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THE GREAT MYTH OF CALEDON

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Summary

The most precise position for the Caledonian Forest is given by the second century AD Greek geographer Ptolemy who related it to the Caledonii, a tribe not located exactly but living north of the Firth of Forth. Some Roman writers used the Caledonian Forest or forests as a literary allusion to a far-away place. Others referred to marshes as much as—or more than—woods while several literary passages demonstrate that there was open countryside in north Britain in the Roman period.

Introduction

In a lecture to the North West Scotland Region of the Nature Conservation Council in 1990 Professor T.C. Smout reviewed the evidence for Highland land use before 1800 (Smout, 1991). His talk was subtitled 'misconceptions, evidence and realities'. One of the misconceptions he touched on was that at the time of the Romans the Highlands were completely forested. The references of Roman (and medieval) writers to the Caledonian Forest play their part in the misconception considered by Smout. These references are frequently cited today in discussions of Scotland's countryside and have even provided the title for a book. Yet few people have gone back to the original sources. Even M.L. Anderson (1967) in his magisterial survey of Scottish forestry quoted the secondary source of Hector Boethius' 1596 history of Scotland rather than original Roman sources. The purpose of this note is to examine the primary literary evidence relating to the Caledonian Forest.

The evidence

The first known published reference to the Caledonian Forest is nearly 2000 years ago in AD 77 by the elder Pliny who was to die two years later in an eruption of Vesuvius. He recorded in his *Natural History* that 30 years after the Roman invasion of Britain in AD 43 Roman arms had not extended knowledge of the island beyond the neighbourhood of the Caledonian Forest. Where was that forest?

The area north of the Firth of Forth was known to the Romans as Caledonia. The historian Tacitus in his account of the campaigns of his father-in-law Julius Agricola, governer of Britain from AD 77 to AD 83, recorded that in his sixth season (AD 82) the general led his troops across the Forth into Caledonia. In the middle of the next century the Greek geographer Ptolemy listed the tribes of Britain, which included the Caledonii, whom he recorded as stretching from the Lemannonius gulf to the Varar estuary. The Farrar river, which flows into the Beauly Firth, retains an element of the latter place name. The Lemannonian gulf lies on the west coast and Loch Long, Loch Linnhe and Loch Fyne have all

been suggested. Many scholars thus place the Caledonii in the Great Glen, which lies directly between these two points, but it has also been argued that their territory stretched round the southern and eastern edge of the Highlands (Hind, 1983). In part this argument is based upon the apparent paucity of Iron Age settlement in the Great Glen, in particular in comparison to the Perthshire glens and straths. Other Roman writers, such as Martianus Capella writing in the fifth century AD and Silius Italicus in the first century, confirm the general northern location of Caledonia by linking the name with the Orkney Islands or Thule which was believed to lie beyond Orkney. The final evidence for the Caledonii survives in modern place names in Perthshire—Dunkeld, Schiehallion and Rohallion—all of which retain an element of the Caledonii in their names (Jackson, 1954).

Both Tacitus and Ptolemy presumably derived their information from the campaigns of Agricola, whose army reached Moray on land, but whose fleet, Tacitus stated, circumnavigated Scotland, visiting the Orkney Islands and sighting Thule, wherever that was. However, their evidence does not exactly coincide. Tacitus always writes of a geographical area known as Caledonia, Ptolemy records a tribe, the Caledonii. Scholars have tried to marry the references, but certainty is impossible, only reasonable hypothesis. It has been suggested, for example, that the Caledonii were part of a confederacy of tribes and, being the largest, gave their name to the area occupied by the whole confederacy; or that the Caledonii had formerly occupied the whole area but had been forced to cede all but the upper straths to newcomers: certainly at one time the Caledonians were important enough to give their name to the Duecaledonius Ocean, which is placed by Ptolemy to the west or north of Scotland. In summary, all that can be said is that the land north of the Forth was known to the Romans as Caledonia and that within that area lived a tribe, the Caledonii.

Ptolemy records that "beyond" the Caledonii was the Caledonian Forest: "beyond" here means "west of". Even here, however, there is a problem. Gordon Maxwell has pointed out to me that the Greek word for "beyond" may be a copyist error for the word for "below", which is very similar. Since the Caledonii cannot be located exactly, and some doubt surrounds the text, it is not possible to locate the Caledonian Forest exactly. It may have lain west and north of the Great Glen; alternatively it may have covered the Grampian and Monadhliath mountains.

While it would be useful to tie down the position of the Caledonian Forest, we must accept that it is possible that the Romans themselves had no clear appreciation of its location. No Roman marching camps are known in the Highlands and it is possible that the army did no more than scout up some of the glens. Ptolemy's seemingly exact position for the forest may have been based upon travellers' tales relayed to the army. Other writers seem to have used "Caledonian this or that" vaguely to mean something a long way off. Thus Florus, writing about AD 120, credited Julius Ceasar with chasing the southern British as far as the

Caledonian forests during his invasion of 54 BC. Silius Italicus, writing in the first century AD in a poem in honour of the Emperor Vespasian (reigned 69-79), offers what is clearly another gross exaggeration, namely that during the Claudian invasion of AD 43 Vespasian had conquered Thule and led an army into the Caledonian forests (*cf* Momigliano, 1950, 41-2). Thule was simply the most northerly land known to the Romans and the implication is that the Caledonian forests were also "somewhere up there". Indeed the use of the plural, forests, suggests that this is a general description of northern woodland and not a reference to a specific place. Statius stated that a governor of Britain in the late 60s had won glory on the Caledonian plains when, so far as we can tell, a Roman army had not penetrated within a 100 miles of Caledonia. Lucan referred to the wild seas of Caledonia as if they were the furthest point of the island. In these and other sources "Caledonian" seems to have been nothing more than a literary allusion to a far-away land (it would certainly have been far away for Martianus Capella who was an African!).

This use continued throughout the Roman period and is picked up by medieval writers. Thus Nennius stated that Merlin hid in the Calidon Forest, while Geoffrey of Monmouth asserted that Arthur fought one of his 12 battles in the Celidon Wood. In medieval tradition the Wood of Celidon is somewhere in the Southern Uplands, between Dumfries and Peebles, not where any reputable Roman source places it (Alcock, 1971).

Roman authors refer to woodland in other contexts. Tacitus, in describing the campaigns of the governor Agricola in the 80s AD, Cassius Dio and Herodian those of the Emperor Septimius Severus in the early third century, and the anonymous *Panegyric of Constantine* that of the Emperor Constantius Chlorus in AD 305 state that their armies had to fight their way through forests in order to get to grips with the enemy. Yet we must consider the nature of these literary sources. Works such as the *Life of Agricola* are full of set phrases whose purpose is to indicate to the reader that the hero of the book was a good general because he did all that was required of a good general. So we must beware of reading too much into such phrases: they may be little more than literary conventions. Furthermore, the Roman writers offer mutually contradictory descriptions of the countryside. Herodian, for example, stated that most of Britain is marshland and in his discussion of the early third century AD campaigns of the Emperor Septimius Severus refers to marshes more frequently than woods. Tacitus also mentions marshes in describing the first century campaigns of Agricola, while the *Panegyric of Constantine* refers to the forests and swamps of the Caledonians and other Picts. Both Tacitus and Cassius Dio, however, also record that the Caledonians used chariots, a vehicle which would require hard open terrain on which to operate. Open pasture would be required for the cattle and sheep which are also mentioned, by Cassius Dio for example. It is clearly dangerous to take out of the descriptions of these authors only what we want to believe.

There is one occasion when we can be sure that a wood was

Comment

THE TRUTH ABOUT GLEN DYE

In this article Sir William Gladstone replies to the article by Keith Jones in the April 1992 number of Scottish Forestry (Volume 46, No. 2) concerning the application by family trust for a Woodland Grant Scheme covering some 1,100 hectares at Glen Dye

The article entitled "The Battle for Glen Dye" by Keith Jones, the Director of Legal Services to the Kincardine and Deeside District Council, which was copied from "Tree News", and published in the April 1992 number of this journal, contains many factual inaccuracies and gives in general terms a very misleading impression. Your readers deserve to know what really happened. The District Council indulged in a good deal of fanciful disinformation. At an advanced stage several councillors were still under the impression that the Woodland Grant Scheme application in question was the first attempt of the applicant to plant trees: We were villains taking advantage of a government grant to submerge a good grouse moor under a blanket of Sitka spruce. In truth the percentage of spruce is 38, all of it in an intimate mixture, and the landscaping is such that a spectactular forest will result.

Planting at Glen Dye began in 1777. Many fine stands of Scots pine and larch, and some magnificent specimen trees, are today's testimony to the lairds of the nineteenth century. During the later years of that century, and the early years of the present century, the acreage added was modest but, since the 1930s, there has been a steady expansion, with strong emphasis on Scots pine. The central parts of the forest, from the Spittal Burn to the Water of Feugh, as can be seen from the Cairn O'Mount road, were complete by the early 1960s. By that time the forest was beginning to present the visitor—whether connoisseur or passer-by—with one of the finest sylvan scenarios in Scotland.

There was extensive felling during the 2nd World War, and then much damage was done by the great gale of 1953. The gaps created by this gale, coinciding with myxomatosis, enabled natural regeneration to take off in the older stands. The estate, then in a small minority, immediately accepted the benefits and determined to overcome the problems posed by this new phenomenon. The resulting uneven-aged stands, especially of Scots pine, are the forest's greatest glory today.

By 1960 it had been decided that the next expansion should be east of the Water of Dye from the Bridge of Bogendreip to the Builg Burn, an area of some 700 acres (as they were in those good old days) on parts of which there was already some self-sown Scots pine. This has helped to create an uneven-aged forest, already of great beauty and friendly to wildlife. When this programme was complete, we turned our attention to the other, westerly side of the forest, beyond the fine Scots pine at Cuttieshillock, and planted a fairly flat area which never held many