

10-2021

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Recommended Citation

McKeever, Gerard Lee (2021) "Introduction: Literary Geographies: the Solway Firth," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 47: Iss. 1, 3–14.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol47/iss1/2>

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INTRODUCTION: LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES: THE SOLWAY FIRTH

Gerard Lee McKeever

In the latter part of 1821, the *Dumfries-shire and Galloway Monthly Magazine* ran a three-part short fiction under the title “The Highland Chieftain Steam Packet.”¹ The series turns the exciting novelty of steam travel into a framing device for a number of inset tales, thus replicating the format of John Galt’s “The Steam-Boat,” which had been appearing in serialized form in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* since February that year. In this case, the tales are told from the decks of the real-life *Highland Chieftain*, a displaced Clyde steamer newly running between Dumfries and Liverpool, stopping at Douglas, Whitehaven, Workington and Maryport along the way.² The *Monthly Magazine* itself debuted in July 1821, fronted by a letter to the editor proclaiming that, “connected with Dumfries-shire and Galloway as is that galaxy of talent from which the leading Magazines of London and Edinburgh draw their richest stories,” its success would be assured.³ In the event, the magazine’s single annual run featured contributors such as John Mayne and Allan Cunningham, both Dumfriesshire migrants in London, as well as the Carlisle poet Robert Anderson. The “Highland Chieftain” series (signed “L” from “Maidstone, Kent”) echoes this composite regionality: Dumfriesshire is slowly disappearing over the horizon as the incongruously “Highland” ship

¹ The essays here originated in “Solway Romanticisms 1770-1830,” a symposium at the University of Glasgow in May 2019, funded by the British Academy and the University, in connection with my tenure of a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship on “Regional Romanticism: Dumfriesshire and Galloway, 1770-1830,” also at the University of Glasgow, 2017-2020.

² *Dumfries and Galloway Courier* (April 3, 1821), 1. Though the *Courier* advertisement lists only Whitehaven on the Cumbrian coast, this fuller itinerary is recorded in Samuel Haining, *A Historical Sketch and Descriptive View of the Isle of Man; designed as a Companion to those who Visit and Make the Tour of it* (Douglas: printed and sold by G. Jefferson for the author, 1822), 160.

³ *Dumfries-shire and Galloway Monthly Magazine*, 1 (Dumfries: J. Swan, 1821): iv.

traverses the Solway Firth to “that great mart of commerce,” Liverpool.⁴ Attempting to make sense of this experience, the passengers sit “in a social circle” and exchange supernatural tales of home.⁵ In doing so, they produce the intersubjectivity of belonging in relation to the ultramodern technology of steam, to the radically open horizons of the firth, and to the literary vanguard represented by *Blackwood’s*. Underlining this last point, the series breaks the fourth wall to advertise “the medium of the Dumfries magazine” as a site for “anecdotes and interesting tales,” where readers can acquire a new, regional sense of place in the age of mass print.⁶

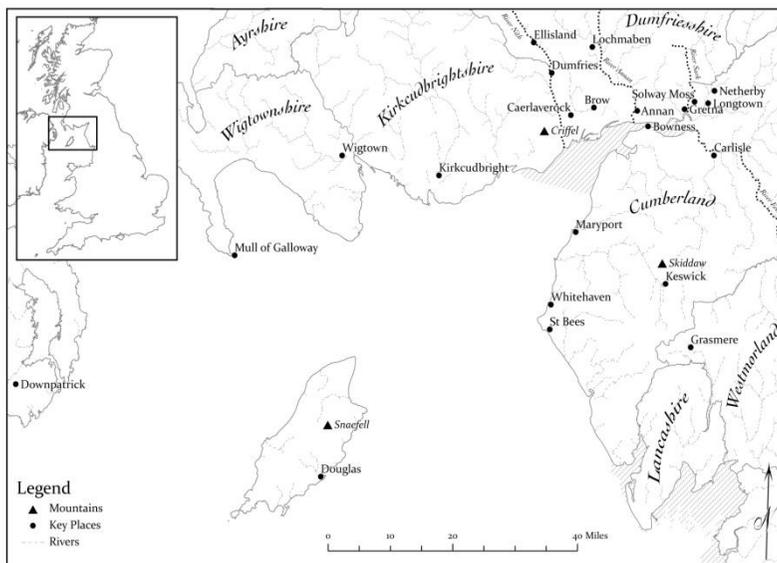


Fig. 1: The Solway region, showing counties. Map credit: Christopher Donaldson.

The “Highland Chieftain” series emerges out of the varied literary inscription of the Solway Firth across the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This broad, shallow estuary reaches eastwards from the Irish Sea to divide southwest Scotland from northwest England (fig. 1). Around its shores, a long stretch of coastline winds from the Mull of Galloway inwards to the Solway Moss and the Anglo-Scottish border, before turning west to its southerly extremity at St. Bee’s Head.⁷ On the

⁴ DGMM (November 1821), 230.

⁵ DGMM (September 1821), 101-2.

⁶ DGMM (September 1821), 102.

⁷ On the disputed limits of the Solway in the nineteenth century, see Edward J. Cowan, “Introduction,” in Cowan and Kenneth Veitch, eds, *Dumfries and*

Scottish side, the counties of Wigtownshire, Kirkcudbrightshire and Dumfriesshire were connected in the period by factors including drove roads that brought cattle from the west and from Ireland through the genteel market town of Dumfries; while the opposite, Cumberland shore was oriented by a burgeoning textile industry at Carlisle and by the maritime centre of Whitehaven, where exports from the surrounding coalfields combined with a colonial trade temporarily supported one of the pre-eminent British ports by tonnage.⁸ The Solway was also, (in)famously a thoroughfare for smugglers: a thriving business with the Isle of Man was displaced rather than eradicated by the 1765 Revestment Act, after which time L. M. Cullen observes a shift to a “Belfast-Scotland axis” as well as longer-haul smuggling directly from Dunkirk and other continental ports.⁹ This existed alongside a legitimate coasting trade that, particularly before the advent of the railways, made the firth an essential component of the wider regional economy: John McDiarmid noted in 1832 that it was cheaper to acquire coal for Dumfries by sea from Cumberland than from “the higher parts of Nithsdale.”¹⁰ Even so, the inner stretches where low tide reveals expanses of sandflats had acquired a widely circulated reputation for being “exceedingly dangerous,” as Tobias Smollett put it in *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), since the sand is “quick in different places” and the tide “rushes in so impetuously, that passengers are often overtaken by the sea.”¹¹

The essays in this feature isolate a set of complexities in accounts of the Solway Firth across the turn of the nineteenth century—a period they occasionally term, for the sake of brevity, “Romantic.” Ranging from scientific prose to poetry, the writings addressed here present the Solway

Galloway: People and Place, c.1700 to 1914 (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2019), 1-30 (13).

⁸ For the unusual gentility of Dumfries among Scottish provincial towns, see Bob Harris and Charles McKean, *The Scottish Town in the Age of Enlightenment 1740-1820* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 54-55. On the rise of Whitehaven, see J. V. Beckett, *Coal and Tobacco: The Lowthers and the Economic Development of West Cumberland, 1660-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and J. E. Williams, “Whitehaven in the Eighteenth Century,” *The Economic History Review*, 8.3 (1956): 393-404.

⁹ L.M. Cullen, “Smuggling in the North Channel in the Eighteenth Century,” *Scottish Economic & Social History*, 7.1 (1987): 9-26 (16-18).

¹⁰ John McDiarmid, *Picture of Dumfries & Its Environs* (Edinburgh: John Gellatly, 1832), 13.

¹¹ Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, ed. Lewis M. Knapp, rev. Paul-Gabriel Boucé (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 266. See also Walter Scott, ed., *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, 2 vols (Kelso: Cadell and Davies, 1802), II: 138-39; and McDiarmid, *Picture of Dumfries*, 15-18.

as a place where, to quote David Harvey, the “dialectical interplay between experience, perception and imagination in place construction” is especially fraught.¹² This is not simply because it is a site where a multiplicity of regional and national borders intersect, with the cultural and legal eccentricities we would expect from such a “debatable land,” to borrow the medieval name for the long-contested, western limit of the Anglo-Scottish border. The Solway also repeatedly figures as a landscape in flux, subject to tidal motion, maritime cosmopolitanism and a firmament that cannot be trusted to stay still. As Fiona Stafford has written, “Understanding the Solway and its depiction in literature demands awareness not only of an unusually fluid physical terrain, but also of a history as shifting as the sands.”¹³ This effort also fixes attention on the spatial politics of literary criticism.

Many of the recent landmarks at the intersection of Scottish studies and Romantic studies have gestured, to varying degrees, beyond the nation state to regional literary geographies: Nigel Leask (Ayrshire), Penny Fielding (Shetland) and Eric Gidal (the former kingdom of Dál Riata), to name a few.¹⁴ The Solway Firth is a promising subject in this regard: it is spotted with small islands and intermittently visible sandbanks, but it invites an archipelagic challenge to spatial hierarchies in a broader sense by virtue of its concatenation of political entities looking out to the Irish sea and from there to the transatlantic and global history of Britain. Collectively, the essays in this symposium practice a form of “critical regionalism,” in this case attuned to a feature of Britain’s physical geography.¹⁵ Nations are curiously porous as well as resilient entities but they are apt to lapse into hegemonic stasis in our thinking; in the Scottish

¹² David Harvey, “From space to place and back again: Reflections on the condition of postmodernity,” in John Bird *et al.*, eds, *Mapping the Futures: Local cultures, global change* (London: Routledge, 1993), 3-29 (17).

¹³ Fiona Stafford, “The Roar of the Solway,” in Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom and Jos Smith, eds, *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 41-60 (43).

¹⁴ Penny Fielding, *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography: North Britain 1760-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Nigel Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Eric Gidal, *Ossianic Unconformities: Bardic Poetry in the Industrial Age* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

¹⁵ On the ways “critical regionalism” has been defined in cultural studies, see José E. Limón, “Border Literary Histories, Globalization, and Critical Regionalism,” *American Literary History*, 20.1/2 (Spring-Summer, 2008): 160-182 (167-68); and Douglas Reichert Powell, *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

context, much the same can be said of the ubiquitous Highland/Lowland divide. Complementing the expansion of literary studies outwards into global perspectives, a sincere act of magnification, shifting the primary frame of reference, can both sharpen and destabilize the relationship between text and space.¹⁶

From the point of view of the Romantic period, certainly, the regional perspective also captures an idiosyncratic and often highly personalized set of interests that were a driving force in Scottish place writing at large. This was a critical moment for an aesthetics of what Clifford Geertz calls “thick description,” granted its cultural apex in terms of influence in the regionally taxonomic, romance ethnography of Walter Scott’s poetry and fiction.¹⁷ It saw a flare-up of interest in the unrealized potential of regional contexts across and beyond Scotland for tourists and specialists ranging from geologists and botanists to poets and antiquarians, so that “literature” in the broad sense then current might be said to have manifested a practice of chorography.¹⁸ Drawing on subjects as varied as natural history, fiction, proverbs and fishing, the contributions here articulate a fragmentary “deep map” of one specific bioregion at a historical inflection point in the history of mobility in which new print forms were serving appetites for the exotic but also for varieties of regional description.

It is clear that sinking sand was not the only reason to distrust the upper reaches of the Solway around the advent of the nineteenth century. In Allan Cunningham’s *Lord Roldan* (1836), the final instalment in a trio of novels he set on the firth, the titular character is about to rehearse an old saying about unlikely events that relies on the permanency of the surrounding

¹⁶ Roberto M. Dainotto is rightly suspicious of a “naturalizing” and “eternalizing” regionalism that claims to have transcended historical contingency and the “inventions of nationalism”: see his *Place in Literature: Regions, Cultures, Communities* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 9-10.

¹⁷ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 9-10. The most effective statement of Scott’s interest in regionality comes in the 1816 preface to *Tale of My Landlord*. See Walter Scott, *The Black Dwarf*, ed. P. D. Garside (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 3-7.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Fiona Stafford, *Local Attachments: The Province of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and the “Curious Travellers” project led by Mary-Ann Constantine and Nigel Leask, <curioustravellers.ac.uk>. On the roots of Romantic-era antiquarianism in classical chorography, see Christopher Donaldson, “Deep Mapping and Romanticism: ‘Practical’ Geography in the Poetry of Sir Walter Scott,” in Sally Bushell, Julia S. Carlson and Damian Walford Davies, eds, *Romantic Cartographies: Mapping, Literature, Culture, 1789-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2020), 211-231 (226). On this inclusive historical view of “literature,” see Paul Keen, *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3-4.

landscape (“Sooner shall Glengarnock-flow run into the Solway—sooner—”) when he is interrupted by a servant screaming, “It’s fulfilled—it’s fulfilled! the prophecy is gude and true!” As it transpires, the peat moss known in the text as Glengarnock-flow *has*, just at that very moment, “ta’en to the sea: I saw it running down the brae a mile wide, and ten feet deep, as black as ink.”¹⁹ The timing of this peculiar deluge, by which the land seems to respond sensitively to the power of a proverb, is entirely of a piece with Cunningham’s fiction and verse, which is preoccupied with the connections between landscape and language, such that it progresses in a register of what might be called romance cartography. Here, this “unlooked-for irruption” (2.36) develops a series of coastal metaphors: “the bay was become part land as well as water; heather was blooming above quicksands” (2.37). With the moss remaining thoroughly unstable and in motion, the local populace crowds around attempting to determine where exactly the coastline is at any given moment. For some, it is a sign of prophecy, for others, a scientific discovery. Peat spills into the waters of the Solway, which will in turn “scatter their burden over the shores of England, Ireland, and Scotland” (2.40), making clear the status of the event as a surrogate for Cunningham’s own archipelagic—and mythopoetic—view of the Solway’s edge effects.

This episode might scan as romantic fabrication but, prophecy aside, it is based on the Eruption of the Solway Moss in 1777, a real-life geomorphological event that filtered through descriptions of the bioregion. Alex Deans’s essay in this symposium takes an ecocritical approach to this event as a localized environmental disaster that challenged contemporaries’ views of the interaction between humans and the non-human. Surveying influential early accounts by writers including the natural historians John Walker and Thomas Pennant, as well as diachronic maps that recognize time as a core dimension of the landscape, Deans identifies the “eruption” as an acute sign of the way that the Earth, in this place but also more generally, was less pliant in either time or space than eighteenth-century providentialism wished to believe. In fact, the region (alternatively a multiregional and multinational area) provided a variety of such localized object lessons: across the border into Scotland from the Solway Moss lies the Lochar Moss, the nature of which was also a subject of speculation in the period. Pennant related signs here of a historical “invasion of the tides,” though this had not extinguished proofs that the area was “in some very distant period, an extensive forest.” He turned to antiquarian curiosities that had been found in the “morass,” including “one of the antient canoes of the primæval inhabitants of the country,” and to a new military road,

¹⁹ Cunningham, *Lord Roldan, a Romance*, 3 vols (London: John Macrone, 1836), II: 13-14.

“which is also to pass over *Lochermoss*, and is intended to facilitate the communication between *North Britain and Ireland*.”²⁰ Reaching forwards and backwards in time, from the surface into the depths of the peat, Pennant held tenaciously to a benevolent stadial history predicated on a historical overlay of land and sea. For Cunningham, substantially making his debut as the hidden author (or “forger”) of R. H. Cromek’s 1810 *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song* collection, the Lochar Moss was created by witchcraft out of “an arm of the sea.”²¹ Whether the coastline was appraised in empirical or non-empirical terms, it demonstrated the tendency of landscapes to elude and multiply the meanings ascribed to them.

A century after the Union of 1707 and with the moss-troopers, Border reivers and conflicts such as the 1542 Battle of Solway Moss embedded in a distant past, the Anglo-Scottish border itself retained a powerful capacity to signify. Weaving all the way from Cairngaun to western Cumberland, the Solway Firth is a fine example of geography ignoring politics, and indeed Claire Lamont and Michael Rossington note the lack of a “commanding geographical feature” at the western border crossing.²² Even more disconcertingly, William Cobbett noted in his 1832 tour,

It is curious that, the moment we get into England, at this point, all becomes sterile and ugly, and continues on heathy and moory, for several miles so that one would think, that it was England and not Scotland, that is the beggarly country.²³

This marks a struggle between multiple versions of the borderland: between a physical space and its cartographic superstructure. Circumnavigating the coastline in the 1815 second volume of *A Voyage Round Great Britain*, a collaboration with the artist William Daniell, Richard Ayton found the Scottish side of the border “recently inclosed,” in contrast to the “muddy marsh” and lingering history of devastation around the Solway Moss to the south. Ayton would subsequently confirm his idea of primitive Scotland at the village of Powhellen near Annan, albeit there

²⁰ Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides in 1772* (Chester: John Monk, 1774), 106-8. On the Lochar Moss, see T. C. Smout, *Nature Contested: Environmental History in Scotland and Northern England since 1600* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 94, 100.

²¹ R. H. Cromek, ed., *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song: with Historical and Traditional Notices relative to the manners and customs of the peasantry* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1810), 292.

²² See Claire Lamont and Michael Rossington, “Introduction,” in Lamont and Rossington, eds., *Romanticism’s Debatable Lands* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1-9 (2).

²³ Daniel Green, ed., *Cobbett’s Tour in Scotland* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1984), 124.

the “wig-wamish” homes were redeemed by “highly civilized” inhabitants, but an overdetermination of the physical environment provoked by the border crossing is a consistent feature of contemporary tours, registering difference *as* contingent.²⁴ For Dorothy Wordsworth, reflecting years later on a journey into Scotland in 1803 in company with her brother William and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, what Franco Moretti calls a “phenomenology of the border” again led to frustrated expectations.²⁵ It is only at the point of *leaving* Dumfriesshire to the north that Wordsworth writes, “We now felt indeed that we were in Scotland”: “In the scenes of the Nith it had not been the same as England, but yet not simple, naked Scotland.”²⁶ The orbit of the Solway, in other words, refused to supply a Highland-bound ideal of the nation, precipitating a neither/nor condition for the tourist interested in a contrast between English domesticity and Scottish exoticism.

Jo Taylor and Chris Donaldson’s essay here sifts the literary geopolitics of the border crossing in Wordsworth’s account, particularly as it is expressed in relation to an old proverbial tradition based on the mountains of Skiddaw and Criffel facing each other across the Solway Firth. Inspired by their visits to sites connected with the poet Robert Burns, both Wordsworth and her brother (in a poem originally titled, “Ejaculation at the Grave of Burns”) updated this place-making tradition, correlating their own home on the far side of the Cumberland fells with Dumfriesshire.²⁷ Still, Burns had been dead for seven years by 1803 and his complicated memory served to enforce difference as much as breach distance for these tourists attempting to realize the meanings of the Solway in syntagmatic form as part of a journey from the English Lakes to the Scottish Highlands. Not all proverbs cause the land to slide into the sea, but the result here is a crosscutting view of the region in which the prospect of community depends—paradoxically—on national difference, not to mention the exercise of the literary imagination. The Solway is peculiarly well-adapted to such a fragile, provocative sense of place emerging from within competing frames of reference. In the efforts made to embody it by visitors and by locals publishing in and beyond the print cultures on both sides of

²⁴ Innes Macleod, ed., *Sailing on Horseback: William Daniell and Richard Ayton in Cumbria and Dumfries and Galloway* (Dumfries, 1988), 72, 79–80.

²⁵ Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel: 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998), 35.

²⁶ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland, A. D. 1803*, ed. J. C. Shairp (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1874), 14.

²⁷ See William Wordsworth, “Ejaculation at the Grave of Burns,” in *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 534–35.

the firth, a persistently littoral quality of this area adds a layer to the inherently “eccentric” (rather than purely “concentric”) nature of attachments to place, especially when they are mediated by print.²⁸

The overriding importance of movement to representations of the Solway was not restricted to emergent forms of tourism, to shipping routes or to vanishingly rare geomorphological phenomena. All landscapes are constituted by movement, David Stewart reminds us in his essay here, through the transit of “insects, birds, humans, rocks, grass, microbes, and other agents.” Thus, if the Solway is possessed of properties that disorient and reorient, this does not make it an outlier so much as a space where the agile systems we call places are helpfully apparent. Tracking accounts of the Solway that oscillate between fact and fiction, Stewart’s essay gives space to Allan Cunningham, arguably the writer to have produced the most elaborate literary geography of the Solway in any era. Though Cunningham migrated in 1810 to London where he became superintendent of works for the sculptor Francis Chantrey, the literary career he forged in the metropolis was anchored by a homesick view of southwest Scotland and the Solway, sustained all the way from his collaboration with Cromek in 1810 through to the early 1840s.²⁹ Stewart pairs Cunningham’s spectacularly tautological novel of geo-cosmic hallucination *Sir Michael Scott* (1828) with Walter Scott’s *Redgauntlet* (1824), the second of the Waverley Novels set immediately on the Solway coast (following 1815’s *Guy Mannering*) and a text whose investment in the mosaic physical and political geography of the firth continues to inspire new spatial work in Scottish studies.³⁰

²⁸ See, for example, G. W. Shirley, “Dumfries Printers in the Eighteenth Century, with Handlists of their Books,” *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History & Antiquarian Society*, 3rd series, 18 (Dumfries: the Society, 1934): 131-40; Gerard Lee McKeever, “Regional News in ‘Peacetime’: *The Dumfries and Galloway Courier* in the 1820s,” in *Remediating the 1820s*, ed. Jon Mee and Matthew Sangster (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming); and Victoria E. M. Gardner, *The Business of News in England, 1760-1820* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 123-29, 154-59.

²⁹ See also Gerard Lee McKeever, “John Paul Jones and the Curse of Home,” *Philological Quarterly*, 99.1 (2020): 95-117; and Gerard Lee McKeever and Brian Aitken, “Romance Cartography: a map of *Paul Jones* (1826),” <https://regionalromanticism.glasgow.ac.uk/paul-jones/>.

³⁰ See Christopher Donaldson *et al.*, “Digital Literary Geography and the Difficulties of Locating ‘*Redgauntlet* Country,’” *SSL*, 42.2 (2016): 147-83; Stafford, “The Roar of the Solway,” 48-53; and Ayşe Çelikkol, “Free Trade and Disloyal Smugglers in Scott’s *Guy Mannering* and *Redgauntlet*,” *ELH*, 74 (Winter 2007): 759-82.

Geertz makes a simple observation that is of paramount importance to Scott: “the shapes of knowledge are always ineluctably local, indivisible from their instruments and their encasements.”³¹ The durability and viable scale of localized cultures had always been a central theme of Scott’s writing, not least through his enduring interest (shared by James Hogg) in the borderland that overlaps with and stretches away northeast from the present area of focus. In *Redgauntlet*, he specifically transforms the Solway into a diorama populated by sequestered life-worlds that present as anachronisms—not least of which is a belated Jacobite plot—threatening the socio-political certainties embedded in Edinburgh’s legal culture, from which the protagonist Darsie Latimer has absented himself on a “ramble.”³² This sense of the untamed singularity of the Solway existed in a kind of dialectical unity in the period with a recognition of ever-increasing connectedness. Fiona Stafford, for the concluding essay in this symposium, pinpoints the same condition in Burns’s description of the firth as a “wild place of the world”: that is, simultaneously “wild” and a “place of the world.” She evokes a landscape of both confluences and mystery that Cunningham mined for its folkloric potential—a place, too, marked by “the history of human misadventure,” where Burns himself would confront “the permanent distance caused by death.” Recapturing a view of the Solway as one of the “wild places where the otherworld pressed close, where the natural often seemed supernatural,” Stafford returns us again to the idiosyncrasies and wavering borders of the firth as constituted by the literary culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The mature phase of global modernity was compelled into being in the Romantic period by forces including wage labour, exploitation, and steam-power; scientific exploration and a new culture of leisured tourism; mass migration at everything from a local scale up to settler colonialism; and a thriving international market in the multiplying forms of anglophone print. From a spatial point of view, we must combat a tendency to view the forces of modernization as essentially integrating: history was generating new, intricate geographies rather than superseding them, and literature was active in the process. Critical attention to regional spaces such as the Solway, which emerge from and illuminate the period’s interaction of local, national and global cultures, will continue to unpick the dynamic

³¹ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 4.

³² Walter Scott, *Redgauntlet*, ed. G. A. M. Wood and David Hewitt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 1; and see Ian Duncan on the “postmodern” quality of *Redgauntlet*, in his *Scott’s Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 246-53.

hierarchies of space that constitute Scottish literature. Done properly, such work is not in any way parochial, though it undoubtedly benefits from a meaningful investment of time and energy on behalf of scholars in particular locales. Literature looks different when oriented regionally: this generates a canon with its own idiosyncratic contours, of course, but it also puts a salutary, focused pressure on the essential contact of text and space. The essays here speak to a form of critical regionalism but also to growing interest in coastal environments in literary studies.³³ Something like the “coastline paradox,” in which the elaborate, fractal geometry of coasts makes it impossible to measure them definitively without an arbitrary degree of generalization, is true of place writing at large. The sense we can give of the world is never more (or less) than partial and contingent; sign and referent remain stubbornly apart. And yet in the examples to follow, the Solway Firth offers a distinctive example of the capacity of places to both trouble and accept literary meaning.

Back on board the *Highland Chieftain* in the ink of the *Dumfries-shire and Galloway Monthly Magazine*, the narrator of the story finds himself being stared at by one of the passengers, who is apparently “magnifying my diminutive features into a ‘terrible outline,’ something like the visage presented by the apparition” in the preceding supernatural tale of life in Dumfries.³⁴ Storytelling, this recognizes, creates an “outline” for experience, and this compulsive myth-making is a natural corollary of the steamboat’s high-speed journey furth of the Solway. For Gidal, steam travel marks a threshold in the history of literature, as a futuristic and future-oriented technology of extreme mobility that reveals in new clarity both the radical environmental change it accelerates and the complex mediation offered by modern place writing.³⁵ By describing periodicals specifically as “floating literature,” the “Highland Chieftain” underlines a metaphorical connection between steamship and magazine, both representatives of a historical moment marvelling at, interrogating and transforming the demesne of the Solway.³⁶ The leading article in the *Monthly Magazine*’s first issue, “The Indians—A Tale,” highlighted an expansive geography being mediated for the readership, but the journal

³³ See, for example, Allen, Groom and Smith, eds, *Coastal Works*; Nicholas Allen, *Ireland, Literature, and the Coast: Seatangled* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Matthew Ingleby and Matthew P. M. Kerr, eds, *Coastal Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Jo Carruthers and Nour Dakkak, eds, *Sandscapes: Writing the British Seaside* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

³⁴ DGMM, October 1821, 174.

³⁵ Gidal, *Ossianic Unconformities*, 161-84.

³⁶ DGMM, November 1821, 221.

was structured by regional content as its primary element.³⁷ Whether regions were treated singularly or in systematic terms that includes the federalism now most commonly associated in the Scottish context with the parish and county hierarchy of John Sinclair's *Statistical Account of Scotland* (1791-1799), the literary culture of the globalizing Romantic period dialectically renewed the hermeneutical and epistemological vigour of the regional. It also consistently registered the changeability and vulnerability of places either physical or cultural—certainly the multidisciplinary forms in which the Solway was inscribed are charged with metamorphoses both on and off the page.

To return finally to Cunningham's *Lord Roldan*, we again encounter the haunting presence on the Solway of the Ayrshire transplant Robert Burns. Here, the poet is found patrolling the shore in his professional capacity as an Excise gauger, working a landscape that is insistently liminal: "the tide had but half filled the bay" and yet the "waves came leaping and rushing, casting foam into the air, and sending a sound before." Supposed to be on duty looking out for smugglers, Burns is quickly seduced by the oscillation of land and sea into his own imaginative geography that at once abstracts and describes the reality of the firth:

He soon forgot that his business was to observe, and not to muse;
and giving way to his imagination, travelled back in Scottish story;
filled the bay with English shallows; lined the shore with Scottish
spearmen; heard the horns sound and the bugles blow, and saw the
white line of shells on the shore dyed with the blood of
encountering ranks. He was standing on a rock nigh the Falcon
tower; his drawn sword was stretched towards the dancing waves,
and he was looking at the moon.³⁸

Poetic moongazing, of course, is only one of many literary modes in which this space could be apprehended, all of which imply degrees of social capital: in a contrasting account of a local beggar called "Violet of the Moss," the *Monthly Magazine* declares that, while treading the same classic ground as Burns, Violet is altogether incapable of appreciating "the romantic dream" it contains.³⁹ Mindful, then, of juxtapositions between alternative forms of geographical knowledge, of what they reveal as well as conceal, and the contested cultural field in which these attempts to write place arose, the following essays proceed to explore the literary geography of the Solway Firth.

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³⁷ DGMM, July 1821, 1-6.

³⁸ Cunningham, *Lord Roldan*, II: 260, 265.

³⁹ DGMM, December 1821, 274.