

**The Royal Society of Edinburgh
RSE @ Dumfries and Galloway**

Galloway Waterways

Professor Ted Cowan, University of Glasgow

Thursday 31 March 2011

Report by Kate Kennedy

Professor Cowan discussed the role of water in the history of the southwest and the importance of the Solway in the history of Dumfries and Galloway from prehistory to the present as a link with the outer world and the means of emigration over the centuries. Waterways conferred identity on the inhabitants of the various dales and glens, paradoxically bringing people together but also serving as territorial boundaries; they served as communication routes as well as barriers to travel in a world without bridges. From the log-boats of prehistory to modern hydro schemes, water has shaped the lives of all who inhabited this ancient landscape.

Professor Cowan set the scene for his talk with two quotes relating to water, one universal in nature, composed by Francis Bacon, and the other, by an anonymous author, which focuses on the Galloway region:

“The knowledge of man is the waters, some descending from above, and some springing from beneath; the one informed by the light of nature, the other inspired by divine revelation.”

*“Oh, tak me back to Galloway, where the caller air like wine,
Sweeps down frae bare Craignelder, or the steeps o dark Corserine,
Where Deuch and Ken wi mony a turn, by hill, and bog, and scree,
Come wimplin frae their mossy hames to join the silver Dee.*

The term ‘waterways’ can refer to the physical presence of sea, rivers, lochs and canals and also to the cultural ‘ways’ of water; for example, how waterways impact upon the population which they support and how folk respond to them. Water is the essential element in our existence. In Dumfries and Galloway, water is a plentiful commodity, yet occasionally we are reminded of how dependent we are upon it when we experience drought or frozen pipes. Professor Cowan described the fragility of water, ascertaining that “future wars will be fought over it. Range wars over access to water in western movies simply symbolise wars between nature and business that have gone on in places such as California for a century and a half. Canadians are paranoid that their neighbours will siphon off the Great Lakes (if both countries do not destroy them with industrial effluent first). In Dubai, a litre of petrol is cheaper than a litre of water; here the benchmark is a can of lager in Tesco.”

World waterways support vast life systems, some of them as yet barely known, yet humanity competes for these resources in supporting ecology, tourism, recreation, energy production, industry, irrigation and domestic water supply. What happens, or has happened, in southwest Scotland is simply a microcosm of what goes on worldwide.

Dumfries and Galloway has numerous physical waterways, the most evident of which is the Solway Firth. Professor Cowan described the Solway as “a supreme waterway....quiet and peaceful but somehow menacing”. Writing in *The Gallovidian* in 1938, E M Balfour-Browne described the Solway bore, “*There was a murmuring sound in the air. It grew, it became a rushing noise, drawing nearer, swelling to a dull roar. Up the quiet river stormed another river-voiceful, clamorous, persistent, tossing, leaping, wave buffeting, wave-rolling over, swallowing up the first smooth stream. On dashed the tumbling swell, the channel behind brimming, heaving, slowly growing calmer. The roar grew fainter – the wave had passed far along the river. The tide was up.*”

The Solway has long been considered a crucial component of the frontier between Scotland and England. However, historically, Professor Cowan suggested, it is more appropriate to think of the Solway in terms of linking places together rather than separating them and, in reality, lessening Galloway's isolation. He noted that Galloway seems to "have become dazzled by such designations as 'A Land Apart', 'The Forgotten Province' or 'The Unknown Region'." But realistically, the Solway could be seen as the highway to the world, bringing the first of our ancestors to Scotland and other major life-changing developments, including Christianity through St Ninian's arrival in Whithorn. The Solway links Galloway with neighbours in Ireland, the Isle of Man, Wales, the Hebrides and northwest England. In medieval times, it also enabled voyages to France, the Low Countries, the Baltic and the Mediterranean.

Many famous seamen were inspired by the Galloway waterways. These included Robert Gordon of Lochinvar, who in 1622 was the inspiration behind Scotland's first colonial expedition to Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, renamed by him New Galloway. Professor Cowan described how boys, including the future founder of the American Navy, John Paul Jones, who hailed from Kirkbean in Galloway, would have "spent their childhoods scanning the southern horizon of the Solway shore. For Jones and many others, Whitehaven, across the Firth in Cumbria, was a kind of capital city of Galloway with its bustling port and lively maritime trade... Later the Solway carried off thousands of emigrants, like Jones, from these shores. Sometimes when lecturing in Washington or Georgetown I like to fancy that some of the water in the Potomac is the end of a current which extends across the Atlantic to curl round by Carsethorn into the Nith Estuary." However, not all commentators were impressed by the majestic Solway, Lord Cockburn writing in *The Gallovidian* in 1939, stated "[the Solway] is the stupidest of all our firths. Few rocks, no islands and especially no edging of picturesque mountains". He also complained quixotically that "Southwick is too far from the sea, at least for a place so near it"!

There were three fords across the Solway and, because of the treacherous tides, boats were always kept at these fords. According to the 16th-century English historian Camden, the Solway shore nurtured a warlike kind of men who were infamous for robberies and depredations. His contemporary John Leslie, in his *History of Scotland*, wrote that these brigands "go forth in the night through desert byways and winding crankies, crooked turnings and steep downfalls in the thickest mists and deepest darkness." However, many were lost crossing the fords. Alexander II of Scotland reputedly lost over 1000 men while crossing in the 13th Century.

Professor Cowan described the Clochmabenstane, a massive granite boulder about 10 feet high and 18 feet in girth, as "the Solway's greatest monument". Originally part of an ellipse including other smaller stones, it is situated near the confluence of the rivers Kirtle and Esk. Many such monuments are associated with water, particularly the meeting point of fresh water and salt water, and the site must have been reached from the sea. "It is tempting to think of the people round here when it was built as somewhat like Marsh Arabs, living off fish and birds. When the stone tumbled some years ago, archaeologists were able to determine that carbon fragments in its socket were dated to 3,200 BC. It may be the Locus Maponi of the 7th-century *Ravenna Cosmography*, a cultic centre devoted to the worship of Mapon or Mabon, the Celtic god whom the Romans identified with Apollo. Mabon was the 'divine youth' who is associated with music and poetry. He also has connections with Arthurian tales but, sadly, little is actually known about his cult." The site of the Clochmabenstane remained of great importance throughout the medieval period.

The rivers of Dumfries and Galloway run like arteries and veins throughout the land. Professor Cowan showed the audience a map marked with the region's rivers which demonstrated their abundance and scope. With the exception of Pilanton Burn, all of these rivers are south-running, and thus symbolic of good luck and the triumph over evil in Scottish folklore.

Many of the region's rivers have been celebrated in poetry, not all of it particularly good and much of it, as noted by Professor Cowan, written by "old guys talking to rivers"! He then illustrated some of the facts about Galloway's rivers using excerpts from appropriate poetry.

The Water of Fleet is one of the shortest of the Galloway rivers, yet it enjoys the somewhat pretentious nomenclature of 'Big Water of Fleet';

*My native stream, my native vale,
With reverence and with love I hail.
O'er me have flown twice thirty years,
Bedimm'd with griefs and charged with tears,
Since first I roved through Anwoth woods,
Or steered my bark on Solway's floods,
Or wont "my youthful limbs to lave"
In winding Fleet's pellucid wave;*

*From Cardoness tower the owlet's screech
Mixed with the sea-mews on the beach-
Wild, shrill, and loud the gray curlew
On sands of Fleet his whistle blew
(Dugald Stewart Williamson from *Rivers of Galloway*, Bards of Galloway 62)*

The River Dee, or the Black Dee as it was known, flows 38 miles to the Solway. At one time it was navigable to Tongland. Lord Cockburn, writing in *The Gallovidian* in 1939, relates an encounter with a shepherd who was 'much offended at the slight put upon his river by my asking him if it was the Tarf. "Tarf? Tarf! deil a drap o' Tarf in't. That's the Black Water o' Dee! The ancientest water in Scotland"

*Dark rolling Dee, with they heath covered mountains,
Thy wild rugged rocks by yon black birken glen,
That claim'st thy supplies from the cold mossy fountains,
And minglest thy treasures with low-spreading Ken
(Bards of Galloway 204)*

The River Nith, flowing for 71 miles to the Solway, is without doubt the major riverway in southwest Scotland. Professor Cowan quoted one commentator who displayed his anti-Ayrshire bias: "Till it gets away from Ayrshire" he wrote, "the Nith 'is one of the most cheerless of streams, sluggish and shallow....deeply tinctured with moss, and rarely graced with plantation, greensward, or even a bold bank, to relieve the dreary monotony of its moorland landscape". Below Sanquhar, however, the river banks were "exquisitely rich in many varieties of landscape, now exhibiting a narrow acclivitous pass, diversified with wood, escarpment, and rock, now bursting into an expanse of valley, blooming as a garden, and screened with warm-coloured and finely outlined mountain heights, and now presenting such rapid alterations of slope, undulation, haugh and hill, as charm and surprise the eye, by the mingled wealth and number of transitions."

Before reciting the following poem celebrating the Nith, Professor Cowan remarked that "it is quite difficult to think of rhymes for Nith but the poet, William Cleland, did not shirk the task, while incidentally demonstrating that not all Covenanters were kill-joys".

*There's as much virtue, sense and pith
In Annan or the Water of Nith,
That quietly slips by Dumfries,
As any water in all Greece.
For there and several other places,
About mill-dams and green brae-faces,
Elrich elves and Brownies stayed,
And green-gowned fairies danced and played,
When old John Knox and other some
Began to plot the Hags of Rome,
They suddenly took to their heels,
And did no more frequent these fields.*

Professor Cowan described the River Annan: "A close rival of Nith historically and scenically is the 'silver Annan', surely the most apostrophised of local rivers, which rises on the slopes of Hartfell to nurture Annandale on its way to Annan Waterfoot". As the old rhyme has it:

*Annan, Tweed and Clyde
A ran oot o ae hillside,*

Though few are so familiar with the rest of it:

*Tweed ran but Annan wan
Clyde burst his side ower Corra Linn*

Thus highlighting that, of the three, the Annan had the shortest drop to the sea.

The furthest east of the Galloway rivers is the Esk, whose dale is rife with tales of reivers and thieves and whose debatable lands led to the persecution of its inhabitants.

Within Dumfries and Galloway there is a distinct difference between the quantity of lochs in the east and west of the region – being curiously scarce in Dumfriesshire with the exception of the seven around Lochmaben, and Loch Ettrick east of Thornhill, but fairly numerous in Galloway. Indeed, Professor Cowan stated that there was an attempt in the nineteenth Century to create a Scottish Lochs District to compete with Wordsworth country. Upon asking the audience, "Of Galloway lochs, how many of the better known could you place on a map?", it was apparent that this early attempt at tourism promotion was not successful. Carlingwark Loch at Castle Douglas is of great interest for its crannogs, artificial islands found on lochs over many parts of Scotland. There is some debate as to whether these were used for defence or agricultural purposes. Additionally, Carlingwark has yielded impressive examples of log boats. Galloway has only one sea loch in the entire region Loch Ryan, near Stranraer is the largest, deepest safewater harbour on the approaches to the Clyde and over the centuries was often full of ships seeking refuge from storms.

Professor Cowan noted that "one sad poet from the Clayhole appears at first sight to be attempting to express his love for a particularly difficult and crabbit mistress":

*On thy face, when the blust'ring tempest king
In his wrath thy bosom scourges,
I love to gaze, and to mark the race
Of thy vexed and foaming surges;*

But it turns out his homily is to Loch Ryan.

*And fair art thou on summer days,
With white sails thickly gleaming;
But sweeter now, with thy sleeping brow,
In the placid moonshine dreaming*

Other Galloway waterways' include many holy wells found throughout the region. Professor Cowan described how "certain wells believed to have curative qualities have been visited since time immemorial, many Christianised by the medieval church. The Protestants attempted to outlaw such practices as pagan superstition to little avail. The rise of reason aided their campaign, but then the world of science began to recognise the medical value of certain spas". A good example was the Dow or Black Loch at Penpont, condemned by the local minister in 1695 but soon reinstated due to the discovery of iron-bearing qualities. Many charmers or folk healers incorporated water in their charms.

Professor Cowan also discussed other aspects of water important to the Galloway region. These include flooding which, although a temporary concern, has a major impact on the fertility of the agricultural land; artificial waterways, including the first Galloway canal constructed in

1765 and used to ship natural fertiliser to communities on the Dee and the Ken; and salt making, the finest of which was produced on the salt marshes at Ruthwell.

Fishing has always been a major cultural activity in regions with an abundance of water. However, Professor Cowan stated that several commentators deplored the lack of sea fishing in the Solway. "William Cobbett became almost apoplectic when he encountered coastal dwellers in the region who were close to starvation yet who never attempted to harvest the sea. The apparent absence of skill may be down to the reliance upon salmon caught in stake nets in estuaries, or otherwise trapped in fresh water. Almost everyone who mentions rivers mentions salmon; for example, in 1884, salmon were said to be 'few and far between on the Fleet' and the Luce boasted the best salmon and sea-trout in Wigtownshire but the fishing was reportedly 'not so grand as formerly'. By the 1880s, rod fishing for salmon had become big business. Every landowner who had the option exploited the salmon resources on his river. Local servants' contracts specified that they were to be fed salmon no more than three times a week. Nobody is sure just how old the practice of haaf net fishing in the estuaries of the Solway is, but the word haaf is Norse or Danish. This tradition is dying out in the region."

The exploitation of water power has a very long history and, as Professor Cowan explained, "we have been living with a hydro economy for a very long time". The greatest water scheme to have an impact on Galloway was the Hydro-Electric Scheme built between 1931 and 1935 at a cost of £3 million. Whilst it was a wonder of its day, Professor Cowan deplored the lack of information about the social history of the project. In a time of serious unemployment, the development of the scheme brought about 2,000 men a year to the region for about five years. This scheme might have been built earlier had the promoters been able to find a market for the electricity, which was not possible until the creation of the National Grid. People at the time were said to be amazed by the engineers' almost God-like control of the waters. However, as with the development of wind farms today, the hydro scheme and associated dams met with some opponents. They lamented the loss of beauty spots and historic places, as well as the erection of pylons. A local opponent, Ms McBurnie, proclaimed "*let us pray for a miracle...and in the meantime let us do all in our power to help those already working in the cause of beauty. Let us keep some ideals, at least, from the welter of modern materialism and ugliness that is making itself so evident in the literature, the cities, the general atmosphere of today*". However, this was largely greeted by the wider community with apathy. As Professor Cowan put it, "The Galloway water power scheme had been conceived and launched and had gone through Parliament almost before the greater proportion of the people of Galloway had heard about it".

Professor Cowan concluded his talk stating, "Rivers fascinate in part because they are metaphors for life. All have humble beginnings up in the hills, some are short, some are long, some are turbulent, some calm, most a blend of both. As they flow irresistibly onwards they are joined by other burns and streams; they exceed themselves in floods and are reduced by drought. They are essentially symbolic, above all, of the life force".