

Scotland

The story of a nation



Magnus Magnusson

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Scotland: The Story of a Nation

Аннотация

A timely and vivid look at Scotland's long and difficult road to nationhood, re-exploring some cherished myths and unearthing a wealth of fascinating new detail. This edition contains a limited number of illustrations. Magnus Magnusson's starting point is Sir Walter Scott's classic version of Scotland's history, 'Tales of a Grandfather' (1827-29), which has moulded the views of generations of Scottish schoolchildren. Like Scott, Magnus Magnusson is a master story teller. In investigating the many questions raised by the nation's turbulent and often poignant past, he gives full weight to the living treasure of local legends and tradition which he believes has as much resonance as academic analysis. Where did the 'Scots' come from? What is the truth about such historical figures as Macbeth, William Wallace and Robert Bruce? What was the significance of the tragic reign of Mary Queen of Scots? What was the impact of Bonnie Prince Charlie and his brutal defeat at Culloden? Incorporating the findings of many leading modern historians, 'Scotland: The Story of a Nation' casts the nation's history in a fascinating new light. It is essential reading for anyone with an interest in Scotland at this pivotal moment in its history.

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SCOTLAND
THE STORY OF A NATION
MAGNUS MAGNUSSON



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Praise

From the reviews of *Scotland: The Story of a Nation*:

‘The answer to a prayer – a history of this complex country that is at the same time intelligent and intelligible’

IAIN GALE, *Sunday Herald* (Glasgow) Books of the Year

‘Readable, poignant, fascinating, a lively combination of narrative and analysis’

The List

‘[Magnus Magnusson] is excellent on the sense of place in history, and any visitor to Scotland would benefit from taking this book as a companion’

ALLAN MASSIE, *Spectator*

‘This is never a dry and dusty academic account. [Magnusson] weaves into his narrative a geographical tour of the country’s historical sights that can only come from being a former chairman of Scottish Natural Heritage. His colourful descriptions of history’s main players are often filled out with humorous and telling anecdotes of the time ... The great strength to which Mr Magnusson plays is the richness of characters who set the course of the nation’s history, from the Roman Agricola through William Wallace, Robert the Bruce, Mary Queen of Scots and John Knox to Rob Roy, Sir Walter Scott and beyond. The book will fill many a dark winter evening for anyone who wants to learn more about Scotland’s complex past’

LAURA KIBBY, *Sunday Express*

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SCOTLAND

SHETLAND

Lerwick
Moussa

ATLANTIC OCEAN

ORKNEY

Skara Brae
Maes Howe
Kirkwall

Calanais
LEWIS
Sornaway
HARRIS
The Minch
SKYE
ISLE OF RUM

HIGHLANDS

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Loch Ness
R. Spey

Aberdeen
R. Dee

Fort William
GRAMPIAN MOUNTAINS
Kenmore
Loch Tay
R. Tay
Perth

NORTH SEA

Oban
R. Forth
Stirling
Glasgow
R. Clyde
Firth of Clyde
Firth of Forth
Edinburgh
R. Tweed
Berwick-upon-Tweed

Dumfries

Introduction

These Tales were written in the interval of other avocations, for the use of the young relative to whom they are inscribed [Sir Walter Scott's grandson, John Hugh Lockhart]. They embrace at the same time some attempt at a general view of Scottish History, with a selection of its more picturesque and prominent points ... The compilation, though professing to be only a collection of Tales, or Narratives from the Scottish Chronicles, will nevertheless be found to contain a general view of the History of that country, from the period when it begins to possess general interest.

SIR WALTER SCOTT,

PREFACE TO *TALES OF A GRANDFATHER*

These are stirring times for Scotland. With a parliament of its own – the first for 292 years – Scotland stands on the threshold of a new future. What this future will bring is anyone's guess; all we can be sure of is that it will be informed and influenced by the past, just as our present has been. History gives the present a context.

In this book I have tried to tease out the significant strands in Scotland's history which highlight the key concepts of nationhood and identity. When and how did the many peoples who inhabited Scotland become Scots? When and how did the country of Scotland become the nation of Scotland? How did relationships with England (and other nations) evolve? How did

an independent realm develop? How did the role of kingship, the concept of monarchy, develop? When and how did the governance of Scotland evolve into the community of counsels which is now called parliament?

All these threads are woven, often luridly, into the tapestry of Scotland's past. But what was that past? The Scottish history which I absorbed in my childhood was the history of Scotland as expressed and cast in the nineteenth century by the greatest novelist of his day, Sir Walter Scott. Some 175 years ago he wrote *Tales of a Grandfather* (1827–29), purportedly for the edification of his grandson John Hugh Lockhart, whom he addressed by the neat pseudonym of 'Master Hugh Littlejohn'. In the *Tales*, Scott told history essentially as *story*. He was a brilliant *teller* of history. And he had a wonderful feel for the natural landscape, for the scenes where history happened – history on the hoof, one might call it. This is one of the things which have made his *Tales* such an enduringly popular exposition of history for generations of readers of all ages.

Like every historian, Scott had his own views – there is no such thing as truly objective history: every generation writes its own history to suit its own agenda, for history is part of the process of cultural definition and redefinition. Scott's agenda was very clear. Soon after writing the *Tales*, he expanded his children's book into a 'grown-up' *History of Scotland, 1033–1788* (published in 1831). His purpose, as he put it, was 'to show the slow and interrupted progress by which England and

Scotland, ostensibly united by the accession of James the First of England, gradually approximated to each other, until the last shades of national difference may be almost said to have disappeared’.

Implicit in everything Scott wrote was the assumption that this union of England and Scotland was the inevitable outcome of an inevitable historical process – a process which meant progress. He believed passionately that the Union of the Crowns in 1603 and the Union of the Parliaments in 1707 had helped Scotland to mature out of turbulent and rebellious adolescence into adult nationhood, as an equal partner in the corporate nation-state of Britain.

Walter Scott was a meticulous and extremely erudite historian as well as being the first great historical novelist. He was familiar with all the fashionable theories of history of his day. He read extraordinarily widely, had a remarkable memory, and absorbed information from all manner of sources. He searched out medieval manuscripts and founded societies to edit and publish them.¹ He was greatly admired by historians all over Europe for the way in which he breathed fresh life into the musty recesses of the past. He was deeply interested in historical changes and movements and their causes – and even more so in their effects. And in his greatest novels (where his characters are constantly seen as being helplessly trapped in the social and economic forces of history), no less than in his writing of history, he subtly and imaginatively examined the *meaning* of history

in terms of the relationship between tradition and progress. Scotland, it has often been said, was *invented* by Walter Scott in his portrayal of its history.

But Scott's version of Scotland's history is now largely out-of-date; and so are the ideas about history which informed it. History is continuously being reassessed and rewritten. That is what Walter Scott was doing – he was harnessing the events of the past to reinforce his agenda for his own time: simultaneously conservative and progressive.

In the last few years there has been a revolution in Scottish historical thinking. Many of our cherished conceptions and ideas about our past are being revised. Where did the 'Scots' come from? What happened to the Picts? And what about Macbeth, whom both Shakespeare and Scott cast as the prototype villain of Scottish monarchy? Did Robert Bruce ever see a spider in a cave? How important was the 'Declaration of Arbroath' (which Scott does not even mention)? What was the Scottish Renaissance? What really happened at the Reformation? What was the significance of the reign of Mary Queen of Scots? Who were the Covenanters? What was the impact of Jacobitism on the Highlands and the Scottish identity? And what were the real, long-term effects of the 1707 Treaty of Union?

All these crucial themes in Scotland's history are being examined, sometimes even turned upside-down, by a generation of brilliant and realistic Scottish academic historians. General books and specialised research papers pour from the presses.

Illustrated part-series, like the fifty-two-part *Story of Scotland* published by the *Sunday Mail* in 1988–89 and the current *Scotland's Story* (First Press Publishing), masterminded by Professor Ted Cowan (Professor of Scottish History at Glasgow University), bring Scottish history to a wide and appreciative audience in a highly readable and accessible form.

The study of Scottish history in our universities has been revolutionised since Walter Scott's day. The first chair specifically dedicated to the subject was endowed at Edinburgh University by a bequest as the Chair of Scottish History and Palaeography in 1901. Glasgow followed in 1911, when a joint Chair of Scottish History and Literature was established by public subscription. St Andrews University started a lectureship in 1948 which was elevated to a professorship in 1974. More specialised research institutes have recently been established, like the Institute for Environmental History at St Andrews and Dundee (by the Historiographer Royal in Scotland, Professor Chris Smout) and the Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies at Aberdeen (by Professor Tom Devine, author of the recent *The Scottish Nation 1700–2000*).

The teaching of Scottish history in our schools has also been gradually expanding over the years since I was learning about it (at home) from an edition of *Scott's Tales of a Grandfather* abridged by Elizabeth Grierson (1934). At my school in Edinburgh we were taught only *British* history, about English rather than Scottish monarchs, about the history of the

British Empire.¹ In Scotland today there is a formal requirement on schools and teachers to cover, at their discretion, aspects of Scottish history for pupils aged five to fourteen: the Wars of Independence, the vikings, the Jacobites, Victorian Scotland and the impact of the two world wars are the most popular at present. For pupils at Standard grade (the successor to the O-grade) who take History as a subject, Scottish History is compulsory.

Scotland: The Story of a Nation arose from a broadcast series on Scottish history which I presented on BBC Radio Scotland in 1998. It was entitled *Tales of a Grandfather* because it used Scott's *Tales* as its framework. In the series, I interviewed twenty-four contemporary historians who were busy casting new light on Scotland's history; they helped me to show how radically the perceptions of that history have altered in recent years. Extracts from several of these interviews are quoted in this book. The series presented a re-examination and a re-illumination of traditional views about Scotland's past, from its roots in the so-called Dark Ages to the Union of the Parliaments in 1707 and the last throes of Jacobitism in the 1745 Rising – which is where Walter Scott ended *his* history.

I have used almost the same framework in *Scotland: The Story of a Nation*. However, as far as Scott was concerned, Scottish history did not begin until the accession of Macbeth in 1040; all the preceding centuries were wrapped up in a preamble to the story (Chapter 1: 'How Scotland and England came to be separate kingdoms'), for the dreariness of which he apologised to

his young grandson: ‘This is but a dull chapter, Master Littlejohn.’ He gave a brief account of the Roman invasion of Britain, talked about the continual warfare between the Scots and the Picts after the Romans withdrew, and then, with a sigh of relief, moved on to Macbeth – ‘The next story shall be more entertaining.’ To my mind, the centuries *before* Macbeth are just as fascinating and revealing as those which came afterwards – and just as important for an understanding of the identity of the Scots.

Like Walter Scott, I am a devotee of the *landscape* of history, the monuments, the man-made relics, the places as well as the people of history. *Scotland: The Story of a Nation* takes the reader on a tour of Scotland’s history, from the earliest Mesolithic settlers on the Island of Rum nine thousand years ago to the establishment of Scotland’s new parliament in 1999. We visit many of the sites and monuments which celebrate significant moments in Scotland’s history: the marvellous Neolithic village of Skara Brae on Orkney; the overgrown hill-fort near Inverness where St Columba tried to convert the King of the Picts to Christianity in AD 600; the site of the decisive battle of Nechtansmere (Dunnichen) in Angus where the Picts repelled the Northumbrians in 685, as illustrated by the ‘war-correspondent’ Pictish stone at nearby Aberlemno; the cliff in Fife where Alexander III fell to his death to create a major succession crisis in 1286; the little-known plaque in Westminster Hall which marks the spot where William Wallace was condemned to a brutal death in 1305; the site of the Battle

of Flodden where James IV and the ‘Flowers of the Forest’ were scythed down in 1513.

We find the site of the house in Perth in which James I was murdered in a sewer in 1437, and of the house in Edinburgh where Mary Queen of Scots’ husband, Lord Darnley, was murdered after an explosion in 1567. We visit the superb sarcophagus for Mary in Westminster Abbey which James VI built for his mother. We discover the derelict summerhouse in Edinburgh in which the 1707 Union of the Parliaments of Scotland and England was signed. And we explore not just the battlefield of Culloden but also the magnificent fortress near Inverness which the Hanoverian government built in the worried aftermath of the 1745 Jacobite Rising – Fort George. And all along the way we savour the ‘people’s history’ of Scotland – the living wealth of local legends and traditions about ‘Braveheart’ William Wallace, for instance, which can have just as much resonance for the general reader as the careful analyses of academics.

History on the hoof, indeed, down the long, helter-skelter trail of Scotland’s quest for its identity through nationhood; it is a story of high drama and far-reaching change – change which has never been more striking than in recent years. The words which Sir Walter Scott wrote in the final chapter of his novel *Waverley* (1814), nearly two centuries ago, are even more relevant today:

There is no European nation which, within the course of half a century, or little more, has undergone so complex a change as

this kingdom of Scotland.

Magnus Magnusson KBE

April 2000

1 As a historian, Scott 'was familiar with all the historical works of the Scottish Enlightenment as well as that of editors and antiquaries, and he knew also the medieval chroniclers. It is probably true to say that as a political and cultural historian of Western Europe he was better equipped with knowledge of both primary and secondary sources than any of his contemporaries.' (David Daiches, 'Character and History in Scott's Novels', in *The Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club Bulletin*, 1993/4).

1 Some pupils of my vintage in Scotland were luckier than I was: other schools showed a greater interest in Scottish history, but everything depended on the enthusiasms of individual teachers.

Chapter 1 IN THE BEGINNING

England is the southern, and Scotland is the northern part of the celebrated island called Great Britain. England is greatly larger than Scotland, and the land is much richer, and produces better crops. There are also a great many more men in England, and both the gentlemen and the country people are more wealthy, and have better food and clothing there than in Scotland. The towns, also, are much more numerous, and more populous.

Scotland, on the contrary, is full of hills, and huge moors and wildernesses, which bear no corn, and afford but little food for flocks of sheep or herds of cattle. But the level ground that lies along the great rivers is more fertile, and produces good crops. The natives of Scotland are accustomed to live more hardily in general than those of England.

TALES OF A GRANDFATHER, CHAPTER I

For three billion years Scotland was on a collision course with England.

I am talking in terms of geology. Scotland's geological past involves a barely believable story in which whole continents moved around like croutons floating half-submerged in a bowl of thick soup; a story of great oceans forming and disappearing like seasonal puddles, of mighty mountains being thrown up and worn down, of formidable glaciers and ice-caps advancing and retreating behind mile-thick walls of ice as they melted and

reformed again. Scotland itself has been a desert, a swamp, a tropical rainforest, and a desert again; it has drifted north over the planet with an ever-changing cargo of lizards, dinosaurs, tropical forests, giant redwoods, sharks, bears, lynx, giant elk, wolves – and also, in the last twinkling of an eye in the geological time-scale, human beings.

And always it was on that inexorable collision course with England.

In their learned writings, geologists tend to toss millions of years around like confetti. About three billion years ago what is now (largely speaking) ‘Scotland’ was part of a continent known as *Laurentia*, one of the many differently-sized ‘plates’ which moved slowly around the surface of the globe. Some eight hundred million years ago it was lying in the centre of another super-continent thirty degrees south of the equator. Over aeons of time it wandered the southern hemisphere before drifting north across the equator. By six hundred million years ago Scotland was attached to the North American continent, separated by an ocean called *Iapetus* from the southerly part of what was to become Britain and which was then attached to the European continent.

And then, some sixty million years ago, the *Iapetus* ocean began to close. North Britain and South Britain came together, roughly along the line of Hadrian’s Wall. That collision produced the Britain we know today (although it was still connected to Europe). But the weld continued to be subject to stress and

strain long after the land masses had locked together: over a three-million-year period a chain of volcanoes erupting off the western seaboard of Scotland created many of the islands of the Hebrides, including Skye, Mull, Arran, Ailsa Craig, St Kilda and Rum.

The foundation of history is geology and its related subject of geomorphology. The underlying rock has shaped the landscape and has influenced, through the soil, the kind of plants, animals, birds and insects in every part of the countryside; it has thereby shaped the lives and livelihoods of the human communities which have lived here.

Agriculture would flourish on the productive farmland on the flatter east coast of Scotland. The more mountainous landscape of the west with its thin, acid soils was suitable only for subsistence husbandry. In the Central Belt of Scotland the abundance of coal and oil-shale entombed in the underlying rocks fuelled the Industrial Revolution and would foster the growth of the iron, steel, heavy engineering and shipbuilding industries.

Edinburgh Castle, at the heart of what became the nation of Scotland, would be built on the eroded roots of a volcano which had erupted some 340 million years ago, when Scotland still lay south of the equator. Castle Rock itself was carved into a classic crag-and-tail shape by the gouging passage of ice during the last glaciation.

When Sir Walter Scott opened his *Tales of a Grandfather*

with his summary description of the difference between Scotland and England, the modern science of geology was in its infancy (that science, incidentally, was created by Scotsmen like James Hutton¹ and Sir Charles Lyell²). Scott did not know *why* Scotland was so different from England; it took the pioneers of geology to explain it.

The first people in Scotland (c.7000 BC)

One day in the early 1980s a ploughman was working on a potato field near the village of Kinloch, at the head of Loch Scresort on the island of Rum in the Inner Hebrides. As his ploughshare turned over the soil, he caught sight of a beautiful barbed and tanged stone arrowhead. He reported the find at once, and in 1984–85 archaeologist Caroline Wickham-Jones conducted an excavation of the area on behalf of Historic Scotland. What she unearthed was the earliest human settlement site yet discovered in Scotland, dating from the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) period, nearly nine thousand years ago.

It was a large camp-site rather than a formal settlement: arcs of stake-holes indicated the locations of several shelters, and there were many traces of fires and broken hearth-stones as well as numerous pits and hollows. These first ‘Scots’ had built small tent-like shelters out of wood, brushwood and skins; they made hearths on which they could prepare food and even smoke meat and fish to keep for the winter. The climate at that time was moist and relatively warm – perhaps 2°C warmer than today; much of the island was covered by open heathlands with shrubs of juniper and bog myrtle, but there was also light, low-canopied woodland, while copses of birch and hazel flourished in the more sheltered areas. Remains of carbonised hazelnut shells showed that nuts were an important part of the early inhabitants’ diet.

The most significant find at Kinloch was the discovery of an assemblage of more than 140,000 stone tools and discarded flint-like material. The Mesolithic dwellers on Rum had made a variety of tools from stone, including microlithic ('small stone') arrowheads, scrapers, awls, blades and flakes. They used flint which they collected as pebbles from the beaches; but they also had access to a good knapping stone known as bloodstone, which has similar properties to flint. The source of the Rum bloodstone was on the west coast of the island, ten kilometres from the Kinloch settlement: Bloodstone Hill (Creag nan Steàrnan).

Good-quality stone for tools is rare in Scotland, and the presence of bloodstone made Rum very special to the early inhabitants of the western seaboard; we know from archaeological sites elsewhere that people from many of the surrounding islands and the adjoining mainland used bloodstone from Rum for their tools.

Such were the first known inhabitants of prehistoric Scotland. They had moved up from the south (i.e. England) soon after the end of the last Ice Age, ten thousand years ago, during the Mesolithic period. This sounds very ancient indeed, but it is worth remembering that hunter-gatherers had been living in England for at least four thousand years before that; and in the much warmer climate of the Middle East, people were already living in cities and experimenting with woollen textiles, metal-working, pottery and the irrigation of farmlands.

The Mesolithic incomers to Scotland were not 'settlers', as

such. They were small family groups or communities of nomadic people who lived by hunting, fishing and gathering plants; they would establish camps where they could spend the winter and then make forays in pursuit of deer herds in the spring and summer. They made tools and weapons of stone, they used fire for cooking and warmth, and they dressed in animal skins. They were mobile on both land and sea, and soon established barter-links with other semi-permanent communities.

It is impossible to say how large the Mesolithic population of Scotland was, but several sites have already been identified at places like Morton on Tentsmuir, north of St Andrews and at various other places from Grampian to Argyll.

The Mesolithic period in Scotland lasted for about four thousand years, and merged into the Neolithic (New Stone Age) period around 3000 BC. By then the last land-link between south-east England and the Continent was submerged, and Britain had become an island. This change had involved an influx of new people from the south, people who started to clear the forests and farm the land. There were now permanent communities, such as the marvellous Neolithic village of Skara Brae, on Orkney.

Skara Brae, Orkney (3100–2600 BC)

In the winter of 1850 a ferocious storm stripped the turf from a high sand-dune known as Skara Brae in the Bay of Skail, on the west coast of mainland Orkney. An immense midden was exposed, as well as a semi-subterranean warren of ancient stone buildings. What came to light in that storm turned out to be the best-preserved prehistoric village in northern Europe. And not only was it perfectly preserved – it was the earliest in Europe as well: the village of Skara Brae was inhabited around 3100 BC, more than half a millennium before the Great Pyramid of Egypt was built (2500 BC), and long before Stonehenge (2000 BC).

A splendid new £900,000 Visitor Centre was opened in April 1998. It had taken ten years to plan and build, and it provides a graphic introduction to the story of Skara Brae, using interactive computer images and a replica of one of the original stone houses. But nothing can match the extraordinary experience of seeing the place for oneself.

The ‘village’ comprises half a dozen separate houses and some associated structures, including a very large workshop for manufacturing stone tools. The houses are spacious and cellular, connected by covered passage-lanes. The village was deliberately embedded into the congealed mass of the midden up to roof height, to provide stability and insulation. The walls were made of local Orkney flagstone, which is easily worked and splits

naturally into building slabs. All the fittings and furnishings were also fashioned from flagstone – the kitchen dressers, the cupboards, the shelves, the compartments for the beds. Some of the houses had under-floor drains for indoor sanitation.

The houses are roofless now. Visitors walk along the tops of the walls and look down into the interiors of the houses. There is a startling sense of intimacy, peering down into these comfortable, well-furnished homes: it is easy to imagine the families who lived there for some twenty generations, from 3100 to 2600 BC. The village evokes a vivid sense of immediacy, of instant identity with that close-knit, self-sufficient farming and fishing community.

They lived well. The womenfolk owned a lot of jewellery (necklaces, pendants and pins made from bone, as well as ivory and pumice) which they kept in a recess above the bed. They cooked with home-made pottery on a square stone-built hearth in the centre of the room. Farming consisted of keeping cattle and sheep and a few pigs, and growing barley; the sea provided cod and saithe, lobsters and crabs, cockles and mussels. The nearby cliffs were a cornucopia of seabirds' eggs. Wind and weather drove whales, dolphins, porpoises and walrus ashore on their doorstep.

It was a stable, unchanging lifestyle. Then the village was deserted, around 2600 BC – no one knows how or why. There is no archaeological evidence of sudden emergency or destruction.

The merging of the Neolithic Age into the Bronze Age also

saw the flowering of an extraordinary architectural phenomenon – the erection of stone circles and standing stones. On Orkney, not far from Skara Brae, the Standing Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brogar survive. But the most imposing, and probably the oldest, of the megalithic (‘big stone’) monuments of Scotland is the great complex at Calanais on the Isle of Lewis – Scotland’s ‘Stonehenge of the North’.

Calanais (Isle of Lewis): 3000–2000 BC

It used to be called ‘Callanish’ or ‘Callernish’. Before that it was ‘Classerniss’. But now the original Gaelic form of the name will be enshrined in the next Ordnance Survey maps of the Western Isles of Scotland, so ‘Calanais’ it is, officially.

Calanais on the Isle of Lewis lies at the head of Loch Roag, some twenty-four kilometres west of Stornoway. It was built in stages from about 3000 BC and was certainly completed by 2000 BC. Briefly, it is a circle of thirteen standing stones huddled round a massive central monolith, 4.75 metres high, and a small chambered cairn. A double line or ‘avenue’ of stones comes in from the north, and ragged tongues protruding from the circle create a rough cruciform shape.

The importance of Calanais has long been recognised. In the seventeenth century the people of Lewis called the standing stones *Fir Bhrèige* (‘False Men’):

It is left by tradition that these were a sort of men converted into stone by ane Inchanter. Others affirme that they were sett up in places for devotion.

JOHN MORISONE OF SOUTH BRAGAR, c.1684

By then the complex had been all but drowned in a layer of peat some 1.5 metres deep. In 1857 the owner of Lewis, Sir James Matheson, ordered the peat to be cleared, and the site became a Mecca for visitors. When the first Ancient Monuments

Act was passed in 1882, Calanais was in the primary list of sixty-three prehistoric or later monuments to be scheduled for protection.

The landscape setting, and the setting of the stones themselves, have changed considerably since then. The local inhabitants, who had lived in a row of crofting houses built in the 1860s at the southern edge of the site, were 'cleared', like the peat. Various excavations of dubious value were undertaken. Early in the 1980s a 'proper' excavation was mounted, led by Patrick Ashmore of Historic Scotland, to clarify the precise positions of fallen and missing stones and to repair and conserve the site; in 1982, in a BBC documentary to celebrate the centenary of the Ancient Monuments Act (*Echoes in Stone*), I filmed the tricky re-erection of one of the stones at Calanais.¹ There is now a new Calanais Visitor Centre next door to the Edinburgh University Field Centre; here, visitors can find out about the main site before going on to admire the stones *in situ*.

Calanais has a special aura of enchantment, of marvel and majesty and mystery. What was it originally intended to be? That is its continuing enigma. A temple? A huge funerary complex? A megalithic astronomical observatory to mark important events in the movements of the sun and the moon and the stars? Or all three, perhaps? The engineering and surveying skills required to construct such a complex monument are astonishing; they argue a high level of sustained social organisation, and the sophisticated and purposeful use of regional power to express ancient beliefs

and rituals which we still cannot fathom.

These beliefs and rituals were given their most impressive and enduring monument in the great prehistoric chambered tomb of Maes Howe, at Tormiston Mill on the Orkney mainland.

Maes Howe on Orkney (3000 BC)

In 1861 an assiduous local antiquary named J. Farrer, along with a friend, George Petrie, dug their way into the heart of a great green mound known as Maes Howe. They had no idea what to expect. First they tried to make their way along the entrance passage. When they found it blocked solid, they broke through a hole in the top of the mound. They dropped into a central chamber choked with clay and stones, and had it cleared by their workmen. What they found disappointed them: it was clearly a burial chamber, with three built-in recesses or cells for bodies, but all they found was a fragment of a human skull and some horse bones and teeth.

They also discovered, however, that they were not the first ‘moderns’ to have broken into Maes Howe. In the middle of the twelfth century AD, a band of Norse crusaders (‘Jerusalem-farers’) had dug a hole in the roof of what they called ‘Orkahaug’ and dropped in, and the signs of their incursion were still apparent when Farrer and Petrie made their entry. The Norsemen had had their reasons for breaking into the chamber: they knew that the kings of antiquity had been buried in huge burial mounds accompanied by their choicest treasures and weapons, and ransacking burial mounds was a favoured diversion for viking heroes. But the crusaders had found nothing to satisfy their greed in Maes Howe, and had scrawled their disappointment – and their

excuses for failure – in runic graffiti on the walls:

To the north-west a great treasure is hidden. It was long ago that a great treasure was hidden here. Happy is he who finds the great treasure.

It is surely true what I say, that treasure was taken away. Treasure was carried off in three nights before these Jerusalem-farers broke into this howe.

I make no excuses for returning to Orkney on this lightning tour of prehistoric Scotland, for Orkney is an archaeological paradise, with more outstanding monuments and sites than any other part of Britain of similar size. Maes Howe itself, which is acclaimed as the finest chambered tomb in north-west Europe, is associated with the Orkney farmers who built the Standing Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brogar, and whose ancestors may have lived at Skara Brae. It was built within a century or two of 3000 BC. The mound stands more than seven metres high, and measures thirty-five metres across. The lofty central chamber is relatively small (some 4.6 metres square) and is approached by a low, stone-flagged entry-passage. The passage points south-west, and in the evenings around the shortest day of the year (21 December) the rays of the setting sun shine directly into the burial chamber.

Maes Howe is a miracle of early engineering. It is built almost entirely of huge flagstone slabs (megaliths), the largest of which weigh more than thirty tonnes. The walls of the central chamber converge in overlapping slabs of stone to form a vaulted ceiling;

the final square of space was closed with slabs.

But Maes Howe has even more to offer than this amazing feat of prehistoric architecture, and for that we have the Norsemen to thank. The graffiti carved by the Orkney crusaders are not the only inscriptions in this fascinating place. After the first Norse break-in, the old burial chamber seems to have become a popular venue for courtship. One boastful inscription states boldly, *Thorný bedded: Helgi carved [it]*. Another, more gallantly, says, *Ingigerð is the sweetest woman there is*. Another refers obliquely to the amorous activities of the local merry widow: *Ingibjörg the fair widow: many a woman has lowered herself to come in here; a great show-off. Erlingr*.

They form part of the largest collection of runic inscriptions anywhere in the viking world – and the fact that their subject-matter is so commonplace gives them, for me, a special value. These are not the epics of kings and heroes which you find in the Icelandic sagas, but the authentic voices of the ordinary folk who, throughout history, are usually as anonymous as a flock of birds. Maes Howe was the ancient, brooding, mysterious place which the Norsemen of Orkney made their own.

The Broch of Mousa

Round about 2000 BC the advent of the Bronze Age brought another revolutionary social change to Scotland with the introduction of metallurgy. A new metal, bronze, which was tougher than silver or gold or copper, underpinned the development of sophisticated social hierarchies based on wealth and power. Bronze brought about an increase in trade and an increase in the effectiveness of weaponry; and the new weaponry enabled ambitious leaders to indulge in territorial aggression.

It was now that Scotland made another uniquely Scottish contribution to architecture – the brochs. They were magnificent edifices: tall round towers, with tapering double-skinned dry-stone walls bonded together at intervals by rows of flat slabs. Between the double walls were stairs leading to galleries and small rooms on separate storeys. There was room for livestock at ground level, which had only one small, low and easily defended entrance. There were no windows. The brochs were practically impregnable.

There are some five hundred brochs, or traces of brochs, still surviving in Scotland. They were built in large numbers in the north, especially in the Northern Isles, the Western Isles and Caithness, with occasional examples in the southern part of the country.

When were they built, and why? They seem to have originated

in Orkney early in the Iron Age, around 200 BC, and were being built until about AD 200, when they were more or less abandoned; their stones were robbed for newer buildings in the farming communities which had been growing around them. They can only have been built as powerful symbols of local authority and prestige, which could also act as strongholds for the local people in times of danger: part refuge, part status symbol.

And who built them? They used to be called ‘Pictish towers’, but in fact they were constructed by the ancestors of the Picts – the indigenous inhabitants of northern and western Scotland from whom the historical Picts were descended ([see Chapter 3](#)).

My own favourite is a broch which stands on a tiny uninhabited island off the east coast of Shetland – the broch of Mousa. It is the best-preserved of all Scotland’s brochs; it is still almost intact, standing to a height of thirteen metres. Many centuries after it ceased to be used by the local population the Icelandic sagas record that it was used on two occasions as a refuge by runaway lovers in viking times.

Egil’s Saga relates how, around AD 900, an Icelander in Norway fell in love with the sister of a powerful Norwegian war-chief, Thórir Hróaldsson, named Thóra Hlaðhönd (Lace-Cuff); her suitor was Björn Brynjólfsson. Thórir refused permission for them to marry, whereupon the lovers eloped one night and boarded a ship bound for Iceland, but were shipwrecked on Shetland on the way. They spent a secure and comparatively comfortable honeymoon that winter in the broch of Mousa

while their ship was being repaired, and in the spring they completed their journey to Iceland and lived happily ever after. The daughter of that marriage, Ásgerð, who was conceived on Mousa, became the wife of the eponymous hero of the saga, the great viking warrior-poet Egil Skallagrímsson.

Orkneyinga Saga ('The Saga of the Earls of Orkney') tells how, in 1153, a high-born lady named Margaret, the mother of Earl Harald of Orkney, was abducted by an ardent admirer named Sigurður. The couple holed up with a band of supporters in the broch of Mousa. They had brought in plentiful supplies of food and water, and Earl Harald wrathfully but vainly besieged the broch all winter. Eventually he was forced to agree to the marriage.

These stories seem to me to underline the constant need for security in a world which was becoming more and more violent and aggressive. Safety was paramount – and the more prosperous you were, the more important safety precautions became.

Crannogs

Deep in the heart of Perthshire, in the village of Kenmore at the eastern end of Loch Tay along the A827 from Aberfeldy, the historical enthusiast comes upon an extraordinary structure beside an embryo marina. On a solid platform of pile-driven wooden stilts in the water stands a massive wooden, thatched round-house. It is a crannog, reconstructed by the Scottish Trust for Underwater Archaeology.

Crannogs were, essentially, loch-dwellings built on artificial or modified natural islands in inland waters. They were usually linked to the shore by timber walkways or stone causeways, for protection against robbers or invaders. They were built by some of the first farmers in Scotland towards the end of the Neolithic Age (3000 BC), and some of them were still inhabited as late as the seventeenth century AD. Eighteen crannogs have been found in Loch Tay alone; hundreds more have been identified the length and breadth of Scotland north of the Central Belt. Some remain hidden as submerged stony mounds, others have become tree-covered islands. They were mini-castles long before castle-building began in Scotland.

The Kenmore crannog is based on ‘Oakbank crannog’, on the northern shore of Loch Tay at Fearnan (‘Place of the Alder’), which was built around 500 BC, at the start of the Iron Age, and was the first crannog in Scotland to have been thoroughly

excavated underwater. The round-house has a floor of stout alder-logs thickly carpeted with bracken. It is furnished with all the kinds of artefacts which the excavation produced: a central flat-stone hearth for cooking and heating, storage areas for provisions, wooden bowls and plates, leather clothes and shoes and bags, jewellery made from jet or polished stone, woven and dyed textiles. It makes an unexpectedly roomy homestead for an extended family of perhaps fifteen to twenty people.

The crannog-dwellers on Loch Tay were farmers, even though they lived on water. They tilled the adjoining land and grew barley and two different types of wheat. They kept cattle, sheep and goats. They cut and coppiced hazel to make hurdles for partitions and wood-panels. Their diet of lamb, beef and boar was supplemented by fish, butter, cheese, hazelnuts, nettles, sorrel and wild carrots, and they enjoyed wild cherries, sloes, blackberries and cloudberry.

And they had water-transport – a 10.5 metre log-boat, hollowed out from a single oak-tree, was found at the site; it was large enough to carry animals and other cargo – the first Loch Tay ferry, perhaps! They presumably had canoes as well.

A visit to the Crannog Centre at Kenmore is a rewarding experience. One comes away more impressed than ever by the evidence of the intelligence and creative skills of these early Scots who pioneered the land-uses and methods of land-management with which we are familiar today. There was nothing ‘primitive’ about our early and Iron Age ancestors.¹

Sir Walter Scott made no reference to these early ancestors in his *Tales of a Grandfather*; they were pre-history. For him, *history* only began with the coming of the Romans to Scotland.

It was the Roman incursion which caused the first armed collision with the forces from the south, through England.

1 Edinburgh-born James Hutton (1726–97) is now universally recognised as the ‘father of modern geology’. He was the first person to grasp the nature of the immense age of geological time and the concept of sequences within that time-scale; until that time, it was widely believed that the earth was precisely 4,004 years old. His book, *Theory of the Earth* (1788), long predated Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), and ranks alongside it as one of the greatest scientific contributions of all time.

2 Sir Charles Lyell (1797–1875) was the prophet of the theory of ‘continental drift’ (plate tectonics) which would later be refined by the German meteorologist Alfred Wegener in 1915. Lyell had been struck by the evidence of massive changes in climate indicated by the rock records. In the year of his death he stated: ‘Continents, therefore, although permanent for whole geological epochs, shift their positions entirely in the course of ages.’

1 Archaeology is simply architecture after it has collapsed. I cherish Patrick Ashmore’s description of how he was planning to re-erect the stone: ‘And then we’ll lower it down and twiddle it a bit, so that it will fit in precisely.’ It sums up neatly the *modus*

operandi of dealing with our heritage of crumbling ancient monuments which want nothing better than to fall down.

1 I am indebted to American-born Barrie Andrian, director of the Crannog Centre, for an illuminating tour of the Centre, which was opened in 1997. ‘The reconstruction crannog’, which was started as an archaeological experiment to try out the technique of driving alder-wood piles to a depth of two metres into the soft bed of the loch, using local materials and ancient methods, took two years to build. Crannog research has been conducted by Nicholas Dixon of Edinburgh University for more than twenty years.

Chapter 2 THE ROMANS IN SCOTLAND

A long time since, eighteen hundred years ago and more, there was a brave and warlike people, called the Romans, who undertook to conquer the whole world, and subdue all countries, so as to make their own city of Rome the head of all the nations upon the face of the earth. And after conquering far and near, at last they came to Britain, and made a great war upon the inhabitants, called the British, or Britons, whom they found living there. The Romans, who were a very brave people, and well armed, beat the British, and took possession of almost all the flat part of the island, which is now called England, and also of a part of the south of Scotland.

TALES OF A GRANDFATHER, CHAPTER I

From the road it looks like a genteel suburban garden, discreetly protected by freshly-painted black iron railings, with a small gate inviting access; but for those who take the trouble to stop and enter, it is a magic garden indeed. Inside is one of the most delightful little monuments in the care of Historic Scotland – the excavated remains of the Roman Bath-House at Bearsden, near Glasgow.

A weather-proof interpretive panel mounted on a solid stone pedestal provides a clear and graphic account of what the visitor

can see among the manicured lawns: the walls, stone floors and hypocaust of an elaborate and well-appointed sauna for the small cavalry detachment which garrisoned one of the forts on the Antonine Wall.

The Antonine Wall was a solid and continuous barrier which stretched across the narrowest part of Scotland between the estuaries of the Forth and the Clyde – the Forth – Clyde isthmus. It ran for sixty kilometres (forty Roman miles) along the high ground bordering the southern edge of the central valley of Scotland, from Bridgeness at Bo'ness, west of Edinburgh on the south coast of the Firth of Forth, to Old Kilpatrick west of Glasgow on the north bank of the Clyde. It was started around the year AD 140 on the order of the Emperor Antoninus Pius. It took four years to build, and consisted of a massive stone-based rampart of turf, some 3.4 metres high, topped by a timber breastwork to protect the Roman sentries on patrol; the turf came from a wide and deep defensive ditch which was dug on the northern side of the wall. The wall was studded along its length with forts and beacon-platforms, linked by a road running behind the wall known as the Military Way. Because of its turf construction, and the sprawl of modern urban development, little of it has survived; but the remains of some of the forts, and a few short stretches of the wall, are still visible at places like Watling Lodge (ditch), Rough Castle and Seabegs Wood (rampart, ditch and Military Way), between Falkirk and Bonny-bridge.

In a sense the Antonine Wall was as much a customs barrier

as a defensive wall; it was a means of controlling trade and traffic moving into and out of the Roman province, as well as a base for military patrols into the native territory to the north. One of those frontier posts was Bearsden.

The fort at Bearsden has long since been engulfed by the tide of neat housing of this douce suburb on the north of Glasgow; the houses now sitting on the site overlook the Bath-House which lay in a large annexe attached to the wall. The legionaries coming off sentry duty were able to choose between a plunge in the Cold Room and Bath (*Frigidarium*), or the Hot Dry Room (*Sudatorium*) with its graded Warm Rooms (*Tepidaria*). To one side lay a stone-built communal latrine housing a wooden bench with round holes cut in it for seating over the sewer channel.

The Bearsden Bath-House with its ‘mod cons’ presents a vivid picture of the advance of Roman civilisation into the wildlands of Scotland. It brings us from prehistory into history ‘proper’. But it also foreshadows the long struggle to settle a border between north and south, between Scotland and England.

Iain MacIvor, former Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments for Historic Scotland, says:

The first military works to divide north from south Britain were made by the Romans, and for a long time there was a fanciful link between the famous wall from the Tyne to the Solway [Hadrian's Wall] and the border between Scotland and England. The Scots were to find a lasting source of national pride in the notion that, whereas the southern parts of Britannia had been taken over

without too much difficulty by the mighty Roman army, their own ancestors had held out against the Roman Empire for centuries, and that this undaunted resistance forced the Romans to build one of the wonders of Europe to protect their province of Britannia – Hadrian's Wall.

The location of the Roman frontier in the north varied considerably over the years. Julius Caesar claimed a 'Conquest' after his two invasions in 55 and 54 BC; but it was not until the massive invasion of AD 43 under the Emperor Claudius that the real conquest of southern Britain began. It took the Romans a full forty years of gradual advance and consolidation to become masters of their new province of Britannia. In the course of these four decades they suffered some severe setbacks, including the ferocious uprising of the Iceni tribe of Norfolk and Suffolk under their redoubtable warrior queen Boudica in AD 60–1. By AD 79, however, all England and Wales had been subdued. Now only the far north remained: the Lowlands and Highlands of Scotland. These were *terrae incognitae* to the Romans: unreconnoitred badlands inhabited by (to them) unknown but ferociously barbarian tribes.

There seem to have been three tribes in the Lowlands at this time: the Votadini in the east with their capital Traprain Law in Lothian; the Novantae in the south-west (Dumfries and Galloway); and in between them the Selgovae, whose territory reached from Eskdale to the Cheviot Hills.

The hill-fort of the Votadini on Traprain Law (152 metres)

had earthen ramparts (now almost invisible) enclosing sixteen hectares. It was more than just a stronghold or a refuge: it housed a permanent settlement and the administration of the district – an embryo town or burgh, in effect. The Votadini would later shift their capital from Traprain Law to Edinburgh (Din Eidyn), probably to the Castle Rock, and would be known in heroic legend as the Gododdin ([see Chapter 3](#)).

Around the Firth of Clyde were the Damnonii. Above that were the mountainous lands of many Highland tribes, collectively called the Caledonii (Caledonians) by Tacitus.

In AD 78 the newly-appointed Governor of the Province of Britannia, Julius Agricola, embarked on a vigorous policy of subduing the native tribes still beyond Roman control in Wales and the north of England. Then he turned his mind to an invasion of Scotland. With him was his son-in-law, the historian Tacitus, who would write (in AD 98) an account of the campaigns in Scotland in his *Life of Agricola*. In AD 80 Agricola launched his blitzkrieg with a pincer movement. He sent his Ninth Legion up through the territory of the Votadini on the east side of Scotland, following the line of today's A68 through Lauderdale and north over the Lammermuirs at Soutra to Lothian and the Firth of Forth. Meanwhile the Twentieth Legion moved up the west side through Annandale, along the line of today's M74 to Clydesdale and the Firth of Clyde. Then the two legions joined forces and marched up to the Firth of Tay. By AD 82 Agricola had subdued the Novantae in the south-west and secured the occupation of

Scotland below the Central Belt. He made treaties and alliances with the native peoples where he could, and consolidated his grip by building several garrison forts, the most substantial of which was at Newstead, next to the Eildon peaks near Melrose. He also built a string of small forts (without a continuous barrier) which superintended a line between the Clyde and Forth, with a network of roads to secure the territory to the south.

What was the impact of the Roman incursion into the Lowlands of Scotland? Anna Ritchie, freelance archaeologist and prolific writer on the archaeology and history of early Scotland, says:

At the time the impact must really have been remarkable, because the tribesmen would never have seen anything like the Roman military machine which marched into Scotland.

And there was also an immense economic effect. Once the Roman army was established in the Lowlands of Scotland, there was an impact on agriculture because the army had to be fed. They needed immense quantities of grain, and that grain had to be obtained locally once the supplies they brought with them were finished. You can see that archaeologically, in fact, in these great souterrains, or earth houses: underground storage chambers, some of which are so large that they cannot just have been for the needs of the little settlements in which they lie; they can only be that size because they were storing the grain for the occupying army.

Another area of impact would have been the transport network they needed for military mobility, for provisioning the army and

for sending messages between battalions. That must have been quite stunning in the eyes of the local peoples, because there had been nothing more than tracks until that time. The roads and the great forts with their ramparts and huge wooden gateways would have been a glimpse of a totally alien world.

Agricola's ambitions did not stop at the Clyde – Forth isthmus. His ultimate aim was the conquest of the whole of northern Britain. In AD 83 he started his march north, with a powerful fleet in support. He had a formidable army under his command: three full legions of crack Roman infantrymen supported by cavalry and squadrons of battle-hardened auxiliaries. He wintered on the Tay, and next spring continued his advance northwards up the coastal plain, taking out any native settlements on the way and building a series of temporary marching camps. Meanwhile the Caledonians, according to Tacitus, 'turned to armed resistance on a large scale'.

Agricola's strategy was to bring the Caledonians, under their leader Calgacus, to pitched battle. In the late summer of AD 84 the strategy succeeded. The locations of Agricola's marching camps suggest that he cut across country from Stonehaven into Morayshire along the line of the modern A96 to Inverurie and Huntly; and there, somewhere in the north-east, at a place which Tacitus called *Mons Graupius* (the 'Graupian Mountain'), the two sides met for the final battle.

More than thirty thousand of the Caledonian tribesmen had gathered in close-packed tiers on the slope of a hill. In the valley

between the two armies the Caledonian charioteers careered back and forth, taunting the Romans and displaying their skills, daring them to advance. And advance they did; under the personal command of Agricola, the auxiliary squadrons moved forward in a disciplined frontal attack while the cavalry engaged the charioteers. The Caledonians fought with reckless courage, but gradually they were outflanked and outfought at close quarters. By the end of the day they had been comprehensively routed amid fearful slaughter: ten thousand tribesmen were said by Tacitus to have perished, at a cost of only 360 Roman dead. The survivors scattered and fled ‘far into the trackless wilds’.

The location of ‘Mons Graupius’ has never been positively identified and has been the source of endless debate among archaeologists and historians. Some think the battle took place near Huntly on the slopes of a hill named Bennachie; others opt for somewhere closer to Stonehaven. The apparent similarity between ‘Graupius’ and ‘Grampian’ is intriguing, if inconclusive. It is also tempting to think that it may have been somewhere near Inverness – such as Culloden? – where in 1746, more than 1600 years later, another retreating ‘Caledonian’ army would be brought to battle and shattered by the superior firepower and discipline of a military machine from the south ([see Chapter 28](#)). There, as at Mons Graupius, it was the last strategic point where a native leader could hold an army of Highland tribesmen together before they melted away to their winter straths and glens; there, as at Mons Graupius, defeat would leave what Tacitus called ‘a

grim silence on every side, the hills deserted, homes smoking to heaven’.

The account by Tacitus of the battle of Mons Graupius makes compelling reading – particularly the noble rhetoric he put into the mouth of Calgacus (his name may be associated with the Gaelic *calgath* and mean ‘swordsmen’) in his pre-battle speech, a ringing denunciation of Rome and its supposed civilisation, and the first recorded despairing cry of ‘Freedom!’ which would echo through the Highlands and Lowlands for centuries to come:

Former battles in which Rome was resisted left behind them hopes of help in us, because we, the noblest souls in all Britain, the dwellers in its inmost shrine, had never seen the shores of slavery and had preserved our very eyes from the desecration and the contamination of tyranny: here at the world’s end, on its last inch of liberty, we have lived unmolested to this day, in this sequestered nook of story.

But today the farthest bounds of Britain lie open; there are no other peoples beyond us; nothing but seas and cliffs and, more deadly even than these, the Romans, whose arrogance you shun in vain by obedience and self-restraint. Harriers of the world, when the earth has nothing left for their ever-plundering hands, they scour even the sea; if their enemy has wealth, they have greed; if he be poor, they are ambitious; neither East nor West can glut their appetite; alone of people on earth they passionately covet wealth and want alike.

To plunder, butcher, steal – these things they misname ‘empire’:

they make a desert, and they call it peace.

The defeat was a crushing blow to the Caledonians and their northern neighbours, and a significant victory for the Romans; although beaten, however, the tribes were not broken. Agricola sent a reconnaissance fleet round the north coast to confirm that Britain was, indeed, an island. He may have felt the terrain so inhospitable as not to be worth the effort of military conquest; besides, he had already exceeded the normal five-year period as Governor. He contented himself with ordering the completion of a massive legionary fortress at Inchtuthil on the Tay, seven miles east of Dunkeld, with satellite forts blocking the way into the northern mountains. The following year he was recalled to Rome.

There was to be no Roman subjugation of the Highlands. The fortress at Inchtuthil did not last long. The Empire was in a constant state of flux, with troops required in hot-spots which would flare up here and there on the Continent. In AD 87, before it was even completed, the fortress was abandoned and systematically dismantled, its stores removed and its defences slighted. The Romans were in retreat, withdrawing gradually from all their forts and bases in Scotland. The native tribespeople helped them on their way with constant harassment. By 105 the Romans had withdrawn to a line between the Solway and the Tyne.

The tide turned again with the accession of Hadrian as Roman Emperor in 117. He visited Britain more than once, and in 122

he decided to consolidate the northern frontier with that great barrier, Hadrian's Wall, across the isthmus between the Solway and the Tyne. The Lowland tribes of Scotland were left in peace for a time – until 139, when a new Roman Governor (Quintus Lollius Urbicus) marched north from the wall in strength to reoccupy the territory Agricola had seized nearly fifty years earlier. It was then that he decided to consolidate his gains by building the Antonine Wall.

The Antonine Wall did not last very long either – only twenty years or so. After it was abandoned around 161 it was reoccupied, but only for a very short time, and by about 180 the Romans seem to have decided to pull back towards Hadrian's Wall. There were occasional uprisings in the Lowlands, followed by severe punitive campaigns. But by 214 the Romans had finally withdrawn from Scotland, leaving Hadrian's Wall as the ultimate frontier – the most impressive and enduring legacy of Roman rule in Britain. Scotland and its restless tribes were left to their own devices, held in check only by their domestic preoccupations and the Roman soldiery still garrisoning the fortlets of Hadrian's Wall.

By now, however, the graffiti were really on the wall. And in 297, one of the most famous names of the north appears in the documentary record – the Picti, the warlike painted people who are still considered one of the great enigmas of early Scotland, with a kingdom which stretched from north of the Firth of Forth to the Moray Firth and beyond ([see Chapter 3](#)).

THE ROMANS IN SCOTLAND



They are mentioned as playing a key part in the great ‘Barbarian Conspiracy’ which, through accident or design, attacked Roman Britannia simultaneously from all sides in 367; the Angles and Saxons overwhelmed the coastal forts of the south and east, the Gaelic-speaking Scoti from Ireland came sweeping in across the Irish Sea, and the Picti overran Hadrian’s Wall from the north. From then on, the Roman hold on Britannia became more and more tenuous. They appointed three generals in quick succession in an attempt to save the province, and the defences were patched up again. But it was to no lasting avail. The Roman Empire was crumbling, and by 410 the last of the Roman army, along with the Roman administrators, had left Britain’s shores.

A century before they left, however, the Romans had given this enduring name to their main enemies in the north of Scotland: in the year 297 a Roman poet had referred to them as Picti (‘painted ones’). The name stuck, and ‘Picts’ became a generic term for the many ‘Caledonian’ tribes who lived north of the Forth – Clyde line and who thwarted the imperial ambitions of the Romans at their ultimate frontier.

Chapter 3 PICTS, SCOTS, BRITONS, ANGLES AND OTHERS

These people of the northern parts of Scotland, whom the Romans had not been able to subdue, were not one nation, but divided into two, called the Scots and the Picts; they often fought against each other, but they always joined together against the Romans, and the Britons who had been subdued by them.

TALES OF A GRANDFATHER, CHAPTER I

In the western outskirts of Inverness stands a massive hill crag, now engulfed in trees – Craig Phadrig. The summit of this crag was once the site of a great hill-fort, a mighty bastion of the early Pictish kings.

Not a lot of people know that it is there, or how to find it when they do know. It stands in the Kinmylies district, near Craig Phadrig Hospital; you drive up the steep, dead-end Leachkin Brae, which is not marked as leading to anywhere. Forest Enterprise has provided two woodland walks which meander through the forest at the lower levels of the crag; each has its own car park. To reach the summit of the crag, you use the second (upper) car park and follow the walkway from it. Then you leave its carefully graded surface, take a very deep breath, and embark on a fiercely steep scramble up, and up, and up.

Twenty-five years ago, archaeologists cleared the surface vegetation and revealed two concentric ramparts crowning the

summit; these ramparts had been what is called ‘vitrified’ – that is to say, the timber framework inside the walls had been set on fire (deliberately or accidentally) so that the stone and earth of the massive ramparts were fused into a slaggy mass. The ramparts enclosed a flat expanse measuring some eighty metres by forty. When I was chairman of the Ancient Monuments Board for Scotland in the 1980s, we all toiled up to the top to admire the revelation of this great hill-fort, and decided there and then that Something Must Be Done to make this remarkable monument more accessible and comprehensible to the public; it was being used at the time as an obstacle course by trail riders and motorbike scramblers and the old ramparts were being undermined by the roots of invasive trees.

Well, Something Was Not Done – immediately. The whole summit is now overgrown with thistles and other tall plants. The commanding views of both the Beaully Firth to the north-west and the Moray Firth to the north-east are blocked by massive tree-growth. The ramparts are once again smothered by shrubs and undergrowth. Historic Scotland has plans to clear the summit and its ramparts once again, however, and people should soon be able not only to reach the summit with much greater ease but also to understand what is to be seen there.

Craig Phadrig was a major Pictish stronghold in the north of Scotland from the fifth century onwards. Towards the end of the sixth century it was the fastness of one of the most powerful kings named in the Pictish king-lists – King Bridei mac

Máelchú, often called by the anglicised name of ‘Brude’. In his monumental *A History of the English Church and People* (c.731), the Venerable Bede described King Bridei as *rex potentissimus*, and he seems to have been the over-king of many local kingdoms which comprised the core of the realm of ‘Pictland’, or ‘Pictavia’, this realm extended from around the Firth of Forth and covered the centre and north-east of Scotland as far as Orkney (the name for the sea between Caithness and Orkney is the ‘Pentland’ Firth, which is a Norse word meaning ‘Pictland’). One of his ‘capitals’ may have been on Castle Hill in Inverness; and it is tempting to see Craig Phadrig as the place where St Columba (see below) may have met King Bridei during an expedition up the Great Glen to convert the northern Picts to Christianity in the latter half of the sixth century.

According to Columba’s biographer, Adomnán, King Bridei refused to open the heavy double gates of the ramparts to his missionary visitor. Columba then went up to the gates, made the sign of the cross against them and knocked; the bolts slid back of their own accord and the gates swung open – whereupon King Bridei ‘greatly honoured the holy and venerable man, as was fitting, with the highest esteem’.

The ‘Picts’

So who were these people, these Picts? The first thing to recognise is that there was nothing ‘mysterious’ or ‘problematic’ about them, as scholars used to state. The Picts were not a new element in the population: ‘Picts’ (*picti* – painted ones) was simply the Roman nickname for the tribal descendants of the indigenous Iron Age tribes of northern Scotland.¹ Anna Ritchie, in *Picts* (Historic Scotland, 1989), puts it like this:

The Picts were Celts. Their ultimate ancestors were the people who built the great stone circles like Calanais on the Isle of Lewis in the third millennium BC in Neolithic times, and the brochs in the early Iron Age from about 600 BC to AD 200. We have no evidence of any major invasions of Scotland after the initial colonisation by farming peoples soon after 4000 BC – there seems to have been very little fresh blood coming in during the Bronze Age.

Just outside the town of Brechin, in Angus, by the A90 trunk road from Dundee to Aberdeen, an impressive £1.2 million visitor centre was opened in the summer of 1999 in the country park of the Brechin Castle Centre. It is called *Pictavia*, and can be described as somewhere between a museum and a theme park. The display tells, vividly and graphically, the story of the Picts, and is a splendid introduction to their world for visitors of all ages and abilities; it includes not only many examples of Pictish stones

and jewellery but also interactive computer facilities explaining the meanings of Pictish symbols ('Cyber Symbols') and the sounds of Pictish music (the 'Tower of Sound').

Some time after the age of King Bridei, of Craig Phadrig fame, the centre of Pictish power moved southward, to Angus, Perthshire and Fife, but the Picts' distinctive culture did not change. They were not by any means the painted barbarians described by Roman chroniclers; on the contrary, they were a cultured society ruled by a sophisticated warrior aristocracy which could afford to employ learned men and, more particularly, craftsmen of all kinds – particularly the sculptors who fashioned the magnificent carved stones which are the unique legacy of the Picts.

This period of early Scottish history has long been known as the 'Dark Ages', not because the deeds of the time were so dark but because the documentary sources are too meagre to shed a great deal of light. Modern historians prefer to call the 'Dark Age' of Scotland by a less misleading name – 'Early Medieval'. What *is* clear is that it was a time of considerable and rapid political and ethnic change. By pulling together the sometimes elusive accounts of medieval chroniclers, and calling in all the available archaeological evidence, it is now possible to see various historical patterns developing in Scotland, both north and south of the Forth – Clyde line.

In our attempt to understand the changing shape of early Scotland it would be enormously useful to be able to call upon

the aid of television, with its graphic use of ‘morphing’ – merging collages of images into one another, like long-range weather forecasts. The pattern of conquests and occupations in Scotland in the centuries succeeding the Roman withdrawal presents a confusing kaleidoscope of shifts in power, like an ever-changing jigsaw puzzle. Before we reach a more stable picture of ‘Scotland’ in the twelfth century, say (the time of David I – [see Chapter 6](#)), we have to follow the fortunes of several apparently different groupings: Picts, Gododdin, Angles, Britons/Celts and Scoti/Scots/Gaels, as well as specific kingdoms like Pictland, Fortriu, Strathclyde, Rheged, Alba and ultimately Scotia.

The Gododdin

While the Picts were the power in the north, another martial kingdom had been developing to the south of the Firth of Forth, in the Lothians – the home of the British tribe known to the Romans as Votadini. During the Roman occupation they had been a client kingdom, or at least had lived peaceably under Roman subjugation; archaeologists have found a major hoard of rather battered Roman silverware which was buried at Traprain Law in the fifth century, after the Roman withdrawal.

By 600, however, the Votadini had their stronghold in Edinburgh (Din Eidyn), and emerged in history under their proper British, or Old Welsh, name of ‘Gododdin’ in an elegiac heroic poem called *Y Gododdin*, composed by a local bard named Aneirin at about that time. The poem tells the story of a raiding expedition mounted by the king of the Gododdin, Mynyddawg Mwynfawr, who ruled territories stretching from the Forth to the Tees. He gathered a princely war-band of 360 chosen champions from all over his realm and even farther afield. For a year they feasted and caroused in the towering timber hall of his stronghold in Edinburgh, wearing robes of purple and gold, with gold brooches and neck-bands, drinking from goblets of gold or silver. Then they pledged themselves, according to ancient custom, to conquer or die in the service of their lord. Next morning they went clattering down the Castle Rock, riding

southward deep into the lands of the Angles. The encounter took place at ‘Catraeth’, identified as Catterick in what is now Yorkshire:

*Men went to Catraeth, they were renowned.
Wine and mead from gold cups was their drink.
A year in noble ceremonial,
Three hundred and sixty gold-torqued men.
Of all those who charged, after too much drink,
But three won free through courage in strife,
Aeron's two war-hounds and tough Cynon,
And myself, soaked in blood, for my song's sake.
Gododdin's war-band on shaggy mounts,
Steeds the hue of swans, in full harness,
Fighting for Eidyn's treasure and mead.
On Mynyddawg's orders
Shields were battered to bits,
Sword-blades descended
On pallid cheeks.
They loved combat, broad line of attack:
They bore no disgrace, men who stood firm.*

FROM *THE GODODDIN* (TRANS. JOSEPH P. CLANCY)

It was the very stuff of heroic legend, that ferocious, unforgiving battle.

Legendary or not, historical fact or poetic fiction, the power of the Gododdin was certainly broken a few years later. In 638 Din Eidyn was besieged and captured by the avenging Angles,

and the place seems then to have received the anglicised name Edinburgh, by which it is known today.

The Angles

It may come as a surprise, at first blush, to think of Angles in Scotland – the Angles from northern Germany who had come over to the south-east of England, first in the fourth century as invited auxiliaries to assist the Romans in keeping their hold on Britannia but later, in the fifth century, as invaders bent on conquest. They had created their own kingdom in England, ‘Anglia’, in the area of today’s East Anglia. They were a tough warrior people, the Angles, and in 547, according to the Venerable Bede, the Anglian King Ida thrust his way far northwards over the Humber, across the Tees and the Tyne, and established his royal seat on the formidable fortress crag of Bamburgh on the north-eastern coast of England. By the year 605 all this territory had been consolidated into the Kingdom of Northumbria (literally, ‘north of the Humber’) under King Æthelfrith, whom Bede described as ‘a very powerful and ambitious king’.

We must be careful, when we talk about the ancient name Northumbria, not to be misled by the boundaries of today’s Northumberland. Northumbria at its greatest extent in the seventh century extended all the way north (after the capture of Edinburgh in 638) to the Firth of Forth and even beyond, perhaps to the Mounth (the eastern extension of the Grampian massif). In that context, it is possible to see the heroic raid by the Gododdin

deep into Yorkshire as an abortive preemptive strike against the growing imperial ambitions of the kingdom of Northumbria.

After the collapse of the Gododdin, the aggressive expansionism of the Angles of Northumbria extended their dominance beyond Edinburgh into the southern part of Pictland, the power-centre of Pictland had by then moved from Inverness south to Abernethy, perhaps, and/or Scone, beside today's city of Perth, and a new name was being applied to it – the kingdom of 'Fortriu'. From 653 to 685 much of the southern part of this area seems to have been under Northumbrian control. There was an attempted Pictish uprising in 672, but this was put down with the utmost ferocity and many of the Pictish aristocracy were massacred. The climax came in 685, with a battle between the Picts and the Northumbrians in the Angus glens, north of the estuary of the Tay.

The Battle of Dunnichen (*Nechtansmere*): 685 1

In 685 a check was given to the encroachment of the Saxons by the slaughter and defeat of their king Egfrid at the battle of Drumnechtan, probably Dunnichen; and the district south of the Forth was repeatedly the scene of severe battles between the Picts and the Northumbrians, the latter striving to hold, the former to regain, these fertile provinces.

WALTER SCOTT, *HISTORY OF SCOTLAND*, VOL. I (1830)

In front of the parish church in the village of Dunnichen, near Forfar in Angus, a commemorative cairn was erected by Letham and District Community Council in 1985. It was set up to mark the 1300th anniversary of one of the most significant battles of 'Dark Age' Scotland: a battle which, until recently, was referred to as 'Nechtansmere' but is now called the Battle of Dunnichen (as Walter Scott called it in his *History of Scotland*). 'Nechtansmere' is the name by which the battle was known from Northumbrian sources.

In 685 the ruler of Northumbria was a headstrong king named Ecgfrith. Against the advice of all his counsellors and of St Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne, who had a premonition of disaster, he decided on a massive cavalry attack on Pictland, under its new king, Bridei mac Bili (who also happened to

be Ecgfrith's kinsman). Ecgfrith probably marched through the Lowlands to Edinburgh, then may have crossed the Forth at Stirling and the Tay at Perth. As he advanced up Strathmore from Perth, he was diverted from his planned route by the Picts; using classic guerrilla tactics, they fell back towards territory of their own choosing rather than offering pitched battle in open country.

The earliest primary account of the Northumbrian invasion of 685 was written, forty-five years later, by the Venerable Bede:

King Ecgfrith ... rashly led an army to ravage the province of the Picts. The enemy pretended to retreat, and lured the king into narrow mountain passes, where he was killed with the greater part of his forces on the 20th of May and the 15th [year] of his reign.

It was somewhere in these 'narrow mountain passes' that the Picts ambushed the invaders on 20 May 685 with devastating effect. It has not proved possible to identify the location with certainty. The topography in this southern, fertile part of Angus is open and rolling (the terrain is much more mountainous farther to the north-west); but Bede had never been to Scotland, and his description doubtless relied on exaggerated accounts brought back by the survivors to justify the defeat. A plausible scenario can be made for an ambush somewhere in the Dunnichen area, probably between the high ground of Dunnichen Hill ('Dun Nechtan') and the marshy ground known later as Dunnichen Moss ('Nechtans mire'); the 'mere', or marshland, has now been reconstituted as a large pool by the farmer of Dunnichen Mains farm. The identification of 'Nechtansmere' with Dunnichen

Moss is purely circumstantial, and not all scholars agree with it; but it is attractive, nonetheless.

In this scenario, the Pictish cavalry would have lured Ecgfrith into an ambush by feigning fear, until Ecgfrith found himself marching eastward past Dunnichen Hill alongside an extensive stretch of 'mere' at the base of the hill. At that point the trap was sprung: the main Pictish forces came swarming down from behind the top of Dunnichen Hill to attack the Northumbrian cavalry on the flank and cut off its retreat. The Northumbrians were virtually wiped out and Ecgfrith was killed.

In the churchyard of Aberlemno, some ten kilometres to the north of Dunnichen, there is a magnificent Pictish cross-slab (a fawn-coloured sandstone slab with a cross carved on it). The cross, richly decorated in high relief, is on the front of the slab; on the reverse, under two Pictish symbols, is depicted a battle-scene in three tiers. It has been called a 'tapestry in stone', but it is more than that: it is a brilliantly detailed despatch by a war-artist from the front line. It portrays the battle in a series of four vivid cartoon panels. The combatants are carefully distinguished: bare-headed Pictish warriors confronting (and eventually defeating) opponents who are wearing Anglo-Saxon helmets with long nose-guards and distinctive neck-collars. The Pictish cavalymen are riding long-tailed ponies which they control with their knees and feet, leaving both hands free to wield their weapons, whereas the Northumbrians on their heavier, short-tailed ('bang-tailed') horses need to use one hand for the reins. The Pictish

infantrymen are drawn up in ranks with a swordsman in front, defended by a warrior behind him wielding a long thrusting-spear and another armed with a throwing-spear.

The Aberlemno cross-slab seems to have been made early in the eighth century; it is tempting to interpret it as a memorial depiction of the Battle of Dunnichen itself. In the bottom right-hand corner an outsize Northumbrian (the size signifies a person of rank – perhaps Ecgfrith himself) lies dead on his side, his helmeted corpse now carrion for ravens.¹

The outcome of the battle was decisive, according to the Venerable Bede:

Henceforward the hopes and strength of the English realm began to waver and slip backwards ever lower. The Picts recovered their own lands which had been occupied by the English ... Many of the English at this time were killed, enslaved or forced to flee from Pictish territory.

The battle marked the end of the Anglian/Northumbrian ascendancy in Scotland: from then on, the Northumbrians were never to be a power in the lands north of the Forth. Modern historians now claim that it was the Battle of Dunnichen which paved the way for northern Britain eventually to become the independent nation of Scotland and not just a northern extension of England. Some have even compared it to Bannockburn as ‘the most decisive battle in Scotland’s history’.

As for Bridei mac Bili, the conquering hero of Dunnichen, he died in 693 and was buried in the royal cemetery on Iona.

The Saltire of Scotland

Half a century or more after the Battle of Dunnichen, it is said, there was another battle against the Northumbrians, of symbolic significance at least, which legend associates with the village of Athelstaneford, on the B1347 near Haddington, in East Lothian; this battle is traditionally believed to have provided Scotland with its patron saint, the apostle Andrew, and its banner, the saltire.

According to Walter Bower's massive *Scotichronicon*, a Latin history of Scotland written in the 1440s, around 750 a Pictish warrior-king named Unust (729–61) was having the worst of a battle against the Northumbrians, when St Andrew appeared to him in a dream and promised him victory; this boost to Pictish morale apparently did the trick, assisted by another supernatural omen – a huge cloud-formation against the blue sky in the shape of a saltire (a diagonal cross, the *crux decussata*, on which Andrew was said to have been crucified at Patras in Achaia). Hence the adoption of St Andrew as Scotland's patron saint, and the blue-and-white saltire banner as the symbol of Scotland's nationhood.

The early Church in Scotland built up the cult of St Andrew by promoting the story that some of the saint's relics had been brought to Scotland at the behest of an angel by St Rule (Regulus) in the fourth century; a shrine was built for the relics at Kilrymont, which later became the site of the great cathedral

of St Andrews. Having Andrew as its patron saint was a great coup for Scotland: he had been the first of the apostles whom Jesus had called. St Andrews quickly became a renowned centre for evangelisation and pilgrimage.

The tourist trade today is as important to the Scottish economy as the pilgrim trade was then – and Athelstaneford, as ‘the birthplace of Scotland’s flag’, has seen no reason to miss out. In 1965 a commemorative cairn was erected in the graveyard of the parish church, incorporating a granite panel showing two armed hosts facing one another beneath the St Andrew’s Cross in the sky, and the inscription:

Tradition says that near this place in times remote Pictish and Scottish warriors about to defeat an army of Northumbrians, saw against a blue sky a great white cross like Saint Andrew’s, and in its image made a banner which became the flag of Scotland.

Beside the cairn the saltire flies permanently on a tall white flagpole. A Flag Heritage Centre was established there in 1996 in a converted sixteenth-century doocot (dovecote).

The Britons

To the west of the Lowlands there was another realm – or rather, another shifting conglomeration of petty kingdoms and principalities – which took in a huge stretch of land from the Clyde down through today's Dumfries and Galloway, over Hadrian's Wall and across the Solway as far south as the present Lake District. This was the kingdom of the Britons – basically, Cumbria; but, as with Northumbria, we must not confuse its boundaries with those of today's Cumbria. The original Cumbria was the Latinised ancient name for this territory of the Britons, derived from a variant of the same word as modern Welsh *Cymry*, the name of the peoples there. In the sixth century this Brittonic realm may well have been the home ground of Arthur (Arturus), a Romanised British war-leader who was promoted, in legend, into a great European champion of Christianity, the 'once and future king' of the Britons.

Within this British realm of Cumbria two separate kingdoms emerged north of Hadrian's crumbling wall. One was Strathclyde, whose boundaries stretched as far south as Penrith. Its power-centre was at the basalt Rock of Clyde (*Altcluith*, Dumbarton Rock), where Dumbarton Castle now stands. Its 'spiritual' centre seems to have been in the Govan area, somewhere near Govan Old Parish Church; this church now houses an impressive collection of thirty-one pieces of sculpted

stonework dating from the ninth to the eleventh centuries, including a magnificently carved giant sarcophagus.

The British of Strathclyde reached the height of their power in the seventh century; Strathclyde survived as a client kingdom of Alba until the Battle of Carham in 1018 (see below), where the last native king of Strathclyde, Owain the Bald, was killed.

The other British kingdom was Rheged, based on Carlisle and covering Galloway in the extreme south-west of Scotland. Rheged is the most shadowy of all the kingdoms of the 'Dark Ages'. One name stands out from ancient Welsh poetry: that of Urien, king of Rheged, whose exploits were hymned by the Welsh bard Taliesin. In 590 he took part in a siege of the Anglian stronghold on the island of Lindisfarne, off the north-east coast of England, but was assassinated by a rival British king who was jealous of his prowess.

The ‘Scots’

The people the Romans called *Scoti* originally came from Ireland. The name was just a term of opprobrium applied by the Roman authors to describe raiders from Ireland, and probably meant, simply, ‘pirates’; it differentiated the *Scoti* from the *Picti* of mainland Scotland. The *Scoti* had raided in the Hebrides and the western mainland of Scotland, they had taken part in the ‘Barbarian Conspiracy’ which overran the Roman province of Britannia in 367 ([see Chapter 2](#)), and they had probably been coming across the North Channel to settle in the west of Scotland for quite a long time. Around the year 500, however, tradition suggests that there was a positive ‘migration’ of the *Scoti* to Scotland: the seventh-century Irish *Senchus fer nAlban* (‘Tradition of the Men of Scotland’) records the story that the *Scoti*, under their king Fergus Mór mac Eirc, an enterprising hero in the legendary mould, moved in strength from Antrim in north-eastern Ireland across the North Channel to the rugged, mountainous, island-haunted terrain of Argyll in the west of Scotland. These people were known as the Dál Riata; they spoke Gaelic, and established a new kingdom in the territory of modern Argyll which came to be known as Dalriada.¹

The Gaelic-speaking Dál Riata in Argyll and the adjacent Inner Hebrides soon started to colonise farther afield. By the end of the sixth century they were hammering at the boundaries of

neighbouring states, led by a series of aggressive warrior kings. One of those whose names are writ large in the *Annal of Scotland* was Áedán mac Gabhráin, overlord of Dalriada from 574 to 603, whose recorded exploits included large-scale raids by land and sea against the territories of the Picts, the Britons of Strathclyde and the Anglians of Northumbria. He was eventually defeated and killed by the Northumbrians in 603.

Dunadd

The massive natural fortress of Dunadd, in mid-Argyll, rears out of the Crinan Moss (Moine Mhor – the ‘great moss’) at the southern end of the fertile Kilmartin Glen above Lochgilphead. For historical pilgrims intent on getting a ‘feel’ for ancient Dalriada, there is a new Museum and Visitor Centre (Kilmartin House) in the village of Kilmartin at the head of the valley.²

The hill-fort of Dunadd is only one of the many power-bases of the old kingdom of Dalriada, but it is perhaps the most striking and evocative. It stands back from the A816 from Lochgilphead to Oban, fifty-four metres high, a grass-grown rock mass made of epidiorite schist and shaped by glacial action – what geologists call a *roche moutonnée*. It is a bit of a scramble in places to reach the top, through natural clefts in the rock, but there is a wonderful panoramic view from the summit which makes the effort well worth while.

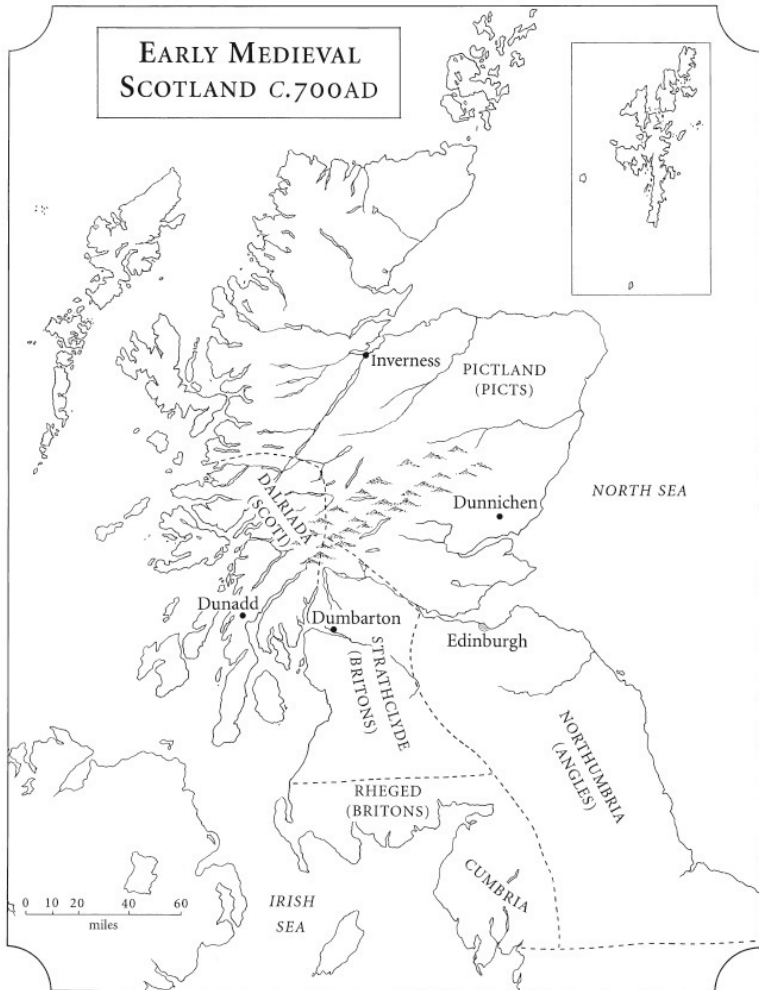
The steep zigzag route to the summit leads through two defiles which give access to concentric terraces which girdle it. The terraces are buttressed by the living rock, and any gaps were filled in by walling to complete the defences. The terraces provided space for timber structures, no trace of which now remains. The path leads onwards and upwards to the highest of the terraces, just below the sanctuary of the summit. On this grassy shelf lies the magnet which draws visitors to the top: a

carved footprint incised into the bedrock, pointing more or less directly towards the distant Ben Cruachan, the 'holy mountain' of Argyll. There is also a roughly-scratched outline of a boar (a Pictish symbol) and an inscription in the unintelligible alphabet known as ogam. On another rock, just behind the 'heel' of the footprint, is a small hollowed-out basin (possibly for libations).

It is a tantalisingly enigmatic spot, where the imagination can take wing. Most commentators now agree that the carved footprint was used in the ritual inauguration of early Dalriadic kings; the new king would have placed one foot in the carving during the ceremony, in full view of his people gathered on the terrace below, to symbolise a royal 'marriage' with the land. Today's visitors cannot resist trying the fit for themselves.¹

There is a magic resonance about Dunadd; for the people of Argyll it is the birthplace of the Scottish nation, a royal centre of major importance in the growth of 'Scotland' as a coherent realm. It has an overwhelming sense of place, of belonging to the land, superintending the surrounding countryside: the coiling meanders of the River Add below, Kilmartin Glen to the north, the hills of Knapdale to the south and, to the west, the Crinan Estuary and the Sound of Jura marking the route of the incomers from Antrim.

EARLY MEDIEVAL SCOTLAND C.700AD



Recent archaeological excavations have shown that Dunadd was occupied, albeit intermittently, from about AD 500 to 1000; it is usually called ‘the capital’ – or ‘a capital’ – of the kings of Dalriada. It was a place where skilled craftspeople fashioned high-quality jewellery and implements in bronze, silver and gold. It was also a major trading centre in a huge Celtic network which stretched from Ireland, down the west coast of Britain and across to the Mediterranean. Dunadd was clearly an important player in European trade, exporting commodities like hides, leather and metal-work and importing luxury goods from abroad. One of the most intriguing items found during excavations at Dunadd was a small piece of a yellow mineral named orpiment which comes from the Mediterranean; orpiment is the mineral which produced the beautiful golden yellow ink used by medieval scribes for their illuminated manuscripts, and may have been used on Iona to make the Book of Kells. Adomnán, the biographer of St Columba, described a visit paid by Columba to the *caput regionis* (capital of the region) and his talking to sailors from Gaul – perhaps he was there to buy orpiment for his scriptorium on Iona!

Ted Cowan, Professor of Scottish History at Glasgow University, says of the carved footprint on Dunadd:

The new king of Dalriada metaphorically (and almost literally) stepped into the shoes of the old king – it's a perfect size nine shoe, by the way. It carried overtones of fitting the role of being king, of being the only person whose foot fitted the footprint; the last echo of that concept is heard in the story of Cinderella and the

glass slipper – the Ugly Sisters try it on, but Cinderella, the ‘real’ princess, is the only person whose foot fits.

These inaugurations would have been Christian ceremonies, whatever ancient pagan traditions may have been reflected in them. And that brings us to a consideration of the impact of Christianity on early Scotland.

The coming of Christianity

Before the Romans officially declared an end to their occupation of Scotland, in 410, the south-west of Scotland may already have been Christianised; early in the fourth century the Emperor Constantine had declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, and this may have led to the establishment of some kind of 'sub-Roman Church' in Pictland.

The Venerable Bede wrote that, after Constantine made Christianity official, 'faithful Christians who during the time of danger had taken refuge in woods, deserted places and hidden caves, came into the open and rebuilt the ruined churches. Shrines of the martyrs were founded and completed and openly displayed everywhere as tokens of victory. The festivals of the Church were observed, and its rites performed reverently and sincerely.'

The one name which emerges from the scanty sources about south-west Scotland during this period is that of St Ninian. Ninian (Nynia) is the first Christian missionary in Scotland's history who is known to us by name. Bede called him 'a most reverend and holy man of British race', and recorded a tradition that he had been trained in Rome and that his see was at St Martin's Church at Candida Casa (the 'White House'), identified as Whithorn in Galloway. He was, apparently, the son of a converted British chieftain, who began his mission in the south-

west late in the fifth century as the bishop of a Romanised community which had been Christian for some time. By the seventh century Ninian had become a cult saint, and many churches were dedicated to him in different parts of Scotland in the ensuing centuries.

In the west of Scotland, St Kentigern, or Mungo,¹ founded a church beside the Molindinar Burn; it was in a 'green hollow' (*glasclu*), which gave the city of Glasgow its name. By 600, Kentigern/Mungo was established as the first bishop of the kingdom of Strathclyde centred on Dumbarton; his shrine lies in the crypt of Glasgow Cathedral.

The man most closely associated with the spread of Christianity in the sixth century, however, is Columba (*Colum Cille*, 'Dove of the Church', c.521–97). He was a scion of the Uí Néill, the most powerful royal family in Ireland at the time. Columba was a vigorous and hot-blooded warrior-monk who was banished after a particularly bloody battle and, as a penance, chose to lead a mission to the Scoti of Dalriada. In 563 he set sail in a coracle with twelve companions to do God's work. After some years on an island which Columba called *Hinba* (perhaps Jura), the king of Dalriada gave him the island of Iona, off the west coast of Mull, probably in the early 570s. Here he founded a large monastic community which was to become the spiritual powerhouse of Christianity in northern Britain. It also became a renowned centre of learning and artistic excellence, and owned an extensive library of books: many claim that the

magnificently illustrated Book of Kells, now in the library of Trinity College, Dublin, was produced in a scriptorium on Iona. Columba's biographer, Adomnán, wrote that he was engaged in making a new manuscript of a psalter on the day of his death.

The major impact of the Church was the introduction of writing, and the close and mutually beneficial relations between Church and state. The Church was both client and patron of the monarchy. Columba himself ordained one of the kings of Dalriada (Áedán mac Gabhráin) on Iona in 574. Another graphic impact was on Pictish art: following the advent of Christianity the Pictish symbol-stones were shaped into slabs with a dominant cross carved on one face, and Biblical figures like David were introduced to symbolise kingship, alongside the characteristic ornamentation of spirals, snakes, dragons, birds and fish.

Although both the Picti and the Scoti were ethnic Celts, the Picts were not the same *kind* of Celts as those incomers who came from Ireland around 500 to found the kingdom of Dalriada. The language the Picts spoke was 'British' or 'Brittonic' Celtic, akin to Welsh, Cornish and Breton (scholars call it 'P-Celtic'), whereas modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic descend from Goidelic Gaelic (which is classified as 'Q-Celtic'). The eventual assimilation of the Picts into the Gaelic culture of the Scots was made much easier through the influence of Christianity. Having been converted by Columban missionaries, the Picts looked to Iona as the head of their Church. Differences between Picts and Gaels began to be reduced, through intermarriage and the

exchange of church personnel. So it is reasonable to assume that it was the rise of the Gaelic Church in Pictland which laid the foundations for the ultimate unification of the Picts and Scots as a new kingdom.

But before that could come about, there was another threat to be faced, in the shape of an enemy who would serve to bring the Picts and the Scots even closer together – the vikings.

The vikings

The vikings have long been considered the bogeymen of history. For centuries they were cast in the role of Anti-Christ – merciless barbarians from Scandinavia who plundered and burned their way across the known world, heedless of their own lives or the lives of others, intent only on destruction and rape and pillage. In fact it was never quite as one-sided as that – history seldom is – but it made a good story at the time. Today there is emerging a much more balanced version of the story which depicts the vikings in a less lurid and more objective light. It is mainly a matter of emphasis: less on the raiding, more on the trading; less on the piracy and pillage, more on the poetry and artistry; less on the terror, more on the technology of the Norsemen and the positive effect they had.

Politically as well as militarily they had a profound effect on the shifting, unstable kingdoms which were developing in what was to become Scotland. The historical record of their incursions into Scottish waters and territory began in 795 with a raid on Iona (the first of three such raids in ten years), and Scotland was then engulfed in the turmoil of what has come to be called the Viking Age (800–1050). While Danish raiders attacked the Continent and southern England, Norwegian invaders established a Norse earldom in Shetland and Orkney which was to last for more than three hundred years, from the middle of the ninth century to the

thirteenth.

The Orkney earldom was a semi-autonomous fiefdom of the Norwegian crown, theoretically a Norwegian possession but frequently a recalcitrant one which displayed a large degree of independence. The main source for our knowledge of the Northern Isles during this period is an Icelandic saga, *Orkneyinga Saga* ('The Saga of the Earls of Orkney'), written early in the thirteenth century. It is a sprawling, dynastic chronicle of the lives of the earls of Orkney, a vivid narrative pageant of clashing personalities and dramatic events – not so much a history as a historical novel. It is the only medieval chronicle which has Orkney as the central place of action, but the story has much to say about the Norse impact on the northernmost counties of mainland Scotland, Caithness and Sutherland (which to the Orcadian Norsemen was 'South-land'!).

Today the people of Shetland celebrate their Norse heritage on the last Tuesday of every January with an exhilarating, night-long viking fire-festival called Up-Helly-Aa, which culminates in the ceremonial burning of a viking galley in Lerwick, the capital town of Shetland. It is not an ancient ritual by any means. It was invented by a blind Shetland poet in the 1880s, an aspect of the Victorian 'rediscovery' of the Viking Age by literary figures like Thomas Carlyle and William Morris – and, before them, Sir Walter Scott with his novel *The Pirate* (1821), which was inspired by a fleeting visit to Shetland in 1814 and a glimpse of the ruined medieval baronial building at Sumburgh which he

named, romantically, Jarlshof ('Earl's Temple').

From their base in the Northern Isles the Norsemen ruled a miniature empire of the North Sea. It was probably from Orkney that their early raids on Iona were mounted; it was from Orkney that they exercised dominion over the Western Isles, which from then on owed fealty to the Norwegian crown. Viking armies penetrated deep into mainland Scotland in the north and the west, inflicting heavy defeats on the Scoti and the Picts alike. On the west coast, in 870, the vikings stormed the Strathclyde fortress of Dumbarton after a four-month siege; on the east coast in 890 they captured the formidable Pictish fortress of Dunnottar on its apparently impregnable rock projecting from the coast three kilometres south of Stonehaven. Norse power played a potent part in the kaleidoscope of aggression and alliance from which the picture of Scotland was to emerge.

Kenneth mac Alpin (800–58): the union of the Picts and the Scots

One effect of the viking incursions in the west was to force the Scots of Dalriada to look eastwards along Strathearn ('the Strath of the Irish') towards the richer lands of Pictish Fortriu, where the Picts, too, were under fierce pressure from viking attacks from the east. The power of Dalriada was now in decline and, despite occasional hostility between Scots and Picts, there was a certain inevitability about the way in which the two kingdoms began to come together against the common viking enemy.

This process of gradual unification culminated in the middle of the ninth century with the first joint king of the Picts of Fortriu and the Scots of Dalriada – Kenneth mac Alpin (Cináed mac Aílpin), known as Kenneth I. He was born about 800, and is believed to have been of mixed Dalriadan and Pictish stock, with a Gaelic father and a Pictish mother.

Out of the welter of warfare which saw the royal families of both kingdoms crushed, Kenneth mac Alpin emerged as king of Dalriada around 840; a few years later he became king of Pictish Fortriu as well. How exactly that came about is not known; according to a lurid folk-tale he invited the leaders of the Pictish nobility to a feast under a flag of truce and had them all slaughtered, but that yarn is no longer given any credence.

Kenneth mac Alpin soon moved his base out of Dalriada and

eastward to Tayside, the heartland of Pictland itself. The island of Iona, founding centre of the Columban Church, had proved to be too vulnerable to viking raids; so when another huge viking fleet came prowling down the west coast in 849 on its way to Ireland, Iona and the other 'hallowed' islands were abandoned and the relics of their saints taken to safety on the mainland. The bones and treasures of St Columba were carried from Iona to Dunkeld ('Fort of the Caledonians'), and installed in a great new church there.

It was the end of Dalriada as a historical identity. Kenneth mac Alpin, or one of his successors, established a new royal seat at Scone, near Perth, which became the capital of a united kingdom. He died in his palace at Forteviot in 858, having in the last ten years of his life invaded the kingdom of Northumbria no fewer than six times. In the course of these incursions he burned the royal fortress of Dunbar and the great early monastery at Melrose.

Kenneth mac Alpin's unification of Dalriada and Pictland as a new political entity was a landmark in the evolution of Scotland as a single kingdom. His authority extended from the Moray Firth in the north to the Firth of Forth in the south. This kingdom soon came to be called Alba, the old Gaelic name for Britain as a whole, which was now applied specifically to the territory ruled by Scottish kings.

Kenneth mac Alpin founded the first recognisably Scottish royal dynasty, and as a result Scotland's kings are formally

numbered from him as Kenneth I. However, the perceived significance of Kenneth mac Alpin in the origins of the Scottish nation is now diminished in the eyes of modern historians. Ted Cowan backs another king as the real creator of the kingdom we now call Scotland; his name was Constantin II (Constantín mac Áeda), and he ruled from 900 to 943:

In my view, Constantín mac Áeda was Scotland's equivalent of England's King Alfred, and he should be on the lips of every schoolchild in this country. Perhaps the only reason that he isn't is because his Gaelic name looks so difficult to pronounce! This Constantín did two things. First, he married members of his family into the viking war-bands and bought peace with them in that way. Second, he manufactured a new origin myth for the 'Scots' to give them a pedigree which showed how the Picts and Scots were related.

The 'original' Scottish origin myth traced the lineage of the Scoti back to Biblical times: they were descended from an Egyptian princess named Scota, the daughter of the Pharaoh of the Oppression (Ramses II, 1304–1237 BC). This enterprising princess left Egypt shortly after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. She wandered for 1,200 years in the deserts of the eastern Mediterranean, before crossing to Sicily and making her way through the Pillars of Hercules (Straits of Gibraltar), through Spain and then across to Ireland. In her baggage she brought the block of sandstone, weighing 152 kilograms, which was reputed to have been used as a pillow by Jacob when, according to

Genesis 28, he had his celebrated dream about Jacob's Ladder ('I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed'). From the east coast of Ireland, Scota beheld her own Promised Land – Scotland – and crossed over to it with Jacob's sacred Stone.

Constantin II, according to Ted Cowan, made a significant addition to this imaginative account: he instructed his bards to give Scota a husband – Gaedel Glas (Gathelos), a Prince of Scythia and ancestor of the Picts. That gave the Picts and the Scots a common ancestry, as a deliberate part of the nation-building on which Constantin II was engaged. As part of the redefining of the new integrated kingdom, Scota's far-travelled Stone was moved to Scone, where it was put to use as the seat on which the rulers of the united Scottish kingdom were inaugurated – the 'Stone of Scone' or 'Stone of Destiny', as it came to be called.

The origin myth of ‘the Scots’

Your identity, both as an individual and as part of a nation, is crucially determined by where you believe you come from – what your origins are, in effect. There comes a time in the growth of any country when it is both politic and imperative to have a respectable pedigree as a nation. And if you don't know it, you invent it.

But how and when, in the case of Scotland, was it done? On what basis was this embryonic origin myth manufactured? Dauvit Brown, a lecturer in Scottish History at the University of Glasgow, has made an exhaustive study of early medieval written sources:

The earliest surviving text which propounds the idea, in all seriousness, of Scotland being two thousand years old was written during the 1290s, during the ill-fated reign of John Balliol [see Chapter 9]. It is basically a king-list, but it also includes an account of Scottish origins, explaining that the original Scots were descended from Gaedel Glas and Scota, and came from Egypt and eventually ended up in Scotland. The length of reigns in the king-list, we are told, added up to 1,976 years to the coronation of John Balliol in 1292.

The way it was achieved was by an ingenious and simple use of the available material. There was a list of kings from Kenneth mac Alpin. There was also a list of about thirty kings from Fergus

Mór mac Eirc, the alleged founder of the 'Scottish' colony of Dalriada around the year 500. There was also a list of sixty-five-plus Pictish kings. All this material was stitched together and presented as if it were a single series of kings, which totalled 113 (once you had included Robert Bruce).

It is noticeable that this text, elaborating in this rudimentary way the idea that Scotland was an ancient kingdom, was written when Edward I [of England] was knocking on Scotland's door with a vengeance. This Irish identity gave the kingship of Scotland the authenticity of age which medieval institutions required, through a royal genealogy stretching all the way back to Noah via the Irish king-lists.

Any desire to express Scottish identity as a form of ethnicity has an inherent weakness: there is not any one set of 'people' who form the backbone of a group which can be identified as modern Scots. Even in the tenth century this was so, and notions of Scottish ethnicity had to be carefully blended into a constructed notion of Scottish nationality. In the twentieth century, too, the range of peoples and cultures one might mix together when trying to construct a notion of Scottish national identity or national characteristics is as broad as ever. But the one culture still in existence today in Scotland, and the one with the longest track record, is that of the Gaels, who have the strongest claim to being the indigenous people of Scotland.

And that raises a puzzle concerning Walter Scott's *Tales of a Grandfather*: the Celts, these Irish progenitors, were given no

mention at all in the opening chapter, and very little mention, indeed, throughout the whole book. Why? Alex Woolf, lecturer in Scottish and Celtic History at Edinburgh University, says:

When I first read Tales of a Grandfather, what struck me most was that Scott completely passes over the Irish origin of the Scots, he makes it look as if the Scoti were indigenous people alongside the Picts from earliest times. To understand this attitude, we have to look at the period in which Scott is writing – the beginning of the nineteenth century. He grew up in the eighteenth century, when Catholicism was outlawed in the United Kingdom. There was a great anxiety about Catholicism in Britain and Ireland, and the period in which Scott was writing saw a powerful political movement demanding Catholic emancipation, which came in 1829, towards the end of Scott's career as a writer. There was much anxiety, particularly in Ireland, about this upswelling of political fervour of a people who were 'not like us' – people who were not Protestants, people who still spoke Gaelic (which was totally alien to the ruling élites of both Scotland and England and, indeed, of Ireland). I think it was this linkage of Ireland with the threat of Popery which probably led Scott to feel somewhat ashamed of his Irish antecedents himself.

Ted Cowan agrees:

Walter Scott really fudged this whole issue of the Irish origins of the Scots: it did not particularly suit a Protestant Scot to make a big deal of the fact that the Scots came from Ireland, so he tended to play it down. But it is rather surprising because, in other contexts,

Scott was very interested in Scottish myth and legend (and did a good deal himself to add to that myth and legend).

It is in line with his silence over the Irish connection that Sir Walter Scott makes no mention at all of Ted Cowan's candidate for the first real king of the embryo realm of Scotland – Constantin II.

Constantin II

Constantin II was a remarkably long-lived king who was eventually to outlive his effectiveness. In his prime he fought against the vikings encroaching from the north and the west; but he was also determined to extend the boundaries of 'Lesser Scotland' southwards beyond the Forth – Clyde line. In 914, and again in 918, he made inconclusive forays as far south as Corbridge; but now the position in Northumbria was changing dramatically.

The old Anglian kingdom of Northumbria had been overwhelmed by the Norsemen, and King Alfred of Wessex (Alfred the Great) had been forced to partition England in 878, yielding to the Norsemen the huge swatch of east and north England which became known as the Danelaw. Alfred's son (Edward the Elder of Wessex, r.899–924) and grandson (Athelstan, r.924–39) succeeded in turning the tide of Norse domination. By 920, Edward the Elder had won back all the Danelaw south of the Humber. The next target was York, and in 927 the vigorous young Athelstan expelled the Norsemen from their powerbase there and assumed the overlordship of Northumbria. Seven years later, in 934, Athelstan consolidated his position in the north of England with a sweeping invasion of Alba, backed by a fleet which harried the east coast as far north as Caithness.

The growing power of Wessex posed an obvious and alarming threat to the fledgling kingdom of Alba, which was also constantly menaced by the power of the Norse earls of Orkney and Shetland. In 937 Constantin II joined a Great Alliance of the Norsemen in Ireland and the Britons of Strathclyde for a pre-emptive strike against the West Saxons. Together they sailed and marched down to the Humber, a huge host, for a trial of strength with Athelstan. The two sides met at a place called Brunanburh, somewhere on Humberside, perhaps, in a ferocious battle which would be commemorated in contemporary poetry and folk memory as the bloodiest encounter yet fought on English soil:

*Athelstan the king,
lord of earls
and ring-giver to men,
his brother beside him,
Edmund the Ætheling,
won undying glory
in furious battle
with the blades of their swords
at Brunanburh:
burst through the shield-wall,
hewed at the bucklers
with well-forged swords,
the sons of Edward ...*

FROM THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH,

IN THE *ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLE* (937)

It was a decisive victory for Athelstan. Among the dead was one of Constantin's sons. The defeat of all his hopes for his kingdom, and the death of his son, seem to have drained the spirit out of Constantin, and in 943 he abdicated and withdrew to monastic life in St Andrews. It was his successors who began to stem the seemingly irresistible Wessex advance. One of his sons, Indulph (r.954–62), managed to capture the formidable stronghold of Edinburgh and gain temporary control of Lothian. But it was not until the next century that the Scots, under the leadership of the forceful and ambitious Malcolm II (Mael Coluim mac Cinaeda, r.1005–34), finally succeeded in wresting control of the Lothians from Northumbria.

The decisive showdown occurred in 1018. Malcolm had already annexed the kingdom of Strathclyde and had shown his mettle with some merciless raids deep into Northumbria, including a siege of Durham on one occasion. The Northumbrians were outraged. They raised a huge army commanded by warrior prelates pledged to recover the Church lands (and revenues) of Lothian. Malcolm met them with his forces at Carham, just south of the Tweed. It was another fierce encounter, but this time the Scots won the day. Many of the English fell, including a score of Northumbrian nobles and eighteen leading churchmen.

One of the casualties on the Scottish side was Owain, who ruled Strathclyde as a vassal of the Scots. He was the last of his

family line, and Malcolm now added the kingdom of Strathclyde (the Britons) to the Scottish realm.^{[1](#)}

The significance of the Battle of Carham in 1018 was only to emerge later. It was the last battle for Scottish control of the Lothians. Carham marked the first firm delineation of a settled frontier between Scots and English along the line of the River Tweed; but it would be a very long time before this line was to emerge as an accepted final boundary. With the hindsight of history, we can see Carham as a real watershed in the evolution of the shape of 'Scotland' as we know it today.

What happened to the Picts?

The Scots and the Picts, after they had been driven back behind the Roman wall, quarrelled and fought between themselves; and at last, after a great many battles, the Scots got completely the better of the Picts. The common people say that the Scots destroyed them entirely; but I think it is not likely that they could kill such great numbers of people.

TALES OF A GRANDFATHER, CHAPTER I

The fate of the Picts has become the great enigma, the great puzzle of Scottish history; and as a result they are probably the most written about of all the Dark Age peoples, simply because they apparently disappeared, and disappeared very suddenly. Scholars used to write darkly of a terrible chapter of genocide.

It is now accepted that there was no wholesale massacre or enslavement of the people known as the Picts; they simply ceased to exist in the historical record as a separate political and ethnic entity. The old Pictish language was swamped by the Gaelic of the Scots, all the Pictish written records perished over time, and the use of the characteristic Pictish symbols on monumental sculptured stones fell into disuse. It was a question of assimilation, of integration, not the kind of ‘ethnic cleansing’ which is such a horrid aspect of some conflicts of modern times.

Ted Cowan has a typically robust attitude to the so-called ‘Problem of the Picts’:

By Page Three of almost any one-volume History of Scotland, the Picts disappear. And it always used to amaze me that nobody asked what on earth happened to them. After all, we are talking about three-quarters of the population of north Britain.

In fact, the Picts did not disappear on Page Three. There must have been intermarriage between the Picts and the Scots, there must have been a process of assimilation through the Church and through the common medium of Latin. And this, to my mind, explains the demise of the Picts, their language and their culture better than anything else. What they did leave behind was the magnificent and unique legacy of their sculptured stones.

There is no better introduction to the exquisite and enigmatic art of the Pictish sculptured stones than the little museum at Meigle, just off the arterial A93 trunk-road near Blairgowrie. The museum is a converted schoolhouse which now contains a marvellous collection of twenty-seven locally-carved stones dating from the ninth and tenth centuries: prayer crosses, symbol stones, sculpted cross-slabs with hunting scenes, animal stones, public war-memorials and personal tombstones. Most of them are decorated with the enigmatic shapes and symbols which no one has yet been able to decipher satisfactorily.

One of the last testimonials of the Picts is the majestic sculptured red sandstone monolith known as 'Sueno's Stone', which stands six metres tall at the eastern edge of the town of Forres, on the Moray Firth, in the heartland of the ancient Pictish kingdom.

‘Sueno’s Stone’ was another of the great problems which the Ancient Monuments Board for Scotland had to tackle in the 1980s. It is a magnificent piece of statuary, with a wealth of intricate carving (pictorial as well as stylised) on all four of its faces. The front bears a relief carving of a great ring-headed cross whose shaft is filled with interlace spiral knotwork; the reverse side depicts an immense battle scene in four panels of unequal length. It is an extraordinarily vivid and complex sculptural gallery: the top panel presents the leader and his guard arriving on horseback for the battle. The great central panel shows ranks of warriors fighting on foot, then rows of the decapitated bodies of prisoners (their hands still tied) and the executioner holding a severed head, while the enemy flee in disorder. The third panel shows another pile of ruthlessly beheaded corpses and severed heads, while the fourth, partially obscured by the modern base, shows the dispersal of the vanquished army.

By the 1980s it was becoming increasingly difficult to make out the images on the stone (for instance, the heaps of severed heads were barely discernible to the naked eye without recourse to earlier sketches of the stone). Modern atmospheric pollution was creating galloping erosion, which was eating away at the vulnerable sandstone and blurring the detail of the sculptor’s art. Something Had To Be Done: Sueno’s Stone either had to be moved into safe housing (the Old Tolbooth at Forres?) or given a protective covering *in situ*. The need for a decision was made urgent by plans to alter the line of the A96 from Inverness to

bypass the town of Forres: the new road was going to run just a few metres to the north of Sueno's Stone.

It was not an easy decision. The stone had been discovered, fallen and buried under peat, in 1726, and re-erected in its present position on a new circular pedestal. It had become a prominent part of the landscape of Moray.

Eventually, after much heart-searching, the decision was made to leave the stone where it was, and to give it its own protective canopy of reinforced glass and steel – a bit like Snow White in the Disney film (although no prince was expected to come to the rescue). The glass case was erected in 1992, complete with immaculate landscaping, useful interpretive panels and all the technological gizmos needed to provide an environment which would ensure Snow White's survival. Not everyone liked it – it looks incongruous at first glance – but it grows on you. The glass case makes photography difficult, but Historic Scotland is happy to accommodate anyone with a special interest.

Sueno's Stone is clearly a memorial to some momentous encounter, but there is no 'label' on the stone, and there has been endless speculation about the conflict it was set up to commemorate. The stone cannot be dated, on stylistic grounds, more precisely than the end of the Pictish period (ninth or tenth century); it has none of the characteristic Pictish symbols on it, which suggests that the Pictish sculptors were then working for new masters. The spurious name 'Sueno' was an antiquarian

invention of the eighteenth century, referring to some viking leader with the generic name of 'Svein', and cannot give any clue to the battle depicted on the stone. But to me it seems not unlikely that Sueno's Stone does, indeed, celebrate a real battle, probably some momentous victory against the Picts' and Scots' most formidable adversaries, the vikings. According to the *Annals of Ulster* there was just such a battle in the year 909, when the 'men of Alba' (Albanaich), fighting under their miracle-working standard, the crozier of St Columba, won the day. That date falls within the early years of the reign of Ted Cowan's favourite early king of Scotland, Constantin II, and the battle seems to have led to a treaty whereby the Norsemen were confirmed in their control of Caithness in exchange for a promise to leave the rest of Alba alone.

Academic speculation about the provenance of the stone and the battle it was designed to commemorate will doubtless continue. Whatever the truth of it, I like to think that Sueno's Stone is the last recorded signature of the people who left their mark on history by carving it on stone.

1 The idea that the Picts painted or tattooed their bodies is older than the reference to *Picti* in AD 297 by the the poet Eumenius. Herodian of Syria, who wrote (in Greek) a history of the Roman emperors from AD 180 to 238, said of the Picts: 'They tattoo their bodies not only with likenesses of animals of all kinds, but with all sorts of drawings.'

1 I am indebted to Graeme Cruickshank, director of

Edinburgh Historical Enterprises, for an enlightening guided tour of the presumed battle-site and its environs; it was due to his dedicated and scholarly researches that the true significance of the Battle of Dunnichen began to be acknowledged.

1 For safety's sake, the Aberlemno stone in Aberlemno churchyard is covered in winter by stout wooden crating to protect it from bad-weather erosion. A faithful fibre-resin cast of the stone is now in the Museum of Scotland; it was formerly on display in the Meffan Museum in Forfar.

1 The traditional version of an Irish colonisation of Argyll is no longer accepted as uncritically as before: scholars like Ewen Campbell, lecturer in archaeology at Glasgow University, point to the lack of archaeological corroboration of any migration of ideas or artefacts from Ireland to the western mainland of Scotland. Dr Campbell argues that the evidence all points the other way – that there was no change in the population in Argyll and that there was considerable influence in the opposite direction.

2 Kilmartin House won the 1998 Scottish Museum of the Year Award and the 1998 Gulbenkian Prize for Museums and Galleries. Kilmartin Glen contains one of the richest assemblages of prehistoric ritual and ceremonial monuments in Scotland: more than 150 sites within six miles of the village of Kilmartin; an extraordinary collection of cup-and-ring rock carvings; a unique linear cemetery of Neolithic and Bronze Age burial cairns; a fine stone circle at Temple Wood and dozens of other

ancient stone monuments, dating back almost to the start of human habitation in Scotland. Kilmartin House, which was opened in 1997, provides a focal point for pilgrims who want to visit the sites, and also houses a research centre for archaeology and landscape interpretation.

1 The footprint into which visitors place their feet is not quite the original one. In 1979, when erosion and increasing wear and tear were beginning to cause damage to the carvings, an exact mould was made up of reconstituted crushed stone, which matched the texture and colouring of the original in every detail; this replica ‘cap’, weighing more than fifteen hundredweight, was helicoptered in by the RAF in 1979 and then manhandled into place to fit snugly and unobtrusively over the stone slab.

1 The name Kentigern means ‘hound-lord’. The diminutive Mungo means ‘hound’.

1 In his *Tales of a Grandfather* (Chapter I), Walter Scott referred generally to the inhabitants of Scotland encountered by the Romans as ‘British’, or ‘Britons’. The term ‘Britons’ properly applies specifically to the people of Strathclyde.

Chapter 4 MACBETH (r.1040–57)

... the three old women went and stood by the wayside, in a great moor or heath near Forres, and waited till Macbeth came up. And then, stepping before him as he was marching at the head of his soldiers, the first woman said, 'All hail, Macbeth – hail to thee, Thane of Glamis.' The second said, 'All hail, Macbeth – hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor.' Then the third, wishing to pay him a higher compliment than the other two, said, 'All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King of Scotland.'

TALES OF A GRANDFATHER, CHAPTER II

The little village of Lumphanan, in Aberdeenshire, lies about fifty kilometres to the west of Aberdeen. It is not as celebrated a name in the Macbeth chronicle as Birnam Wood or Dunsinane Hill in Perthshire, or Forres in Moray, but in fact it is much more significant – because it was at Lumphanan that Macbeth (the historical Macbeth, not the Macbeth of Shakespeare's 'Scottish play') met his death in the year 1057.

What Shakespeare did for Macbeth was to make him perhaps the best known, and certainly the most notorious, character in Scottish history – but at appalling cost to historical veracity. Yet so persuasive is the story, so compelling is the skill of the playwright, so powerful is the characterisation of a noble soul seduced by ambition (and by a ferocious harpy of a wife), that everyone knows it and believes it.

Oddly enough, Sir Walter Scott gave it his imprimatur, too. In his *Tales of a Grandfather* he related the Shakespeare version wholesale, with some additional embroidery of his own. The puzzle is that Scott knew perfectly well that it was a travesty of events; indeed, in his *History of Scotland* (1829–30), which he wrote as a spin-off from *Tales of a Grandfather*, he gave a very different and much more soberly accurate account. Yet in the *Tales* he preferred to entertain his grandson rather than to educate him. It is a dilemma which faces every ‘popular’ historian.

According to Shakespeare (and the *Tales of a Grandfather*), Macbeth was a trusted general of the venerable and much-loved King Duncan I of Scotland. With his fellow-general Banquo, Macbeth quells an insurrection and defeats a major viking invasion in Fife. On his way home, on a ‘blasted heath’ near Forres, he encounters three witches. The first addresses him as Thane of Glamis (a title which he has just inherited). The second addresses him as Thane of Cawdor (which Duncan has just named him, although Macbeth does not know it yet). The third, ominously, addresses him as ‘Macbeth! that shalt be king hereafter!’ For Banquo, they promise less in the immediate future but much more to come: ‘Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.’

Soon afterwards, messengers arrive to announce that Macbeth is to receive the title and possessions of the Thane of Cawdor, who had been a traitor in the rebellion and is shortly to be

executed. Macbeth is thunderstruck: 'Two truths are told,/as happy prologues to the swelling act/of the imperial theme'.

According to Shakespeare, Macbeth now writes a letter to his wife telling her of his encounter with the witches, and sends notice that the king himself is coming to stay with them at their castle at Inverness. Lady Macbeth works on her husband's latent ambition and incites him to kill the king – which he does, albeit unnerved by the deed.¹ Duncan's two young sons, Malcolm (the Prince of Cumbria) and Donalbain, fearful of suffering the same fate, flee the country.

Macbeth thereupon assumes the crown. Mindful of the witches' prophecy that Banquo will be the progenitor of future kings of Scotland, Macbeth sends hired assassins to kill Banquo and his young son Fleance; Banquo is struck down, but Fleance escapes, and his progeny later become the ruling Stewart dynasty of Scotland.

Macbeth now embarks on a reign of terror. He consults the witches again, and they warn him to beware of Macduff, the Thane of Fife. But they also tell him that 'none of woman born' will ever harm him, and that he 'shall never vanquished be, until/ Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill/ Shall come against him.'

Before Macbeth has time to act, Macduff, suspecting that he is next on the king's hit-list, flees to England to join Duncan's son Malcolm. In thwarted fury Macbeth sends his assassins to Macduff's castle in Fife and has Macduff's wife and young family

slaughtered.

At the English court the Scottish refugees, spurred on by Macduff's arrival, assemble an army with English help and invade Scotland. To hide their advance towards the tyrant's lair at Dunsinane Castle they camouflage themselves with branches cut from Birnam Wood. Macbeth is shaken by the news that the wood seems to be coming to Dunsinane; he is even more dismayed when he faces the vengeful Macduff, who reveals that he was not 'of woman born', but had been 'from his mother's womb untimely ripp'd'. There is nothing left for Macbeth now but to die valiantly: 'Lay on, Macduff; and damn'd be him that first cries, "Hold, enough!"' Macbeth is duly slain by Macduff, who brings the tyrant's head to Malcolm – the future Malcolm III, Malcolm Canmore.

Birnam Wood and Dunsinane

A walkway along the River Tay, known as the ‘Terrace Walk’, runs between the neighbouring towns of Dunkeld and Birnam. Just behind the Oak Inn of the Birnam House Hotel a sign highlights the presence of the ‘Birnam Oak’ – a very old, gigantic oak tree, its heavy, brittle branches now propped up on crutches. It is said to be the last remaining tree from the ancient Birnam Wood made famous by the witches’ prophecy in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. It was from this very tree (it is implied), and others like it, that Malcolm’s soldiers cut branches to disguise their advance on Macbeth’s castle at Dunsinane Hill, in the Sidlaws, some twenty-two kilometres as the crow flies to the south-east, off the Perth to Coupar Angus road (A94).¹ Dunsinane is a low hill which is not difficult to ascend. Its flat summit is crowned by the impressive remains of a huge prehistoric hill-fort with triple ramparts which are still clearly visible; unfortunately, it could not have been a castle in Macbeth’s day. However, from the summit one can look north-west along the Tay Valley towards the woods of Birnam and the beautiful Howe of Strathmore, and (with luck and a little imagination) make out the gap in the hills through which a camouflaged army might have advanced towards Dunsinane. Or so they say.

A few miles to the south of Dunkeld, and now bypassed by the A9 to Perth, the little village of Bankfoot provides a

'Macbeth Experience' as part of a Visitor Centre which was created in a former motor museum in 1993 by an entrepreneurial local couple, Wilson and Catriona Girvan. A spirited multimedia production offers a view of the 'millennium of mystery' surrounding the Macbeth story, or rather two views – the Shakespearean view, and the 'real' view. It presents Shakespeare enthusiastically reading his source material – the English chronicler Ralph Holinshed, who compiled *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* in the 1570s – and penning his 'pretty tale' of the witch-ridden, bloodthirsty usurper who lost his head to Macduff when Birnam Wood came to Dunsinane; interwoven with this yarn is the story of what is now considered the 'real' Macbeth.

In this story, Macbeth was one of the great Scottish kings. His name in Gaelic, MacBeathadh, means 'Son of Life'. He was the son of Findlaech mac Ruairdri, *mormaer* (earl) of Moray, who was killed by his nephews in 1020; Macbeth had royal blood in his veins as a member of one of the three kindreds of Dalriada (Argyll) who had extended their power up the Great Glen into Moray. In 1032 Macbeth took vengeance when he burned to death one of his father's killers, Gillacomgain, along with fifty of his men, and was thereby able to assume his father's rank of *mormaer* of Moray. He then strengthened his claim to the throne by marrying the dead man's widow, Gruoch, who was herself descended from the royal line.

In the same vein, Duncan I was not by any means

Shakespeare's gentle, much-revered king, rich in years and loved by his subjects. He was, in fact, a rash and militarily incompetent youngster, the grandson of a ruthless and despotic king, Malcolm II, who had appointed him Prince of Cumbria and arranged that he should succeed to the throne in 1034. His succession caused widespread anger: ancient custom favoured succession by election, not *diktat*; besides, Duncan had neither the maturity nor the track-record to merit the throne.

Duncan had clearly inherited his father's ambition, but not his skill: he invaded the north of England and made a disastrous attack on Durham in 1039; he then made an equally ill-fated attempt to impose his authority in the recalcitrant north of Scotland. Duncan met Macbeth, *mormaer* of Moray, in battle somewhere near the village of Pitgaveny, near Elgin, on the Feast of the Assumption (10 August) in 1040, and was killed.

Macbeth was immediately accepted as King of Scots and crowned at Scone, which suggests that Duncan I's military failures had antagonised his subjects in the south, too. Macbeth went on to reign for seventeen years (1040–57), and the *Chronicle of Melrose* noted that 'in his time there were productive seasons' (a line borrowed from an early Latin poem – *fertile tempus erat*). He drove Duncan's two sons out of Scotland: Malcolm fled to England, where he became a protégé of King Edward the Confessor (r.1042–66); and Donalbain (Donald Bán) fled to the Western Isles.

Macbeth was able to deal effectively with an abortive attempt

by Duncan I's father to oust him in 1046. He was less successful in his confrontations with his half-cousin, Thorfinn the Mighty, the Norse Earl of Orkney.

Thorfinn Sigurðarson, nicknamed 'the Mighty', is one of the most compelling figures in the great portrait-gallery of Norse earls presented in *Orkneyinga Saga*. A huge, powerfully-built, swarthy man, ugly and sharp-featured, beetle-browed and with a prominent nose, he was ambitious, ruthless and very shrewd, a born survivor in an age when survival was always precarious. According to *Orkneyinga Saga* Thorfinn was one of the sons of Earl Sigurð Hlöðvisson of Orkney, and (like Duncan I) a grandson of a King Malcolm of Scotland (Malcolm II?). He was created Earl of Caithness and Sutherland by King Malcolm at the age of five in 1014; thereafter he fought his way to control of Orkney (by the 1030s), and by the time he died, at some date between 1057 and 1065, he had extended his realm deep into the heartlands of Scotland and over the Western Isles as well, and was recognised as the most powerful ruler in northern Britain. He was a man of compelling personal authority; after the turbulent years of his early piratical reign, he spent the latter part of his life ruling his realms wisely and benevolently from the palace and church he built on the Brough of Birsay, at the northern end of the Mainland of Orkney. His reign was the high point of the golden age of viking power in the north.

This was the man who represented the greatest threat to Macbeth's authority in the north of Scotland. According to

Orkneyinga Saga, Macbeth and Thorfinn had several encounters, all of which ended in Thorfinn's favour. But it would say that, wouldn't it?

Macbeth may not have been the most compelling King of Scots in the eleventh century, but he seems to have been a very capable one. He was generous to the Church, which ensured him a good early press (he and Gruoch granted lands in Fife to the Culdees of Loch Leven¹). Certainly, he felt secure enough to leave Scotland in 1050 and go on a pilgrimage to Rome where, according to the *Chronicon* of Marianus Scottus (1028–83), written in 1073, 'he scattered his money like seed among the poor'.

In the 1050s, however, Macbeth's reign became clouded. Duncan's elder son, Malcolm – the future Malcolm Canmore – was cultivating support in England to reclaim the throne of Scotland. Edward the Confessor seems to have backed his ambitions. In 1054 he sanctioned an invasion of Scotland by Earl Siward, the doughty Danish-born Earl of Northumbria. Siward (probably with Malcolm at his side) invaded Scotland with a mixed army of Anglo-Saxon Northumbrians and Scots. Macbeth seems to have conducted a defensive guerrilla campaign at first; the contemporary English chronicle *Vita Edwardi Regis* claims that the Scots were 'an uncertain race of men and fickle, and one which trusts rather in woods than on the plain, and more in flight than in manly courage in battle'. Siward reached Dundee apparently unopposed, where his army was reinforced by supply

ships. Shortly afterwards he brought Macbeth to pitched battle on the Festival of the Seven Sleepers (27 July).

Where was this battle? Was this Shakespeare's final 'Battle of Dunsinane'? It could well have been – there is no documentary evidence either way. But if it was at Dunsinane, it would have been decided on the level ground below Dunsinane Hill, not in the ancient hill-fort on the summit.

Wherever it took place, it was a long and bloody encounter. There were heavy casualties on both sides. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 1054 noted:

In this year Earl Siward invaded Scotland with a great host both by land and sea, and fought against the Scots. He put to flight their king, Macbeth, and slew the noblest in the land, carrying off much plunder such as none had previously gained; but his son Osbern and his sister's son and numbers of his housecarles, as well as of the king [Edward the Confessor], were slain there.

'He put to flight their king, Macbeth'. The one historical fact we can be absolutely sure of, *pace* Shakespeare and Walter Scott, is that Macbeth was not killed at Dunsinane in 1054.

For the next three years the records are silent. Siward's victory had not been enough to give Malcolm the throne; Siward had to return to Northumbria to deal with an uprising there, and died soon afterwards. Malcolm seems to have been installed by Edward the Confessor as ruler over Strathclyde and the Lothians, but no more. Macbeth retreated northward, back to his original power-base in Moray. By 1057, however, his support seems to

have been draining away, and Malcolm felt strong enough to seek out his enemy on his home ground.

The chronicles say that the fugitive Macbeth was eventually hunted down by Malcolm near the village of Lumphanan, in Aberdeenshire, and killed there in a desperate final stand rather than a pitched battle. His head was then brought to Malcolm, either on a pole or a golden platter.

There is nothing like local tradition to keep historical memory alive, however embroidered it might have become. At Lumphanan, which lies on the A980 between Banchory and Alford, the epicentre of the tradition is the nearby Peel Ring of Lumphanan, which is signposted. The Peel was once a medieval Anglo-Norman fortified motte-and-bailey;¹ now all that remains of it is a large grassy mound surrounded by a swampy moat, with an encircling earthwork. A convenient path offers easy access to the crown of the mound. In the fifteenth century, a local worthy had built himself a stone residence there – Ha'ton House – which was abandoned in the eighteenth century. The Peel has long been linked with Macbeth's last stand; unfortunately, it dates from the early thirteenth century – nearly two hundred years after Macbeth's death.

Other features in the district are traditionally associated with the demise of Macbeth, but it takes a very determined pilgrim to track them down. On Perk Hill on the farmlands north of the village, clearly visible from the road, there lies a ruined Bronze Age cairn girdled by a guard of honour of beech trees. It is known

locally as ‘Macbeth’s Cairn’. The farmer is quite happy to permit access, although he cannot fathom why anyone should want to trek across his fields to visit it. The site was roughly excavated in 1855 and was found to contain the bones of someone who had died three thousand years earlier. It has nothing at all to do with Macbeth; indeed, the early chroniclers say that Macbeth was buried, like so many Kings of Scots before him, on the holy island of Iona.

There is also an even less accessible ‘Macbeth’s Stone’, unmarked, where the king’s head is alleged to have been severed from his body. It is the largest of a group of boulders on top of a grassy slope on Cairnbeathie Farm, on the west side of the disused railway embankment.

And there is (of course!) an unmarked ‘Macbeth’s Well’, at Burnside, near the parish church to the north-east. It is practically invisible – a small and very low stone lintel set into the base of a steep and overgrown bank at the roadside. There is no hope of finding it without a friendly and particularly knowledgeable local guide – the casual visitor would drive or even walk right past it without spotting it. An incongruous plastic hose-pipe now drips into the well. This is where the doomed monarch is said to have quenched his thirst before the final encounter.

Wherever Macbeth died, and wherever his body ended up, his death did not automatically give Malcolm the throne. Macbeth’s remaining supporters in the north proclaimed as King of Scots his stepson, Lulach (the son of Gruoch from a previous

marriage). Lulach appears in history under the unflattering nickname of ‘Lulach the Simpleton’. Simpleton or not, he too was hunted down by Malcolm, and killed in March 1058 in an ambush at Essie (now Rhynie) in Strathbogie, the strategic pass between Moray and Strathdon. Lulach, too, was buried on Iona.

With Lulach dead, Malcolm’s hold on the kingdom was at last secure. A month later he was crowned at Scone at the age of twenty-seven, and embarked on his thirty-five-year reign as King of Scots ([see Chapter 5](#)).

Shakespeare and Scott

So what were Shakespeare, and Sir Walter Scott following him, playing at? Why did they present such an extraordinarily biased view of Macbeth?

Shakespeare had not simply made it all up; nor had Holinshed in his *Chronicle*. The denigration of Macbeth had started much earlier, by John of Fordun in *Chronica Gentis Scotorum* (Chronicle of the Scottish People), his proto-version of the *Scotichronicon* around 1380:¹ here Macbeth is portrayed as an evil murderer and usurper. Andrew Wyntoun, prior of St Serf's in Loch Leven and author of the metrical *Origynale Cronikil of Scotland* in vernacular Scots around 1420, introduced the witches and the advancing Birnam Wood and the theme of 'unnatural birth'. It seems clear that conflicting stories about Macbeth and Malcolm were current soon after Macbeth's reign: pro-Macbeth stories in the heartlands of Moray, and anti-Macbeth stories which were nurtured by the court propagandists of the victorious Canmore dynasty. These were the tales which Holinshed relied upon in his *Chronicle*.

Did Shakespeare believe what he read in Holinshed? For a playwright, it scarcely mattered – he must have found Holinshed extraordinarily convenient. He wrote *Macbeth* in the period around 1606, soon after the Union of the Crowns of 1603 which had brought King James VI of Scotland to London as King

James I of England as well. James was the latest of the Stewart dynasty of Scotland, and Banquo (who seems to have been an invented character) was, providentially, the legendary progenitor of the Stewart monarchy. What more flattering than such a theme for a play presented by The King's Men to welcome the new incumbent of the throne? Shakespeare was in no way averse to twisting history for political ends: ten years earlier he had played fast and loose with the story of *Richard III* to celebrate the first of the Tudors, Henry VII, in order to please his demanding royal patron, Queen Elizabeth.

It was also well known that King James VI and I was deeply interested in witchcraft – his book on *Daemonologie*, first published in Edinburgh in 1597, had been republished in London on his accession in 1603. Furthermore, the mere fact that Macbeth had caused the death of a reigning king made him automatically, in Elizabethan eyes, a regicide and a usurper, even though kingship in Macbeth's day was decided by election, not inheritance – as the succession had been in England at the death of Edward the Confessor in 1066.

There was less immediate excuse for Walter Scott, however. Ted Cowan says:

The Macbeth episode in Tales of a Grandfather has always puzzled me because Scott simply regurgitated the plot of Shakespeare's play. His account gives the impression of Macbeth the usurper, Macbeth the barbarian king, Macbeth the tyrant who would massacre his own subjects, and so on; yet Scott knew that

this was far from the historical truth – if there is such a thing as historical truth!

Scott was perhaps trying to set up a contrast between the disappearing old Celtic world and the wonderful new world of the Normans as portrayed in Ivanhoe and other novels; he was personifying the dissolution of Celtic Scotland in the figure of Macbeth. That may be all right in literary or artistic terms, but it is certainly not legitimate in strictly historical terms.

So *Tales of a Grandfather* presents the demise of Macbeth as a happy prelude to the normanisation and ultimate anglicisation of Scotland to come. For pro-Unionist historians like Scott, the denigration of Macbeth reflected a profound distaste for the ancient role of Celtic culture in the Lowland Scotland of his day; for Scott, any relevance it might have had was overshadowed by the emerging Norman (i.e. civilising) influence which was to begin in the reign of Malcolm Canmore. Not that Scott himself would have admitted to any such notion; in his *History of Scotland* he showed clearly that he was aware of the historical inaccuracies of Shakespeare's plot:

All these things are now known: but the mind retains pertinaciously the impression made by the impositions of genius. While the works of Shakespeare are read, and the English language subsists, History may say what she will, but the general reader will only recollect Macbeth as a sacrilegious usurper, and Richard [III] as a deformed murderer.

It is only in much more recent times that Macbeth has been

rehabilitated as the champion of the Men of Moray and the last truly Celtic king of Scotland.

But there was another player in the Macbeth drama whom Shakespeare did not mention at all – Thorfinn the Mighty, Earl of Orkney. The sources about Thorfinn's life (both Icelandic and Scottish) are tantalisingly elusive about his real impact on Scottish affairs – so elusive, indeed, that the eminent Scottish historical novelist Dorothy Dunnett was able to create a brilliantly plausible scenario from them in her novel *King Hereafter* (1982). Her thesis was that Macbeth and Thorfinn were in reality the same person, known as Thorfinn in Orkney and Macbeth in Scotland. It may sound outrageously unlikely, but ...

Orkneyinga Saga relates that on the Feast of the Assumption (10 August) in 1040 – the very day on which Macbeth defeated Duncan near the village of Pitgaveny in Aberdeenshire – Thorfinn defeated a King of Scots called 'Karl Hundason' in battle at a fortified site the saga called Torfnæs, somewhere on the northern coast of Scotland. It is impossible to identify the site with any certainty, but circumstantial evidence suggests that 'Torfnæs' may well have been a name for the large and important fortification at modern Burghead, on the north Moray coast, near Elgin. Meanwhile John of Fordun's early version of the *Scotichronicon* relates an old Scottish tradition that after Duncan's death at Pitgaveny in 1040, his body was taken to Elgin; it was this tradition which, two centuries later, in 1235, inspired

King Alexander II to found a chapel in the cathedral church in Elgin where masses were sung for Duncan's soul.

In the year 1050, when Macbeth went on his pilgrimage to Rome, *Orkneyinga Saga* tells us that Thorfinn the Mighty went to Rome as well. Was it pure coincidence that these two rulers should choose the same year in which to absent themselves from their respective warring domains for such a long time? Thereafter, according to the saga, Thorfinn maintained good relations with the Scottish court.

There are just as many inconsistencies as coincidences between the stories of Thorfinn and Macbeth, of course. According to *Orkneyinga Saga*, for instance, Thorfinn died peacefully in Orkney and was buried in his beloved minster of Christchurch on the Brough of Birsay; whereas Macbeth, as we have heard, was buried on Iona. But both the saga and the Scottish sources agree that Thorfinn was married to Ingibjörg, the daughter of Earl Finn Arnason of Norway, and that after Thorfinn's death she married Malcolm III – Macbeth's conqueror and successor as King of Scots. Intriguing, isn't it?

1 Local tradition in Inverness insists that the murdered King Duncan was buried in Culcabock, a village to the east of the town (now a suburb of it). In front of a petrol station on the Old Perth Road, at the junction with Culcabock Avenue, is a stone marked with a plaque which reads: 'Behind is the supposed burial place of King Duncan 1040' – that is to say, underneath the present petrol station. On the opposite side of the road is a 'Duncan's

Well' (*Fuaran Dhonnachaidh*). According to this tradition, the king's body was later removed and buried in the royal cemetery on the Holy Island of Iona. In fact, Duncan was killed in battle in Aberdeenshire ([see here](#)).

1 Just for the record (literally), the 'Birnam Oak' stands next to the largest sycamore tree in Britain; it has a height of thirty metres and a girth of eight metres.

1 The Culdees (*Cele dei*, 'Friends of God') formed early monastic communities which attached themselves to hereditary secular priests.

1 'Motte-and-bailey' is the term used for an early Anglo-Norman fortification consisting of a timber tower raised on an artificial mound. The word 'motte' comes from Old French, meaning mound, and the 'bailey' was the fortified courtyard within the surrounding ditch, or moat. In English, 'motte' came to mean the moat rather than the mound.

1 John of Fordun (c.1320–84) has often been called 'the Father of Scottish History'. Not a great deal is known about him; he is believed to have been a chantry priest at Aberdeen Cathedral, and may have come from Fordoun in the Mearns. His history was a compilation of (now lost) earlier historical writings on Scotland and took the story down to 1383. His work formed the basis of the *Scotichronicon* of Walter Bower, which was written in the 1440s.

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