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The History of the North of Scotland Before 1945: As Told By Surfers

Matthew L McDowell¹
University of Edinburgh

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Abstract

This article examines the telling of the north of Scotland's history by people who participated in surfing. Surfing, as a sport/activity, is likely to have first appeared on the Pentland Firth, and in Caithness and Sutherland, after the 1954-58 arrival of the Dounreay nuclear power facility, and the fledgling Scottish/British and international surfing press was keen to stress the other-worldly qualities of surfing in an incongruous landscape and treacherous weather. History, elements of which were embellished or inaccurately understood, was a key to this. Travelling surfers, including some based in Scotland, emphasised Norse heritage or generic signifiers of Scottish identity, and surfing's place within a broad arc of history with a heavy accent on adventure. Less discussed (but not altogether absent) were the Sutherland Clearances, a process which accelerated the coming of industry and radical population changes on the north coast. Reflective of these gaps is the (re)telling of the history of Thurso Castle, symbolic as it is of surfing's tourist gaze and, with regard to international men's surfing events, the marketing of elements of Scottish history and heritage towards commercial ends.

Introduction

This article focuses on the encountering, and continual reinterpretation, of the north of Scotland's history by a unique group of tourists who first appeared on the region's coasts in the 1960s. The Pentland Firth and the north coast of Scotland, particularly along the coasts of Caithness and Sutherland, feature sites with world-class surfing waves. The first Scottish surfing championship was held at Bettyhill, Sutherland, in 1973, while the 1981 and 1993 European Surfing Championships (Eurosurf) were based primarily at Thurso East, with a variety of other north coast sites being used depending on weather conditions. Many Scottish, and numerous British, surfing championships have been held there and, from 2006 to 2011, surfing kit manufacturer O'Neill chose the north coast to hold the Highland Open, an official event for the World Qualifying Series, the second tier of the global men's professional surfing circuit.² Elite competitive surfing on the north coast, however, was part of a much larger 'scene' which featured travelling and recreational surfers, as well as those

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¹ This research has received ethical approval from the University of Edinburgh, Moray House School of Education and Sport.

² McDowell 2017. The author is also drafting a monograph which will further examine the history of surfing in the region.

who resided on the north coast. The latter group also took part in competitions to make up numbers, and many of them had significant management and volunteering roles in the sport. The function, purpose, and status of surfing in the north of Scotland, as elsewhere, depends upon the point of view of the group or individual, and the sensations upon the body being caused by immersion in cold water and attaining ‘stoke’ – what Clifton Evers describes as ‘a fully embodied feeling of satisfaction, joy, and pride’ – are deeply personal.³ The introduction of surfing on the coasts of the north of Scotland, however, also reflects the post-1945 history of the region, particularly the construction of the Dounreay nuclear research facility between 1954 and 1958 and the influx of skilled workers from elsewhere in the UK and beyond which was associated with the project. Additionally, the niche, but steady, popularity of surfing in the UK at that time was aspirational, reflective of a period when the idea of social mobility was increasingly being defined in intellectual circles, and as well as being significantly mythologised in broader popular culture.⁴ Simon Gunn recently noted the advent of a new kind of ‘automobility’ in the UK from the 1950s too, which was not only crucial to the changing relationship between class and internal migration, but is also likely to have facilitated surfing as transportation of surfboards and kit was difficult on public transport.⁵ Accordingly, Richard Butler notes that the arrival of the automobile in the Highlands and Islands marked a new phase of tourism in the region, one which would eventually see the decline of excursion trains and steamships from urban Scotland, and an increase in car traffic (although not an improvement in the quality of roads) and roll-on roll-off car ferries.⁶ Despite this, as a sporting activity surfing was very much an outlier in the broader history of the Pentland Firth, which was historically seen as a conduit, a dangerous geographical barrier, or a means of making a living, rather than as a place of leisure.⁷ On land, the Highlands had a long history of attracting a kind of sporting tourist who enjoyed ‘adventure,’ although surfers might not have agreed that their activity shared any similarities with the likes of deer and grouse hunting and angling, interacting as it did far less with the formal, conservative hospitality economy.⁸

This article does not look at surfers’ perceptions of contemporary Caithness and Sutherland. It instead examines their treatments of what might have been thought of as the distant past, in particular the pre-Second World War north of Scotland. This period is perhaps far more familiar to the typical readership of this journal, but nevertheless here it was – possibly unrecognisably, and probably frustratingly for many – reinterpreted through a contemporary lens which emphasised adventure, achievement, and elements of Scottishness more broadly recognisable within the post-1945 tourist economy of Scotland. Their histories tend to emphasise the ‘Scandinavian’ elements of regional and international history, and most accounts focus less on more recent events – notably the Sutherland Clearances – which did much to shape the north coast as surfers might have recognised it. Ultimately, though, their understanding of regional history was hazy and broadly defined, and this could be seen in discussions and the commercial framing of the history and imagery of Thurso Castle, a sight all surfers, travelling and residential, knew well and one which was not exactly known as a major site of tourism otherwise. The histories of the north of Scotland

³ Evers 2006 (quote from 230-1); Langseth 2012.

⁴ de Bellaigue, Mills, and Worth 2019; Renwick 2019.

⁵ Gunn 2022.

⁶ Butler 1985; Butler 2014.

⁷ Miller 1994.

⁸ Durie 1998; Durie 2017; Hunter 1972-73; Wightman and Higgins 2000; McWilliam and Walden 1998.

discussed here are a reminder that, despite surfers representing a very different kind of visitor from what many would consider a typical late twentieth-century tourist to the Highlands and Islands, *all* visitors to the region were likely to view and discuss its history through their own biases, preconceptions, and rhetorical shorthand. It is thus a challenge for academic historians and heritage practitioners to view and understand the history of the Highlands and Islands as not just dynamic in and of itself, but something which is made constantly fluid through the diverse tourists and audiences with which it interacts.

This current article primarily makes use of British surfing periodicals produced in the years after 1970, most substantially accounts of surfing in the region which appeared in *The Surfer's Path*, *Wavelength*, *Surf Scene* and *Carve*. These titles were Cornwall-based but featured at least some Scottish-based authors, and some use has also been made of the newsletter of the Scottish Surfing Federation (SSF). The SSF has kindly allowed the author access to some of their internal publications, although their collection is dominated by material from the 1990s aimed at a largely domestic audience. Reference has also been made to the American magazine *Surfer*, as well as interviews with three participants and associates of the Thurso surf scene who discussed various aspects relating to the historic, and continued, uses of 'history' and 'heritage' in north of Scotland surfing. Interviewees' names have been anonymised. This article additionally utilises some digital newspaper and media sources. The goal here is not necessarily to unduly emphasise the prominence of these offhand and sometimes tongue in cheek historical accounts and references: media accounts of surfing were written by overwhelmingly male surfers themselves, and offered narrative accounts and imagery of so-called 'surfaris,' and practical advice on how to replicate them, including how to surf the big waves. It does, however, contribute to an understanding how regional 'histories' of the north of Scotland interacted with the universes of tourists, including a new and unique kind of tourist who, at first, significantly challenged perceptions of why one went on holiday in Scotland. It also improves understanding of Scotland's coastal history as a dynamic one, featuring encounters between very different peoples, which has been identified in recent texts, most notably David Worthington's 2017 edited collection, and David Gange's 2019 book, which discussed how the north of Scotland's history is not something which can be understood solely from studying locations and actors based on 'the land.'⁹

Riding the Wave

Surfing was by no means alone in the sporting world in placing itself within a much grander historical framework. Amongst the Oxbridge-educated elite responsible for the rise of the 'athleticism' cult in British private schools, ancient Greece was used to provide a role model for what nineteenth- and twentieth-century sport should look like: amateur and un-commercial, with control from the top. It did not matter that this history, researched and taught by privately-educated gentlemen, has largely been discredited since as it reflected the contemporary politics of those who were interested in it and, consequently, the 1896 revival of the Olympic Games helped inculcate this mythical history into the broader popular-cultural vernacular.¹⁰ Despite its status as an 'alternative' or 'lifestyle' sport, surfing's own narrative storytelling, and the means by which its participants historicised it, similarly reflected those who produced its stories. From the famous 1964 Bruce Brown

⁹ Worthington 2017, Gange 2019.

¹⁰ Carter 2021.

documentary *The Endless Summer* onwards, surf media has overwhelmingly highlighted white, male, middle-class, and heterosexual – and mobile and abled – voices and participants.¹¹ And, much like the late-nineteenth century rhetoric on sport, it has emphasised imperialist undertones, particularly in language used around ‘discovery.’ Much like polo and lacrosse, surfing was appropriated from conquered peoples, in this case from the native Hawaiian activity of ‘board riding,’ popularised amongst white Americans after the 1898 annexation of Hawaii by the United States of America.¹²

The earliest sustained appearances of surfing on British shores had much to do with the movement of people between the United Kingdom and the British Empire and later Commonwealth. Surfing has been present in Cornwall and Devon since the 1920s, probably brought by soldiers returning from South Africa after the First World War, and the earliest surfing events on the coasts of Cornwall and Devon coasts were organised by Australians, and Allan Kennedy, an employee of the Australian High Commission, established the Surf Life Saving Association of Great Britain (SLSA) in 1955.¹³ Similarly, in Jersey, one of the first significant centres of competitive surfing in or surrounding the UK as it was the closest port of call for European surfers, three South African lifesavers based at a holiday camp in the Crown Dependency were the first to form a surf club in the Channel Islands in 1959, and they were also responsible for designing long boards.¹⁴

The birth of surfing in Scotland initially had little to do with the Cornwall, Devon and Jersey scenes, but it might also largely be explained through intercourse with the British Empire and Commonwealth, most notably with New Zealand. When the European Surfing Championships were held at Thurso in 1981, the *Glasgow Herald* credited the late Bill Batten, the first President of the SSF, with having brought surfing to Scotland in 1967, when he ‘changed his mind about turning his surfboard into a coffee table after returning from New Zealand.’¹⁵ That said, it is difficult to verify ‘when surfing first appeared in Scotland.’ Indeed, the nature of historical storytelling in Scottish surfing is little different from the way that Tanis Thorne noted, in 1976, the surf scenes of California and Hawaii were historicised around ‘legends,’ both in terms of persons, occurrences, and continuing informal conversations.¹⁶ Similarly, Douglas Booth’s history of Australian beach cultures features significant primary research from oral histories and periodicals, and thus here historical ‘facts’ are more of a moving target within broadly defined themes.¹⁷ It is likely, then, that Batten was not solely responsible for the presence of surfing in Scotland for, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Scotland had two notable surf scenes based within very different social circles: one based in the capital, Edinburgh – specifically involving men who attended Napier College, who formed a surf club in 1975 (though Batten, a member of this scene, was not a student, but a plumber) – and another based in Fraserburgh, Aberdeenshire. One other organisation, the Scottish Surf Club, formed in Glasgow in 1969 by Lenzie native George Raynes, quickly folded.

¹¹ Wheaton 2005, Ormrod 2005.

¹² Laderman 2014, McDevitt, 2003, Salter 1995.

¹³ Ormrod 2007a.

¹⁴ Mansfield 2011.

¹⁵ Ian Bruce, ‘Thurso to host surfing contest,’ *Glasgow Herald*, 15 Aug 1981.

¹⁶ Thorne 1976a; Thorne 1976b.

¹⁷ Booth 2001.

Up to this point, from a surfing perspective, little of Scotland had been mapped out, with the most well-known surf breaks on opposite coasts and hours' drives from one another: most notably at Fraserburgh, Pease Bay (east of Edinburgh), and Machrihanish, on the Mull of Kintyre.¹⁸ The Scottish surfing community initially had little dialogue with sunnier Cornwall and Devon. The then-British Surfing Association (BSA) Chair, Reginald Prytherch, in the 1972 book *Surfing: a Modern Guide*, which purported to be a guide to surfing in the UK, took a dismissive attitude towards the possibility of surfing in Scotland, a country 'so unpopulated that it is unlikely that much surfing will have ever been seen around either the western or eastern coasts.'¹⁹ However, the coastal geography which could be traversed by surfers increased at this time due to the creation of the short board, which allowed far more manoeuvrability on waves than long boards had to that point.²⁰ Joan Ormrod notes that the perceived incongruity of surfing in Scotland and the north-east of England was a major motif and identity marker of locally-based contributors to the UK's fledgling surfing periodical press, including *Point Break* which was formed in 1974 in Edinburgh. Notably, significant discussions took place about weather conditions, dressing appropriately despite not having access to proper wetsuits, and disappointments with the waves.

New Arrivals

The photographic potential of the surf scenes of the north coast of Scotland was nothing like those featured in *The Endless Summer*. The north coast, even with its lovely beaches, looks very different from those in California, Australia, South Africa, Ghana, Senegal, Tahiti and Hawaii, all locales in Brown's film, misleadingly portrayed as unspoilt – but these Scottish locations nevertheless presented different possibilities.²¹ The north coast's primary surf season, after all, is during the winter, with the waves necessary for surfing typically caused by low-pressure systems over Norway. In 2012, *The Endless Winter*, a documentary history written, directed, and presented by Matt Crocker and James Dean, aired on Channel Four in the UK. The film was essentially a road trip highlighting Britain's main surf spots along the way. The road trip to find Britain's best waves began in Cornwall and ended in Thurso, the mainland's northernmost town.²² The main irony here was that the coming of surfing to the north coast of Scotland was inextricably linked to industry: most notably, the opening of the Dounreay nuclear power facility just west of Thurso in 1954-8. Dounreay attracted a skilled middle class from all over the UK and further afield and, from 1951 to 1966, the population of Thurso trebled. The new Pennyland and Mountvernon estates were built in the town to accommodate incoming workers who increasingly became known as 'atomics.'²³ Murray Watson states that Thurso during that period was one of several major sites in the Highlands and Islands of English in-migration driven by employment.²⁴

English migrants, however, whilst comprising a significant portion of the newcomers, were not the only ones. It is typically Bob Treeby, a contract draughtsman from New Zealand employed at Dounreay, who is credited with being the first to surf on the north coast,

¹⁸ Andy Bennetts, 'The Early Days with Andy Bennetts,' *Hardcore*, Dec. 1997; George Raynes, 'Scotland: "The Green Wall"' *Surfing UK*, June 1969.

¹⁹ Prytherch 1972, 104-6.

²⁰ Ormrod 2007b.

²¹ Ormrod 2005.

²² *The Endless Winter*.

²³ Miller 1989; Ross 2019; Ross 2021.

²⁴ Watson 2004.

particularly the world-famous reef break at Thurso East. But significantly it was another Dounreay employee, engineer Patrick Kieran, who had arrived in 1976 from suburban Liverpool, who cultivated the north coast's surf scene by offering travelling surfers a place to stay at his rented cottage at Thurso East, and by advertising its waves further afield. A letter he sent to the Northwest Surf Club in 1978, in which he looked excitedly for travelling surfers, has become a part of both surfing and local lore. It was included in surfing writer Chris Nelson's 2010 book *Cold Water Souls*, a collection showcasing major sites of cold-water surfing in the northern hemisphere, and it was also displayed at Caithness Horizons, the local history museum in Thurso, which at the time of writing is known as the North Coast Visitor Centre.²⁵

Another Thurso 'scene' developed amongst teenage girls based at Thurso High School around 1981. One of these girls, Sheila Finlayson, who has been a central figure in the north coast surf scene ever since, helped to form the North Shore Surf Club out of this experience. However, even in the early 1970s, the Edinburgh-based SSF leaders, Batten and Andy Bennetts, were on the lookout for new surfing spots, with Batten first noting, during a trip to Armadale, Sutherland, that the north coast had many potential sites for surfing, giving travelling surfers other potential options when one set of waves went flat.²⁶ In the coming years, they would meet up with Kieran and later Finlayson.

Where these, and other, surfers, viewed themselves within the broader context of regional and Scottish history reflected both changes which were happening to the region, and a selective remembering and often incomplete knowledge of elements of Scottish history. Dounreay was frequently discussed, but often as a *contemporary* and *ongoing* phenomenon rather than an *historical* one, particularly after the release of a damaging 1995 report by the UK Department of Health's Committee on the Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment (COMARE). This discussed an incident in 1977 whereby, after coming into contact with sea water, an underground shaft full of unsuitably disposed nuclear waste exploded, scattering hot radioactive particles onto nearby beaches. The findings resulted in the closure of Sandside Bay, a popular beach with surfers which sat adjacent to Dounreay. Less established was the link between this and abnormally high concentrations of childhood leukaemia in Thurso, despite a great deal of debate on the matter.²⁷

Where does surfing's narrativising of regional and international history fit in with this? The nature and politics of 'Highland sport' has long been relevant to debates regarding both radical and conservative interpretations of Scottish national identity.²⁸ Locally 'invented' traditions in sport and physical-cultural spectacle, most notably in the form of the Kirkwall Ba' and Up-Helly-Aa, had long been a part of the cultural firmament of the modern northern isles.²⁹ Perhaps, paradoxically for its own image of itself, the presence of surfing was reflective of an *industrial*, post-Clearances Highlands and Islands whose development had significant state intervention, including the creation of Highlands and Islands Development

²⁵ Nelson 2010; Roger Cox, 'Four Seasons: a Sacred Surf Relic', *The Scotsman*, 7 May 2011.

²⁶ Interview with early Scottish surfer, 29 March 2017.

²⁷ COMARE 2016; 'The prince of tides,' *Daily Record*, 19 Apr. 1995; John Aldridge and Tom Wilkie, 'Fall-out of the foreshore,' *The Independent*, 15 Jun. 1995.

²⁸ Jarvie 1991; Jarvie 1998; MacLennan 1995; MacLennan 1998; Reid 1998; Reid 2013; Jackson 1999.

²⁹ Brown 1999; Robertson 2005.

Board (HIDB) and later Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE).³⁰ Dounreay was certainly the product of central investment from the UK Government. Linda Ross argues that Dounreay, despite being a problematic project, ultimately proved that the narrative of decline which was assumed regarding the Highlands and Islands was not a geographical or temporal universality throughout the region.³¹ Culturally, it was a highly dynamic area. Kimberley Masson, in her 2009 PhD thesis, notes the existence in Caithness of what she categorises as three distinctive groups within modern Caithness society: 'Caithnessians,' 'atomics,' and 'white settlers,' the latter middle-class arrivals from urban locations who were intent on changing their new homes.³² 'Atomics' (for want of a better phrase) might have brought surfing to Caithness and Sutherland, but there were many Caithnessians who also took enthusiastically to surfing. Travellers from elsewhere, including other Scots, are not easily placed within this hierarchy, but they were, nevertheless, responsible for a significant amount of the periodical writing and/or image crafting surrounding the place of surfing in the north of Scotland.

Without intending to do so, some surfers were echoing travel writing of previous centuries on the Highlands and Islands, essentially making outsiders' 'romantic' judgements on a landscape seen to be at odds with modernity – even in pieces which dissonantly made reference to environmental issues with Dounreay.³³ Sport tourism, however – perhaps best exemplified by the controversial development of Aviemore and the Cairngorms from the 1950s onwards – was also integral to the UK Government's post-1945 strategy for investment in the region.³⁴ Unwittingly, then, travelling and even resident surfers reflected these historical realities, and here sport and physical activity reflected a means by which to treat the north coast as a challenge, a conquest, an achievement, and (perhaps most relevant here) a means by which to experience Scottish history. The waves at Thurso East, Sandside, Melvich, Brims Ness, Dunnet, and other places, then, joined the likes of the Bealach na Bà, the Old Man of Hoy, the Inaccessible Pinnacle, and (much further south) Dumbarton Rock – more recognisable landmarks – as sites of lifestyle/adventure sport which had significant meanings for those who successfully navigated them.³⁵

The 'Vikings'

If one was to trace the broad arc of surfers' histories of the north of Scotland, it would start roughly with the period in time in which Caithness was under the control of the King of Norway. The end of 'the past' and the beginning of 'the present' would coincide roughly with the arrival of Dounreay. For the most part, there would be few broad strokes in between, with a lot of other details mentioned, but not fixed down, with the story shifting depending on who was telling it. Because most travelling surfers would have been based in Thurso, and most significant contests were initially held at Thurso East (conditions permitting), the

³⁰ E A Cameron 1997; E A Cameron 2003; Levitt 1999; Levitt 2000; Mackenzie 2006; Perchard 2012; Perchard and Mackenzie 2013.

³¹ Ross 2021.

³² Masson 2009.

³³ Fenyo 2000; Glendening 1997; Grenier 2005; McNeil 2007. Surfers' writing on the north of Scotland landscape/seascape are discussed in McDowell 2017, and will be elaborated upon further in the upcoming monograph by the author.

³⁴ Lambert 2000; Lambert 2001; Levitt 2005.

³⁵ G Cameron 2016; P Gilchrist 2007; Zhang and McDowell 2020. One media discussion of the Inaccessible Pinnacle is featured in Andrew Gilchrist, 'The Inaccessible Pinnacle: Britain's most notorious climb,' *The Guardian*, 30 Sept. 2016.

details of the history of Caithness tended to be discussed more than that of Sutherland. Inevitably, this meant that the 'Nordic' elements of these embellished histories were emphasised more than the 'Celtic,' and one ends up reading more about Viking (and Inuit) adventurers than about the Sutherland Clearances, a far more recent series of events which arguably facilitated the making of the coastal landscape surfers were familiar with.³⁶ The chances are, however, that the association of 'Vikings' with 'sea' was a more powerful one for surfers than any consideration of inland agriculture.

Caithness may have only come under Scottish control in 1266 but, historically, the dividing line between 'Nordic' Caithness and 'Gaelic' Sutherland was in reality far more porous.³⁷ The Clearances 'happened' inland, but the development of the north of Scotland's coastal regions was indelibly linked to the displacement of people and the changing priorities of landlords. Many of Sutherland's displaced population passed through Caithness, and those leaving for North America usually left from Thurso, and travelled via Stromness, Orkney through harbours which overlapped with or were visible from the surf breaks of late twentieth- and early twenty-first century surfers.³⁸ Whilst the herring economy exploded in Wick in the early nineteenth century, facilitating the creation of the planned village of Pulteneytown, Sir John Sinclair was largely responsible for developing Thurso's New Town and harbour, and a more successful harbour for the town at the neighbouring village of Scrabster. Migration from the other parts of the Highlands is explicitly linked to a crucial episode in Caithness history: an 1859 riot in Wick, triggered by an argument over a piece of fruit, took place between 'permanent' town residents and Highlanders.³⁹ Earlier disturbances, notably the February 1847 Pulteneytown riot over the rising price of oatmeal (which coincided with the failure of the potato crop), similarly echoed a lack of a fixed boundary between coast and countryside.⁴⁰ Such conflicts have twenty-first century manifestations in incidences in Caithness which have had media coverage outside of the region, most notably the continuing controversy over the appropriateness of Gaelic road signs put in place by Highland Council in Caithness, where Gaelic was supposedly never a major language.⁴¹

This particular conflict rarely came up in surf periodicals. Scott Laderman notes that a perceived, and usually false, political detachment, both from where surfers are from, and from the places where they end up, is one feature of the rhetorical universe of surfing's considerable body of travel literature.⁴² Nevertheless, if often in a humorous and irreverent way, *history* was frequently on the minds of those who visited Scotland's north coast and ran its surfing events. Andy Bennetts, one of the SSF's leading lights and a major figure in the Edinburgh scene, was one of the primary organisers of Eurosurf '81, held at Thurso East. Ahead of this event Bennetts, in the Cornwall-based *Surf Scene*, placed the contest within a very long historical framework. 'Geographically,' he stated, 'Scotland is nearly an island, with the Atlantic on both sides, the North Sea on the third, and England on the fourth side. Back in Roman times rumour had it that Hadrian's Wall was built to keep the Romans out of the

³⁶ Hunter 2016; Richards, 2013.

³⁷ Crawford 1982.

³⁸ Hunter 2016; Harper 2017.

³⁹ McMillan 1992; Dunlop 1982.

⁴⁰ Hunter 2020.

⁴¹ Masson 2012, Rosie 2012.

⁴² Laderman 2014.

Picts' good surf spots!⁴³ The Romans came up very little elsewhere, but Scandinavians and other peoples of the Arctic did. The Scottish Surfing Federation's Autumn 1992 newsletter posited an intriguing hypothesis on the history of surfing in the north of Scotland, based on an interpretation of a 1701 text:

"...when they adventured to put out a boat to see if they could apprehend him, he presently sped away most swiftly. He hath a coat of leather upon him and he sitteth in the middle of his boat. And when in a storm, he seet the high surge of a wave approaching, he hath a way of sinking his boat, till the wave pass over." No, this is not as you might think, a description of Bill Batten doing his first duck dive, it is in fact an excerpt from 'A Brief Description of Orkney, Zetland and the Pentland Firth' published in 1701. It is part of an account of 'fin-men' in the early eighteenth century in that area, who were actually eskimos who had apparently managed to make their way to Greenland to the shores of northern Scotland. Could these guys have been the first to surf Thurso East?⁴⁴

As Jonathan Westaway has recently noted, the legend of Inuit 'Finnmen' and their voyage to Orkney has been an enduring and much-repeated one, despite little material evidence that such a voyage ever took place.⁴⁵ But as surfers' own reference points about their own history were imprecise legends and stories of their own, it made sense that their tales were heavily entangled with some of the more spectacular myths of the places they visited and lived. As if to emphasise this point, original surfboards designed by Kieran upon his move to the north coast in the mid-1970s were branded as 'Selkie Styx.'⁴⁶ Other surfers similarly couched venturing to Thurso within a broader, if ill-defined arc of Scandinavian history. Welsh surfer Chris Power, in a 1990 piece for Cornwall-based surfing magazine *Wavelength* believed that 'Thurso East... sound[ed] more like a stop on the Norwegian underground than a full-on turbo-charged right hand barrel, Scotland's undisputed number one wave.'⁴⁷ A 2008 piece in the US *Surfer* magazine by American surfer Shaun Burrell stated 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.'⁴⁸ Another Cornwall-based title, *Carve*, noted in 2012, in the run up to the World Tour event, 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.'⁴⁹

The 'Coming of Industry'

By and large, surfers commented on the history they believed they were interacting with, and perhaps that was one reason the Highland Clearances were rarely explicitly mentioned. The Clearances may have happened 'inland,' but, as discussed, the town of Thurso and the coast on which it sat, was indelibly affected by the period – not to mention the very presence

⁴³ Andy Bennetts, 'Tales from the Tartan Tube – Scotland, venue for the 1981 European Championships,' *Surf Scene* 5, 1981.

⁴⁴ 'Floaters,' *Scottish Surfing Federation Newsletter*, Autumn 1992.

⁴⁵ Westaway 2022.

⁴⁶ Chris Nelson, 'Scotland's North Shore surfers are cold-water pioneers,' *Huck*, 22 Dec. 2016, <https://www.huckmag.com/outdoor/surf/scotlands-north-shore-surfers-cold-water-pioneers/>, accessed 26 May 2022.

⁴⁷ Chris Power, 'North by Northwest,' *Wavelength*, Mar.-Apr. 1990.

⁴⁸ Shaun Burrell, 'Scotch on the Rocks: Thurso, Scotland,' *Surfer*, 2008.

⁴⁹ 'Thurso,' *Carve*, 17 Sept. 2012.

of surfing itself. In the case of the north coast, the arrival of surfing had little to do with manmade manipulation of the environment, at least not in the same respect as parts of Sutherland in previous centuries, where rivers and other natural features were moulded according to landed estates' wishes to exploit the land for angling and hunting purposes.⁵⁰ This was in contrast to other parts of the world: surfing's very existence in the twentieth century was largely a reflection of human activity, artificially fixed coasts, and (in the case of the US, Australia, and South Africa) segregated beaches.⁵¹

Despite this, though, surfers were not wholly naïve about the impact of human presence on the north coast. The Pentland Firth provided little in the way of visible pollution – at least not in the same sense as surfing off the coast of industrial South Wales might⁵² – but in the 1990s and early 2000s, after the 1995 release of the COMARE report, Dounreay's environmental woes were increasingly being critically discussed by the UK surfing press, albeit usually in separate sections of issues of magazines which discussed travel to the north coast.⁵³ Many surfers were also aware that Dounreay was not the only historic industry and that remnants of the flagstone industry were omnipresent on the north coast. Major flagstone quarries were based at Castletown and Scrabster, and slabs would be taken to dressing yards on both sides of the River Thurso in the town itself to be dressed. The Caithness Flagstone Company lobbied for the creation of a new harbour in Thurso, and the work to build it began during the 1890s. It was an industry that reached its height around 1900, with 500 men employed, and up to 24,000 tons of flagstone produced in a year.⁵⁴ Power noted for *Wavelength* in 1990 that flagstone, which 'until the era of concrete ... was quarried and exported worldwide for use as paving stones,' – was a familiar sight to surfers who journeyed to the north coast. He noted that many houses in Castletown were still tiled with the material, and that reef breaks at Thurso East, Brims Ness, Murkle Bay, Sandside Bay, and Point of Ness were created courtesy of flagstone, stating that 'Since virtually every headland and point in the area is fringed with flagstone ledges, there seem to be hollow peeling waves almost everywhere you look.' Power directly linked the creation of Thurso's harbour to the environment experienced by surfers, stating that 'Man has also had a hand in shaping Scottish waves. It's likely that the deepening of Thurso's harbour entrance, around the beginning of the century, actually improved the end section of the Thurso East waves.'⁵⁵

But it was Alex Williams, a surf photographer and writer from Plymouth, who was able to impart considerably more nuance into his history of the place of surfing in the history of the

⁵⁰ Tindley and Haynes 2014a; Tindley and Haynes 2014b.

⁵¹ Gillis 2012; Booth 2001; Thompson 2011.

⁵² Surfers from Cornwall were often shocked by the colour of sea water off of Port Talbot and Aberavon which had a significant surf scene: Interview with Roger Mansfield, *Surf*, Oct. 1974.

⁵³ Alex Dick-Read, 'The trouble with hotspots...,' *The Surfer's Path* 5, Jan. 1998; Lee Robertson, 'Dounreay Surf Check – Nuclear nightmare for the hot spot capital of Scotland,' *The Surfer's Path* 13, June-July 1999. Surfers Against Sewage's official publication, *Pipeline News*, also wrote a feature on Dounreay in 1996 'Dounreay update', *Pipeline News* 26, Oct. 1996.

⁵⁴ Porter 1982; Porter and Omand 1981.

⁵⁵ Power, *Wavelength*, Mar.-Apr. 1990.

north of Scotland.⁵⁶ Williams had been coming to Thurso since 1979.⁵⁷ However, the north of Scotland's culture was largely unrecognisable from Williams's description in a piece he wrote for *Surf Magazine* in 1993 of, and it might have been written by someone who had never actually visited Scotland. Here Williams seemed aware only of the most superficial (and conservative) signifiers of Scottish nationhood, stating 'Scots have a heritage that binds them together and they are very proud of it, with their castles, bagpipes, clans, whisky, haggis, lochs, tartans, kilts, and highland games.'⁵⁸ As Masson claimed that Caithnessians often viewed their own identity through a prism which prioritised their *regional* identity over their *Scottish* one; Williams's identity markers here may have thus been questionable.⁵⁹

However, in a 1998 cover story on 'Caithness and Sutherland' for *The Surfer's Path*, Williams was able to provide a history that, whilst perhaps not recognisable to residents or academics, nevertheless placed surfing within a broader spectrum of regional, national, and even North Atlantic history than was typically the case. He started with Scandinavians:

The demons never got here, but the Vikings did, steaming in from Norway ... bringing a bad attitude but stylish boats. They set up shop on the Orkneys and hung out in Thurso, or Thor's River, using [their boats] for raids on England, Ireland, and the rest of Scotland. They did some trade with the brothers back home, and over on Iceland, Greenland and North America.⁶⁰

Williams was fascinated by Thurso Castle, which will be discussed in the next section, but he was able to separate his awe of it from the reality of the (unnamed) post-1715 and post-1746 Government suppression of traditional Gaelic culture and the Highland Clearances:

As time passed the whole Norway thing died out a bit and the clan leaders of the Highlands took over, treating their people pretty rough, but letting lots of them live on their land so they could pay high rents and fight for them against other clan leaders ... [After 1718] Pretty soon these big families were all going to church together and not fighting anymore, so they didn't need these peasants on their land. They could make a lot more cash using it for sheep farming, so they cleared their tenants off. Suddenly people had to move to tiny patches of shitty land, 'crofts,' where they were supposed to fend for themselves. The big families got richer and richer and guess what happened to the poor ones. There was famine and a lot of them decided it would be even better to become Americans than try to grow potatoes, under these conditions.⁶¹

In Williams's potted history, the creation of the local flagstone industry was 'a solution to this poverty problem.' Beside the 'lurking legacy' of Dounreay, the flagstone industry itself provided both a place of reference for travelling surfers and a hazard to watch out for, but also a product which connected Thurso to the world:

Flagstones became a large part of the industry in the area from the 1820s. Thurso was the centre of the busy quarrying area. The huge slabs were loaded up at Thurso River, Scrabster and Castlehill. There were cutting yards on both banks of

⁵⁶ 'The original – Alex Williams, legendary windsurfing/surfing photographer Q&A', Windsurfing UK, 23 Apr. 2021, <http://www.windsurfingukmag.co.uk/the-original-alex-williams-legendary-windsurfing-surfing-photographer-qa/>, accessed 7 June 2021.

⁵⁷ Alex Williams, 'Thick suit & a wanderlust,' *The Surfer's Path*, Jan. 1998.

⁵⁸ Alex Williams, 'Far out, far north,' *Surf Magazine*, 1993.

⁵⁹ Masson 2009.

⁶⁰ Alex Williams, 'Caithness and Sutherland,' *The Surfer's Path*, Jan. 1998.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

the river which employed nearly 1000 men in the area. The quality of the stone made it very much in demand, most cities and towns in Britain were using it and it was exported abroad to Australia, the USA and Canada. Flagstones can still be seen used in the local fencing, and be warned, a short distance underwater at heavy reef breaks.⁶²

Crucially, Williams's history hinted at the dynamic nature of historical storytelling, both between surfers themselves and the people who lived on the north coast. The curiosity of Williams and his travelling surfer companions as to the history of the land had been piqued by where they were staying, and it was sustained by a conversation in the pub:

We stayed at a motel in Castletown, from where we made forays to different beaches each day. Every day Derek was checking out the prices of properties, and on occasions we would head off in some direction where he'd spotted a derelict house on a hill. We'd look at the views and size of it, and if he liked it, it was off on a mission to find out who owned it. Kye and Craig would always pull in for beers and whisky at the motel in the evenings and get chatting to the old guys at the bar. They found that most of them, though classic old crofting types, had done loads of travelling – easily as much as the surfing maestros who'd just cruised into their town.⁶³

Williams's piece hinted that travelling surfers who arrived on the north coast had the potential to learn about the history of the region through interaction with the environment and its people, and that the region had an historical storytelling tradition of its own.⁶⁴ But if this was the case, it made surfers' struggle to pin down the exact date a castle was built an even more noticeable manifestation of the tendency to historicise the landscape as 'undefinably ancient,' rather than something modern.

An 'Ancient' Castle

In most series of photographs which form part of surfers' travelogues of the north coast, and, at the time of writing, that usually includes Instagram, Thurso Castle – not normally treated by tourists to the north of Scotland as a tourist destination in its own right – has often played an integral role. Images of the castle and its rocky shores at Thurso East, sometimes referred to as Castle Reef by surfers, are iconic in the world of cold-water surfing. Thurso Castle was not the only castle surfers encountered on the north coast – Brims Ness, a popular surfing site west of Thurso had the sixteenth-century Brims Castle overlooking it – but this structure was less remarked on (and less photographed) than the one in Thurso.⁶⁵ The Thurso Castle complex has long been the principal home of the Sinclairs, the primary landowning dynasty in Caithness, whose family – in two distant branches – hold two peerage titles: the Viscounts Thurso (originally the Baronet of Ulbster) and the Earldom of Caithness. The Castle has been occupied by the Viscounts Thurso, including its current occupant, John Archibald Sinclair, 3rd Viscount Thurso (more commonly referred to as John Thurso) a sitting Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords who also represented Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross in the House of Commons from 2001 to 2015. Non-experts in the region will perhaps be most familiar with the current Viscount's grandfather, Sir Archibald Sinclair, a previous MP for Caithness and Sutherland who was the leader of the Liberal party during the

⁶² Alex Williams, 'Thick suit & a wanderlust,' *The Surfer's Path*, Jan 1998.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Henderson 1966.

⁶⁵ 'Brim's Castle,' CANMORE: National Record of the Historic Environment, <https://canmore.org.uk/site/8018/brims-castle#details>, accessed 26 May 2022.

Second World War, and a member of Winston Churchill's wartime coalition government.⁶⁶ Thurso residents will know Archibald's son and John's father, Robin Sinclair, the 2nd Viscount, as a member of Thurso's burgh council; surfers will know him for making an official and dramatic welcome to the surfers at Eurosurf '81, one which featured his bold, and ultimately correct, prediction that there would be waves on the first day of the surfing championship, which was made to great cheers and applause from the surfers.⁶⁷

The 2nd Viscount was easily placed within surfers' own history, but the history of the castle itself – even with dates included – was something of a moving target. Few definitive histories exist of the structure, but the castle was originally built in 1660 by George Sinclair, the 6th Earl of Caithness,⁶⁸ a date confirmed officially and noted by Williams in his praise of the castle's view:

In 1660 George Earl of Caithness built a castle. The spot he chose was insane, man. Right out front there's this incredible right hander which must have been firing off glassy cylinders the day he first went there. Why else would he choose that particular spot? We don't know if the Earl was a surfer, but there's no proof that he wasn't and he seems to have had sound ocean instincts.⁶⁹

Williams also noted that in 1872 Sir John George Tollemache Sinclair, the 3rd Baronet, tore down the original building and rebuilt it 'in the style of a French chateaux, (sic)' only for this part of the structure to be condemned in 1952, and abandoned.⁷⁰

It is this abandoned *Victorian* structure that surfers have often been photographed surfing in front of and, unlike Williams, they have not always made the distinction between that structure and something older. Certainly, the aforementioned 2012 *Carve* piece only makes reference to a non-specified castle when stating that 'Caithness is all about the spectacular really – *ancient castles* (my emphasis) haunt the cliffs, Neolithic remains are dotted around, there's a pervading sense of wilderness and the surf can be sublime.'⁷¹ Bringing in an almost adjacent structure, Chris Power, in his 1990 piece in *Wavelength*, noted that Castle Reef lay in front of Harold's Tower, a mausoleum just along the coast from the east of the castle itself which he claimed was built in the eighteenth century,⁷² and, officially, Historic Environment Scotland agrees that it was built before 1780.⁷³ The American Burrell, in 2008, noted for *Surfer* that his surf sessions at Thurso East and Brims Ness took place in front of 'castles that predate the founding of America.'⁷⁴ In effect, this was the 'visual consumption' end of what John Urry refers to as the relationship between the 'tourist gaze' and the environment, for participants and an audience who had comfort in mobility and knowledge of many different environments.⁷⁵ It also reflected what tourists to Scotland judged through their own experiences to be a link with an authentic historical marker, an echo of users' experiences

⁶⁶ De Groot 1993.

⁶⁷ Ross 2021; Interview with Pat Kieran ('The Lord'), by Mitch Corbett and Mark Harris (2013 – exact date not specified), *The First Wave*, <https://vimeo.com/68533273>, accessed 6 July 2020.

⁶⁸ Interview with local official, 27 Mar. 2017.

⁶⁹ Williams, 'Thick suit,' *The Surfer's Path*, Jan. 1998.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ 'Thurso,' *Carve*, 17 Sept. 2012.

⁷² Power, *Wavelength*, Mar.-Apr. 1990.

⁷³ Power, *Wavelength*, Mar.-Apr. 1990; 'Thurso, Harold's Tower Mausoleum,' Historic Environment Scotland, <https://canmore.org.uk/site/8433/thurso-harolds-tower-mausoleum>, accessed 10 June 2018.

⁷⁴ Burrell, *Surfer*, Sept. 2008.

⁷⁵ Urry 1995, 173-92.

with Scottish tourism marketing and products elsewhere.⁷⁶ Such accounts and images significantly had little overlap (and no major shared audience, aside from the region's resident surfers) with Highlanders' own experiences of film and television, which emphasised very different elements.⁷⁷ Within surfing media, it went undiscussed that one of the previous occupants of Thurso Castle, Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster (born at the Castle in 1754, and most famous through his role as the compiler of the first *Statistical Account of Scotland* in the 1790s) was a significant proponent of 'improvement' as a form of internal colonialism, including the eviction of tenants and their transportation to coastal areas.⁷⁸ But that, of course, is something discussed in *academic* history.

It was a link to an older world that interested the organisers of international surfing competitions which came to the north coast. The arrival of surfing apparel brand O'Neill's World Qualifying Series on the north coast in 2006 provided another opportunity for showcasing the castles of Thurso and Brims in the backdrop of wider scenery along the north coast and Pentland Firth. In an April 2006 article in *The Times* by Kenny Farquharson, which largely noted the incongruity of surfing with Thurso, mainland Scotland's and Great Britain's northernmost town, the contest director was quoted as saying humorously that 'Australians and Americans have never seen castles that date back to the eighth century and are completely blown away by it all.'⁷⁹ In an interview with the author in 2020, the contest director (not from the UK) stated 'Scotland is such a mysterious mythical place, and knights, and Highlanders, and castles, and cold'. He was also in awe of the still-functional modern part of Thurso Castle, a 'fifteenth century replica.'⁸⁰ The contest director came from a marketing background and, whilst O'Neill was a brand which explicitly sold wetsuits and other kit for cold-water surfing, it was a struggle to convince company executives that the north of Scotland was as an attractive backdrop for the product as more typical beaches in the likes of California. The key, he believed, was telling a 'story' about the product, with that narrative visually incorporating 'the culture, the history, and the geography.'⁸¹ The contest was also filmed and relayed all over the world on O'Neill's website.

Thurso Castle, then, and to a lesser extent Brims Castle, were placed within an historical framework which emphasised Scottish history more generally, rather than any regional or international particularities. These historical semantics, in different forms, are similar to those present in other thematic tourism to Scotland, inclusive of roots tourism from settler-colonial societies with significant Scottish-descended populations, and those related to major media productions about Scotland: in these cases, 'history' was funnelled through broader popular-cultural understandings of Scottish identity far more than anything academic.⁸² And, at the time of writing, this surfing tourism, whilst highly relevant to the region from a public relations standpoint more than a profit one, given the notorious frugality of surfers, predated the more destructive (over)tourism associated with the arrival

⁷⁶ Hughes 1995.

⁷⁷ Goode, Neely, Brown, and Munro 2020.

⁷⁸ MacKinnon 2017.

⁷⁹ Kenny Farquharson, 'The Hawaii of the Highlands,' *The Times*, 30 Apr. 2006.

⁸⁰ Interview with event organiser, 6 Feb. 2020.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Basu 2005a; Basu 2005b; Cateridge 2018.

of the North Coast 500 – even while it continues to exist in parallel to the more recent initiative.⁸³

Conclusion

One of the principal aims of this article has been to examine different ways in which twentieth- and twenty-first-century tourists have treated and approached questions of the history of Caithness and Sutherland. It does not necessarily matter that this is a highly atypical group of tourists, and one explicitly looking to engage with the seascape/landscape in a way in which Scots prior to the Second World War would not have recognised. Travelling surfers to the north of Scotland, including those English and Welsh surfers who – like Scots – did not grow up in settler societies famous for picturesque surfing beaches, nevertheless grappled with how to situate their lifestyle within a broader historical framework. Here, that often meant using historical shorthand to place themselves within the action. In these historical narratives certain themes dominated, and ‘Viking’ tales which implied mobility and cosmopolitanism often won out. While discussions of the Sutherland Clearances appeared at the fringes of these narratives, the arrival of post-Clearance industries was acknowledged by these travelling surfers to have had a significant effect on the coast they knew and loved, though not always noting that such industries were often imposed from above by landowners and central government. When discussing Thurso Castle, however, it was additionally clear that, while travelling surfers may have understood some of the broad strokes of Scottish and Caithness and Sutherland history, they nevertheless interpreted that through their own lenses, for a variety of different purposes – including utilising the imagery of the region towards commercial ends. This article thus contributes to our knowledge of how the history of the north of Scotland and the Pentland Firth continue to be understood and reinterpreted by contemporary audiences, perhaps in very different ways from those which academic historians might imagine.

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⁸³ Lennon and Harris 2020; Butler 2020; Ruck 2020. Surfing’s place in the broader regional tourism hierarchy will be discussed in later publications by the author.

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