

*The Muses Threnodie* (1638) and Walking Perth's Past (2023)

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*Walking Perth's Past* is a new programme of research into relations between locality, perception and memory. Perth's archival and literary records are revealing how its early modern inhabitants perceived their region and its capricious river, the Tay. Appeals to the Crown to rebuild the repeatedly flood-wrecked Tay bridge had long been a staple of literary writing at Perth but failed to persuade Charles I. In *The Muses Threnodie*, Henry Adamson takes a different tack. As this poem reveals, observation and historical memory were converging at Moncreiffe Hill, Kinnoull Hill, and Campsie Linn, local landmarks where the geologist James Hutton would later discover evidence of volcanic faults (Slavin 2010).

Perceptions of waterways and landforms contributed to understanding of historical change in Perth but also reflected political anxieties on the eve of the National Covenant. The Reformation had created local faultlines of its own, marked by the townspeople's demolition of religious houses, the rise of Perth's vigilant Kirk Session, and the crown's destruction of the region's chief noble family, the Ruthvens. Attitudes toward these changes, far from settled or unanimous, found ways to be expressed despite official control. Connections can be traced between these social undercurrents and awareness of significant places at Perth.

**May 1559** John Knox's fiery sermon in St John's Church, Perth provokes riots in which most of the town's religious houses are destroyed.

**August 1582** James VI is captured by William Ruthven, earl of Gowrie. The king's favourite Esmé Stuart, duke of Lennox departs for France and dies.

**August 1600** James VI arrives suddenly at Gowrie House in Perth. Believing that the king is being assaulted, his servitors kill John Ruthven, earl of Gowrie and the earl's brother Alexander.

**January 1638** aided by John Adamson, George Anderson prints Henry Adamson's *The Muses Threnodie* in Edinburgh.

**February 1638** at Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh the National Covenant is accepted and first subscribed.

Forms of public engagement and community-based research are strands of *Walking Perth's Past*. The team members are consulting with organisations such as the Perth Museum and Art Gallery, Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust, and the Perthshire Society of Natural Science. They are preparing various initiatives, such as podcast interviews, a Wiki event, exhibits, and a research workshop. Each of these people has helped in the preparation of the presentation I'm giving today — and this is far from a complete list of all those who have supported and guided the project so far.

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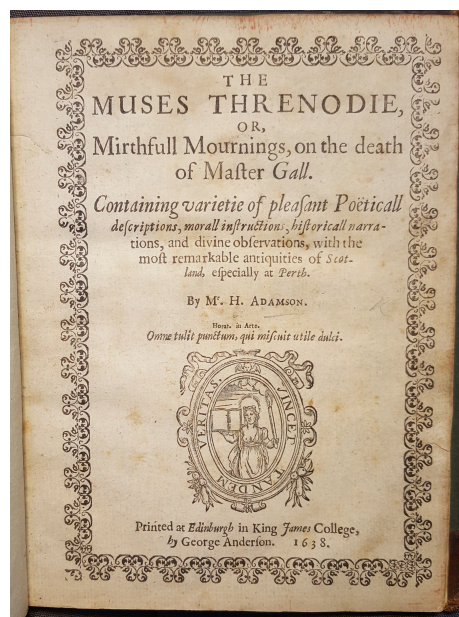
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*Walking Perth's Past* includes the first scholarly edition of Henry Adamson's *The Muses Threnodie*, a seventeenth-century poem that offers some insights into the lives, amusements and anxieties of Perth's early modern residents. This edition, for the Scottish Text Society, is being designed in part to help modern audiences better understand how previous generations interacted with local nature and architecture. Might this poem address issues of identity and location that remain important?



One could describe this poem of about three thousand lines – divided like the *Histories* of Herodotus into nine parts called *Muses* – as a narrative in which an eccentric citizen of Perth recalls his excursions a decade or so earlier with a since-deceased friend into the regions around their town. In three eventful days, the two wayfarers exchange discourses about the natural features and historical associations of the sites they visit. They debate the causes of their town's cultural and economic decline. Now lamenting the death of his friend, the survivor finds consolation in their having claimed the right by learning, curiosity and eloquence to step beyond their workaday lives. This consolation is not entirely undercut by the frequent indications that their access is less than perfect. The beguilingly inglorious verse in which Henry Adamson clothes his characters' sentiments serves as the outermost layer of several stylistic misdirections, as if to distract official attention from any culpable criticism within.

Of travels let them talk,  
We in the works of learned men do walk  
And painfully their learned paths do tread,  
For sure he's travel'd far who is well read. (Adamson [2024]; B7.31–4)

Though *The Muses Threnodie* often views Perth's environs through the lens of other books, occasionally it seems to do so more directly. Writing it in the 1630s, Henry Adamson might be curating his literary heritage as a means to engage anew with his setting. If so, the ways he retraces waterways to assert access to cultural origins merit further attention.

[T]he antiquity of the Tay makes it something like an imaginative time machine; watching its waters can provoke all kinds of meditations on history and the shortness of human life, thinking of all the humans and creatures who have lived with it before you. (Helen Macdonald, qtd Storror 2019)



(BBC 2019)

The poem begins in an effusion of grief, which relaxes into memories of games and sports enjoyed in former times. Most avidly remembered are the archery competitions that brought the poem's two main characters into the fields beyond the town walls. The

perspective soon settles on one such outing, in which the two contestants follow the river Tay north to the confluence of its next tributary, the Almond.



(Adair 1683)

They continue along the Almond's banks until they reach a weir called *Lowswark*, 'Built our mightie Kings for to preserve us' (B2.137).



(Hume 1976)

At this weir, a sluice diverts a *rill* into a channel that feeds the town lade.





(Giles 2023a)

Tracing its returning flow, the two characters step into the roles they will occupy for the rest of the poem, as enthusiastic but sometimes contestive reciters of historical narrative.



(Giles 2023b)

Much later, in its penultimate section, the poem will return to this district to allude to a more controversial source.



(Giles 2023c)

It is a well or spring that the narrator feels obliged to avoid naming accurately.



(Giles 2023d)

To visit this shadowy well is to sing ‘with the Muses’; but the narrator adds that ‘none durst approach their table | But we’ (B9.25, 27–8).



(Parnell 2011)

Perth Kirk Session’s repeated prohibitions of idolatrous or riotous activities at a well near Huntingtower had little obvious effect until three women were convicted in 1623 of witchcraft for using its water in their celebrations and remedies (Todd 2002, 205–7). The obscuring of this site in *The Muses Threnodie* can be seen in relation to official resistance to such traditional practices.





(Ross n.d.)

Improvement and urbanisation would later erase such wells but also their adjoining communities from the district. The villages that crowd Tibbermore parish in the eighteenth century vanish by the mid-nineteenth. Where one well was located, the village was named the Hole of Ruthven. By the 1840s, according to the description of the parish in the New Statistical Account, there was ‘still to be seen in the neighbourhood an old stone cross, where a regular market was wont to be held; but the village is now no more’ (Tulloch 1845, 1036).



(Stobie 1783)

The notes compiled in the late 1850s for the Ordnance Survey map of the parish mention that the name of the village was ‘now applied to an old one storey thatched house

which is built on the site of the well' (1859–1862, 76.19). Written in the 1630s, *The Muses Threnodie* retains evidence of the older rural and suburban landscape while it also registers some initial reactions to the official suppressions and dislocations that will change awareness of and access to Perth's environs, and in many ways alter the landscape itself.

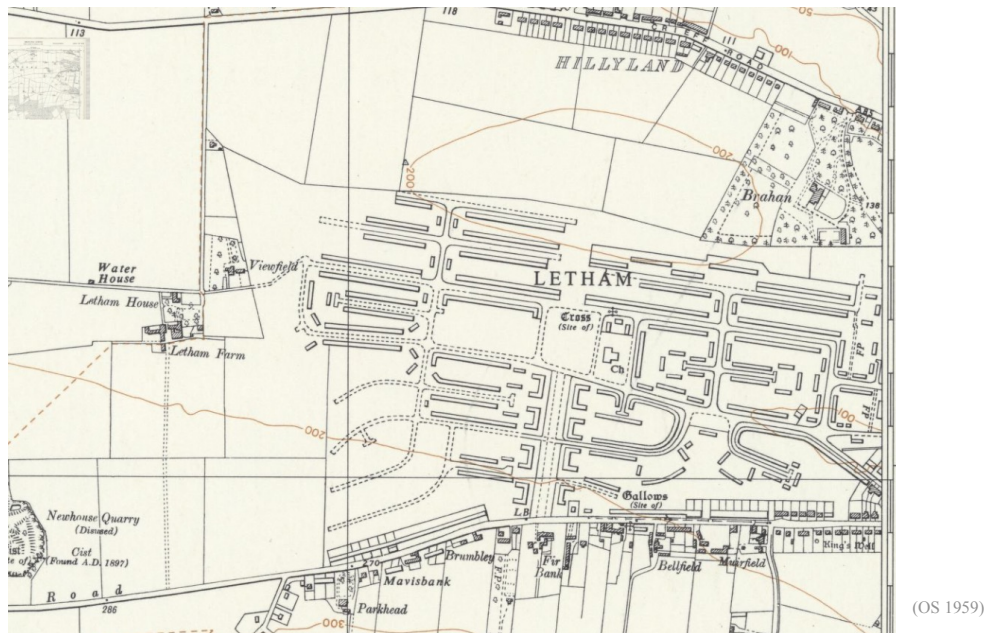


Accumulation of arbitrary change tends to dissolve the historicity of a location and thereby weaken its inhabitants' sense of place.

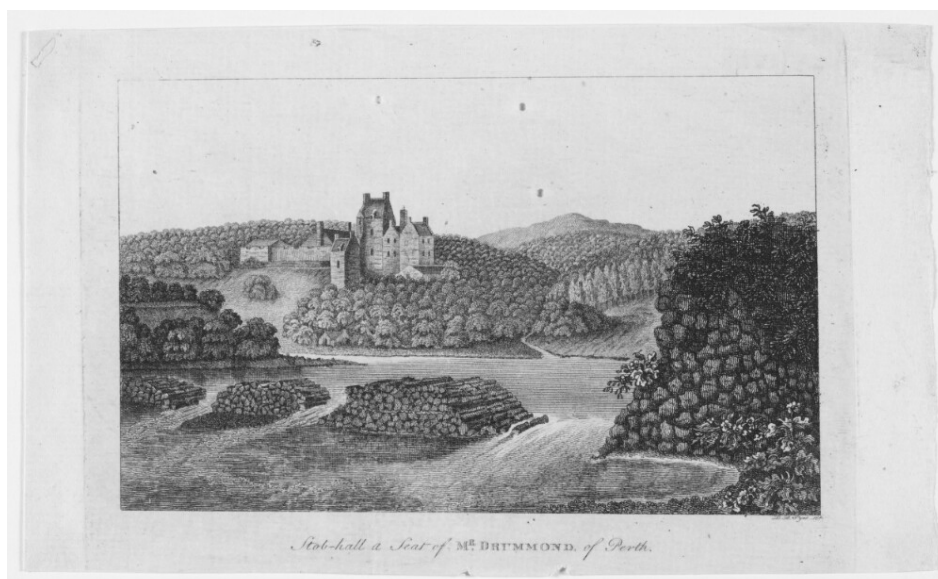




Adjusting to such change eventually silences *The Muses Threnodie*. The stress of navigating around controversial topics increases: even in jest, one mustn't mention the proscribed Ruthvens; the riots that led to the destruction of Perth's religious houses oughtn't to be praised, but neither should they be deplored; it's even problematic to extoll outdoor recreation when this is a point of contention between the Church and the Crown. No wonder that Adamson depicts his interlocutors with a protective touch of foolery.



Another way of reading this poem is to observe how its characters assert and even invent connectivity in the face of such suppression and impairment. The main route the two wayfarers take to re-envision momentous stages in Perth's past is along the river Tay. Following the Tay and experiencing its obstacles and undercurrents make possible a





directness of access to authority and heritage that would otherwise be perilous for these unheroic middle-class characters to achieve or sustain.

Five miles or so from Perth up the Tay is Campsie Linn.



(Giles 2023e)

This is the destination of the second excursion in *The Muses Threnodie*, and a decisive location for the poem as a whole. This may not be the earliest literary mention of this location: the Older Scots lyric ‘Tayis Bank’ makes closing reference to the Tay’s ‘stremis stout ... vnder Stobschaw’ (*Bannatyne* 1928, 300), Stobhall overlooking the Linn as in the print of the drawing by James Hutton shown previously.



(Giles 2023f)

A recent geological excursion guide identifies the rock outcroppings at the Linn as volcanic:



(Burgess 2021)

[T]he quartz-dolerite dyke ... is about 15–18m wide. It trends approximately E–W but its course is affected at intervals by small but distinct and abrupt right-lateral shifts, which can be seen to offset the line of the dyke progressively farther south as it crosses the Tay. At the linn, four such shifts occur within a distance of 250m. (Browne 2019)



(RCAHMS 1993)

For Walter Scott, this stretch of what he termed ‘the princely river’ had ‘peculiarly’ human qualities:





(Giles 2023g)

at ‘the cataract called Campsie Linn ... its waters rush tumultuously over a range of basaltic rock, which intercepts the current, like a dike erected by human hands’ (1999, 382).



(Wills 2010)

Adamson equates this stretch of the Tay with the first cataract on the Nile. In his poem, this is one of several places where he alludes to ancient wonders but substitutes local scenes.

Thence forward went we unto *Campsie-lin*,  
 From whence the river falling makes such din  
 As *Nilus Catadups* ... (Adamson [2024], B3.137–9)

Adamson took his term *Catadups* from Pliny: the noise of the confined water at Campsie Linn has summoned up the analogy. The moment contributes to his characters' argument that Scotland here and now encompasses all marvels the world has ever had to offer. To journey up the river is to rediscover human origins.\

postremo inclusus montibus, nec aliunde torrentior, vectus aquis properantibus ad  
locum Aethiopicum qui Catadupi vocatur, novissimo catarracte inter occursantis  
scopulos non fluere inmenso fragore creditur sed ruere.

finally it is shut in by mountains, its flow being nowhere more rapid; and it is borne on  
with hurrying waters to the place in Ethiopia called in Greek the Downcrash, where at  
its last cataract owing to the enormous noise it seems not to run but to riot between the  
rocks that bar its way. (Pliny 1942, 258–9)

Adamson's wayfarers are making their excursion in the autumn, when the flow of the Tay is high and its rapids are swollen. This is the season when the salmon are returning to the river's headwaters to spawn. The salmon's return assumes a structural importance; the initial mention of their leaping at the rapids will be echoed at the end of this section of the poem, its Second Muse.

There we admir'd to see the Salmond leap  
And overreach the waters mightie heap,  
Which from a mountain falls, so high and steep,  
And tumbling down devals into the deep (Adamson [2024], B3.145–8)

The longing of expatriate Scots to come back home corresponds to the impulse of 'these kindly fishes' to return to their origins. Regaining access to one's sources despite obstacles, and reasserting the sufficiency of these sources, is an imperative of *The Muses Threnodie*.

Hence these desires fair *Caledonias* soile  
To view, when bravest stratagems with toile  
Have acted beene, hence come these kindly wishes  
To see these fields, even like these kindly fishes,  
Which we beheld ov'rcome this mightie lin  
And seeke the fountaines where they did begin. (Adamson [2024], B3.317–22)

Adamson takes quite an independent perspective to view these determinedly homeward-bound fish. In most documentary sources, salmon is a commodity, an important component in Scotland's exports, and the object of much legislation from Robert I to Charles I and beyond. In the twenty-first century, its economic status is higher than ever: farmed Atlantic salmon is

touted as ‘the UK’s largest food export’ (Salmon Scotland 2023; DEFRA 2022). References to salmon in Older Scots poems confirm the estimate of this species as especially desirable



(Scott 2020)

and valuable. Barbour’s and Henryson’s allusions to salmon evoke fantasies of supping on a delicacy all the tastier for having been ill-gotten. Alexander Hume’s depiction of salmon being loaded into boats tops off his vision of a well-ordered world.

In-till his luge a fox he saw  
*That fast on ane salmond gan gnaw* (Barbour 1980–1985, 3.233)

‘It is ane syde off salmond, as it wair,  
 And callour, py pand lyke ane pertrik ee:  
 It is worth all the hering ȝe haue thair –  
 ȝe, and we had it swa, is it worth sic thre.’ (Henryson 1981, 81)

The salmon out of cruifs and creils  
 Up hailed into skowts (Hume 1987, 301)

Adamson’s handling of sources in this passage reveals his independent-mindedness. One source is Montgomerie’s *Cherrie and the Slae*, in which the roar of a waterfall stirs Echo to outdo the Muses in a five-part musical setting. Imitating the soundscape, Montgomerie is devising a verbal counterpart to both the natural scene and its mythologised music.



But as I looked mine alone  
 I saw a river rinne  
 Out our a steepie rock of stone  
 Syne lighted in a linne  
 With tumbling and rumbling  
 Amongst the Roches round  
 Devalling and falling  
 Into a pit profound. (Montgomerie 2000, 185)

There we admir'd to see the Salmond leap  
 And overreach the waters mightie heap,  
 Which from a mountain falls, so high and steep,  
 And tumbling down devals into the deep (Adamson [2024], B3.145–8)

In the early 1580s Montgomerie was concerned with asserting his status as a courtly maker; but for Adamson in the 1630s, that role no longer had much point – though the sustaining of a near-rhyme across the four lines quoted suggests that he is aware of the tuneful tradition. He prefers to work implicitly, using allusion to chart a private, self-reliant course.

A telling instance of Adamson's allusive technique occurs immediately after the river 'devals into the deep'. The rebounding waters are compared to the currents near Greenland – a far stretch for a simile.

Making the boyling waters to rebound,  
 Like these great surges near by *Greenland* found:  
 Yet these small fish ov'come these watrie mountains,  
 And kindly take them to their mother fountains. (Adamson [2024], B3.149–52)

Adamson is using George Best's account of the Arctic expeditions of Martin Frobisher. Best identifies the west coast of Greenland as the scene of a momentous confluence of ocean currents.

we suppose these great indrafts do growe, and are made by the reuerberation and reflection of that same Currant, which ... reboundeth ouer to the Northest parts of the world, as *Norway, Islande, &c.* where not finding any passage to an open Sea, but rather is there encreased by a new accesse, and another Currant meeting with it from *the Scythian Sea*, passing the bay of Saint *Nicholas* Westwarde, doeth once againe rebound backe, by the coasts of *Groenland* ... (Best 1578, 21)

Adamson's comparison with the 'surges near by *Greenland*' gives Campsie Linn an up-to-date global significance. In contrast to the Northwest Passage's lures of wealth and fame, the waterfall stirs a homing instinct to turn inward, to view 'fair *Caledonias* soile'. Still, this image of the homeward pull of Scotland's inner, upper reaches may not be meant entirely seriously. In the transition zone between lowlands and highlands, the wayfarers have travelled as far as they can in one day and now turn back home.

Observing the salmon in their migration, Adamson contradicts a paragon of Jacobean literary culture, Josuah Sylvester's translation of the *Divine Works and Weeks* of Du Bartas. Adamson's salmon are journeying upstream to spawn and not to enjoy some summer vacation. Their nesting place and 'Tombe' await in the river's headwaters and not the sea. Correcting faulty natural history involves swimming against the political current. In James VI's early verse, for instance his translation from Lucan (1947–58, 62–3), the sea is an emblem of self-sufficient kingship. Half a century later, Adamson is noticing that salmon need to leave the sea behind to fulfil their destiny.

So, dainty Salmons ...  
 In the Spring Season the rough Seas forsake,  
 And in the Rivers thousand pleasures take;  
 And yet the plentie of delicious foods,  
 Their pleasant Lodging in the Cristal floods,  
 The fragrant sents of flowerie banks about,  
 Cannot their Countries tender Love wipe out  
 Of their remembrance; but they needs will home,  
 In th'irefull Ocean to goe seeke their Tombe. (Du Bartas 1979, 1.234–5)

A more accurate account than Sylvester's of the salmons' migration can be found in the description of Scotland at the beginning of Hector Boece's *Scotorum historiae*:

... they swim upstream to the places they were born, and this presents a wonderful spectacle for observers. For some streams, compressed by narrow cliffs on both sides, flow with a swift current, and when the salmon begin to be swept downstream by its fast-running water, they are not immediately swept along by the river, but cast themselves out of the water and, sailing a certain space through the air with their curved bodies, fall to the ground with a loud noise. (Boece 2010, *Praëliminaria* 28)

There we admir'd to see the Salmond leap  
 And overreach the waters mightie heap,  
 Which from a mountain falls, so high and steep,  
 And tumbling down devals into the deep

(The relevant passage is not included in Bellenden's Scots version of Boece; Boece 1527, fol. 12v). Adamson knew Boece's book; it is his source for several episodes in *The Muses Threnodie*.

Adamson prefers Boece's natural observation to the fantasies about leaping salmon purveyed by the English topographer William Camden, who described these fish holding 'fast their taile in their mouth, and as they unloose themselves from such a circle, they give a jerk, as if a twig bended into a rondle were sudainely let goe ... and whip themselves aloft from beneath' (1610, 654). In the second passage on this slide, Camden is echoed by Drayton.

And so when they have come to such turbulent water they seek to overcome it by leaping, thus passing through the water with greater violence than they could by swimming. Those equipped with less strength are cast back by the water or fall onto dry land. (Boece 2010, *Præliminaria* 28)

... Which bending of himselfe to th' fashion of a Ring,  
Aboue the forced Weares, himself doth nimbly fling (Drayton 1622, 121)

Instead, Adamson follows Boece in recounting observations of salmon leaping weirs, falls, and other obstacles to return to the headwaters where they hatched and grew. Might Adamson's focus on natural forms and processes arise from their supposed ineradicability, in contrast to the contingency of human behaviour?

But the salmon who do manage to overcome the falling water, if not caught, make straight for the places where they were hatched the previous autumn, where they remain until breeding-time. (Boece 2010, *Præliminaria* 28)

Yet these small fish ov'come these watrie mountains,  
And kindly take them to their mother fountains. (Adamson [2024], B3.151–2)

*The Muses Threnodie* offers a wealth of observations of places in and near Perth. How might this information stimulate and sustain understanding of these localities now? How might a newly edited *Muses Threnodie* support the initiatives taking shape in the project known as *Walking Perth's Past*? Put simply, *The Muses Threnodie* offers vantages from which to consider successive human interactions with environment in a historically rich locale.

## Illustrations

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(Daily Record 2019)