Romancing Stirling: a case study on the cumulative impacts of local tradition, popular literature and tourism on archaeological interpretation.

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Introduction

'To pass in reasonable safety and comfort from southern to northern Scotland a man must cross the Forth within a mile or two of Stirling. "Stirling is the brooch that holds together the two parts of the country"' (Mitchison 1970: 1- 2, quoting Smith 1856). The name Stirling is argued to derive from its location as the upper most navigable point of the Forth (Clancy 2017: 13). Stirling's location on the Forth means that it was perhaps one of the most strategic points in Scottish history (Royal Commission on the Ancient Monuments of Scotland RCAHMS 1963: 4). Control of this upper navigation point (pers comm Andrew Tibbs) along with the farmland of Fife and the mineral resources of the Ochils formed an objective of the first two Roman occupations (Crawford 1948: 18; Breeze, 2006). Stirling also formed the central point of the late/post-Roman region/entity Manau (Taylor et al 2020: 54-60), which was the location of several early medieval battles (Clancy & Crawford 2001:49). Stirling lay on the boundary between Pictland (and its successor polity Alba) and the northern English kingdoms between c 700 and 1100 (Broun 2018) and indeed the area south of the Forth does not appear to have been fully integrated into Scotland 'proper' until the reign of Alexander III (1249-86) (Broun 1998: 9; 2017:32-37). From 1180 Stirling Bridge was the location for a court held every six weeks for disputes between parties north and south of the Forth (Taylor 2009: 281).

Later, Stirling witnessed the two most critical battles of the Wars of Independence (Stirling Bridge and Bannockburn) as well as sitting between the two major post-medieval Scottish cattle markets at Crieff and Falkirk (Matthews 1974: 180-2), ie it sat on the main artery southwards for trade and exchange. Finally the strategic importance of crossing at Stirling is eloquently made by both the Matthew Paris and Gough[1] maps (respectively dating to c 1250 and the 1370s) both of which show a narrow land passage at Stirling. Famously the only bridge in the whole of Britain depicted by Paris was at Stirling which crosses a body of water called the 'Sea of Scotland'. This point was also made by Sir John Cope's northern pursuit of the Jacobites in 1745 when he simply could've waited at Stirling for

them to come to him (Johnstone 1821: 12). The 'Sea of Scotland' appears to be a conflation of the rivers Forth, Teith and Clyde along with the low lying boggy ground to the west of Stirling called now the Western Carselands of Stirling (Harrison & Tipping 2007). The geomorphological background and changing sea levels of the Western Carselands are explored by Smith (et al 2010; see also Neville 1974). Explicitly this article focuses on the first millennium AD as following detailed analyses of soil cores the current water level within the Forth Valley is considered to be roughly the same as c 2000 years ago (Smith et al 2010: 2407; Davies 2020: 39). However, Hannon (2018: 425-8) proposed that the locations of the Roman forts at Camelon and Inveravon on the Antonine Wall made more sense with higher sea levels. Prior to this time the water level was higher and more of the valley was flooded and in effect a sea loch (Smith et al 2010: 2406) and therefore movement across the valley was even more restricted. However, despite its significance, the actual nature of the crossing point(s) prior to the construction of a bridge at Stirling has been little studied.

In the absence of facts attention has focussed on the on the area commonly known as the 'Fords of Frew' near Kippen, Stirlingshire. This is described by Professor Dauvit Broun (2007: 54) 'as a striking site: for a stretch of eighty yards in summer the river's depth becomes no more than that of a paddling pool, but for a small channel near the north bank where the water comes up to an adult's knees.' Site visits by the author confirm the general shallowness of the area, although Broun's description appears to relate to a very dry summer. Watson (1926: 350) considered 'frew' related to shallow fordable points and McNiven (2011: 196) links it to the 'Welsh frwd 'current' or the British equivalents of Welsh ffrau 'stream, flow, flood' or Welsh ffraw 'swift, lively, brisk". As will be shown references to the 'Fords of Frew' are littered across academic volumes: from accounts of Bronze Age swords, the Roman incursions, the Pictish period and even the invasion of Scotland by William The Conqueror in 1072. In turn this academic groupthink also colours popular accounts where the 'Fords of Frew' are linked to William Wallace, Rob Roy, the Battle of Sauchieburn and the Battle of Falkirk Muir (Old Weird Scotland undated). You will struggle however, to find the 'Fords of Frew' on any map as the location does not exist and it is certainly not the only path through the Western Carsleands. This article explores both the reality of the Forth valley crossing and how Sir Walter Scott may have come to colour its interpretation.

Historiography of the Fords of Frew

As noted above Romanists (eg Maxwell 1989: 113; Woolliscroft & Hoffmann 2006: 81), early medieval historians (eg Woolf 2007: 165; Broun 2007: 54; Clarkson 2014: 2436; McGuigan 2021: 16[2],) and archaeologists (eg Mackie 1982: 60: 2017: 31; Morrison 1979; O'Connor & Cowie 1995; Cook et al 2019; Davies 2020: 41; and Maldonado 2021: 179-80) tend to use the phrase 'the Fords of Frew' while post-medieval historians use 'the ford of Frew' , 'the ford at Frew' or 'the Ford of Frew' (eg Mair 1990: 137; Haldane

Figure 1: An extract of Roy's mid-18th Century *Military Survey of Scotland* on Drip, © British Library Board, CC.5.a.441, Strip 16/2d and Strip 15 Section 4F.

1997: 83; Harrison 2005: 107) or 'the Frew route' (Harrison & Tipping 2007), though there are exceptions (eg Duffy 2020: 108).

A review of 18th- and 19th-century documents including military memoirs and newspaper accounts from the Jacobite Risings 1745 (Douglas 1755; Bell 1898; and Buchanan 1841), The Old and New Statistical Accounts (Tait 1793; Campbell 1796; Robertson 1796; MacGibbon 1798; Laurie 1845; and Anderson 1845), poetry (MacGregor 1883), history (Nimmo 1777; and Randall 1812), Roy's map (Strip 15, Section 4F) and Stirling Burgh Records (Renwick 1889) demonstrate a variety of forms: 'the passage of the Frew', 'the Frew', 'the Frew ford', 'the Frews', 'the Ford of Frew', 'the ford of Frew' and 'the Ford of Frews' (there are four farms in the area named Frew (Harrison and Tipping 2007: 468)) but never 'the Fords of Frew' or 'the fords of Frew'.

As far as the author can tell the phrase 'the Fords of Frew' was popularised, if not coined by Sir Walter Scott in his novel Rob Roy (Scott 1817: 441). Scott's later Tales of a Grandfather (1828: 240) features 'the fords of Frew' and 'The Fords of Frew'[3]. By contrast it should be noted that Stevenson's David Balfour, the hero of Kidnapped tries Stirling Bridge, although the island that they spent the night on before attempting the bridge is also a likely inspiration for the one in Treasure Island! Local tradition has his inspiration as a small island near the confluence of the Allan Water and the Forth at Bridge of Allan where the Stevenson's went for family holidays (Mair 2018: 237). It is of course impossible to confirm if the erroneous capitalisation was a mistake or if Scott deliberately replaced the duller Ford of Frew with the slightly more rhythmic Fords of Frew.

If we examine the reality on the ground our

key source is Roy's Great Map (Strips 15 Section 4F and 162d, Figure 1) which shows two fording points over the Forth near Kippen either side of the Goodie Water and its confluence with the Forth. The Goodie Water was navigable in the 18th century (albeit by small, probably specialist boats) and used to transport lime (Harrison 2005: 106). It's 'valley' is up to c 4m wide and up to 2m deep and while it was later canalised (ibid) it still represents a significant barrier to land transport. The fording point to the west is called the Ford of Frew which is repeated by the 1st and 2nd edition Ordnance Surveys (Stirlingshire Sheet IX 1865; 1899) but is not associated with a road or track, although a 'bad' road to it is recorded but not mapped by Edgar (1746) and significantly the location is associated with a milestone which is marked by the 1st edition Ordnance Survey (Stirlingshire Sheet IX 1865) and which is located to the east of the two surviving bridges at this location.

The second fording point lies some 3.3km as the crow flies to the east and is unnamed but lies next to a farm called Carse. This was mapped on Roy and associated with a track but neither are recorded on either Stobie (1783) or the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey, (Stirlingshire Sheet IX 1865). Given the above, from this point on the article will use the Ford of Frew when discussing the western fording point at Kippen, Carse to describe the eastern point and the fords at Frew when discussing the general area.

The Carse fording point led to a crossing over the Teith at Doune and the Ford of Frew to Thornhill aided by the Bridge of Goodie built in 1647 (Harrison & Tipping 2007: 464). The Old Statistical Account for Gargunnock, (Robertson 1796: 94) records the 'recent' (without a precise date) construction of a road south from the Ford of Frew with no reference to an older road. The Kippen Old Statistical Account (Campbell 1796: 328) records (presumably at a later date than the road) a bridge replacing the Ford of Frew in 1783.

The RCAHMS (1963: 424, 430) notes that 'the Fords of Frew' was used by two post-medieval armies: Montrose's force once ahead of the Battle of Kilsyth and by Bonnie Prince Charlie and his army during the 1745. The Scots Magazine's account of the 1745 suggests that the Ford of Frew was used at least four times across the duration of the campaign from September 1745 to February 1746: once on the march south to Derby, twice from the north in advance of the siege of first Stirling and then Stirling Castle, and finally during the retreat (quoted by Renwick 1889: 274-6; but see also the original Douglas 1755).

Looking in detail at both sets of crossings the RCAHMS (1963: 424) quote Nimmo's 18th century account (1880: 220) for Montrose's campaign. However, Nimmo does not quote his source. It is worth here expanding on the nature of Nimmo's two volume 1777 history of Stirlingshire: the first major account of the area and one which appears to record every tradition of the area. It is therefore difficult to distinguish fact from fiction in his account and often his is the only or earliest source for a specific incident (see Savakis et al 2018).

George Wishart's contemporary memoir

of Montrose (1819) does not mention Frew. Another source, Bishop Guthrie (Napier 1838: 435-6), whose son Andrew fought with Montrose, mentions that the Teith and the Forth were both crossed, which could be either of the fords at Frew. With regard to the 1745 this was clearly a recent event and of course is the subject of his third novel Waverly. The Scots Magazine notes that Government troops had 'destroyed boats' and that floats were needed to get cannons across at Frew (Renwick 1889: 275) implying that boats were normally used to cross here. During the retreat an eyewitness, Maxwell of Kirkconnell (Buchanan 1841: 132) notes that the heaviest pieces of artillery had to be abandoned as it 'would have been impossible to get them over the Frews, where an eight pounder was left after some fruitless labour to get it out of the mud'. The cannons were transported in December and the retreat was undertaken in early February so one would expect conditions to be worse than in the Summer, however, this does suggest the crossing was not as easy as is generally believed. Both sets of crossings were undertaken during civil wars and the need for secrecy about troop movements was paramount, although Dougal Graham, a Jacobite eyewitness to the '45 crossing suggests that it was watched by locals (Rorke 2017: 97).

A review of the available map evidence and a canoe trip down the Forth (Cook forthcoming) indicates a variety of crossing points across the Forth of which the most documented is at Drip which is mentioned first named in 1303/4 (Bain 1884: 382-4) and also features on Gough's 1370s map. Drip has also been described as one of the most important fords in Scotland (Stell 1988: 32). The mid-15th century traveller and English spy John Hardying mentions 'foorde of Tirps' (Brown 1891: 18) which is taken to be Drip ford (pers comm Peter McNiven). Drip is also recorded as the main ford for travel west from Stirling across the published extracts of Stirling Burgh records from 1519 to 1752 (Renwick 1887; 1889) as well as those of the Stirling Guildry between 1592 and 1846 (Cook & Morris 1916).

There is no question that crossings at Drip could be easily monitored from the Castle (pers obs Murray Cook). Edgar (1746) goes further and states that Drip was within the range of the Castle's cannons. The secret approach of both armies does appear to have been successful and certainly in 1745 Sir John Cope had no idea where the Jacobites were and marched from Stirling to Inverness while the Jacobites were marching to Stirling (Riding 2016: 100). Another consideration in 1745/6 was that the western arch of Stirling Bridge was cut by the British military in late December 1745 preventing its use (Renwick 1889: 272).

Given this is it worth considering whether the Jacobites really used the Ford of Frew each time or if perhaps they also used the fording point at Carse and did not realise, or perhaps the name applied to both fording points[4]. As noted above only the Carse fording point had a road viewed by Roy as worth marking. To have used the Ford of Frew would also have meant marching large bodies of men and equipment either along a poor road or across muddy fields (in December, January and February). In addition any use of the

Ford of Frew would require crossing the Goodie Water and it is more likely that the Carse fording point was used if the objective was efficient travel (Figure 1). However, such a circuitous route made sense on the Jacobite's original invasion southwards on march to Derby in 1745 as secrecy was paramount. In addition, the march south took place in September when presumably the weather was better. However, it certainly did not make sense during the sieges of Stirling and Stirling Castle, let alone the panicked retreat where time was surely of the essence. This raises the possibility that contemporary accounts may have confused the two fords at Frew, certainly Duffy (2020: 362-3) notes that Government dragoons ordered to sow caltrops at the main fording points were confused as to which they were. The only other reference to the use of the Ford of Frew in contemporary accounts is by cattle drovers (Haldane 1997: 83), though Renwick asserts that this appears to be an attempt to avoid fees at Stirling rather than a routine action (1889: 123).

Watson's original sin?

For archaeologists, Romanists and Early Medievalists one of the foundational, near canonical texts in understanding the very earliest history of Scotland is Watson's magisterial 1926 History of The Celtic Place-names of Scotland. Watson (1926: 349-50) explicitly writes of 'the fords of Frew' (although he also later writes 'The Fords of Frew') and is clearly describing a stretch of water where fording was possible. Presumably he means from the Ford of Frew to the ford at Carse. However, he also describes the stretch of water as one of the 'seven wonders of Scotland' which has helped to aggrandise their reputation. Watson's view of the crossing was clearly informed by an assumption still being made today (eg Woolliscroft & Hoffman 2006: 81; Clarkson 2014:2436) that in the past that Stirling's Western Carsleands were an extensive and impassable body of bog. That the Western Carselands were not an impenetrable morass has been established by John Harrison in two key papers (Harrison 2003; Harrison & Tipping 2007). As noted above Watson also uses the term 'the Fords of Frew' (ibid 52-3), however, he does not explain his use of the two variants (although it may simply be an error) and presents his assertions (ibid 52-3) as facts and well before his discussion (ibid 349-50).

Watson linked the 'Fords of Frew' to a key event in Kenneth II's reign (c971–97), described in the Chronicles of the Kings of Alba (Anderson 1922: 512). After a raid south of the Forth into then Northumbria, fearing a retaliation 'Kenneth fortified the banks of the Fords of Forthin' (Watson (1926: 52-53). It is also worth noting that Watson (1926: 52-53) also uses 'the Fords of Forthin' while others such as Anderson (1922: 512), Hudson (1998: 161), and Taylor (et al 2020: 94) write of 'the fords of Forthin'. While 'Forthin' is assumed to be the Forth, it is not clear if the 'fords of Forthin' is a single place or a description of multiple fording points.

While Watson's intention is unknown it appears that in capitalising both the 'Fords of Frew' and the 'Fords of Forthin' he creates a rhetorical drive for a single location that that given his assumptions about the Western Carselands must

Figure 2: The Beheading Stone.

have been the same unchanging location across millennia. Watson's position in academia in turn means his assumptions were never challenged and carried forward over the next century. This assumption was not the case with post-medieval historians (eg Mair 1990: 137; Haldane 1997: 83; Harrison 2005: 107) who had far more primary documents to review and no need to refer to Watson.

Scott's Impact on Watson?

It is now impossible to determine if Watson's view was coloured by reading Scott or indeed Buchan, though it can be surely assumed that he was likely to have read them given their then popularity (certainly even the current author has read lots of Scott and Buchan…though he prefers Hogg!). Certainly, if one looks across the rest of Stirling and its environs Scott looms large. It is widely acknowledged that Scott stimulated the Trossachs tourist industry with his monumentally popular poem Lady of the Lake (1810). However, this poem also helped create another myth: that of the beheading of Murdoch Duke of Albany at the orders of his nephew James I. Local tradition has that the execution took place on the northern tip of the Gowan Hills (also known as the Gowling Hills, or the Hill of Lamentations or The Hills of Weeping) which is called today Mote Hill but was also known as Murdoch's Knowe, Heiding Hill and Hurley Haky (Drew 1887). The latter name referencing a tradition that James Vth used to sledge down it in a cattle skull. The earliest source that links the hill to the execution is Nimmo's 1777 account (1880: 84). Scott weaves Mote Hill into his tale and recounts:

'and thou, O sad and fatal mound
That oft hast herd the death-axe sound,
As on the noblest of the land
Fell the stern headsman's bloody hand'

In turn The Stirling Natural History and Antiquarian Society repositioned a stone with incised marks on it under a handsome monument with a domed cage and called it The Beheading Stone (Figure 2). The account of the meeting in which this was first mooted reveals no clear 'chain of custody' for the stone (Drew 1887). People remembered a stone on Mote Hill from their childhood which they called the beheading stone. This stone was then rolled down the hill and ended up at Stirling Old Bridge where a local butcher Tam Dawson 'who did a large trade in sheeps' heads…and ..used it as a block for chopping sheeps' horns'. This and the apparent difficulty of using a stone block as a base of chopping anything did not deter the Society. This created a tourist attraction and a subject for the sale of postcards that combined an image of the site with Scott's verse. The site is still advertised by Stirling Council today and its story is well known by locals.

Another of Scott's poem The Lord of the Isles (1815) mined the landscape and history of the Battle of Bannockburn. At the assumed site of Day 1 of the Battle of Bannockburn, Burns was in part inspired by thoughts of Bruce raising his standard at Bore Stone (which is now acknowledged to be a dropped post-medieval mill stone (RCAHMS 1963: 113-4) and wrote his magnificent Scots wa hae, which purports to be Bruce's speech at the Bore Stone (Figure 3).

The poem was never published in Burn's name in his lifetime and Crawford note's its final stanza (2014: 92-5) appears to tie the Wars of Independence to the Jacobite, The French Revolution and The American Revolution with a call to arms.

'Lay the proud usurpers low!
Tyrants fall in every foe!
Liberty's in every blow!—
Let us do or die!'

These were very dangerous sentiments as it must be remembered that in 1820 The Radical War provoked unrest across the country and resulted in several executions. If there were any doubt of the radical nature of Burns' poem one of the Cato Street plotters,(a related Radical War conspiracy to murder the entire British Cabinet in 1820), William Davidson was singing Scots wa hae as he was arrested (Alston 2021: 297).

Scott again built on (and sanitised?) local traditions and connects the local Gillies Hill, which he links ghillie (Gaelic for servant) to the Barbour's The Sma' Folk (they become Scott's 'the serf and page') who played such a key role in the decisive victory of Day 2 of the Battle of Bannockburn (Barbour 1999: 427) and has them stationed on it.

'On Gillie's -hill, whose height commands
The battle-field, fair Edith stands,
With serf and page unfit for war,
To eye the conflict from afar.'

It is perhaps more likely that the gillies in question relate to drovers using the former common grazing of the hill (Cook 2021: 55-56). However, this has not stopped Gillies Hill

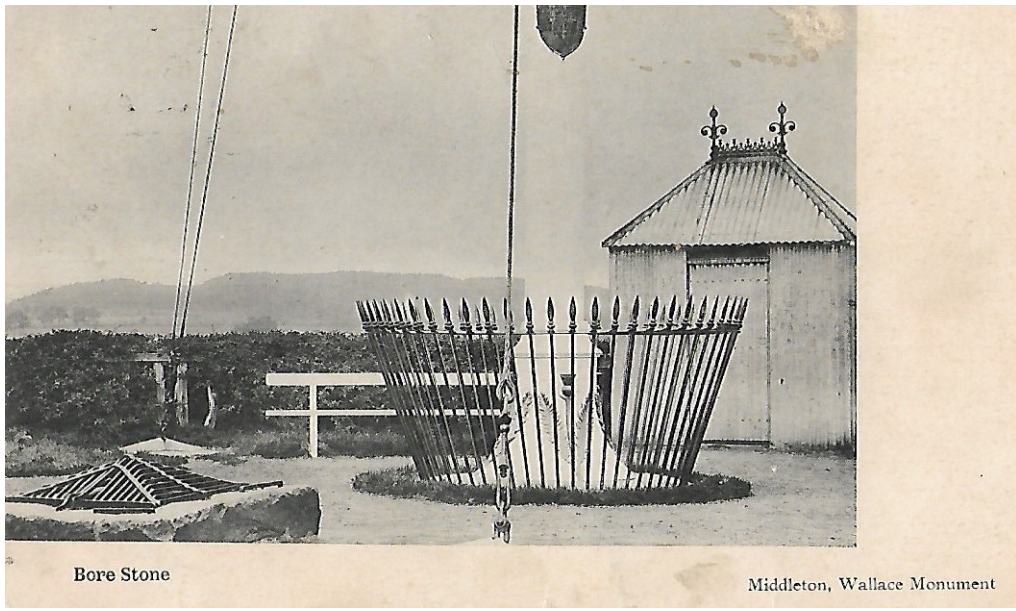

Figure 3: The Victorian Bore Stone Complex (erroneously named the Wallace Monument in the postcard).

being included in the revised Bannockburn entry of Historic Environment Scotland's Inventory of Historic Battlefields in Scotland (HES 2012), even though the document describes the connection as 'unlikely'. The subsequent inclusion of Gillies Hills appears to have derived from local pressure. The Inventory provides protection for historic battlefields from development. Even after over 200 years Scott is influencing Scotland's understanding of its history even affecting planning policy!

However, I am clearly being unfair to Scott and as we have seen he was in part following Burns with specific regard to the Bore Stone and Bannockburn but it is likely that both Burns and Scott (and indeed the RCAHMS) drew upon Nimmo's 1777 two volume account of Stirlingshire's history, geography, geology and industries. The volumes stand as a multi-parish equivalent of the Statistical Accounts compiled by Church of Scotland Minister in every Parish in Scotland in the late 18th century. However, like the Statistical Accounts the volumes capture a variety of oral traditions, presented as fact and all without listing their original sources or assessing their reliability. That they are written down gives them an authenticity that they do not always deserve which is surely the biggest irony of Enlightenment Scotland?

Conclusion

The article has demonstrated a clear line of influence from oral traditions to literature to archaeological and historical interpretation and on occasion to state policy and designation. This seems particularly egregious with regard the Ford of Frew which has demonstrated that an

accumulation of nearly 100 years of assumptions has created a near mythical reputation for the fords at Frew that has impacted both academic and popular accounts. This location has never been called the Fords of Frew and is absolutely not the only path across the Western Carsleands to the west of Stirling and appears to have only been used in extremis. The earliest erroneous description of the location can be traced to Scott's Rob Roy. However, the author feels that perhaps the case against the accused, Sir Walter Scott remains unproven, he is clearly guilty of shaping the perception of Scotland and its history for good or ill (Mark Twain's damming judgment comes to mind) and he drew straight, clear bold lines where only blurs can be seen. Such was his genius that his version of our history crowded all others out. This may of course have been part of a wider deliberate policy to strengthen the Union (eg Pittock 2009). It is also clear that he drew upon older sources who were also interested in bold clear narratives. However, it is not clear if he (or indeed his publisher) made a mistake in erroneously capitalising the first 'f' of the fords at Frew. Equally it is not clear if Watson made the same mistake. So let us conclude with another Scottish tradition that the case is not proven.

Cartographic Resources

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Endnotes

1 It is worth noting that despite the apparent fame and inevitability of the crossing at Stirling Inglis (1913: 303) reports that guides could be provided for journeys north.

2 However see Clarkson (2012:192) for a notable exception, though this may be an error.

3 The phrase also also appears in John Buchan's 1913 novel of the Battle of Kilsyth *The Marquis of Montrose* (quoted by Stott 1993:15).

4 Duffy (2020:108) 'solves' this problem by ignoring the Ford of Frew as mapped by Roy and relocating the '*Fords of Frew*' to the east of the Goodie Water's confluence with the Forth and marking them as the Carse and Bridge of Offers fording points.