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## The Natural-Supernatural Solway

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## THE NATURAL-SUPERNATURAL SOLWAY

*Fiona Stafford*

In August 1792, Robert Burns wrote to his friend Mrs Dunlop to let her know that he was in love with one of her neighbours, signing off with a characteristically self-dramatizing flourish: “written at this wild place of the world, in the intervals of my labor of discharging a vessel of rum from Antigua.”<sup>1</sup> The “wild place” was Annan Waterfoot. Although Burns often located his letters before despatching them, he was not in the habit of characterizing his surroundings. Annan was unfamiliar territory, Burns, excited and unsettled by the spirits of place and bottle. His awareness of the distant origin of the rum was heightened by his work as an Excise Officer and perhaps by thoughts of Agnes McLehose, his fair Clarinda, who had left to rejoin her husband in the West Indies.<sup>2</sup>

Annan Waterfoot was a “place of the world,” as Burns was discovering through his new career. The Solway’s broad mouth was for ever welcoming and discharging vessels of various kinds to and from Scottish and Cumbrian harbours, from Wales, the Isle of Man, the West of England, Ireland, Europe, the Caribbean and the Americas.<sup>3</sup> The coast was “wild,” too. Even in August tides swept in fast across the marshes and mudflats, while smugglers still moved surreptitiously among the Solway’s many inlets. On the seashore, it was often hard to tell where the land stopped and the sea began, as the sands shifted with the tides, the saltmarshes filled and disappeared. The estuary was marked with “scars” made from the pebbles and grit carried by the rivers, from the shells pounded by the waves. The turbulent power of the estuary erupts from the confluence of rivers meeting

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Burns to Mrs Dunlop, 22 August, 1792, in G. Ross Roy, ed., *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), II: 144; hereafter Roy.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Crawford, *The Bard: Robert Burns, A Biography* (London: Cape, 2009), 342-346.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Nixon and Hugh Dias, *Exploring Solway History* (Derby: Breedon Books, 2007), 32-35, 55-56, 71-73.

the surge of the sea. The waters of the Annan, along with the Bladnoch, Cree, Dee, Eamont, Esk, Eden, Fleet, Irthing, Luce, Nith, Waver, Wampool and Urr, flow into the firth, but at times, especially when the moon is new or full, the freshwater may be overwhelmed by the force of the tide rushing upstream.<sup>4</sup> Like many of the river ports along the Solway, Annan turned inward and outward, towards Lockerbie and the Borders as well as to faraway worlds over the sea. When Burns had encountered the River Annan at Moffat, it was smaller, slower and tamer altogether. But, if wild at the waterfoot, it was wild at the waterhead, too. The river rises north of Moffat at Annanhead Hill, just above the “damned deep, black, blackguard-looking abyss of a hole,” as one of Scott’s characters described the geological formation otherwise known as the Marquis’s Beef-stand or Devil’s Beef Tub.<sup>5</sup> The sway of the Solway reaches deep inland, drawing life from a vast network of freshwater veins and arteries, stirring and seeping into the minds of those who travel or dwell there.

The woman who inspired Burns’s letter to Mrs Dunlop was not Clarinda, but Lesley Baillie. She was travelling south through Dumfries with her father and sister and found Burns more than happy to escort the party on their way towards Gretna. At the end of a heady day, Burns composed his song, “O saw ye bonie Lesley, / As she gaed o’er the Border?”<sup>6</sup> The wildness of the Solway was in keeping with Burns’s mood, judging by his extravagant, sea-soaked confession to Mrs Dunlop: “I am almost in love with an acquaintance of yours. ‘Almost!’ said I—I am in love, souse! over head & ears, deep as the most unfathomable abyss of the boundless ocean” (Roy, II: 142-143). The inner tumult is evident in the celebratory lines of his new song, “To see her is to love her, / And love but her for ever,” which carry an unmistakable echo of “Ae Fond Kiss,” composed only a few months before for Agnes Mclellan. Burns’s letter reveals the swell and fall of internal depths, as his “weather-beaten” conscience struggles with his boundless, unfathomable feeling (*ibid.*, 142). The emphasis on the purity of his feelings for Mrs Dunlop’s young friend, who had appeared like “a Messenger from Heaven,” demonstrates the collision between sexual desire and the opposing forces of respect for Miss Baillie’s reputation, Mrs Dunlop’s good opinion and an unusually determined effort of self-restraint (*ibid.*, 143). The great estuary, with its clashing currents, was a wild enough place for such emotional drama—as well as for the emptiness that ensued. The letter moves on in quieter mood,

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<sup>4</sup> “The Solway Tides,” *Nature*, 151 (1943): 51: <https://doi.org/10.1038/151051a0>

<sup>5</sup> Walter Scott, *Redgauntlet*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 242.

<sup>6</sup> James Kinsley, ed., *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), II: 596–97.

as the departure of Miss Baillie leads to thoughts on the misery of separation from friends and, finally, the permanent distance caused by death. The wild place of this world was prompting meditation on the uncertain “world beyond the grave” (*ibid.*, 144).

Lesley Baillie was still on Burns’s mind a fortnight later, when he sent warm, if belated, wishes to his newly wed friend, Alexander Cunningham. Before sharing his memories of “the loveliness of the works of God in such an unequalled display” which he had enjoyed on his day out with the Baillies, Burns was riffing on inspiration, or rather its absence.<sup>7</sup> His speculation on the mysterious movement of the “Spirit” shifts from Isaiah to more local presences—bogles, brownies, ghosts and apparitions—before descending into the mundanity of the “prating Advocate” and “tea-bibbing Gossip” (*ibid.*, 145-146). Although evidently intended to amuse his friend, Burns’s elaborate evocation of Scottish folklore attests to his own interest in haunted places. His longstanding awareness of supernatural beliefs had informed earlier poems such as “Address to the Deil,” “Halloween” and “Death and Dr Hornbook.” In the long, autobiographical letter he sent to John Moore in 1787, Burns attributed his knowledge of such matters to the influence of his mother’s maid, Betty Davidson, who loved to tell “tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, cantraipts, giants, enchanted towers, dragons and other trumpery” (Roy, I: 135). The old folk beliefs gripped his imagination and cultivated the “latent seeds of Poesy,” which flowered abundantly on the arrival of Francis Grose in Dumfriesshire, whose enquiries prompted Burns’s comic-supernatural *tour de force*, “Tam o’ Shanter.”<sup>8</sup>

Although Burns’s brilliant narrative poem is explicitly set in Alloway, it was composed at Friar’s Carse by the waters of the Nith. Internal details, then, about storms, fords, and rivers, including Tam’s narrow escape over the bridge, or his inability to “tether time and tide,” may owe something to Burns’s new home in Dumfriesshire.<sup>9</sup> The strong association between supernatural phenomena and particular locations in “Tam o’ Shanter” is evident again in Burns’s strange letter to Cunningham of September 1792. As Burns expatiates on the movements of “spirit,” each manifestation is vividly imagined in its peculiar setting, from the “Bogle by the eerie side of an auld thorn” to the ghost among “the hoary ruins of decayed Grandeur” (Roy, II: 145). As in the poems, the procession of apparitions is hedged about with humour but, in the light of the gloomy meditations

<sup>7</sup> Burns to Alexander Cunningham, 10 September, 1792, in Roy, *Letters*, II: 147.

<sup>8</sup> Roy, I: 135; “Tam o’ Shanter” was first published in Grose’s *Antiquities of Scotland* (1791), and in the *Edinburgh Magazine* and *Edinburgh Herald*.

<sup>9</sup> “Tam o’ Shanter,” l. 67, in Kinsley, II: 559.

about the “world beyond the grave” in his previous letter, the ghosts and bogles retain a more chilling quality.

Among these eerie spirits is the Kelpie, which had also appeared in the catalogue of horrors recalled from Betty Davidson’s remarkable repertoire. What is striking in the letter to Cunningham is the more selective, more imaginative, and more carefully situated evocation of the supernatural. The Kelpie, a shape-changing water demon, often resembling a horse and always bent on drowning its victims, was a source of terror local to the Solway. Burns’s address to this manifestation suggests the influence of his current surroundings rather than his old haunts in Alloway:

Be thou a KELPIE, haunting the ford, or ferry, in the starless night,  
mixing thy laughing yell with the howling of the storm & the  
roaring of the flood, as thou viewest the perils & miseries of Man  
on the foundering horse, or in the tumbling boat! (*ibid.*).

The Kelpie was sometimes associated with rivers, sometimes seashores, but primarily with the “fresh and the salt” of the Solway.<sup>10</sup> In their compendium of maritime legends, the modern folklorists Sophia Kingshill and Jennifer Westwood recount a “shocking episode” from 1830, when a group of passengers accidentally disembarked on a sandbank in the Solway.<sup>11</sup> Their cries for help, mistaken for the “wailings of Kelpies” by those on either side of the firth, went unheeded—with fatal consequences.

In areas where, all too often, swift tides and sudden storms sweep away the hapless and helpless, a belief in malignant water-spirits is not hard to understand. Burns’s vision of the Kelpie’s laughing yell, mixing with the howling storm and roaring flood, smacks of first-hand experience on the Solway’s shores. This was a wild place of the world, where “the world beyond the grave” often seemed uncomfortably close. The roar of a tidal bore, swirling up the Annan, the Eden or the Nith, is as intrinsic to the regional acoustic as the call of wild geese and the scream of gulls. George Neilson, describing the phenomenon in 1899, recalled the “tumbling foam” of the white wave, with its “great curve of broken surf” as a kind of marine stampede: “the white horses of the Solway ride to the end of their long gallop from the Irish Sea with a deep and angry roar.”<sup>12</sup> This was the

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<sup>10</sup> Ann Lingard’s *The Fresh and the Salt: The Story of the Solway* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2020) takes its title from Norman Nicholson’s poem “Five Rivers.”

<sup>11</sup> Sophia Kingshill and Jennifer Westwood, *The Fabled Coast* (London: UK Century/Random House, 2012; pbk edn, London: Arrow, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> George Neilson, “Annals of the Solway until AD 1307,” *Transactions of the Glasgow Archaeological Society*, 3.2 (1899): 245-308 (276), cited in Lingard, 268.

terrifying sound that characterized the Solway in Scott's *Redgauntlet* and which John Ruskin heard with awe in his twilight years.<sup>13</sup>

Burns, surveying the wide saltmarshes and mudflats of the Solway, must surely have been struck by the difference between the quiet, inland river that flowed past his farm at Ellisland and the rapid, restless, roar of the estuary where the Nith was engulfed by the sea. In a song written at Ellisland, "O were I on Parnassus Hill," Burns had proclaimed the Nith to be his new "Muses well," but it was by no means a calm, steady source providing a reliable supply of inspiration (Kinsley, I: 423). Though not as large or long as the Tweed or Clyde, the Nith is remarkably various, at times resembling the "trotting burn" of Burns's "Epistle to W. Simson" or, when coursing through the old bridge at Dumfries, like the Ayr in "The Brigs of Ayr," and finally, at Caerlaverock, more of a turbulent cauldron fit for songs of passion or witches tales. Burns understood how rapidly the waters of Dumfriesshire flowed and changed. His work with the Excise meant frequent exposure to wet winds, low clouds, slanting rain and seething waves, as well as liquid fortification with spirits of a portable kind. Songs, sounds, love and life often seemed as fluid and fleeting as the surrounding land and seascapes.

From Annan Waterfoot, as at Caerlaverock, Burns could turn his back on the sea to look upriver. Annandale was the old domain of Robert the Bruce, whose warlike character had fed local tradition for centuries and would now inspire one of Burns's most famous songs. The Solway's long history as a battleground lived on in song and story as well as in ruin and rampart. The drawings and descriptions of local sites, such as the ruined Spedlins Castle near Lockerbie, published by Francis Grose in *The Antiquities of Scotland*, created a permanent record of a rich historical and legendary heritage familiar from birth to those who lived there.<sup>14</sup> Burns's songs drew on his memories of Ayrshire tradition and his Highland tour, but were freshly invigorated by the history of the Solway region—the old Border conflicts and the more recent Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745.

The new antiquarian interest in Solway tradition was fostered more explicitly, however, by Burns's younger contemporary, Allan Cunningham, a Dumfriesshire stonemason, whose father served as factor to Burns's landlord at Ellisland. Cunningham built his alternative literary career on the local traditions and landscapes of the Solway, collecting,

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<sup>13</sup> See also my essay "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), 41–59.

<sup>14</sup> This reputation persists—the Kinmount stretch of the A75 between Annan and Dumfries is still known as the most haunted road in Scotland:  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-south-scotland-24655488>.

adapting and creating popular tales and poems, which he presented to the world as treasures recovered rather than composed. When Robert Cromek, inspired by his work on Burns's songs for his *Reliques of Robert Burns* (1808), turned to collecting further examples of the song culture of southwest Scotland, his main source was Allan Cunningham. The materials published in 1810 as *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song* were presented as having been "gleaned from among the peasantry," though they appear to have come almost entirely from the hand of his local adviser.<sup>15</sup> How much of Cunningham's work was based on tradition and how much on imagination is difficult to assess, not least because his work has since been used as evidence for local folklore.<sup>16</sup> The very fluidity of Cunningham's tales, however, is in many ways truer to a region where attempts to establish firm ground have so often foundered. Readers from near and far responded to a different kind of local truth in the stories he offered to the world.

Spedlins Castle, famous for its ghosts, provided the setting, but not the focus for Cunningham's "Judith Macrone, the Prophetess." Published as a "Traditional Tale" in the *London Magazine*, in September 1821, Cunningham's story brought the hidden character of the river valley to audiences far beyond the Annan. The tale begins with a guide-like description of Annan-water, locating its source and mouth, its Roman roads, medieval fortresses, rich vegetation and mixed agriculture. Within the realistic panorama, however, are details of secluded nooks and "fairy beauty," "deepest pools" and riverbanks of "varied and romantic character."<sup>17</sup> The "superior strength, agility and courage" of the local people is a prelude to remarks on the "strange, romantic, and martial stories" that "linger among them" and the good fortune of the narrator, who has lingered there too (*ibid.*, 231).

Cunningham's introduction to Annandale knowingly situates his own art within the area's "curious oral communications, in which history, true and fabulous, and poetry, and superstition, are strangely blended together" (*ibid.*). It was a manifesto for stories more distinctive than the "ordinary horror" of a castle spectre, for these were "traditions more romantic in their

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<sup>15</sup> 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), xxiv. See Dennis Read, "Cromek, Cunningham, and Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song: A Case of Literary Duplicity," *Studies in Bibliography*, 40 (1987): 171-190, and Read's *R. H. Cromek, Engraver, Editor, and Entrepreneur* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 126-139.

<sup>16</sup> Kingshill and Westwood give Cunningham as the source for Solway legends of "Phantom Ships," *Fabled Coast*, 315.

<sup>17</sup> Allan Cunningham, *Traditional Tales*, ed. Tim Killick (Glasgow: ASLS, 2012), 230.

origin and more deeply steeped in the dews of tradition” (*ibid.*). The tale of “Judith Macrone, The Prophetess” is at once part of Annandale and a window through which distant readers might gain a glimpse of an imaginative world unlike any other. Even before being transported to Annandale, readers are primed to expect supernatural presences by the “fearful shape” or “dismal shadow” introduced in the epigraph:

Something which haunts my slumbers—finds me out  
 In my deep dreams—in fiercest strife, when blood  
 Runs rife as rivulet water—in quiet peace  
 When rustic songs abound....<sup>18</sup>

This ominous note, struck at the start, means that even though the local community dismiss Judith’s troubling premonitions, readers expect the worst—and are therefore ready to accept both the tragedy that unfolds and the unhappy power of the prophetess. Cunningham’s tale invites sympathy for the grieving woman who lives alone in the woods beside the river and whose behaviour alienates many. Readers, perhaps far from the Annan, were being placed closer to its deepest pools than those who lived there and yet remained proofed against the romantic “dews of tradition.”

Cunningham’s stories blended verse and prose, history and fiction, orality and writing, in landscapes carefully observed and creatively imagined. The new periodical culture of the nineteenth century offered fresh opportunities for young writers, with the short story developing into a form ideally suited to uncanny moments, glimpses of otherworldliness and second-sight visions.<sup>19</sup> As a native of Dumfriesshire, nurtured on Solway tradition, Cunningham was well placed to supply the demand for arresting short stories. In a region of perpetually shifting light, weather, sea and sand, where fresh and saltwater meet and mingle, where currents collide, where rivers change course, ice over and melt, while storms descend and vanish as fast as breaking light, where nothing lasts long and yet the forgotten re-emerges without warning, tales are carried on the tides. In Cunningham’s tales, phantoms appear or vanish into the waves, while an apparently spectral ship might emerge “through the cloud, approaching the coast in full swing; her sails rent, and the wave and foam flashing over her, mid—mast high” and still turn out to be crewed by men, ocean-battered,

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<sup>18</sup> Here as in the *London Magazine*, 4 (September 1821), 237, these lines are attributed to an “Old Play,” but they come (slightly misquoted) from Cunningham’s own Solway-based verse drama *Sir Marmaduke Maxwell, A Dramatic Poem* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1822), V.v.43-46.

<sup>19</sup> Ian Duncan, *Scott’s Shadow* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 26–29.

long absent, but all the more welcome to families ashore.<sup>20</sup> Solway folklore is soaked in the distinctive seascape. The return of Richard Faulder and the crew of the Mermaid, for example, is observed from the Cumbrian hills, overlooking the “mighty space” between Criffel and Skiddaw:

While this conversation went on, the clouds had assembled on the summits of the Scottish and Cumbrian mountains, and a thick canopy of vapour, which hung over the Isle of Man, waxed more ominous and vast. A light, as of a fierce fire burning, dropped frequent from its bosom,—throwing a sort of supernatural flame along the surface of the water (*ibid.*, 202–3).

The atmospheric effects, amplified by the local acoustics (“the wild and piercing scream” of the seabirds, “the hollow moan running among the cliffs!”) animate the scene and prompt the watching reapers to anticipate fatalities. Cunningham’s Solway tales raise questions about what is seen, what is imagined and how humans make sense—and stories—of their experiences. The borders between metaphorical and literal, natural and supernatural, tale and tale are perpetually dissolving: the story of Richard Faulder, published in January 1821, was followed in March by a tale told by Faulder, which echoes the opening of its predecessor. “The Last Lord of Helvellyn” opens with a similar panoramic, clifftop view over “a low dark mist” rising from the middle of the Solway, which first suggests the shape of a boat and then becomes “a barge, with a shroud for a sail” (*ibid.*, 214). Once ashore, the sound of the crew turns from “mirth to sorrow,” while “the forms of seven men, shaped from the cloud” lie stretched out on the beach, with an extra space “like room measured out for an eighth” (*ibid.*). The recollection of the previous tale creates a sense of the uncanny in the reader, which in turn sets the tone for the visionary nature of the scene on the beach. Uncertain sights and ominous forecasts give rise, naturally enough, to strange stories, along an estuary steeped in the history of human misadventure, where for centuries, rapid tides have been sweeping away seafarers and washing up skeletons and wreckage.

While the supernatural often seems to erupt from the sea and weather, the unfolding tale may provoke a deeper unease over human behaviour. If “Miles Colvine, The Cumberland Mariner,” with its mysterious, grizzled protagonist and the beautiful “creature” gliding around the remote coastal cottage, raises expectations of a fairy story, it soon develops into an account of human brutality. There is nothing romantic or sinister about Colvine hiding away his daughter, once the traumatic memories of his wife’s unspeakable fate at the hands of smugglers have been shared. In this disturbing tale, human action is far more troubling than supernatural

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<sup>20</sup> “The Haunted Ships,” *Traditional Tales*, 261–75; “Richard Faulder, Mariner,” *Traditional Tales*, 201–213 (207).

possibility. “The Ghost with the Golden Casket” sounds similarly like a fairy tale, but the account of Gilbert Gyrape obsessively re-enacting his cold-blooded robbery and murder of a young female shipwreck survivor turns a local ghost story into a harrowing psychological study. And yet, Cunningham’s tales, “deeply steeped in the dews of tradition” are often as enchanting as horrifying. Even this sombre tale includes an alternative version of the wreck in the ballad sung by young fishermen on a “tranquil evening” at the beautiful shoreline at Caerlaverock.<sup>21</sup>

As the haunt of beings thought to inhabit sea and land, half-human, half-marine, the Solway offered presences menacing and enticing, immediate and elusive. Since the appetite for strange phenomena was keen among early nineteenth-century readers, Cunningham had a ready-made audience for his local tales. When sightings of mermaids began to fill the national press in 1809, for example, he was able to offer a story from Galloway—where such creatures were apparently long familiar. In October, the *Scots Magazine* published an eye-witness account from Miss Elizabeth Mackay, daughter of the Minister of Reay in Caithness, of a “remarkable inhabitant of the deep,” with a pink-cheeked, human face and long hair of a “green, oily cast.”<sup>22</sup> Miss Mackay, who was at pains to emphasize her habitual scepticism regarding such sightings “among the lower class” and to mention the four friends who had also seen the strange figure on 12 January, was still not convinced that she had seen a mermaid. Her letter, however, was published alongside an account from William Munro in nearby Thurso, who was quite sure that he had. Twelve years before, when working as a schoolmaster in Reay, Munro had seen “a figure of an unclothed female, sitting on a rock extended into the sea, and apparently in the action of combing its hair, which flowed around its shoulders, and of a light brown colour” (*ibid.*, 736). Like Miss Mackay, he had heard local stories about mermaids with incredulity and admitted that “it was only by seeing the phenomenon” that he became “perfectly convinced of its existence.” First-hand evidence from educated observers stimulated excitement across Great Britain. As Vaughn Scribner has shown in his recent book on *Merpeople*, the “supposed authenticity” of the accounts from Caithness led to further coverage, such as the report of a wounded mermaid in the Isle of Wight which appeared in March.<sup>23</sup> The first half of the nineteenth century saw not only a plethora of mermaid

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<sup>21</sup> “The Ghost with the Golden Casket,” *Traditional Tales*, 252.

<sup>22</sup> “Letters descriptive of the MERMAID seen on the Coast of CAITHNESS,” *Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Miscellany*, October 1809, 734.

<sup>23</sup> Vaughn Scribner, *Merpeople* (London: Reaktion, 2020), 130. Scribner (129-130) notes that Munro’s letter was first published in the London *Morning Chronicle* in June 1809, and the Isle of Wight report in the *Morning Post* in March 1810.

sightings, but also descriptions, drawings and even displays of specimens supposedly caught by fishermen in the Far East (*ibid.*, 131–71).

There could hardly have been a more auspicious time for the appearance of “The Mermaid of Galloway” than 1810, when Cromek’s *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway* was published. Unlike the reports from Caithness, this Scottish mermaid was not offered as a startling once-in-a-lifetime sighting by a sceptical observer of an as-yet-unexplained natural phenomenon, but rather as a familiar figure of local culture. Far from dismissing mermaids as part of ignorant, lower-class superstition, Cunningham was deeply sympathetic to a tradition enriched “with the fame of this bewitching Mermaid.” The ballad is prefaced by the comment that “many of the good old folks have held most edifying and instructing communion with her,” along with details of her “favourite haunts and couches ... along the shores of the Nith and Orr, and on the edge of the Solway sea, which adjoins the mouths of those waters.”<sup>24</sup> The poem begins accordingly at the “merse,” a term specific to the Solway for the flat saltmarsh along the estuary:

There’s a maid has sat o’ the green merse side  
Thae ten lang years and mair;  
An’ every first night o’ the new moon  
She kames her yellow hair.<sup>25</sup>

The natural danger of the Solway currents, the quick-sands, dubs, and shifting sandbars, were the perfect environment for this enchanting, amphibious creature. In the wild places where the otherworld pressed close, where the natural often seemed supernatural, and even the mud, magical, a being half-woman, half-fish was very much at home. With her pearl comb, white shoulders and shift of sea-green silk net, she perches naturally on the sea-weed rock, “wash’d wi’ the white sea faem.”<sup>26</sup>

The mermaid of Galloway is a siren figure, whose music is irresistible to anyone who hears it, such as young Willie of Cowehill in Nithsdale, who catches the unearthly air through the “greenwood” (*ibid.*, 236). The preface explains that the mermaid is a goddess, bestowing affection only on “men of exalted virtue,” but the poem reveals the deadly power of her attractions as Willie is carried off to her watery domain, leaving his forlorn bride to wait in vain. The ravishing sound and appearance of the mermaid, half seen, half heard, and always on the point of disappearing into another realm is reminiscent of the Irish *aisling* or Sky-woman, or La Belle Dame Sans Merci. She is the Venus of the Solway, the embodiment of desire,

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<sup>24</sup> *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway*, 229–30.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 234; Lingard, “Marshes and Merses,” *Fresh and the Salt*, 94–131

<sup>26</sup> *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway*, 237.

born on the waves, a force universal and perennial, but clothed in local colour.

Although Cunningham's tales are filled with pain, violence and loss, the human tragedies are part of a place charged with magic and lit by celestial glimpses of other realms. His habit of casting himself as a listener to conversations among working people in real places creates a figure for the reader in the text, while simultaneously setting himself apart. The narrator is at once a down-to-earth local, puzzled by what he sees close to home and a medium for the unexplained. Often he catches only incomplete truths, but in so doing sets the reader's imagination free to create the rest. The unheard melodies of the Mermaid, the unconfessed guilt of Gilbert Gytrap, the untold suffering of Miles Colvine or the unseen congress of Ezra Peden, are far more enticing than fuller explanations.

These were no ordinary Gothic tales, but expressions of a writer who presented "this world" as "an outer husk or shell, which encloses a kernel of most rare abode, where dwell the Mermaids of popular belief."<sup>27</sup> Cunningham understood that local folklore was a sacred well of magical stories, ancient music and natural truth, whose old, lifegiving force had been almost destroyed by the successive waves of reforming zeal, political upheaval, war, and modernity. In this way, his *Traditional Tales* can be seen in the light of a more famous contemporary and Cumbrian, who in a sonnet published in 1807 had expressed his own wish to

Have sight of Proteus coming from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.<sup>28</sup>

Wordsworth had already tapped into the mythology of the Solway region in *Lyrical Ballads*, in poems such as "A Fragment" and "Ellen Irwin," but his *Poems, in Two Volumes* included numerous poems inspired by Scottish tradition. The rapt listener in "The Solitary Reaper" expresses a pervasive longing for an increasingly elusive world of imaginative vision. Scott had demonstrated the attraction of Border legends to modern audiences in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, 1802–3, and *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* of 1805, laying the ground for Cunningham to offer glimpses of a dangerous and enticing "kernel of most rare abode."

And yet, it was perhaps Robert Burns who understood the extremes of the Solway better than anyone. As he waded into the cold water at Brow well in the summer of 1796, the other world pressed all too close. The profound, conflicted feelings experienced in this wild place of the world only four years before were soon to be engulfed altogether. But during his

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<sup>27</sup> *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway*, 230.

<sup>28</sup> William Wordsworth, "The world is too much with us," ll. 13–14, *Poems, in Two Volumes*, 2 vols (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807), I: 122.

brief sojourn in the Solway region, Burns was moved to create the songs that would outlive his mortal body and give independent life to the passions, in all their heights and depths.

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