



• DORNOCH • HERITAGE • SOCIETY



Talk by Wade Cormack to the Dornoch

Heritage Society

The History of Sport & Culture

in the Moray Firth Region

c 1600 - 1800

Historylinks Catalogue No. 2013_118_02

Thank you for that nice introduction. As has been said, this is just kind of my initial thoughts and some of the research that I've done so far. So as you can see, my lecture tonight is titled From the Links to Festivals, An Introduction to the History of Sport and Culture in the Murray-Firth Region, Circa 1600 to 1800.

It is with great enthusiasm that I'm able to speak to you today about my initial thoughts and research that I've begun at the UHI Centre for History as the recipient of the Royal Dornoch PhD studentship. The collision of sport and culture in early modern Scotland is a largely neglected subject of historical

inquiry. As the title suggests, this discussion is an introduction to just that and is geared towards explaining my PhD research project.

My research aims to uncover the nuances in the development of sport alongside cultural practices. We can see examples of this intersection of sport and cultural practices throughout historical records with festival celebrations. These celebrations held symbolic significance to the inhabitants of this region and I will expand upon this shortly.

To illuminate the development of this intersection, my study examines contemporary ideas of and attitudes towards sport, folk festivals, leisure and the definitions of space. In this short discussion, I will situate my study within current historiography, exploring some trends in Scottish history and in the history of sport. Then I will present the definitions and the boundaries of my research.

In doing so, I introduce my research methodologies and my sources which are the backbone of this project. Also, this discussion provides a series of questions on a variety of topics that will help direct my use of primary sources and inform my research. So first I'll get into my historiography section, placing my work within work that's already been done in the field.

Regional histories of early modern Scotland are in direct competition with large grand narratives of the nation, focusing on themes of the Reformation, the Union of the Crowns, the Glorious Revolution and Jacobitism, the Act of Union and the Scottish Enlightenment. However, much is left untold about daily life in these histories and historians have recently been turning their attention towards the study of everyday life and regional histories of Scotland are a vital component to this branch of research. Keeping this in mind, it is imperative that regional histories do not become antiquarian in nature, lacking the discussion of the wider historical significance.

The Murray Firth region, as defined by Dr. David Worthington, is roughly an indented triangle of sea and coastal fringe between the northernmost point on Duncan's By Head, Duncan's Bee Head, sorry, Head in Caithness, the River Bewley, most of the River Bewley in the southwest and to the east, Kinnard Head, next to the town of Fraserborough. This region answers Ian R. Mowat's call for an eastern highland sub-region that is distinct and is in direct connection to his historical examination of Easter Ross. The Murray Firth region is a geographic, historic and cultural meeting point where different languages, cultures, social customs and landscapes have and continue to coalesce.

Therefore, it provides an intriguing and complex case study. Geographically, the coastal plains are a transitional area, enclosed on one side by the rugged highland landscape and on the other by the sea. This area, in general, is far more fertile than its highland counterpart.

The links along the north shore of the North Sea are multipurpose common space that have been used historically for grazing, gathering of turf for construction, drying your clothes and also drying fishing nets. Importantly, for this study, the links have also historically been an arena for various sports, including golf, shinty, football and horse racing, not to mention a space where violent and bitter clashes of clan rivalries were settled. Culturally, the Murray Firth region is a crossroads where Picts, Vikings, Highland Gaels and Lowland Scots have met and occasionally clashed, leaving their own historic legacy with place names, customs, legends, artifacts and language.

The focus on the Murray Firth is vital. However, it is necessary to compare it to other regions of Scotland to place the Murray Firth area within a wider Scottish and British context post-1707. This

comparison will illuminate the unique attributes of the region as well as demonstrate larger trends with the development of sport and culture.

For example, were there certain sports played more frequently in this northern maritime region than the Highlands or the Lowlands proper? Did the land's topography influence what sports were played and were not played? Answering questions like this will definitely benefit my research about the history of sport in the area. The vast majority of sport history in Britain, and Scotland specifically, has focused on the formation of organized and institutionalized sport in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Geoffrey Hill and John Burnett both call for comprehensive studies of early modern sport to fill the void in our present understanding.

This disparity can easily be seen when inspecting academic journals such as the *International Journal of Sport History* and *Sport in History*. Standard historical texts on Scotland, such as T.C. Smout's *A History of the Scottish People, 1560-1830*, and Tom Devine's *The Scottish Nation, 1700-2007*, for all intents and purposes neglect the development of sport, except Devine's nod to the boom of football as an urban working-class sport in the 19th century. I find this particularly disturbing as sport has been developing alongside the Scottish people throughout the periods of these studies.

Scholars such as Neil Tranter, Grant Jarvie, Hugh Dan MacLennan, and John Bale have investigated a variety of sports in Scotland. Donald M. Cameron, Alistair Dury, and all of Getty's, David Hamilton and John Burnett specifically, provide insight into the history of golf in Britain. However, much research is still required to situate the Murray Firth within this region into this framework.

Burnett's *Riot, Revelry and Route*, and Getty's *A Swing Through Time*, are two excellent examples of historical research that has begun to focus on the development of sport prior to 1860. Also, Dr. Worthington and I have discussed there is a need to focus on sports in the Highlands, diverging from traditionally studied Highland sport. Although this may sound like a simple flip of words, it has dramatic implications for historical research.

There's been limited research on sports that were played in the Highlands, but were not distinctively Highland in nature, but more general to Scotland and the British Isles. For example, golf, bowls, cricket, and horse racing. Next, I'll move on to my research questions and some of the perspectives I'm taking.

When examining sport and culture in early modern Scotland, many new questions arise. First, however, it is important that I clarify what types of activities I'm going to be investigating. In this study, I'm planning to examine physically active forms of recreation.

At the moment, I'm not sure how to address sports such as deer stalking and sport fishing. This is because both of these activities can be seen as a form of subsistence as well as sporting practice. At what point do you deem these activities sports? This question requires further discussion and clarification.

Similarly, my research is attempting to grapple with ideas of play versus sport. When does play transform into sport? Clarification of such issues is necessary when examining sport prior to the institutionalization of it in the 19th century. Next, I must discover who participated in sport during this chronology.

By determining who participated in sport, it is possible to begin constructing socioeconomic connections between the participants and their involvement in other cultural activities. It is easy to assume that the participants were the affluent, either noble families and emerging wealthy merchants, as they had more time in their hands and a greater degree of disposable income. However, I wish to test this assumption and to explore sport not just as an elite form of leisure, but as a democratized practice within the Murray-Frith region.

This will be a fruitful endeavour because many sports came in different forms. For example, golf, in its complex form, was the most popular sport in the Murray-Frith region. However, it was very expensive due to the cost of the equipment.

A famous excerpt from the expenses of John Gordon, the future 13th Earl of Sutherland in 1616 and 1617, recorded that 12 and 10 pounds was paid for bows, arrows, golf clubs, and balls to be used by him, John, as well as for books, paper, ink, and other school necessities. Due to the expensive nature of equipment, there were also more ad hoc forms of the game played with less sophistication. Brennan explains that this form was played with a simple curved stick and a ball made out of available material.

Hamilton describes two different games of golf in the early modern period, the short game and the long game. The former was played in the kirkyard or street and was typically played by the ordinary peasant, while the long game was played by the elite out on the links with expensive equipment. Also when examining the participants of sport, gender is an important factor, looking at both femininity and masculinity.

In Doric, there's a long history of both men and women playing golf since the 19th century, although gender segregation was still very apparent with women having the ladies' course as well as their own clubhouse. This is not surprising as it follows Victorian sensibility of gender relations.

Extensive research still needs to be done when examining masculinity and femininity in the early modern period. There's a brief reference to these contemporary gender norms in Sir James Stewart, Earl of Moray's chastisement of Mary Queen of Scots playing sports, and specifically golf. Queen Mary's half-brother believed that her playing was a frivolous and slightly risqué exercise that was not ladylike.

200 years later, Thomas Matheson's poem, *The Golf*, which I will share with you shortly, demonstrates that golf was seen as a manly sport. Additionally, in this study of the Murray Firth region, I'm investigating the construction of leisure spaces, including golf links, horse racing tracks, shinty and football pitches. Thus, I'm addressing another set of questions.

First, how were the places of sport perceived in the minds of the actors and non-actors? Second, when were places of sport deemed as such? In other words, when were places classified as pitches, golf links, in football fields, racetracks, things like this? Did these designations change how people perceived them? For example, the Royal Dornoch Golf Club was not established until 1877. However, the game was played here for much longer on the site of the course. Did the designation of the club and the lands change how space was perceived? From my initial research, the answer is unequivocally yes.

As the golf club received special permission from the town council to build the course on the lands, and moreover, after the establishment of the course, bylaws were created to control the use of the

land. Illuminating how spaces were perceived is important in understanding how they were used. Furthermore, this arm of my study will uncover the cultural value placed on sites of recreation, and what that meant for the participants and the community at large.

To grasp a greater understanding of the culture of the Murray Firth, my project investigates festivals as well. Looking at what these festival celebrations entailed, specifically examining the consumption of alcohol and sport, social activities that are inevitably linked and can be traced through historical record. Within this stream of research, I'm looking for historical references to community-based celebrations, in conjunction with sporting activities, tournaments, and the formation of early clubs.

Evidence suggests that large sporting festivities on Christmas Day and New Year's Day occurred frequently, with community-wide games of football or shindy. Donald Sage, describing his own experience growing up in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Sutherland, provided an excellent example of a New Year's game of shindy and darn, where all the men of the town played and it lasted all day. Unfortunately, he notes that the day-long match resulted in the fatal injury of one of the participants.

So now, I'm going to move on to the sources that I'm going to be using. In searching for answers about the perception of sport and celebration, examining records of Parliament is useful. From preliminary research, the Parliamentary Acts of King James II in 1457 and King James IV in 1491 give us insight into the monarch's view on sport.

In both 1457 and 91, the kings outlawed the practice of sports, which they deemed useless and unprofitable games that had little benefit for military training. Golf and football came under direct fire and were mentioned explicitly in these proclamations. King James VI, was contradictory to his predecessors and was a proponent of sport and physical activity.

References such as these demonstrate how the monarchy won the Scots to spend their free time, either being war-ready people not being distracted by frivolous games, or enjoying their leisure pursuits of their choosing. Another set of sources that I plan to take advantage of are municipal records, such as the records of the Dornoch Borough that survived from 1711 to 1886. The records of the borough will be useful in many ways, accounting for the development of places of sport, such as golf links, or describing the restrictions placed on the participants and practice of sport.

For example, appropriate times to play, not to play, and alternative uses for the land. Moreover, they may discuss the planning of celebrations within the borough. These records, along with Kirk session records, typically illuminate people's transgressions surrounding alcohol, for example, not only mentioning the consumption of sale, but also penalties for unlawful behaviour.

The following is an example of such council proceedings that come from the town council of Banff in 1637. Interestingly, we can see an implicit reference to golf in the demise of this young man. A boy of an evil life was hanged for the theft, among many things, of some golf balls, some of which, he said, were to Thomas Urquhart's.

The next set of records that I will be looking at are Kirk session records, and also the Presbytery records. They are vital in illuminating the church's view on sport during the early modern period. To clarify, I do not want this to become a history of religion in the area.

However, by mining religious documents, I will be able to better assess the cultural climate of the time. My initial assumption is that I will find the most about sport in these records when parishioners were in direct violation of the sanctity of the Sabbath, or indulged in excessive drinking and did not follow the church's decrees. Additionally, private papers from the Lairds of the Moray Firth region, including the Sutherland Papers, the memoirs of Duncan Forbes of Culloden, and the Seafield Papers, some of them there, provide great insight into the goings-on in the area and provide information about who was playing sport and what types of sports were popular.

Other searches, such as ledgers, are indicative of what daily life was like. The ledgers by Sir John Foulis of Ravelston were a meticulous account of his expenses from 1684 to 1689. From these ledgers, we can gather that he was an avid golfer who played around Edinburgh.

If such records survived elsewhere, they would be goldmine for further research. The ledger account of Gordon and Foulis are massively beneficial for developing socio-economic connections between the participants and their social standing. For example, Sir John Foulis often mentions his golfing companions and the expenses he incurred for placing and mending clubs, purchasing of golf balls, paying for his caddy, and of course, gambling in the 19th hole entertainment, some of which were rather lavish.

Bottles and bottles of port and whiskey, and it sounds like it was quite a party after a match. Golf around Edinburgh and St. Andrews during this time was extremely popular, as we already know. What is of particular interest about the mention above of Foulis playing around Edinburgh was that one of his golfing companions was Sir George Mackenzie, the Lord Register Clerk and future First Earl of Cromarty.

Moreover, frequent references to Duncan Forbes of Culloden playing golf during his professional career are in Edinburgh. Although I have not yet found references to these men playing in the Murray Firth region, further research into their place of origin, or at least place of title, their home life in the Murray Firth region, without any luck, will show golf at home and their passion for it. For example, in 1703, the Provost of Fortrose wrote to Edinburgh requesting golf clubs and balls and expressing his guilt about playing during the harvest.

Hamilton also briefly mentions golf taking place in the north of Scotland throughout the 18th century at Cromarty and Orkney, Fortrose, and he also mentions new records that emerge in the later century, in 1777 to 1786, that allude to a new golf club being formed in Fraserburgh. Of course, he also mentions the early point of golf happening in Dornick, but he doesn't really elaborate on this at all, with this whole section, so there's lots of research still needing to be done. While we know that it was not until the 19th century that the Royal Dornick Golf Club was established, Hamilton importantly notes that in the 18th century, and I'm quoting, the absence of a club in a town does not mean golf was absent.

Although, all over the country, not only were there ordinary players out on the links, but little groups of country sporting gentlemen who were well known to each other, who gathered regularly for sport, including golf. Moreover, personal correspondence is always a treasure trove of information about the daily life of the writer and the correspondent. For example, in the Seafield Papers, a letter was penned by James Ogilvie near Boyne in 1690 to his cousin in Cullen, inviting him to play golf.

So here. Sir, I have sent order for the trees my lord has written for and have sent the news. My father is gone to Carnoustie for the day, and if Mr. Patrick and you have a mind for a touch of long golf

tomorrow, let me know this night, where I shall wait on you with a second, or if ye would do me great honour to come this length, because the lengths are better, and we shall see if you cannot make better use of your club in this country than you did at Eden.

This is not that I doubt, but ye made good use of your short-putting club there. So hoping ye will give my humble service to the ladies and lords with you, I remain yours, James Ogilvie. From this letter, it is clear not only that golf was happening in the Murray Firth region in the 1690s, but it was fairly common.

The letter, in a half-mocking tone, provides insight into the mentality and the jovial nature of these golfing partners, as well as the familial connections. Literary sources also provide insight to sport in the form of poems and songs. For example, the mock epic poem, *The Golf*, by Thomas Matheson, first published in 1743, informs the reader about who is playing golf and the contemporary attitudes towards it.

Here is an excerpt, as provided by Olive Geddes. *“MacDonald and unmatched Dalrymple ply, their ponderous weapons in green defy. Rattray for skill, in course for strength renowned, Stuart and Leslie beat the sandy ground. Golf and the man I sing, who, in loose plies, the jointed club whose balls invade the skies. Who from Edna's towers, his peaceful home, in quest of fame, unleashes planes did roam. Long toiled the hero on the verdant field, strained his stout arm, weighty club to wield. Such toils it costs, such labours to obtain, the bays of conquest and the bowls to gain. O thou Golfina, goddess of these plains, great patroness of golf, indulge my strains. Whether beneath the thorn-tree shade you lie, or from Mercerine's towers the game survey, or round the green the flying ball you chase, or make your bed in some hot sandy face. Leave your much-loved abode, inspire his lays, who sings of golf in thy favourites praise. North from Edna, eight furlongs and more, lies the fame-field on Firtha's sounding shore. Her Caledonian chiefs for health resort confirm their sinews by manly sport.”*

So I hope my discussion has identified my research goals, the perspectives that I'm employing, the types of questions that I'm asking, and the sources that I'm using. There is a need to study the Moray Firth as a distinct sub-region of the Highlands. There remains a void in our understanding of the history of sport in early modern Scotland, especially in the Highlands.

My research addresses this disparity and I plan to uncover the traditions of sporting and recreational culture in the Moray Firth region. In doing so, I will examine Parliamentary, Borough and Kirk session records, family papers, personal correspondence and literary sources. As a result of this research, I sincerely hope that my work will assist in the celebration of the 400 years of golf in Dorne.

Sport tourism is a driving economic factor in this region and I hope that my work alongside the 400 Years of Golf program will further stimulate the growth and development of the sport as well as its history. Many thanks to the Royal Dornoch Golf Club and the University of the Highlands and Islands for welcoming me here today. I look forward to discussing my project as it develops and I'm excited to be an active member of the Centre for History.

I'm always open to suggestions and new ideas.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Thank you very much.