunken Rock [13/14th century onward]

Eilean Ur, The New Island [after 1577?]

Eilean a' Bhùth, The Island of the Store or Booth [after 1697?]

Whatever the origins of its name may be, the island has most simply been called “Vow” throughout its history and, we suggest, it is still most appropriately called Eilean Vow or Eilean a Vow.