

Walking Perth's Past:

Memory and Place in a Seventeenth-Century Burgh

The Strathmartine Centre



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I'm grateful to the Director, Norman Reid, for inviting me to address you this morning and for encouraging me to introduce my colleagues to you: Dr Lorna MacBean and Jessica Reid of the University of Glasgow, and Dr Bess Rhodes of the University of St Andrews. We are engaged on a collaborative research programme, *Walking Perth's Past*, which is designed to help modern audiences better understand how previous generations interacted with nature and architecture, and to inform local discussions about such interactions today. Its first milestone is an edition, now nearing completion, of a seventeenth-century poem about Perth and its history. One goal for Walking Perth's past is to translate the editorial work on the poem into new ways of engaging with the local environment at and around Perth: *The Muses Threnodie* becomes *Walking Perth's Past*.

This talk actually consists of various elements. First is a discussion of *The Muses Threnodie* by Henry Adamson, as published in 1638. I will look at the way the relationship between Perth and the river Tay takes shape in this poem. True to my own training, this section will be rather literary. Then I'll turn the discussion over to Bess Rhodes, Lorna MacBean, and Jessica Reid. Supported by the British Academy, Bess is preparing a research workshop on landscape and memory in premodern Perth and Tayside. Supported by the Strathmartine Trust, Lorna MacBean and Jessica Reid are preparing to interview community members about local places, their documentation, and their significance now, toward a podcast. Jessica, Lorna, Bess, and I are hoping that our different perspectives will encourage you to take part in a more free-ranging discussion at the end of this talk.

For our time together today, I'd like to begin by identifying some features of *The Muses Threnodie* for discussion about poetry involving responses to environmental change.

Aldis 898

STC. 135

THE ^{44.3.40.}
MUSES THRENODIE,
OR, ~~THE~~
Mirthfull Mournings, on the death
of Master Gall.

*Containing varietie of pleasant Poëticall
descriptions, morall instructions, historicall narra-
tions, and divine observations, with the
most remarkable antiquities of Scot-
land, especially at Perth.*

By M. H. ADAMSON.

Horat. in Arte.
Omne tulit punctum, qui miscuit utile dulci.



Printed at Edinburgh in King James College,
by George Anderson. 1638.

This time our boat, passing too nigh the land,
The whirling streame did make her run on sand.
'Aluif!' we cry'd, but all in vain! T'abide
We were constrain'd till flowing of the tide. (4Mu.1-4)

The bridge draws nigh where contrare streames do run.
‘Take heed, shipper!’ said we, ‘These dangers shun!
The whirling streame will make our boat to cowp,
Therefore let’s passe the bridge by Wallace loup.’ (5Mu.421–4)

When we these heaven-like arches had survey'd,
We admird in th'air these hinging stones what stay'd. (5Mu.431-2)

So heavens respect the earth, and all their powers
Together in her bosome strongly powres,
Which is their center, roote, and sure pedestall,
The stedfast base whereon this world doth rest all. (5Mu.443–6)

The Muses Threnodie consists of six itineraries, three of which take place on or beside the river. Travel on the river can be chancy. Changing currents and unexpected shoals lead to accidents, as here:

This time our boat, passing too nigh the land,
The whirling streame did make her run on sand.
'Aluif!' we cry'd, but all in vain! T'abide
We were constrain'd till flowing of the tide. (4Mu.1–4)

Being capsized may be upsetting but it produces some happy results: some healthful bathing, finding a fine freshwater pearl, and lively discussion about the construction and destruction of some of Perth's monuments, notably its walls and its religious houses.

When the tidal current changes and the boat can be dislodged from its shoal, the journey home continues, but new dangers arise as the river approaches the Tay bridge:

The bridge draws nigh where contrare streames do run.
'Take heed, shipper!' said we, 'These dangers shun!
The whirling streame will make our boat to cowp,
Therefore let's passe the bridge by Wallace loup.' (5Mu.421–4)

The skilful rowers guide the boat into safety, and the travellers pass under the bridge.

When we these heaven-like arches had survey'd,
We admird in th'air these hinging stones what stay'd. (5Mu.431–2)

There's a sense of forces that could only too readily turn destructive. What sustains the enormous mass of the stones in mid-air is knowledge of counter-forces in the design and construction of arches. This knowledge, the travellers suppose, connects the arches of the Tay bridge to the forces unifying the cosmos:

So heavens respect the earth, and all their powers
Together in her bosome strongly powres,
Which is their center, roote, and sure pedestall,
The stedfast base whereon this world doth rest all. (5Mu.443–6)

Even so the arches of this bridge proclaime
And shew the building of the starrie frame;
But now all lost, needs Archimedes skill –
Oh, if it were supplied by Master Mylne! (5Mu.455–8)

The ancient Bertha, now ov'rflow'd with flood
Of mightie waters, and that princely hold
Where dwelt King William, by the streame down rold,
Was utterly defac'd and overthrown,
That now the place thereof scarce can be known. (1Mu.126–30)

This description is hardly Copernican (let alone Newtonian), but it summarises the older cosmology with the small world at the centre of the great world comprised of the orbiting planets, including the sun and moon, encircled by the starry firmament.

The gazing travellers think of their bridge as an instrument for perceiving these forces at play, like the glass sphere Archimedes devised as working model of the varying motions in time of the heavenly spheres:

Even so the arches of this bridge proclaime
And shew the building of the starrie frame;
But now all lost, needs Archimedes skill –
Oh, if it were supplied by Master Mylne! (5Mu.455–8)

Now we are at the crux of the poem. In the face of recurrent destruction, how do ordinary people sustain the knowledge needed to restore the structures that gave scope and continuity to their community? They can await a master mason like John Mylne junior, but what can a poem offer in the interim?

You see, the poem is tracing recollections of events that took place over a decade previously, before the bridge under which they travelled that fine day was destroyed in a flood, on 21 October 1621. The damage was extreme but not unprecedented; memory persisted of the annihilation of an earlier town, Bertha, at the confluence of the rivers Almond and Tay:

The ancient Bertha, now ov'rflow'd with flood
Of mightie waters, and that princely hold
Where dwelt King William, by the streame down rold,
Was utterly defac'd and overthrown,
That now the place thereof scarce can be known. (1Mu.126–30)

With such dire precedents, it is no wonder that the two wayfarers who are the main characters of the poem talk about all their town's calamities as if they were floods. From this perspective even the destruction of Perth's Charterhouse in the Reformation riots of May 1559 has something of a deluge about it:

Then they all conclude
In armes to rise; and – rushing as a floud
Which overflowes the banks and headlongs hurles
The strongest bulwarks with devouring whirles,
Swallowing the mightie ships, them overwhelme;
Nothing availes his skill that guides the helme –
Even so, the multitude in armes arise
With noise confusde of mirth and mourning cryes
For that fair palace, then sexscore nine yeeres
Which had continued; turning of the spheres
The fatall period brought, to ground it must,
And all its pomp and riches turne to dust. (5Mu.307–18)

In stormie seas, while as the ship doth reele
Of publick state, the meanest boy may feele
Shipwrack, as well as he the helme who guides,
When seas do rage with winds and contrare tides;
Which – ah! – too true I found, upon an ore
Not long ago, while as I swim'd to shore. (6Mu.129–34)

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 In armes to rise; and – rushing as a floud
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 And all its pomp and riches turne to dust. (5Mu.307–18)

Such destruction is inevitable, even fated. The narrator tries to fit it into the pattern of judgement for past crimes; but for this passage at least, the ‘devouring whirles’ can hardly be reduced to such tidy explanations. The epic simile involves a reference to the ship of state which cannot be steered to safety in such storms. Much later in the poem, the narrator, whose name is George Ruthven, alludes nervously to the Gowrie Conspiracy of 1600, in which members of James VI’s retinue killed John Ruthven, earl of Gowrie and his brother Alexander:

In stormie seas, while as the ship doth reele
 Of publick state, the meanest boy may feele
 Shipwrack, as well as he the helme who guides,
 When seas do rage with winds and contrare tides;
 Which – ah! – too true I found, upon an ore
 Not long ago, while as I swim’d to shore. (6Mu.129–34)

Such writing strongly evokes an awareness of human littleness in the ‘devouring whirles’ of public affairs: ‘No fish doth sip in troubled seas clean water’ (6Mu.142).

Therefore I courage take and hope to see
A bridge yet built, although I aged be,
More stately, firme, more sumptuous and fair
Than any former age could yet compare.
... For what we presage is not in grosse,
For we be brethren of the Rosie Crosse;
We have the Mason word and second sight;
Things for to come we can foretell aright;
And shall we show what misterie we meane,
In fair acrosticks *Carolus Rex* is seene
Describ'd upon that bridge in perfect gold (3Mu.193–6, 199–205)

At moments, however, the poem offers glimpses of a higher ambition. At one point, the narrator reaches for previously inaccessible forms of knowledge and insight to find restoration in the midst of loss:

Therefore I courage take and hope to see
A bridge yet built, although I aged be,
More stately, firme, more sumptuous and fair
Than any former age could yet compare.
... For what we presage is not in grosse,
For we be brethren of the Rosie Crosse;
We have the Mason word and second sight;
Things for to come we can foretell aright;
And shall we show what misterie we meane,
In fair acrosticks *Carolus Rex* is seene
Describ'd upon that bridge in perfect gold (3Mu.193–6, 199–205)

It is possible to dismiss the reference to Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry and the second sight as mystification. Imagining a future bridge that excels all its predecessors, complete with a grateful golden inscription to its patron, Charles I, may seem only wishful thinking. The passage may well have seemed nothing more when the poem was published, mere days before the promulgation of the National Covenant in February 1638. In 1635, when the passage was written, however, it might have been possible to envision some form of accommodation, embodied by this perfect bridge.

I'm coming to the end of my part of this talk, and it is almost time to hand things over to Bess Rhodes, Lorna MacBean, and Jessica Reid. Here is a summary of my findings ...

