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### Thurso and the Pentland Firth as a Site of Sport

**Citation for published version:**

McDowell, M 2017, Thurso and the Pentland Firth as a Site of Sport. in D Worthington (ed.), *The New Coastal History: Cultural and Environmental Perspectives from Scotland and Beyond*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 197-214. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64090-7\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64090-7_12)

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1007/978-3-319-64090-7\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64090-7_12)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

The New Coastal History

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## Thurso and the Pentland Firth as a Site of Sport

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**(This is the text of a pre-publication print of: Matthew L. McDowell, 'Thurso and the Pentland Firth as a Site of Sport', in David Worthington (ed.), *The New Coastal History: Cultural and Environmental Perspectives from Scotland and Beyond* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 197-214. There may be small textual differences between this version and the published version. Any reference made to this paper should refer to the published version.)**

### Introduction

*The Endless Winter*, a documentary written, directed, and produced by Matt Crocker and James Dean, debuted on Channel Four in 2012.<sup>1</sup> The film's title and premise was a play on typically British stereotypes of what constituted sport, leisure, and good weather, in this instance, in relation to what is popularly perceived to be a very un-British pastime: surfing. *The Endless Winter* featured two surfers, Mark Harris and Mitch Corbett, on a quest with a dual purpose: to meet the pioneers of British surfing; to discover where in Britain they could find the perfect wave. With regard to both, their journey ended at Thurso East, on Scotland's and Britain's north shore. Thurso was both the furthest point of land from the surfers' Newquay base, and the actualisation of a dream. Similarly, when the Scottish Surfing Federation enlisted its media officer Allyn Harper to direct a film on Scottish surfing's history – entitled *Through the Whisky Barrel* – much of the action was set in Thurso, and many of the characters and scenes were based there.<sup>2</sup> The small Caithness town features also as a major location in *Cold Water Souls: In*

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Harris and Mitch Corbett, *The Endless Winter* (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Allyn Harper, *Through The Whisky Barrel* (2011).

*Search of Surfing's Cold Water Pioneers*, freelance journalist Chris Nelson's 2010 book on the characters and history involved in cold-water surfing's most famed locales, Thurso being the archetypal Scottish example.<sup>3</sup> As part of a different conversation entirely (and one taking place outwith surf media), BBC's *My Life* in 2017 introduced a local teenager and her preparation for the World Junior Championships in the Azores.<sup>4</sup> Surf culture's embrace of the town, however, needs to be seen within the larger contemporary context of the area, and indeed of tourism to the north of Scotland. This is, after all, not a truly remote region by any stretch: despite Thurso being a seven-hour train ride north of Edinburgh, the Pentland Firth forms part of one of the world's busiest shipping passages, whilst Thurso's famous neighbour is a nuclear power plant in the process of being decommissioned.

This chapter is an initial stage of a larger project, which will eventually utilise oral histories to examine the history of Scottish surfing. It will examine Thurso's place in surf culture within wider cultural and media dynamics. To that end, it will utilise 'mainstream' newspapers – broadsheets, tabloids, and local newspapers – to determine the context for the often fleeting, usually mocking references to the sport, especially its presence in such an apparently unlikely location as Thurso. It is a bias itself which is reflected in the scholarly historiography on surfing in that British surfing has no equivalent to Booth's exhaustive work on beach culture in Australia.<sup>5</sup> However, this chapter also includes accounts from Anglophone surf publications themselves: including the British *Carve*, the American *Surfer*, and – most importantly – the UK's

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<sup>3</sup> Chris Nelson, *Cold Water Souls: In Search of Surfing's Cold Water Pioneers* (Bath, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Will Moore, *My Life: Surf's Up*, BBC (2017),

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Booth, *Australian Beach Cultures: The History of Sun, Sand and Surf* (Abingdon, 2001).

first stable and most authoritative periodical, *Wavelength*, founded in 1981. Joan Ormrod's work on the rhetoric of British surfing magazines of the pre-1980 period and the formation of identities within British surfing informs these examinations, as surf magazines of the pre-internet era were crucial in forming subcultures within the broader UK surfing community, one that differentiated itself heavily from the US surfing scene.<sup>6</sup> Film treatments of Thurso will also be examined, in particular *The Endless Winter* and *Through the Whisky Barrel*.<sup>7</sup> There are limitations to these materials, especially with regard to the more ephemeral elements of Thurso's surfing 'scene'. As Ormrod and Belinda Wheaton have noted, the dominant 'lifestyle sports' media titles are mostly produced by men, with a focus on male achievement and socialisation.<sup>8</sup> Some of the major figures within the Scottish surfing scene have been interviewed often, especially through a Heritage Lottery-funded project known as The First Wave: much of its material is already public, although the content is decidedly skewed towards male 'founders'.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the tension between the surf and 'mainstream' media's perception of this locale forms a part of the challenge in researching: aside from Roger Cox – *The Scotsman's* outdoor recreation correspondent – there are currently no other journalists in the 'mainstream' Scottish newspapers who write about surfing.

## The 'Real' Scotland

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<sup>6</sup> Joan Ormrod, 'Surf Rhetoric in American and British Surfing Magazines Between 1965 and 1976', *Sport in History*, 27(1), (2007), pp. 88-109.

<sup>7</sup> The numerous clips of surfing at Thurso which have been uploaded to YouTube, now filmic treatments of history in their own right, will not be examined here.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.; Belinda Wheaton, 'Introduction: Mapping the Life-style Sport Scape', in Belinda Wheaton ed., *The Cultural Politics of Lifestyle Sports* (Abingdon, 2013), pp. 1-28.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.thefirstwave.co.uk/> (accessed 31 January 2017).

Within the context of lifestyle sports, Thurso is a globally-transmitted idea of what Scotland means to outsiders. Its cultural reach might not be quite that of Ailsa Craig or the Bealach na Bà; but landmarks such as these – not initially thought of as being sites of sport – nevertheless play key roles in affirming the ‘authenticity’ of Scotland within both culturally significant and more niche sporting contexts.<sup>10</sup> The ‘coast’ at Thurso East – a beach-less wall-edge next to a collection of houses and a dirt path – does not resemble anything as iconic within the popular Scottish imagination. Indeed, outsiders themselves might be more familiar with a site across the Pentland Firth from Thurso: the Old Man of Hoy, itself used by the BBC for a televised climb in 1967, responding to the desire of the British public to see adventure within their living rooms.<sup>11</sup> Sporting venues themselves form a material-cultural category within Hardy, Loy, and Booth’s typology of sporting events, but locations for surfing do not fit easily within their particular schema, which looks heavily at sites of mass spectator sport.<sup>12</sup> Of course, there are others major sites of surfing within Scotland – including Tiree, Pease Bay, and Machrihanish – but it is Thurso East that has nevertheless been the location of several world-class surfing events. The first Scottish Surfing Championship was held in nearby Bettyhill in 1973, whilst the European Surfing Championships were held at Thurso East in 1981 and 1993. Many Scottish and UK events have been held at Thurso East ever since; and, from 2006 to 2011, surfboard/kit manufacturers O’Neill held its World Qualifying Series (professional surfing’s second tier) at

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew L. McDowell, “‘That Little Sugarloaf Island’: Ailsa Craig, Romance, Reality and the Branding of Scottish Sport and Leisure”, *Sport in History*, 34(2), (2014), pp. 249-275; Gordon Cameron, ‘The Bealach na Bà: A Highland Challenge Environment’, *Sport in History* 36(3), (2016), pp. 370-386.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Gilchrist, ‘Reality TV on the Rock Face – Climbing the Old Man of Hoy’, *Sport in History*, 27(1), (2007), pp. 44-63.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Hardy, John Loy, and Douglas Booth, ‘The Material Culture of Sport: Toward a Typology’, *Journal of Sport History*, 36(1), (2009), pp. 129-152.

Thurso East, which was estimated by the Glasgow tabloid *Daily Record* to be bringing £100,000 to the town annually; it also received considerable financial support from Highland Council.<sup>13</sup>

A 2013 assessment of Scottish surfing written by Scottish Surfing Federation (SSF) President, William Watson, confirmed that the north coast of Caithness ‘has been deemed by the surfing world as a “Coldwater Surfing Mecca” and has been instrumental to the development of the sport both within Scotland and the UK as a whole’.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Watson noted that, after the arrival of YouTube and other social media, Thurso was no longer a secret:

As has been the case with many other surfing destinations across the world there are early signs of friction developing at some spots due to a bolstering water population over a limited area tainting what was deemed an empty surf wilderness. Many “soul surfers” are now frequently spreading their search further afield to the western fringes of the North Coast and the Scottish Isles.<sup>15</sup>

A survey sent out to SSF members in December 2012 estimated that only 52 ‘regular surfers’ (those who surfed four or more times a year) resided in Caithness and Sutherland – out of 1,533 for the whole of Scotland.<sup>16</sup> That number did not, however, include tourists who travelled to the region. Thus, the SSF noted that Thurso’s surf culture was mature enough to have

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<sup>13</sup> Brian McIver, ‘The Surf’s Up for Bronzed Beach Hunks... in Thurso’, *Daily Record*, 25 April 2007.

<sup>14</sup> William Watson, *Scottish Marine Recreational Resources: Assessment of the Sport of Surfing within Scottish Waters* (Scottish Surfing Federation, 2013), p. 7, published to the Internet at: <http://thesf.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Assessment-of-the-Sport-of-Surfing-within-Scottish-Waters-2602132.pdf> (accessed 2 March 2017).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

developed 'localism', whereby 'local' surfers defended their space when queuing to catch breaks – a common practice in developed surfing communities such as those in Cornwall.<sup>17</sup> One professional surfer, Chris Noble, who lived in Thurso, noted in a 2012 interview with author Chris Nelson in *Wavelength*:

When we lived at Thurso East it would be crowded weekends, but we knew everyone would be away to be at work Monday... Not like now. Everybody seems to have time off. Through the week, weekends, doesn't seem to make too much difference. There's pretty much people on it all the time, crew of about 15 or 20 guys. And then you get everybody else who looks at the internet and goes 'we're going up for that swell.' Even though the waves are the same, it's definitely not the same place anymore.<sup>18</sup>

Roger Cox charted these subtle changes to the town in his *Scotsman* columns, particularly during the five years that the World Qualifying Series came to Thurso: in one 2008 column, he noted that the town's citizens had grudgingly accepted the newcomers, even though their suntans and accents made them stand out in the cold location.<sup>19</sup> Even in this allegedly niche sporting subculture, then, Thurso could be a tourist's vision of some kind of authentic Scotland – very different from, for example, Edinburgh Castle, but no less relevant – and a small-scale tourist industry in Caithness catered towards it.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 9., Emily Beaumont and David Brown, "'It's Not Something I'm Proud of But it's... Just How I Feel": Local Surfer Perspectives of Localism', *Leisure Studies*, 35(3), (2016), pp. 278-295.

<sup>18</sup> Chris Nelson, 'In My Experience: Being the Local – How Chris Noble came to Terms with the Crowds', *Wavelength* (219), (2012). Page number

<sup>19</sup> Roger Cox, 'On Home Surf', *The Scotsman*, 26 April 2008.

## **'Modern' Caithness and Scottish identity**

In a sporting context, the Pentland Firth and the Isle of Man have an unusual commonality: as Simon Vaukins notes, the Isle of Man's annual Tourist Trophy (TT) races ensure that, within the popular imagination, one particular location on the geographical peripheries of the British Isles is recognised overwhelmingly as a symbol of modernity. The Races, therefore, have become a crucial identifier of 'Manx-ness'.<sup>20</sup> Surfing, in effect, fulfils a similar role for the Pentland Firth, Thurso, and Caithness. However, chances are, when one thinks of the region, one thinks of a very different kind of expression of modernity: that of the nuclear power plant at Dounreay, just to the west of Thurso. Dounreay began life in 1955, and it would become one of the most famous major industrial projects in Scotland initiated by the Westminster Government in the post-war period.<sup>21</sup> In William Ritchie's words, with its construction 'the coastline of Caithness altered dramatically'.<sup>22</sup> The changes in demographics and physical environment brought to the region by the creation of the Dounreay facility are the subject of current PhD research by Linda Ross at the University of the Highlands and Islands. As Scottish surfing's own oral tradition tells the story, it was these demographic changes that allowed for the first surfing communities on the north Caithness coast in the first place. Pat Kieran, a migrant from Merseyside, had moved to Thurso in 1976 to take up a job as an electrical engineer at Dounreay: he had been introduced to the waves at Thurso East by a workmate at the plant. A letter that he sent to the

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<sup>20</sup> Simon Vaukins, *The Isle of Man TT Races: Motorcycling, Society, and Identity* (Newcastle, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Perchard and Niall Mackenzie, "'Too Much on the Highlands?'" Recasting the Economic History of the Highlands and Islands', *Northern Scotland*, 4, (2013), pp. 3-22.

<sup>22</sup> William Ritchie, 'Coastal Planning and the Coastline of Scotland', in James R. Coull, Alexander Fenton, and Kenneth Veitch eds., *Scottish Life and Society: A Compendium of Scottish Ethnology – Vol. 4: Boats, Fishing and the Sea* (Edinburgh, 2008), p.27.



Northwest Surf Club in Liverpool proclaiming his excitement at the waves, and asking for friends to come up to Caithness, became so much a part of surfing (and local) lore that it was included as part of an exhibition of local surfing memorabilia at the Caithness Horizons museum in the Thurso town hall. Kieran would end up living in a house in Thurso East and sharing the space with any surfers who came up north to test the waves.<sup>23</sup> Kieran and his workmates were not alone. Thurso's population had been at a low ebb in 1951, with 2,710 people living there, and increasing emigration. However, after the building of Dounreay, the population of the town nearly trebled, signalling the building of new houses, schools, and roads. *Caithness Courier* journalist James Miller wrote in 1989's *The New Caithness Book* that:

The spherical steel housing of the Dounreay reactor, familiarly 'the dome', became an unofficial symbol of Caithness's place in the modern world, almost as the sails of the vast herring fleet had been in the 1860s. Dounreay also brought a large number of immigrants to the county, from England and other parts of Scotland, and Thurso's streets echoed happily with a novel mixture of accents. The incomers were affectionately nicknamed 'atomics'.<sup>24</sup>

Murray Watson, using research compiled in the *Third Statistical Account of Scotland*, notes that Thurso, not unlike Fort William, and, perhaps more appropriately, Sullom Voe, Shetland, was an area which 'experienced the impact of employment-driven English migration'.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Through the Whisky Barrel*; Nelson, *Cold Water Souls*, pp. 181-212; Roger Cox, 'Four Seasons: A Sacred Surf Relic', *The Scotsman*, 7 May 2011.

<sup>24</sup> James Miller, 'Modern Times', in Donald Omand ed., *The New Caithness Book* (Wick, 1989), pp. 116-117.

<sup>25</sup> Murray Watson, 'Using the *Third Statistical Account of Scotland* to Expose a Major Gap in Scottish Historiography', *Contemporary British History*, 18(1), (2004), pp. 100-122.

Even if Thurso was an area which attracted professionals from outwith the region, and Thurso and nearby Bettyhill and Dunnet Head were known quantities within the surfing world by 1980, there remained a perception locally that Caithness was often bypassed as a tourist destination for other locales within Scotland.<sup>26</sup> And, as a recent battle in Caithness over the controversial existence of Gaelic road signs shows, there was a tension in outsiders' treatments of 'Caithnessness' (such as was believed to exist amongst the surfers who visited Thurso) vis-à-vis 'Celticness' and Highland identity.<sup>27</sup> Non-Scottish surf magazines did not always comment on Thurso's Nordic history or alleged 'Nordicness'. One exception is *Carve*, which, in one piece from 17 September 2012 – in the run-up to a World Tour event at Thurso east – noted that: 'Historically the Vikings have had more influence in the area than the Scottish clans hence the Scandy names – Thurso is Thors river, Brims Ness is Surf Point'.<sup>28</sup> Shaun Burrell, in a 2008 piece for American magazine, *Surfer*, noted that: 'The history of Thurso dates back to the thirteenth century when it was a Norse settlement peopled by Scandinavians. The Scottish came in and eventually took over the sea, and it became an important fishing and trading port.'<sup>29</sup> Such discussions of Caithness's Nordic history were rare: time and time again, up to the time of writing, the UK surf media (most of which was based in Cornwall), the UK 'mainstream', and also publications and sources from outside the UK, utilised more generic Scottish tropes. At

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<sup>26</sup> A cartoon in the *Caithness Courier*, 28 January 1981, from the 'Old Matt' series, was amongst those which mocked the tourist positioning of Caithness in relation to its neighbours.

<sup>27</sup> Kimberley Masson, 'Reclaiming Caithness Identity: Gaelic, Staged Authenticity, and Representation in Moments of Transformation', *Scottish Affairs*, 78, (2012), pp. 86-112; Michael Rosie, "'Areas Cannot be Selective": Caithness and the Gaelic Road-sign Saga', *Scottish Affairs*, 80, (2012), pp. 33-61.

<sup>28</sup> 'Thurso', *Carve*, 17 September 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Shaun Burrell, 'Scotch on the Rocks: Thurso, Scotland', *Surfer*, 49(9), (September 2008).

least in part, this was due to Scottish tourism's own way of marketing the Highlands. One 2015 article in *Aberdeen's Press and Journal*, aimed at a domestic audience, could have been written as a VisitScotland press release. It did not even mention Caithness when it mentioned surfing at Thurso as a holiday activity, reporting that:

The Highlands offer all-year-round outdoor adventure opportunities. Visitors can try their hand at climbing Torridon or swinging in the trees at the Nevis Range High Wire Adventure in Lochaber, go mountain biking on the Highland Wildcat Trails at Golspie or ride a wave in Scotland's surfing capital, Thurso.<sup>30</sup>

Then again, there were other occasions during the promotion of surfing events in the town when tourism promoters angered residents, most notably one 2010 reference on EventScotland's website to the surfing competition on the 'island of Thurso', which gave local Liberal Democrat Member of Scottish Parliament (MSP) Jamie Stone the chance to fume in the *Daily Record* that: 'Many of us in the far north fear that national agencies sometimes do not know what they are talking about when it comes to outlying areas of Scotland and this merely confirms it.'<sup>31</sup>

Surfing's own media was far more successful in selling the place, but, nevertheless, employed problematic discourses and imagery of its own. The 2012 *Carve* piece, despite tipping its cap to Thurso's Nordic influences, foregrounded experiences for surfers which were perceived to be

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<sup>30</sup> 'Fall for the Highlands this Autumn', *Press and Journal*, 23 October 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Amy Devine, 'Townfolk Furious as Tourism Chiefs call Thurso 'an Island'', *Daily Record*, 1 March 2010.

authentic. This included the unique Scottish imagery: 'Caithness is all about the spectacular really – ancient castles haunt the cliffs, Neolithic remains are dotted around, there's a pervading sense of wilderness and the surf can be sublime.'<sup>32</sup> Further to its description of landscape, its practical guide noted the local cuisine as essentially a collection of generic stereotypes about the 'authentic' Scotland:

Scotland has one of the worst records for heart disease and obesity in the world; deep fried comfort food is to blame. Anything can be deep-fried: pizzas, mars bars and at Easter even Crème Eggs. That said you should sample fish and chips with the day's catch at least once. There's a great seafood restaurant in Scrabster and the pub food in Thurso ranges from excellent to cheap and cheerful (i.e. deep fried). There's also a decent Indian and Chinese. You should try haggis, neeps and tatties for the authentic Scottish experience.<sup>33</sup>

Burrell's 2008 *Surfer* piece – entitled 'Scotch on the Rocks' – was only slightly less interested in the food, but similarly foregrounded photography, along with the landscape, in what readers might have understood as an authentic Scottish image. Of course, that too included haggis:

The backdrop to our session is postcard scenery. Snow-covered mountains, a dramatic coastline, grassy hillside, abandoned buildings, and castles that predate the founding of America are the norm. A surf check in Thurso involves driving past a herd of feeding sheep, past the

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<sup>32</sup> 'Thurso', *Carve*, 17 September 2012.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

cow pastures, and setting off down a muddy track towards the coast...

As for the local cuisine, just make sure you know what haggis is before you dig in.<sup>34</sup>

These more recent accounts can be seen as part of a larger body of literature on Thurso, once again written by outsiders, material that typically stressed the 'remote' qualities of the town, even whilst mentioning that Dounreay, by then a known environmental hazard, sat a few miles west. One early 1988 edition of *Wavelength* included a piece by John Wood on Thurso East (referred to here as Castle Reef) as a surfing destination:

Setting off from Newquay, Simon Kellam, Mick Etherington, Keith Beddoe, and myself travelled almost the entire length of Great Britain to one of the remotest parts of the UK. It may not be tropical but it is an area of rugged beauty with dramatic landscapes teeming with wildlife.<sup>35</sup>

The next year, the drive to the British National Championships at Thurso was the centrepiece of Welsh surfer Chris Power's piece in *Wavelength*. Power, travelling with the Welsh surf team from Swansea, described seeing Scotland when waking up within the team bus:

Dawn the next morning was a yellowy pink vastness that glowed like heaven behind the misty slopes of the Cairngorms. It was an inspirational sight, regardless of the fact that we were still hurtling along, gears crashing, each one of us feeling rougher than a doormat. Past pine-covered mountains and silver lochs we sped around the

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<sup>34</sup> *Surfer*, September 2008.

<sup>35</sup> John Wood, 'Scotland', *Wavelength*, 16, January/February/March 1989.

Moray Firth with its fleet of huge anchored oilrigs, and onwards to Inverness where we joined the coast road that followed Scotland's eastern shore all the way up to John O'Groats.<sup>36</sup>

Later, at nearby Brimms Ness, Power described the scene thus:

Brimms Ness is a terrifically spooky, desolate place that basically consists of a graveyard, some field, and a broad expanse of flat rock ledges onto which break some of Scotland's most evil-minded waves. It's real edge-of-the-world stuff.<sup>37</sup>

Steven Andrew Martin and Ilian Assenov, in a 2012 piece, proclaimed the birth of 'a new body of sport tourism literature', from 1997 onwards, with regard to academic pieces on surf tourism.<sup>38</sup> But surf periodicals were excluded from this research, and, as Ormrod's research hints, these surf narratives within magazines potentially offer historians a very different means of exploring historic treatments of British/Scottish coastal tourist destinations.<sup>39</sup>

If surfers' magazines were keen to emphasise the unique aspects of surfing in Scotland, the wider press was far more interested in noting the alleged incongruity of surfing within a Scottish landscape. 'Mainstream' UK newspapers also utilised common tropes of Scotland when setting the scene of tournaments at Thurso. Meanwhile, Plymouth's *Evening Herald*, in the run-

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<sup>36</sup> Chris Power, 'North Shore Showdown', *Wavelength*, 21, February-March 1989.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Steven Andrew Martin and Ilian Assenov, 'The Genesis of a New Body of Sport Tourism Literature: A Systematic Review of Surf Tourism Research (1997-2011)', *Journal of Sport and Tourism*, 17(4) (2012), pp. 257-287.

<sup>39</sup> Ormrod, 'Surf Rhetoric'.

up to the first O'Neill World Qualifying Series Highland Open in April 2006, published an article headlined 'We'll take the high road', noting:

Scots will see 168 of the world's up-and-coming surfers treading the high road to Thurso in a bid to earn some of the valuable points on offer at this 5-star WQS. An isolated spot, Thurso is situated on mainland Scotland's rugged northern coast. Besides the remote location, the 'fairytale' backdrop of majestic castles will most certainly make this event one of a kind.<sup>40</sup>

*The Metro*, in a 2009 feature on where to head in Britain for surfing, included Thurso along with Newquay, the Gower Peninsula in Wales, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and Bournemouth. The paper, in its print form given away free to passengers on public transportation, stated:

It's a long way from anywhere but the slate reef at Thurso East can lay claim to some of Europe's best waves. The drive and the cold water may put out all but the hardiest surfers, yet those who make the trip invariably return with tales of fast, tubing waves. For experts only.<sup>41</sup>

The paper also advised visitors that, once they were finished they should 'warm up after a surf with a tour of the Old Pulteney whisky distillery in Wick'. *The Guardian's* Jill Turner, who visited the town during the preparation for the Scottish surfing championships in 21 March 1997, offered the flip side of the stereotypical images of Scotland when stressing the unlikeliness of Thurso as a surfing locale: 'A granite-grey Victorian industrial town of Presbyterian churches,

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<sup>40</sup> 'We'll Take the High Road', *Evening Herald*, 4 March 2006.

<sup>41</sup> 'Get on Board with Britain's Best Surf', *The Metro*, 10 May 2009.

sepulchral monuments and grim ecclesiastical-looking villas. A bleak storm-whipped outpost on a latitude comparable to Alaska.<sup>42</sup>

### **'The Bondi of the North'**

Scots' relationships with the sea were not typically of the kind depicted in surfing. Both surf and 'mainstream' media aired out Scots' alleged reticence and indeed hostility towards directly engaging with the sea. In his 1994 history of the Pentland Firth, James Miller laid out the somewhat ambiguous relationship that people who lived along the Firth had with the body of water:

The people along the shores of the Firth live with the constant presence of the sea: it shapes their consciousness and their world-view. The exile can grow homesick for the roaring of the Men of Mey, or long to see the black silhouette of Hoy as a summer sun slips redly into the western ocean. Like life itself, the sea brings good and bad fortune; like life, it cannot be escaped but has to be endured, to be made the best of.<sup>43</sup>

This was, of course, an idea that grated heavily against surfing's ethos that the sea provided a form of freedom. Furthermore, as John Gillis states, surfing was an historic product largely of beach culture, reliant as that was upon artificially-created fixed coastlines.<sup>44</sup> At that time, much of the discourse about Thurso, centred around its being unusual within the broader 'church' of surfing; however, as Tommy Langseth states in his work on surfing in the Jæren region of

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<sup>42</sup> Jill Turner, 'Northern Exposure', *The Guardian*, 21 March 1997.

<sup>43</sup> James Miller, *A Wild and Open Sea: The Story of the Pentland Firth* (Kirkwall, 1994), p.119.

<sup>44</sup> John R. Gillis: *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (Chicago, 2012), pp. 149-155.



southern Norway, some surfers in cold-water locales treat followers of ‘summer’ surf cultures derisively, assumed as they are to be less interested in endurance of the elements.<sup>45</sup> Inevitably, in Thurso, this included discussions of clothing: some of the first surfers to visit Thurso East in the 1970s spent a great deal of time in *The Endless Winter* and *Through the Whisky Barrel* discussing the primitive wetsuits they wore (often with sweaters underneath).<sup>46</sup> Ormrod’s interviews showed that bodily endurance to cold was a major rhetorical motif amongst the writings of male British surfers based in Scotland and the northeast of England during the 1960s-70s.<sup>47</sup> Of course, for the mainstream Scottish and British newspapers, the presumed novelty of surfing in Scotland meant that most stories involving Thurso East made false equivalencies (often for humorous purposes) with sunnier locales. In part, this was encouraged by the surfers themselves. The earliest ‘mainstream’ press references to surfing at Thurso in the *Glasgow Herald* – namely those in the run-up to Eurosurf 81 – started this dubious tradition. ‘Frostbite could be a worse hazard than sharkbite at this year’s European surfing championships’, the *Herald*’s Ian Bruce stated in the immediate run-up to Eurosurf.<sup>48</sup> In the same article, then-president of the Scottish Surfing Federation Andy Bennetts – another pioneer of the Thurso scene – took the novelty a step further by stating that an ‘après-surf’ would be a part of the festivities at Thurso: ‘It’s a bit like après-ski. We have the mandatory disco-scene with Beach Boys numbers and surfing films from the United States’.<sup>49</sup> In other articles, there are continuing references to Hawaii and Australia, with one *Guardian* piece by

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<sup>45</sup> Tommy Langseth, ‘Liquid Ice Surfers – The Construction of Surfer Identities in Norway’, *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 12(1), (2012), pp. 3-23.

<sup>46</sup> *The Endless Winter; Through the Whisky Barrel*.

<sup>47</sup> Ormrod, ‘Surf Rhetoric’.

<sup>48</sup> Ian Bruce, ‘Thurso to Host Surfing Contest’, *Glasgow Herald*, 15 August 1981.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

Andy Martin from 1988 referring to Thurso as ‘the Bondi of the North’.<sup>50</sup> A *Times* article from April 2006, written by columnist Kenny Farquharson and entitled ‘The Hawaii of the Highlands’, set the scene in the run-up to the World Qualifying Series thus (with added gendered stereotyping):

As a professional surfer, Dayyan Neve seldom finds himself more than a dozen yards from a palm tree, a tropic ocean or a girl in a bikini. So far this year he has felt the caress of warm waters in Brazil, Hawaii, Australia, and California. So what on earth was he doing in gale-lashed Thurso at 6:30am... wading into a raging sea that was barely seven degrees above freezing, without a beach babe in sight? Unlikely as it might seem, Thurso has just broken into the surfing big league.<sup>51</sup>

And, after Neve discussed surfing in a hailstorm, Farquharson continued:

We all think we know what surfing is. It might be the opening sequence of Hawaii Five-O. Or the cover of the The Beach Boys’ greatest hits. It is the smell of Ambre Solaire. It is certainly not the whiff of manure on a muddy Caithness farm, near a dozy Scottish town best known for its proximity to the Dounreay nuclear research plant.<sup>52</sup>

But the man who brought the World Qualifying Series to Thurso, Dutch event manager Bernhard Ritzer, was also quoted in Farquharson’s article as hinting at a subtext of ‘otherness’ to Thurso:

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<sup>50</sup> Andy Martin, ‘Tube Travel Comes to Thurso, Bondi of the North’, *The Guardian*, 15 October 1988.

<sup>51</sup> Kenny Farquharson, ‘The Hawaii of the Highlands’, *The Times*, 30 April 2006.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

It's definitely extreme, but part of surfing is exploring new territory. This is the same as finding a new corner of Tahiti. In the whole tour, which goes all over the world, this is one our surfers have been most interested in, because of the location. Australians and Americans have never seen castles that date back to the eighth century and are completely blown away by it all.<sup>53</sup>

Scott Landeman, in his book *Empire In Waves: A Political History of Surfing*, states that the language of 'discovery' and of finding new frontiers used within surfing literature and film often resembles that of colonialism, especially when one takes into account the class, race, and gender of those primarily involved in the production of surf media.<sup>54</sup> Caithness is not a colony, of course: it cannot be viewed in the same light as Indonesia or South Africa, where Anglophone surfers made their way to in the 1960s and 1970s, and were often accommodated by brutal, authoritarian regimes.<sup>55</sup> But, at the very least, some of the previous language does echo that of post-Culloden, pre- and post- Highland Clearances tourism to the broader region, as examined by John Glendening and Katherine Haldane Grenier: in this context, surfers' narratives fit a larger pattern of outsiders' judgments on a landscape which – in either a romantic or critical sense, saw the Highland landscape as something at odds with metropolitan modernity.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Scott Landeman, *Empire in Waves: A Political History of Surfing* (Berkeley, 2004).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> John Glendening, *The High Road: Romantic Tourism, Scotland, and Literature, 1720-1820* (London, 1997), Katherine Haldane Grenier, *Tourism and Identity in Scotland, 1770-1914* (Aldershot, 2005).

## Environment

There is, of course, a distinct tension in treating Thurso's coast as primeval: one cannot talk about the place without discussing Dounreay, an omnipresent subtext and an uncomfortable juxtaposition with the more bucolic elements of the landscape and seascape. Surfers have often doubled as environmental activists, something which manifests itself in the existence of Surfers Against Sewage (SAS). SAS was created in 1990 by a group of surfers based in Cornwall. Belinda Wheaton, in 2007, posited the group as one interested in generating campaigns within the surf media for an approach towards fighting pollution which is evidence-based, lobbying Westminster, Holyrood, and Brussels, whilst appearing 'apolitical', a stance reflective of surfing's self-identity as an alternative to traditional sport (and politics).<sup>57</sup> Thurso's first hosting of the World Qualifying Series in 2006 coincided with the opening of a £13m treatment project from Scottish Water, which put a stop to raw sewage being dumped into the Pentland Firth.<sup>58</sup> SAS's concerns for Thurso in the past ten years have revolved less around nuclear power and sewage, and more around renewable energy. A March 2011 press release from their campaigns team detailed how the Pentland Firth was an area of special concern to the group: 'an array of world-class waves', they stated, 'threatened by offshore developments'.<sup>59</sup> A 2013 report from the Scottish Surfing Federation acknowledged that the Pentland Firth had been described as 'the Saudi Arabia of tidal power'.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Belinda Wheaton, 'Identity, Politics, and the Beach: Environmental Activism in Surfers Against Sewage', *Leisure Studies*, 26(3), (2007), pp. 279-302

<sup>58</sup> 'Surfers Wave "Hello" to Caithness', BBC, 24 April 2006. More detail needed here.

<sup>59</sup> 'Protect Our Waves – Sites of Special Surfing Interest', *Surfers Against Sewage*, 11 March 2011, <https://www.sas.org.uk/news/campaigns/protect-our-waves-sites-of-special-surfing-interest/>, accessed 31 January 2017.

<sup>60</sup> Watson, *Scottish Marine Recreational Resources*, p.15.

Before the creation of SAS, Greenpeace made considerable efforts within the pages of *Wavelength* to enlist surfers in their battles against coastal pollution.<sup>61</sup> Nuclear power was certainly on the radar of *Wavelength* readers and contributors from the 1980s onwards. The December 1988 issue ostensibly welcomed the announcement by Conservative secretary of energy, Cecil Parkinson, that Dounreay's workforce was to be cut as part of a phased closure, noting the plant's environmental issues.<sup>62</sup> However, in the same piece, the magazine hit on the double-edged sword Dounreay's eventual closure represented, stating:

The cuts will, however, mean that three-quarters of Dounreay's 2100-strong workforce, many of whom are local surfers, will be sacked: only 500 security and maintenance jobs will remain. The layoffs are bound to have a serious impact on the community of Thurso, since Dounreay is by far the largest employer in the area. There are as yet no specific Government plans to encourage new industries in the region.<sup>63</sup>

Some surfers, then, took a pragmatic attitude towards nuclear power. Some even noted the disparity in coverage between sewage and potential nuclear waste. In the July/August 1991 issue of *Wavelength*, Stephen Carr, based in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, noted that:

A lot of publicity is given to the sewage problem in our waters at the moment but perhaps less so to the problem of radioactivity in the

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<sup>61</sup> For instance, one advert from Greenpeace in *Wavelength*, 23, June-July 1989, encouraged surfers to make a donation to help prevent the dumping of 'industrial, chemical, and radioactive waste and the dumping of sludge... into the North and Irish seas'.

<sup>62</sup> Frank Dennis, Graeme Morgan, and Fiona Henderson, 'Dounreay Hot Particles: The Story so Far', *Journal of Radiological Protection*, 27, (2007), A3-A11.

<sup>63</sup> 'Headlines: Dounreay Nuke To Shut Down', *Wavelength*, 20, December 1988.

water. Whilst not understanding the dangers from surfing in sewage, I would say that leukaemia is a far greater potential hazard than getting a bad stomach and dose of craps for a couple of weeks – an experience incidentally I recently enjoyed courtesy of Tynemouth Longsands. A lot of people surf in and around Dounreay, so I wondered whether the radiation problem presented a real risk or whether some of it might just be scientific hype.<sup>64</sup>

Turner's 1997 *Guardian* piece addressed the threat more head-on. Aside from mentioning that Thurso East's waves were close to the sewerage pipe – affectionately referred to by local surfers as the Shitpipe – Turner chronicled local surfer Andy Bain's various ailments:

Even worse than the Shitpipe's offerings are the possible nuclear nasties from along the coast. Bain has suffered ear infections, kidney infections and what he swears was meningitis. Metal shavings sometimes spill out into the sea from Dounreay. "Swallow one of those and you've had it," says Bain's mate Iain Masson. One wonders what else might spill out into the sea. They shrug. "Hopefully anything gets carried away on the tide further up."<sup>65</sup>

Burrell's 2008 *Surfer* piece echoes this, stating, 'Today, the plant is being decommissioned, but it's already done major damage to the surrounding environment, including a frightening discovery of radioactive material on the beach adjacent to the plant'.<sup>66</sup> So, in the pursuit of an

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<sup>64</sup> 'Radioactivity', *Wavelength*, 33, July/August 1991.

<sup>65</sup> *The Guardian*, 21 March 1997.

<sup>66</sup> *Surfer*, September 2008.

idyll, surfers nevertheless interacted with something resembling a potential modern nightmare. It was certainly a realisation that humans had shaped a coast that some writers thought was, in a broader sense, pure.

## Conclusion

In *Surfing Britain*, a 2005 travel guide for surfers, Noble and Demi Taylor stated that: ‘Thurso East holds a unique place in European surf lore’ for having ‘the best right reef in the UK’.<sup>67</sup> The size and relevance of this ‘lore’ might translate differently into different sports and activities, but it nevertheless confirms the idea that sports such as surfing can be effectively used as a means of examining humans’ historic and contemporary relationships with the coast. This chapter is part of a larger project that will examine different aspects of this lore – in particular their connection with reality – but surfing provides an unusually rich body of written and visual material for scholars to critically analyse. As the surfers who wrote for *Wavelength* in the 1980s described their journeys heading north, so too do the surfers whose YouTube clips feature amongst their first images of the ride up the A9 from Inverness. Potentially, then, this sport and others like it – in the wider context of tourism – offers historians of the littoral the opportunity to study the coast as the end of a land journey and a destination in its own right. More importantly, it offers an inversion of typical, more transactional relationships with bodies of water employing different sets of sensations, vocabularies, and experiences than are typically utilised.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Chris Noble and Demi Taylor, *Surfing Britain* (Bath, 2005), p.166.

<sup>68</sup> For more on this, see Jon Anderson, ‘Exploring the Space Between Words and Meaning: Understanding the Relational Sensibility of Surf Spaces’, *Emotion, Space and Society*, 10, (2014), pp. 27-34.

