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**“THIS PRODIGIOUS MASS”:
THE ERUPTION OF THE SOLWAY MOSS IN 1771**

Alex Deans

On 16 November 1771, the north of England experienced an episode of extreme rainfall thought by some to be the worst the region had ever seen. Flooding in the catchments of the rivers Tyne and Wear swept away bridges in Newcastle and Durham, inundated waterside dwellings and warehouses, and scattered, stranded, wrecked, sunk, or bore out to sea numerous ships and boats. Under the section “Affairs in England,” the December number for the *Scots Magazine* enumerated twenty bridges destroyed along the courses of the Tyne, Wear and other rivers. “But,” the piece continued:

the most extraordinary devastation occasioned by these floods was the eruption of the Solway Moss in Cumberland.—For the better understanding of which, we shall first give a description and draught of the spot of ground which was the scene of this remarkable event.¹

The Solway Moss was a large raised peatbog, between the rivers Sark and Esk, just south of the Anglo-Scottish border. Following the heavy rains of November 1771 that had wrought havoc east of the watershed, the moss breached its outer skin of turf and spewed its contents over the surrounding plain. According to the account given in the *Scots Magazine*, the peat flowed from “a gully, or hollow, called by the country people the gap,” the course of a small waterway with its source under the moss, which formed a lake after being clogged in the eruption (*ibid.*, 665). According to a letter

¹ M.A., “To the author of the SCOTS MAGAZINE,” *Scots Magazine*, 33 (December 1771): 662-667 (665-666), with an engraved map facing p. 666; cited below as *Scots Mag*. The first pages of the article deal with flooding on the east coast near Newcastle. On the Solway eruption in the contexts of environmental history and historical geography, see further Lindsey J. McEwen and Charles W. J. Withers, “Historical records and geomorphological events: the 1771 ‘eruption’ of Solway Moss,” *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 105.3 (1989): 149-57.

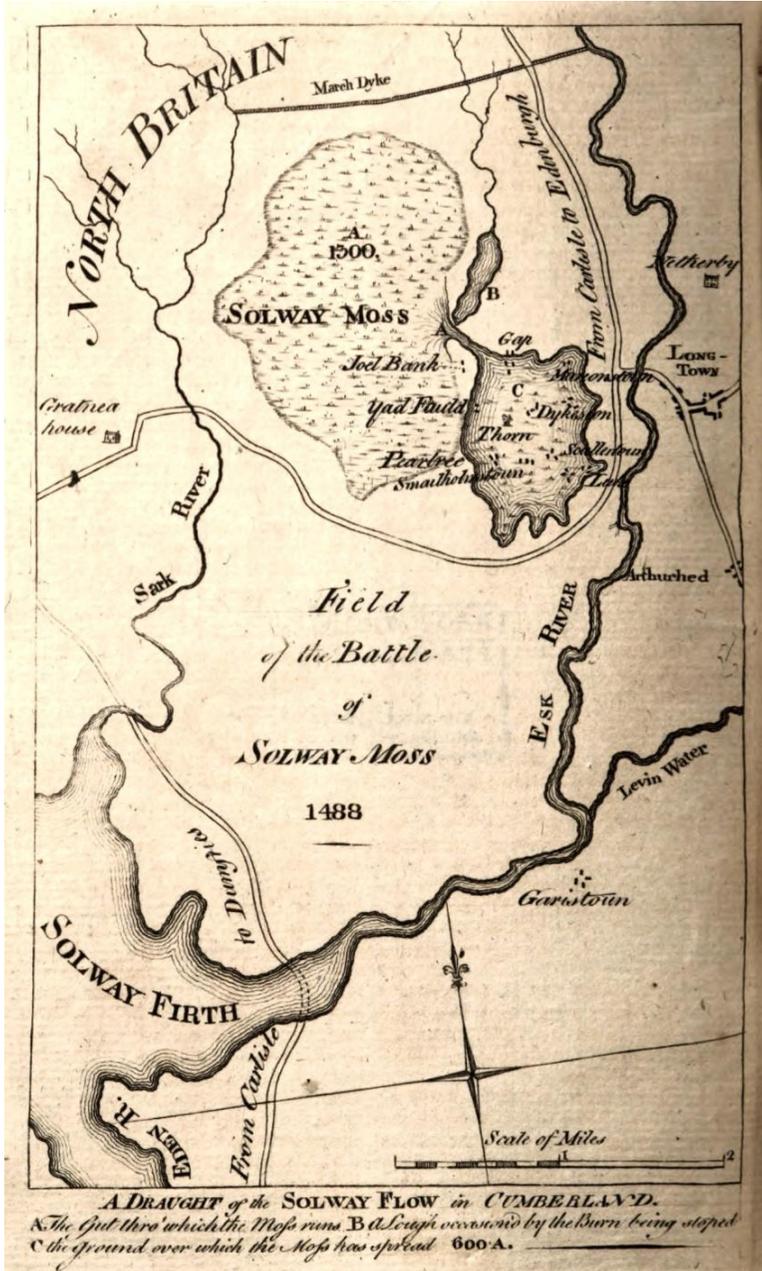


Fig. 1: Map from *Scots Magazine*, 33 (December 1771), facing p. 666

from a local correspondent, the moss rapidly covered as many as 800 acres of farmland, dwellings and livestock in a layer of saturated peat up to fifteen feet in depth, and continued to leak into nearby rivers and fields for some time afterwards; a second eruption caused by further rains blocked the road from Dumfries to Carlisle via Longtown and claimed another 300 acres.

Although all of the tenants in the path of the expanding bog escaped with their lives, they were helpless to prevent the inundation of their livestock, crops, enclosures, and dwellings. The proprietor, the Rev. Dr. Robert Graham of Netherby, was estimated to have lost nearly 250 pounds worth of rent as a result of the catastrophe. As the *Scots Magazine* correspondent reported:

Many saw their houses, out of which they had narrowly escaped the preceding night, rendered inaccessible, or tumbled into ruins, and their corn, built up in stacks for their winters provision, and the payment of their rents, floating on the surface of this new moss (*Scots Mag.*, 665).

The original moss, the writer continued,

retains so much of a natural appearance, that a stranger is at a loss to conceive whence all this prodigious mass has come. But the people who lived near the mouth of the gap, tell, that they are sensible how much the moss has subsided, by objects on the west side of it, such as the planting at Graitney, which before were totally intercepted by the moss, being now obvious to their view (*ibid.*, 666).

The emphasis placed in the *Scots Magazine* account on situating the eruption site reflects an eighteenth-century interest in places and landscapes as empirical illustrations of environmental causality.² But there is also a sense, both here and in later descriptions, of the eruption of the moss as an expression of the peculiarly unstable geography of the Solway itself.³ In the event of 1771, peat seems to have emulated the region's surging tides and fluctuating political fealty, with disastrous consequences for Graham and his tenants. The land's negative transformation is powerfully evoked in the altered visual prospect presented by the sunken bog, the eruption having literally reshaped the way in which the landscape is seen by visitor and inhabitant. This perceptual change accentuates a language of astonishment, loss, and estrangement, bordering on betrayal,

² See Penny Fielding, *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography: North Britain, 1760-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³ See Fiona Stafford, "The Roar of the Solway" in *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge*, ed. Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom, and Jos Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 43.

that permeates the broader narrative of agricultural ruin. The landscape “retains... a natural appearance,” yet the “prodigious mass” of the new moss signifies an aberration that is implied to be unnatural. In the face of sudden and radical change, the writer cannot help but ascribe a deceptive agency to the earth beneath our feet.

The Eruption of the Solway Moss, as “this remarkable event” seems to have been consistently named by contemporaries, presents an example of a small-scale environmental disaster that nonetheless had a profound effect on its locale; as such it is worth considering in relation to recent work on Romantic-era catastrophe that takes a somewhat broader scope. The global aftermath of the volcanic eruption of Tambora in Java in 1815 forms the focal point of two recent books on Romanticism: David Higgins’ *British Romanticism, Climate Change, and the Anthropocene*, and Anne Collett and Olivia Murphy’s edited collection, *Romantic Climates Literature and Science in an Age of Catastrophe*. On one level, such work has helped to further crystallize some of the core concerns of Romantic ecocriticism, in particular the period’s incipient awareness of anthropogenic climate change; the unpredictable agency of matter; and the way in which our own concept of nature itself continues to be shaped by eighteenth and nineteenth-century thought and aesthetics. While its origins in an episode of extreme weather lend it some affinity with the climatic focus of the above studies, the eruption of the Solway Moss is not, of course, comparable in scale to Tambora, which altered the planet’s atmosphere and resulted in 1816’s infamous “year without a summer.” But climate change aside, the mixture of curiosity and horror that characterizes accounts of the Solway eruption and its aftermath evokes many of the same conceptual issues raised in recent Romantic scholarship on Tambora.

To varying degrees, accounts of the eruption of the Solway Moss help to illuminate issues of “material agency,” or what Jane Bennet calls “the agency of assemblages,” as well as what Higgins identifies as the philosophical tension between the “withdrawnness” of a real world that is beyond human comprehension and indifferent to human happiness on the one hand, and the intermeshing of human society and activity with the materiality of place and ecological networks on the other.⁴ In the introductions to their respective volumes, Higgins, and Collet and Murphy, all respond to the work of the theorist Timothy Morton. For Higgins, Tambora allows us to broach the relationship between culture and what Morton has called the “hyper object” of climate change.⁵ For Collet and

⁴ See Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), 20-38; David Higgins, *British Romanticism, Climate Change, and the Anthropocene: Writing Tambora*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 9.

⁵ Higgins, 9.

Murphy, Tambora provides a point from which to consider the broader topic of Morton's book *Ecology without Nature*: namely the problematic legacy of a Romantic nature "seen as fundamentally distinct and distant from human life," and the latent potential of those alternative modes of proto-ecological thought that it both gave rise to and displaced.⁶

In short, the Solway Moss is exemplary of a type of significantly more minor, localized catastrophe which nonetheless registered the imbrication of human and non-human actants within a global ecological fabric. Moreover, the responses it produced reveal a pre-anthropocenic cultural discourse around the complex and unpredictable interaction between people and environment, that bears examining in relation to our own ideas of nature, and the ways in which we might think ourselves out of them. Like the neighbours of the collapsed peatbog, suddenly able to see through to an unfamiliar landscape, the estranging effects of disaster allow us to see ecologies anew, even as they painfully distance us from our previous ideas of the natural and unnatural.

This sense of estrangement seems on one level to have compelled writers to attempt to normalize the eruption of the moss by schematizing the conditions which gave rise to it. Emergent mixtures of matter and circumstance frequently surface in these efforts, and writers are fairly insistent in attributing the cause of the eruption to a combination of things, rather than solely to the extreme weather of the preceding day. Geographical factors such as the flatness of the Solway plain and the positions of banks and rivers are among the contributors identified in the 1771 letter to the *Scots Magazine*, which concludes that

The immediate cause of this eruption is thought to have been, the late heavy rains, especially the excessive fall on the day preceding the night in which it happened, which having overcharged the moss, and filled and distended the cavities within, and the *inequalities* upon the surface, the weight of so great a body of moss and water impending at the head of the gap, had there burst, and broke off, and forced its way down the gap.—The remote cause of it is however, thought to be so evident, from the situation of the moss, and of the adjacent lands on the east side of it, together with the former management of the persons who had cast their peats in the moss, that its not having broke out sooner is more to be wondered at, than its having broken out at last (*Scots Mag.*, 666-67).

⁶ Anne Collett and Olivia Murphy, eds, *Romantic Climates: Literature and Science in an Age of Catastrophe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 3; see also Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

In the alleged mismanagement of peat cutting, this account clearly identifies human activity as a crucial element of the disaster. The multi-causal nature of the eruption as it is described here might be read as an example of what Bennett, in her book *Vibrant Matter*, calls the “capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”⁷ Accounts of similar phenomena involving a mixture of human activity and mundane matter, such as coastal sand blow, suggest that this way of thinking about landscapes as complex assemblages of the human and the other than human—in this case the unruly form of matter created from the mixture of peat and a massive volume of rainwater—was not uncommon in this period.⁸ Here, an emergent “assemblage” of peat, weather, the lay of the land, and misapplied human labour, is seen to have manifested not just as environmental mishap, but as a new landscape, defined by a “new moss” which incorporates and erases various elements of what was there before.

The *Scots Magazine*’s 1771 account set the tone for the characteristic emphasis in subsequent descriptions on the particularities of locale. Accounts of the eruption tend to orbit around a core of common anecdotes and images, although these are modulated by different writers and genres, bringing to the fore various aesthetic and philosophical responses to an event which few had actually witnessed unfold. Through their very appeal to the authenticity of “on-the-spot” description, these accounts by naturalists, travellers, and anonymous reporters, serve to highlight the often intertextual nature of place and nature writing, nowhere more pronounced than in their common emphasis on the inky blackness of the erupted matter itself.

The phenomenon of bog-burst or bog-slide (to use two anachronistic descriptors) was not unheard of, but a combination of scale, location and historical context, in terms of a rise in domestic travel and natural history—particularly as the latter related to improvement and land management—conspired to produce the Eruption of the Solway Moss as an object of knowledge that was repeatedly described and depicted. The Solway Moss attracted the attention of, among others, the future Regius Chair in Natural History at Edinburgh, the Reverend John Walker of

⁷ Bennet, viii.

⁸ See, e.g., Isaac J. Biberg’s emphasis on “friable” matter in his treatise, “The Oeconomy of Nature,” translated in Benjamin Stillingfleet, *Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Natural History, Husbandry and Physick* (London: R. And J. Dodsley, 1759), 31-108 (65, 73-76); and D. M. Henderson and J. H. Dickson, *A naturalist in the Highlands: James Robertson, his life and travels in Scotland, 1767-1771* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1994).

Moffat. Walker was regarded as one of Scotland's foremost Linnaean naturalists and earlier in 1771 had submitted a report to the Commissioners of the Annexed Estates based on one of the extensive tours he had undertaken in the Highlands and Hebrides since 1764.⁹ In 1772, the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* printed a letter from Walker to the Earl of Bute, himself a keen botanist and scientific patron, reporting on "the extraordinary irruption of Solway-moss, which I went to visit, about a week after it happened." Walker comments that "the alteration it has produced on the face of the earth, is greater than any we have known in Britain, from natural causes, since the destruction of Earl Goodwin's estate."¹⁰ Walker is referring here to a semi-legendary island lost to tidal



Fig. 2: John Walker, "Eye Draught of the Solway Moss," *Philosophical Transactions*, 62 (1772), tab iv, after p. 124. Image courtesy of the Royal Society.

⁹ See John Walker, *The Reverend Dr. John Walker's Report on the Hebrides of 1764 and 1771*, ed. Margaret M. McKay (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1980). On Walker's involvement with the Board for Annexed Estates, see Frederick Albritton Jonsson, *Enlightenment's Frontier: The Scottish Highlands and the Origins of Environmentalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 93-120.

¹⁰ John Walker, "Account of the Irruption of Solway Moss in December 16, 1772; in a Letter from Mr. John Walker, to the Earl of Bute, and communicated by his Lordship to the Royal Society," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 62 (1772): 123-127 (123). Walker's was chosen from several reports received by the Society; note that his title as printed gives the wrong month and year for the eruption, which occurred in November 1771.

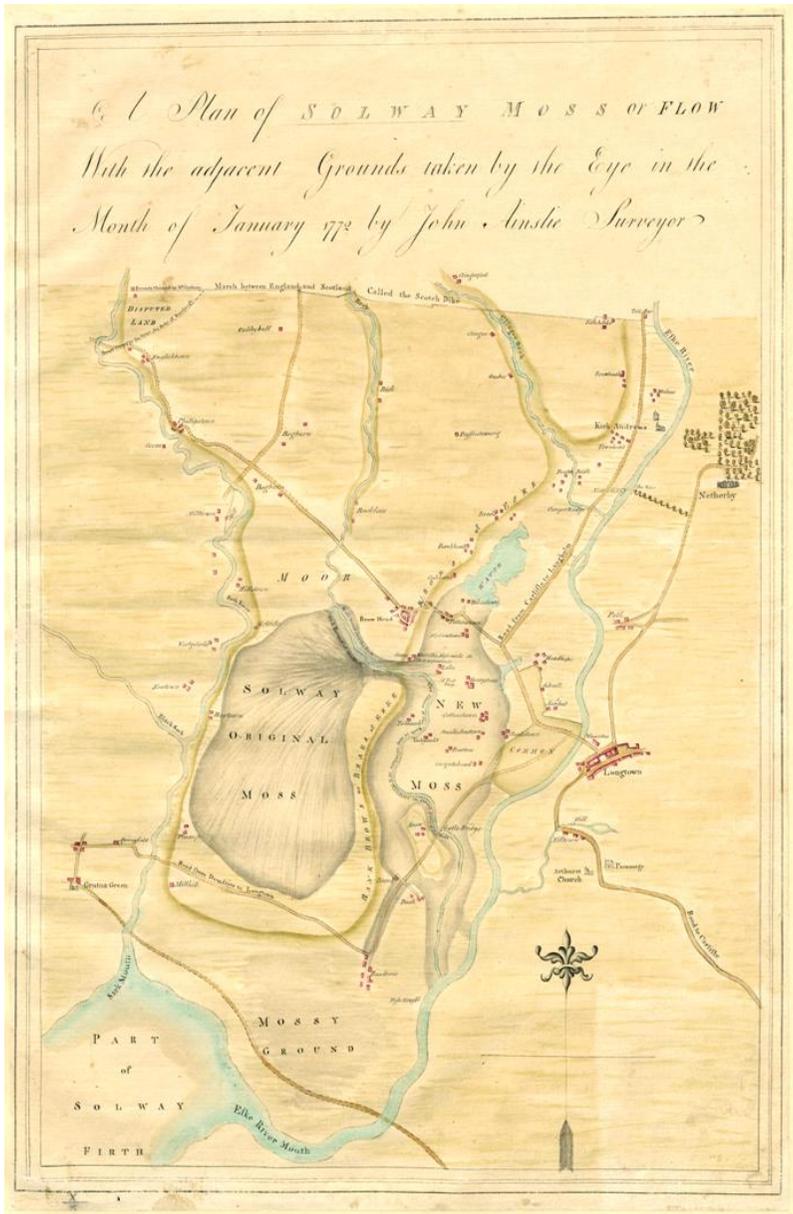
inundation in the eleventh century, so a fairly remote precedent, but his authority as a naturalist and the strength of his language here, gives a sense of how shocking this event was to contemporary observers. Walker's relatively straightforward account eschews speculation as to the causes of the eruption beyond the combination of heavy rainfall and the unusual situation of the moss upon a flat plain. Instead, his account suggests the challenging novelty of surveying a newly-created topographical palimpsest, where the human meaning of the locale and its markers must be superimposed upon a boggy wasteland, beneath which the formerly inhabited landscape lies submerged. Walker's account is full of measurements: of the fissures that have formed in the subsided surface of the old moss; of the length of pole that could formerly be submerged there; of the depth of the debris and the width of the channels and quags through which it flowed, and of the chunks of heath carried with it. The map accompanying Walker's article (Fig. 2) included some of these measurements and their locations, but also allowed the simultaneous depiction of both the present and past terrain, and the past location of dwellings consumed by the eruption.

Perhaps because maps could overlay past and present in this way, numerous cartographical representations of the eruption emerged. The finest of these is probably John Ainslie's watercolour map (Fig. 3) produced for George III from a survey taken in January 1772, depicting the proportions of the "Old" and "New Moss," the blocking of the road between Carlisle and Gretna, the disruption of watercourses and the positions of lost hamlets and farms. The existence of Ainslie's map also reflected the ways in which natural curiosities like the Solway Eruption offered the prospect of advancement to those whom Noah Heringman calls "knowledge workers": the class of skilled "practical scholars" who carried-out the legwork of enlightenment science and antiquity as guides, fieldworkers, technicians, surveyors and so on.¹¹ By inscribing this unusual phenomenon for the King, Ainslie no doubt hoped to increase his stock as a surveyor and mapmaker setting out in the world. The shading of Ainslie's plan suggests both the directionality of peat flowing out by the Gap onto the Solway plain, and the still-transitional nature of the landscape between habitation and loss, with buildings and place names visible beneath the grey wash of the New Moss.

Perhaps the most striking element of Walker's map is a thorn tree depicted at the centre of the inundated plain, of which he writes:

I endeavoured to guess at the depth of the moss upon the plain, by a large thorn, which stands in the middle of it, and which is buried to

¹¹ Noah Heringman, *Sciences of Antiquity: Romantic Antiquarianism, Natural History, and Knowledge Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.



**Fig. 3: “A Plan of Solway Moss or Flow, with the Adjacent Grounds taken by Eye in the Month of January 1772 by John Ainslie Surveyor”
King’s Topographical Collection, British Library.**

above the division of the branches. The farmers told me, that it stood upon a rising, more than 6 feet above the general level of the plain; and that it was upwards of 9 feet high, of clear stem.¹²

Walker's thorn tree, transformed into a land feature by the negation of its surroundings, occupies a strangely marginal position as the referent which joins the submerged world to the surface. The aftermath of the eruption presents a reality that cannot be captured by the names of ruined farms or the projection of cartographical features onto peat. As with Ainslie's map, cartographical representation of the disaster has the strange effect of compounding the physical erasure of the human landscape, by reducing it to a scattering of approximate markers on an otherwise featureless surface.

Reflecting the often anecdotal character of eighteenth-century natural-history writing, Walker's account is also interwoven with observations, some sent in by other correspondents, that reveal unexpected forms of ecological damage. These include the story of an unfortunate cow that would often be adapted or incorporated into later narratives. The cow had survived buried "up to the neck in mud and water" for over two days: "When she was got out, she did not refuse to eat, but water she would not taste, nor could even look at, without shewing manifest signs of horror" (*ibid.*, 125n). Walker reports that the environmental chaos caused by the eruption reached beyond the destruction of crops and livestock, writing that the river Esk, near the site of the eruption,

which was one of the clearest in the world, is now rendered black as ink, by the *mixture* of the moss, and no salmon has since entered into it. A farmer also told me, that, upon removing the moss, to get at a well which it had covered, they found all the earth-worms lying dead upon the surface of the ground (*ibid.*, 126).

Walker's attention to the effects of catastrophe on animal populations suggests the lack of clear distinction between the agricultural, economic and ecological in this period, which, while in some ways an obstacle to something that we might recognize as green consciousness, nonetheless shares affinities with more recent challenges by figures such as Bruno Latour and Morton to the cultural and political separation of the human and natural.¹³ Here again, however, the nature of disaster seems to be bound-up with an *excessive* mixing: of rain and peat, river and moss, and so on. By the same token, the eruption again appears symptomatic of the Solway's estuarine locale as a whole, with its unstable boundaries between elements and nations.

¹² Walker, 126.

¹³ See Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), and Morton, *Ecology without Nature*.

The intertwining of human and material agencies in a landscape both overcharged with historical meaning and suddenly devoid of its physical markers, contributes to the sense that the so-called “Debatable Land” is the perfect place for this kind of catastrophe. As Claire Lamont and Michael Rossington point out in their introduction to the edited collection *Romanticism’s Debatable Lands*, while the term is often used figuratively to phrase the changing local and global significance of the Anglo-Scottish border zone, it also refers specifically to the stretch of long-disputed territory between the rivers Esk and Sark: the past site of clan and national conflict upon which the eruption occurred.¹⁴ It is perhaps for this reason that the eruption of the moss seems to have so appealed to two of the most widely-read domestic travellers of the late-eighteenth century, William Gilpin and Thomas Pennant, the former of whom memorably describes the “*substance*” of the moss as “a gross fluid, composed of mud, and the putrid fibres of heath, diluted by internal springs.”¹⁵

It is however Pennant’s elaborate, composite account that I would like to turn to in closing. While clearly drawing heavily on earlier periodical accounts and Walker’s report, Pennant’s description of the Eruption of the Solway Moss in his *Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides, 1772*, is distinguished by its own temporal structure, in turn facilitated by the author’s status as a repeat traveller through the area, having seen it in its previous condition on the return leg of his *Tour in Scotland 1769*.¹⁶ Equally, while Pennant emphasizes that the “disaster was apparently a natural phaenomenon, without anything wonderful or unprecedented” and offers a handful of examples in evidence, it is hard not to be struck by the literary and aesthetic intensity of his account, which he spins into a topographical allegory that seems to reflect more broadly on the relationship between the natural world and the human business of improvement.¹⁷

Pennant leads into his account of the eruption with an encomium on the land management of the area’s proprietor, Reverend Graham of Netherby, which serves to foreground the broader human meaning of the subsequent

¹⁴ See Claire Lamont and Michael Rossington, eds, *Romanticism’s Debatable Lands* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1.

¹⁵ William Gilpin, *Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, Made in the Year 1772*, 2 vols (London: R. Blamire, 1786), II: 134.

¹⁶ On the chronology of Pennant’s two Scottish tours, see Alex Deans and Nigel Leask, “Curious Travellers: Thomas Pennant and the Welsh and Scottish Tour (1760-1820),” *SSL*, 42:2 (2016): 164-72.

¹⁷ Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides in 1772* (Chester: John Monk, 1774), 74.

catastrophe. Pennant describes something approaching a reclaimed wilderness:

lands that eighteen years ago were in a state of nature; the people idle and bad, still retaining a smack of the feudal manners: scarce a hedge to be seen: and a total ignorance prevailed of even coal and lime. His improving spirit soon wrought a great change in these parts: his example instilled into the inhabitants an inclination to industry: and they soon found the difference between sloth and its concomitants, dirt and beggary, and a plenty that a right application of the arts of husbandry brought among them (*ibid.*, 73).

Pennant continues in the same vein, seeming to present an enlightenment conjectural history of human progress from primitive subsistence to commercial prosperity, as much as a local and particular one. Pennant's emphasis on his own recollections of the locale in a cultivated state, serves to heighten the sense of loss presented by the post-eruption scene:

A tract distinguished for its fertility and beauty, ran in form of a valley for some space in view of Netherby ... a tract completely improved in all respects, except in houses, the antient clay-dabbed habitations still existing. I saw it in that situation in the year 1769: at this time a melancholy extent of black turbery, the eruption of the *Solway* moss, having in a few days covered grass and corn; levelled the boundaries of almost every farm; destroyed most of the houses, and driven the poor inhabitants to the utmost distress (*ibid.*, 73-74).

The passage presents a disorientating mixture of temporalities. Pennant's two journeys through the locale, separated by three years, frame a brief period of enlightened prosperity under Graham of Netherby, on either side of which lie indefinite stretches of primitive neglect. The effect, amplified by Pennant's primitivist register of "dirt" and "antient clay-dabbed habitations," is to render the triumph of the bog as not only prior and current, but anterior: the state of cultivation becomes the aberration; the return to waste the true face of nature in this locale.

Pennant follows with an elaborate account of the eruption itself, delivered in language that hovers uncomfortably between scatological comedy and Biblical diluvianism. The event itself is described in a series of accumulating clauses, as the slow progress of peat over farmland becomes more inexorable than that of improvement:

The crust had at once given way, and the black deluge was rolling towards [a farmer's] house, when he was gone out with a lantern to see the cause of his fright: he saw the stream approach him; and first thought that it was his dunghill, that by some supernatural cause, had been set in motion; but soon discovering the danger, he gave notice to his neighbours with all expedition: but others

received no other advice but what this *Stygian* tide gave them ... The eruption burst from the place of its discharge, like a cataract of thick ink; and continued to flow in a stream of the same appearance, intermixed with great fragments of peat, with their heathy surface; then flowed like a tide charged with pieces of wreck, filling the whole valley, running up every little opening, and on its retreat, leaving upon the shore tremendous heaps of turf, memorials of the height this dark torrent arrived at. (*ibid.*, 75-76).

Pennant's is by some measure the most oozingly catastrophist account of this particular catastrophe. Coming before a description of the turbulent historical associations of the Debatable Land with its blood hounds and moss troopers, it is tempting to interpret this passage as a kind of sensationalist gothic horror aimed at the gentleman improver, as well as a reflection on the lasting physical legacy of national enmity, particularly in border regions. In a material return of the repressed, an unimproved past literally rises to the surface in a historically contested and problematic place. At the same time, Pennant's description discloses a kind of awe at the recalcitrant power of raw matter, as he revels in the spectacle of mobile muck. Pennant's "*Stygian* tide" of peat carries the symbolic charge of negation or death; an eerily sterile or primitive kind of nature, and of the threat of sudden reversion to an unproductive landscape, devoid of human labour. Perhaps echoing Pennant, Gilpin renders the event in even more atavistic terms: a re-emergence of "those subterraneous floods, which had been bedded in darkness, since the memory of man" (Gilpin, p. 137).

But as in earlier accounts of the eruption, Pennant appears keen to attribute a human cause to this natural disaster. He writes that "The shell or crust that kept this liquid within bounds, nearest to the valley, was at first of sufficient strength to contain it: but by the imprudence of the peat-diggers, who were continually working on that side, at length became so weakened, as not longer to be able to resist the weight pressing on it" (Pennant, p. 75). The labour of the peat diggers takes on rhetorical and symbolic importance in an environmental narrative intent on salvaging the centrality of human labour as a shaping factor in landscape and ecology. In the schema of Pennant's eruption narrative, the peat diggers appear as almost spectral representatives of the land's unimproved former inhabitants, who have somehow resisted the enlightened management of the exalted Dr. Graham. That it is the "imprudent" activity of peat cutting that releases the tide of primitive matter over improved land, exposing its lack of resilience, perhaps also serves to forestall the unsettling possibility for Pennant, of a nature that is not only ontologically withdrawn, but prone to rewarding diligent cultivation with discharges of useless waste. The nature that is celebrated as a benevolent agency in synergy with the aims of land ownership—"The full-adjusted Harmony of Things" in James

Thomson's georgic poem, *The Seasons*—might itself be only a thin crust hiding a material reality much harder to reconcile with the providentialism of eighteenth-century improvers.¹⁸ The Solway Moss becomes a recalcitrant witness not only of its own history, human and natural, but of the way in which—in the eighteenth century as now—we look to individual landscapes both to define and question the border between nature and ourselves.

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¹⁸ James Thomson, "Autumn," line 835, in Thomson, *The Seasons*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 177.