

## ***Exploring the boundaries – what do we mean by the historic environment today?***

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The environment is our surroundings. It is where we place ourselves. The historic environment is the totality of the archaeology, buildings, material objects and documents that remain from the past. We can say objective things about its extent: there are, for example, 6800 scheduled ancient monuments, tens of thousands more unscheduled, tens of thousands more again undiscovered. There are 1300 historic buildings on the Scottish Buildings at Risk register, ranging from castles and great Greek Thomson kirks here in Glasgow, to warehouse monuments of past industry and simple vernacular homes. Many are likely to be lost. We can say objective things about the material value of the historic environment: the tourist industry generates more than any other towards our economy every year and 83% of overseas visitors come to visit historic attractions, but government grants for the historic environment have in real terms been static or falling for ten years. The central agencies, like Historic Scotland, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland and the National Archives of Scotland are seriously underfunded. Local authorities lack key resources and personnel to care for their heritage and make the best economic advantage out of it. The first thing that has to be said in a talk on exploring the boundaries of the historic environment is that they will, without more resources, shrivel, contract, implode, as we lose more and know less. But then it is up to the Scottish public to demand more money from the public purse for heritage. It will not come otherwise.

The historic environment is that through which we understand our historical heritage. Heritage, like art or beauty, or for that matter like humour, sex-appeal, love and friendship, all the most important things in life, is subjective. It is real, but cannot itself readily be measured, valuable but cannot itself properly be costed, though the provision and benefit of heritage interpretation and care of the historic environment can certainly be measured and costed. It lies in the eye of the beholder, in the sense that one person's heritage can be another person's junk. Yet heritage answers a universal need for self-understanding. It is a taproot to the past, up which we draw a nourishment of knowledge about ourselves and our society. It confronts those deepest of human questions: who came before me in this place? Could they feel what I feel, live as I live, do as I can do? Can I achieve what they could achieve? How alike and how different am I from them? Therefore, who am I?

Concepts of heritage differ greatly from culture to culture over time. In early sixteenth-century Scotland, heritage was lineage, and the office of Lord Lyon long precedes that of the Keeper of the Records of Scotland. The coat of arms over the castle door, the genealogy recited by a Highland bard at an occasion of great hospitality, the kin and tenorial tie which made a man turn out with horse and arms 'bodin in feir of weir' at the request of his lord, this was heritage. It could be extended upwards and downwards to encompass loyalty to the hereditary king and to the historic realm of Scotland, for tales and ballads of Wallace and Bruce were also formed from the understanding of the past for the common people. But

Scotland even then had more than one culture. The larger burghs had their own corporate sense of heritage, their own coats of arms, their guilds with altars and saints in prestigious churches. The church had a distinctive heritage in the teachings of the fathers, stories of the miracles of the saints, often closely related to locality, the relics, the images, the fabrics of the great cathedrals and churches. It was this which made it so offensive to the Protestant reformers, for whom the one true historic heritage was the Word of God in the raw, all else being accretion and rubbish. In 1578 the ministers of Glasgow, led by the forceful reformers and Principal of the University, Andrew Melville, proposed to tear down the cathedral on the grounds that it attracted superstitions and inappropriate veneration. They were equally forcibly opposed by the crafts of Glasgow, to whom, on the contrary it represented civic prestige, their past. The king intervened on behalf of the guilds, remarking that enough kirks had been pulled down already: this was the first time the state in Scotland intervened to save an historic building, and the last time for 200 years.

The king was right. Too many fine churches had been pulled down, without a squeak of protest from burgh or lord, the Cathedral of St Andrews among them. Listen to my colleague Douglas Dunn read a poem by the St Andrews and Anstruther poet, William Tennant, describing in 1827 the destruction of the Cathedral.

I sing the steir, strabush, and strife,  
 Whan, bickerin' frae the towns o' Fife,  
 Great bangs of bodies, thick and rife,  
     Gaed to Sanct Androis town,  
 And, wi' John Calvin i' their heads,  
 And hammers i' their hands and spades,  
 Enrag'd at idols, mass, and beads,  
     Dang the Cathedral down:  
 I wat the bruilze then was dour,  
 Wi' sticks, and stanes, and bluidy clour,  
 Ere Papists unto Calvin's power  
     Gaif up their strangest places;  
 And fearfu' the stramash and stour,  
 Whan pinnacle cam doun and tow'r,  
 And Virgin Maries in a shower  
     Fell flat and smash't their faces;  
 The capper roofs, that dazzlit heaven,  
 Were frae their rafters rent and riven;  
 The marble altars dash't and driven;  
     The cods wi' velvet laces,  
 The siller ewers and candlesticks,  
 The purple stole and gowden pyx,  
 And tunakyls and dalmatyks,  
     Cam tumblin' frae their cases;  
 The Devil stood bumbaz'd to see  
 The bonny cosy byke, whair he  
 Had cuddlit monie a centurie  
     Ripp't up wi' sic disgraces!

'Virgin Maries in a shower Fell flat and smashed their faces'. Tennant is removed from the Knoxian mobs by almost 250 years, but he has exactly caught the

Taliban tone of the iconoclasts, for whom the inheritance of the past had nothing to do with heritage and beauty, but with error; it was Satan's work.

St Andrews Cathedral, Graeme Munro tells me, was actually the first building in Scotland to receive public money for the upkeep of what was left: a plaque in St Rule's tower recalls its restoration with the help of a grant from the Baron's of the Exchequer about 200 years after James VI had saved Glasgow. By then a new sense of what was meant by the historic environment was sweeping Europe, driven by the Enlightenment's taste for antiquities. It was nicely shown in Scotland when General Roy took time off from his military survey to record the Roman remains that his men encountered, and when Sir John Clerk of Penicuik constructed on his stables a replica of the Roman temple known as Arthur's O'on, that another landowner with less taste had barbarously destroyed on his estate near Falkirk. Outsiders began to visit Scotland for the sake of the historic environment: Thomas Pennant and Sir Joseph Banks were fascinated by Pictish stones and the great Neolithic monuments of Orkney.

Alongside the Enlightenment came the Romantics. The debt to Sir Walter Scott cannot be half told. Most famously he recovered for us those icons of the first importance to our sense of nationality, the crown and regalia of Scotland; but still more importantly he made the past of the common people the business of the nation. He was the first social historian, with a fine respect for sources and for material and oral heritage of every kind. By the start of the twentieth century we had the National Museum of Antiquities collecting, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland recording, and the Ministry of Works (the predecessor of Historic Scotland) preserving.

The boundaries of the historic environment were not then where they are today: the Royal Commission recorded nothing later than 1707. But a process was underway of widening those boundaries constantly, which accelerated throughout the twentieth century. Partly it was a reflection of a widening knowledge base as experts became more expert still, particularly following the revolution in archaeology that began in the 1960s, that has utterly transformed our notion of what can be found out from an historic landscape about the depth, patterning and sheer abundance of prehistoric and early historic remains, notably in the uplands. But at a profounder level it is the consequence of a modern democracy. The heritage is not now the monopoly of a gentlemanly class or even of professional scholars. Even the ancient pursuit of lineage is massively popular, as anyone who has visited the National Archives of Scotland and noted the predominance of genealogists will know.

Vastly more in the twenty-first century are those who whom the past belongs – the past belongs to all of us in equal measure. We all want to know (in some sense or other) who was before us in this place, where we came from, who we are. We need to place ourselves as Scots, as Britons, as Europeans, as human beings. Moreover, we all have a right to know, a human right to access this knowledge. This is not nostalgia, or an escape from the reality of modern life, but a search for self understanding. Those who do not know where they came from can have only a poor idea of where they are going. Without a sense of the historic environment, as individuals and as a nation, we are directionless.

Yet nothing is more commonly said to me by people of Scottish nationality and residence than that at school they were taught almost no Scottish history, or if they were it was either at primary level alone, or in so disjointed a manner at secondary level as to fail totally to answer the questions – who was before us in this place, who are we, who am I? And children will soon be able to go through their

entire secondary education without learning anything at all about their own country and their own roots. In what other European country would this even be contemplated, let alone tolerated? We reap the harvest of denying the people access to this knowledge, in the reluctance or inability of many local communities to take an active, informal responsibility for their own historic environment. So the next thing we might say in exploring the boundaries is that the boundary of general understanding about the historic environment needs to be secured and expanded. People will be impoverished and disempowered, and the government's agenda of social inclusion frustrated, unless both at the level of school education and of life-long learning, more is done to give access to the understanding of the historic environment. It is not enough to open a castle to the public, to grant the right to roam on a moorland studded with archaeological remains, to construct a web-site filled with ancient wills: the people need the educational tools to encounter and evaluate – to use – their own heritage to the full.

Let us turn now to the question of where the boundaries of the historic environment itself can lie. It is all very well to say, as I did in my opening sentences, that the historic environment is the totality of the archaeology, buildings, material objects and documents that remain from the past, but the restive practical ones in the audience will be saying to themselves, in the real world of government there have to be priorities: there have to be boundaries, there have to be limits, for quite practical reasons. The middens in which Skara Brae was constructed may well be historic environment; but not last week's landfill. The National Museums of Scotland may keep a range of eighteenth-century snuff boxes; but not of modern car keys. The Royal Commission may record burnt mounds from the Neolithic; but surely not modern street fire hydrants. The National Archives may treasure its merchant letters from seventeenth-century Scots in Rotterdam, but not want your old gas bills. Not all the past since yesterday afternoon can possibly receive public money for its recording and preservation, even though at some time in the future people may well become really inquisitive about crisp bags, car keys, fire hydrants and gas bills.

There are three main points that I want to make here. The first is that every institution should have a coherent policy in respect of what to collect, record and preserve regarding the recent or the modern, and that in doing so they should take advice both from experts and from the public through some kind of consultative committee. I am aware that practice varies widely from one institution to another and that there is no magic formula that will meet every circumstance. I am also aware that it is extremely difficult, insofar as it partly involves trying to second-guess the interests and the intellectual horizons of a future yet unborn. But it is easy to come unstuck, for no better reason than never having grasped the problem properly in the first place. When I was chairman of the exhibition review committee, planning for the new Museum of Scotland in the early 1990s, we agonised fruitlessly about what to put in the twentieth-century gallery, and we eventually copped out and invited the public to make their own suggestions. The result was a collection of nostalgic bric-à-brac, ranging from the Prime Minister's guitar upwards or downwards, and by common consent the least satisfactory part of the museum. The biggest car boot sale in Scotland, as one reviewer described it. We went wrong because we had insufficient structure, and we involved the public only at the last minute and in a relatively haphazard way. Perhaps every museum should have a standing subgroup of one or two trustees, curators, external advisors and members of the museum friends, to draw up a policy on acquisition of the modern and the recent and to review such acquisitions from time to time. Perhaps most of them now do: it is easy

to teach grandmothers to suck eggs. The same policy could be extended, where appropriate, to analogous bodies of building preservation and record, both public and private.

The second point is that the boundary between the natural heritage and the historic environment needs to be made much more permeable, by a renewed appreciation on both sides of how much of 'nature' is a cultural artefact of human activity, and how much of 'the built environment' is profoundly conditioned by natural forces. SNC and Historic Scotland have their Concordat, but its message needs to be understood and internalised by the staff of both organisations and of many others. The remarkable work that the Royal Commission has done on Historic Landscape Assessment needs to be integrated at every level with the Landscape Character Assessment of SNH, so that planners and the public can turn to one tool to understand the landscape about them. It all needs to be taken to a very particular level. Historic Scotland and local authorities alike need to watch what they are up to when they repoint a wall on an historic monument. As a matter of course they should do a flora and fauna assessment, to avoid removing a rare snail that has found a niche there since the Middle Ages, or a plant like Pellitory-of-the-wall which seems to me to grow in Scotland mainly where there have been trading links with the south of Europe. Near my home it is found on the site of the old town gate of Crail, and adjacent to the ancient quay of St Andrews harbour, but nobody sees it as part of the historic environment, because nobody is trained to do so. Whose job is it to treasure the deep orange wallflowers that grow almost exclusively on old castle ruins, witness to the garden taste of pre-Union Scotland? Or to note when henbane and other medical plants flower after an archaeological dig on an old monastic site, or indeed, to note what flora is associated with any such sites? These are just as much history as a shard or a coin, but they have the advantage of being living history. It is a tragedy, for example, that the ruins of Bothwell Castle, in the care of Historic Scotland, once described by Douglas Simpson as the grandest piece of medieval secular architecture in Scotland, can be simultaneously described by Professor Jim Dickson as one of the centres of extinction of plants in the Glasgow area, having list Dittander, Yellow Figwort, Pellitory-of-the-wall and Common Gromwell, not only from the castle but from the whole of the Glasgow area. These were part of the historic environment of the castles in the way that herbicide soaked lawns and gravel paths never were. As an historian of woodland, I am constantly frustrated by the way that such marvels as the oakwoods of Argyll, and the granny pines of the ancient pinewoods, are seen as natural but not as part of our historic environment. The appearance and indeed the survival of the oakwoods are due to the demands of the Industrial Revolution, of which they are almost as much an artefact as the Crinan Canal or New Lanark. The appearance of the pinewoods is in most cases entirely due to the use of the ancient woods as pasture and shelter by the Highlanders for their beasts. I am not proposing that Historic Scotland takes over their care from SNH, but that, in our understanding and teaching of the historic environment and of the natural environment alike, we grasp that the boundary is permeable.

Furthermore, without an understanding of the importance of some natural things to the historic environment we give them inadequate protection from either side of the divide. This is particularly true of ancient woods and veteran trees, with their inner archaeology of coppicing and pollarding. It is more widely true of historic upland landscapes, with their rigs and boundaries, shielings and farmstead sites set among the heather and the hill grass – but as this is better known and the subject of

ongoing work in the MOLRS programme of Historic Scotland and the Historic Landscape Assessment of the Royal Commission, I need not dwell on it. I could also mention the plight of significant historic gardens and designed landscapes, of which a mere 400 out of some 4,000 are actually included in the official inventory of gardens and landscapes which SNH and Historic Scotland do keep together. If we do not list or know what we have, how can we know where the boundaries can be?

Finally, I want to bring us to one boundary – the physical boundary of Scotland itself, the boundary of land and sea, because the problems here on the coast exemplify many of the overall problems facing the historic environment today, and there is a potential line of solution that, if modestly resourced, has wider promise. First, the Scottish coastline is of great length – longer than that of England – and of extraordinary importance to the historical and cultural heritage of Scotland. Second, we have only just begun to get to know it archaeologically, by survey and by the very limited excavation. Thirdly, it is seriously at risk – Historic Scotland estimate there may be 12,000 sites at risk, of which some 600 are of national or international importance: although all of these were in some sense coastal, not all of them necessarily sat on the shore originally. Sea level changes of millennia, and more recently the effects of climate change in accelerating coastal erosion, have brought many sites – cemeteries, farmsteads, brochs, kirks – to the edge of the shore: others, like fish traps and harbours, have always been there, but are now endangered by a more dynamic coast. It is quite impossible to preserve more than a handful for posterity – Skara Brae, clearly, and a few more. The remainder need to be comprehensively recorded for Local and National Monument Records, and the most interesting of them to be excavated before being washed away. To ignore the problem would be an inexcusable frittering away of our heritage which posterity would not lightly excuse. The SCAPE Trust are running a conference on this next month (all invited) but we believe the solution to lie partly with central and local authorities, but partly with local communities. Shorewatch, begun by the Council for Scottish Archaeology and continued by SCAPE with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, establishes local groups with the help of professional archaeologists to monitor and survey stretches of the coastline, and local people are often enabled to make a very substantial contribution to knowledge. At Loch Hourn, for instance, the work of the local Shorewatch group increased the number of known coastal archaeology sites from around 20 to over 200. The next step will be to involve amateurs, under professional guidance, much more seriously in rescue excavations, as are presently being undertaken at Unst on Shetland.

Here, I believe, may be a way forward on the boundaries: to involve the community at a much deeper level, but to do so with professional help – to fund the people, to work with the experts. It will cost, of course, but it will also be both socially-inclusive and cost-effective. Surely the future lies in a flexible approach to the boundaries of this kind. Thank you.