

Medieval Scottish Historians and the Contest for Britain

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Abstract Scholars often claim that medieval writers use *Britain* and *England* interchangeably, but *Britain* was a contested term throughout the period. One persistent issue was how Scotland fit within Anglocentric visions of the island it shared with England and Wales. This article traces imperialist geography in English historiography via the *descriptio Britanniae* (description of Britain), a trope found across the Middle Ages, and the fourteenth-century Gough Map, the first sheet-map of Britain. Scottish historians rebut the claims of their Anglocentric counterparts and demonstrate their incomplete knowledge, which they zealously supplement by inventorying Scotland's natural abundance. In particular, the article concentrates on the remarkable celebration of Scotland's marine life in Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon* (ca. 1447). Attending to the long history of these debates both reveals and counteracts the Anglocentrism of insular literary history.

Keywords history writing, Scottish literature, Britain, nation, imperialism

Great Britain" as a confederated political entity was a creation of the eighteenth century, but throughout the Middle Ages insular historians were fascinated with the geography and identity of the land they occupied.¹ One persistent issue was how Scotland fit within Anglocentric

¹ For histories of Britain, see Broun 2007, Colley 2008, Davies 2000, Ingham 2016, Kerrigan 2008, and Meecham-Jones 2008.

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Figure 1.
Matthew Paris,
map of Britain,
ca. 1250.
London, British
Library, Cotton
MS Claudius D
vi, fol. 12v.
Courtesy of the
British Library.



visions of the island it shared with England and Wales. While Wales was conquered by Edward I in 1284, Scotland remained beyond the reach of English kings. Although it seemed at times that Scotland might be brought under the yoke of the English, somehow the decisive blow was never struck, and fundamental change came only when James VI of Scotland was crowned king of England in 1603 and claimed the title of king of Great Britain and Ireland the next year. In an almost literal representation of English anxieties about Scotland, maps and historical texts sometimes imagined the north of Scotland as detached from the rest of the island. For example, the thirteenth-century historian Matthew Paris's four maps of Britain show northern Scotland connected to the British mainland only by a bridge at Stirling (fig. 1), and they heighten the sense of separation between England and Scotland through exaggerated representations of the Antonine Wall and Hadrian's Wall. The history and geography of Britain became a way for English historians to imagine an Anglocentric vision of Britain and to create historical precedents for why this distant land should be brought under English control. Scottish historians did not reject the historiographical tradition wholesale but reformed it, rebutting the claims of English historians and revealing their impoverished understanding of the island they shared.

Medieval English historians often represented the history of their realm as comprising three eras recognizable by different names:

þis lond hæp hadde names þre:
 First men cleped [called] it Albion
 & seþpe [after that], for Brut, Breteyne anon,
 & now Ingland icleped it is.
 (National Library of Scotland 2003: lines 1270–73)

First Albion, then Britain, now England: the names may change, but the land stays the same. This providential triplet melded histories of territory, conquest, and identity and named England the inheritor of Britain (MacColl 2006). But the historians' representations of Britain aligned with the military expansionism of the kings of England by portraying the whole island as a territory they rightfully controlled. This ideological project was supported by a trope known as the *descriptio Britanniae*, a chorographic "description of Britain" that inventories the geography, resources, and regions of the island. Emerging in the fifth- or sixth-century work of Gildas known as *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae* (*Concerning the Ruin of Britain*), the *descriptio* became a mainstay of insular historiography and even entered the university classroom (Ruddick 2013: 52). Providing more than the vividness occasioned by the use of *descriptio* in rhetoric, the *descriptio Britanniae* is instead a form of ethno-genesis, a yoking of people to place (Grey 2015; Kempshall 2012: 330n264). These geographic imaginings engage a logic that ultimately positions the rulers of England as inheritors of the entire island rather than of one of its constituent parts, making a singular out of Britain's coexistent plurality of identities.

Similar geographic descriptions in medieval Scottish history writing register the imperialist dreams of English kings while promoting countervailing strategies. In particular, two interlinked Latin chronicles, the *Chronica gentis Scotorum* (*Chronicle of the Scottish People*) of John of Fordun (ca. 1384) and the *Scotichronicon* of Walter Bower (ca. 1447), establish a vision of Scotland based on correcting the mistakes of insular historians.² Fordun and Bower rebut the claims of earlier historians, both demonstrating their incomplete knowledge and zealously supplementing it. Alan MacColl (2006: 249–50) argues that Scottish historians reacted to Anglocentric visions of Britain by expanding British identity to include

² John of Fordun's text is printed as part of Bower 1987–98. All quotations are taken from this edition and are cited by volume and page number.

Scotland, but he neglects Scottish historians who used geographic accounts of Britain to reinforce claims of Scottish identity rather than assimilate to a broader insular community.

John of Fordun's *Chronica gentis Scotorum* adapted the tradition of the universal chronicle to Scottish history. Encapsulating the history of the world from Creation, the universal chronicle is a genre that had flourished in England, France, and the Arab world (Campopiano and Bainton 2017; Muhanna 2018). While its scope may seem at first glance more "international than national," Emily Steiner (2005: 174) shows that the genre's capaciousness allowed historians to put a local spin on world history. Where earlier Scottish history writing had mainly comprised stark lists of kings, John of Fordun created a vivid historical narrative that defined "the independence of the Scottish people from the earliest beginnings" (Royan 2016: 369). Sixty years after the *Chronica gentis Scotorum*, Bower, abbot of Inchcolm Abbey in the Firth of Forth, expanded the text to create the *Scotichronicon*.³ Medieval chroniclers often adapted the work of their predecessors, but Bower's transformation goes beyond the usual mode of expansion. What had been a relatively slim work became monumental as Bower added eleven books to the *Chronica*'s five; the modern edition runs to nine volumes. Among his new materials, Bower provided extra details, new information, and, especially, new quotations from literary authorities.

Bringing the historical narrative of the Scots up to the present day of the 1440s, the *Scotichronicon* has been described by its modern editor as "a national treasure" of Scottish literature (Bower 1987–98, 1:xiv). The text ends with an emphatic endorsement of this national agenda: "Christ! He is not a Scot who is not pleased with this book" ([Non] Scotus est Christe cui liber non placet iste) (8:340 [trans. 341]). Yet the declaration is more a statement of aspiration than a reflection of political reality: Scotland remained a heavily regional land, split between the Highlands, the West,

³ Katherine H. Terrell (2012: 153–54) draws attention to the conceptual power of the *descriptio Britanniae* but focuses on the mythographic rather than the geographic project of Scottish historiography. Critical discussion of the *Scotichronicon* has focused on its attitudes toward kingship and, more recently, on the representation of saintly and royal women and its use of dream visions. For Bower's use of dream visions, see Murray 2017. For Bower on kingship, see Mapstone 1998. For representations of women, see Ash 2015, Harrill 2016, Royan 2008, and Spencer-Hall 2013. For Bower's relationship to contemporary politics and the legacy of the *Scotichronicon*, see Mapstone 1999.

and the center of royal power in the Lowlands. Moreover, Bower was by no means engaged in a democratic project. Unlike other works of Scottish historiography, such as the *Original Chronicle* of Andrew of Wyntoun (ca. 1407–20), which were designed to increase historical awareness among the laity, Bower’s project is explicitly institutionalizing and geared toward a Latinate public, a goal that it spectacularly achieved (Mapstone 1999; Terrell 2011). That is to say, the vision of Scotland that emerges through the *Scotichronicon* is sharply circumscribed, organized around a powerful church, and should not be mistaken for a nascent articulation of “organic” nationhood. Like all concepts of nation, Bower’s theocentric vision is a construct that illustrates the contingent process of national imagining on a path that ultimately was not taken.⁴ Furthermore, Bower’s imagined community of Scotland reproduces the centralizing tendencies that he so abhors in England’s treatment of Scotland.

Wars of Historiography

English claims to suzerainty over Scotland were based on a historical fiction that R. James Goldstein (1993: 57–103) describes as a “war of historiography.” Beginning with Edward I in the late thirteenth century, English monarchs drew on historical writing not simply as a record of valiant deeds but as support for their imperial claims in Scotland. Edward asked monasteries to search their records for evidence legitimating his rule in Scotland that he ultimately used in an appeal to the pope to endorse his project of Plantagenet empire (Clanchy 2013: 154–56, 163; Crooks, Green, and Ormrod 2016; Given-Wilson 2004: 65–69). While Goldstein concentrates on how these historiographical conflicts unfolded from 1291 to 1321, the most intense years of the Wars of Independence, similar ideas emerged throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In 1352 Ranulph Higden, author of the *Polychronicon*, one of the most popular chronicles of the late Middle Ages, was told to

⁴ As Kate Ash-Irisarri (2019: 243) shows, the chronicle uses a broad vocabulary of community, emphasizing “*regnum*, *gens*, and *patria* over *nacio*, which does not assume a dominant force in Scottish historiographical writing until [Hector] Boece’s sixteenth-century *Scotorum Historia*.” For studies of medieval literature and nation, see Ashe 2017: 357–430, Butterfield 2009, Lavezzo 2004 (especially Galloway 2004), Staley 2012, and Turville-Petre 1996.

bring all the chronicles in his possession to court to address the King's Council. No surviving evidence explains Higden's summons, but given the high priority of Scotland for Edward III at that time, it is possible that he was called as a witness for the prosecution in the renewed "war of historiography" (Brown 1998; Given-Wilson 2004: 74; Gransden 1982: 43). Similarly, in a campaign launched against Scotland in 1400 Henry IV ordered muniments and chronicles outlining his ancient right to rule Scotland to be brought north with him (Given-Wilson 2016: 169).

Although Bower was writing the *Scotichronicon* around forty years after Henry IV's campaign, history remained a potent tool for asserting English domination. Shortly after Bower finished his chronicle, John Hardyng, an English soldier and former spy, took on the mantle of imperialist history by producing a chronicle that not only demonstrated England's dominion over Scotland but also laid out explicit plans for invasion (Peverley 2012). In his prologue Hardyng (2015) states that he has written the chronicle so that Henry VI can "know the state of youre domynacioun," especially Scotland, "which shuld your reule obaye / As sovereyn lorde, fro whiche they [the Scots] prouwdly straye" (lines 7, 20–21). As English kings sought to assert dominance over Scotland, the authority of historical chronicles became a pillar of their ideological and legal case. Bower wrote the *Scotichronicon* in part as an act of resistance to this threat, a monumental effort to refute and supersede incomplete, partial, and biased English history.

Bower generates an origin myth for Scottish history writing from the tradition of English historiographical aggression. Indeed, throughout the *Scotichronicon* Bower treats the reign of Edward I as the decisive break in Anglo-Scottish relations. The prologue to the most authoritative manuscript of the *Scotichronicon* provides an evocative account of how Bower's source text, the *Chronica gentis Scotorum*, was compiled.⁵ According to Bower, when Edward called for evidence supporting his claim over Scotland, he destroyed or stole many of Scotland's chronicles, so John of Fordun began collecting the stories of his people in what amounted to a cross-border intellectual raid. "For that reason," Bower (1987–98, 9:12 [trans. 15]) writes, the industrious chronicler traversed Britain and

⁵ Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 171, a manuscript produced under Bower's supervision.

Ireland “like a busy bee” (Idcirco et ipse pedester tamquam apis argumentosa), visiting as many places and speaking to as many people as possible to gather material. “From such exhaustive enquiries he found out what was unknown to him, and he carefully gathered together his findings like combs flowing with honey in a book he carried on his person as if in a beehive” (Tali fatigabili investigacione, quod non novit invenit atque in sinuali suo codice, tamquam in alveario, inventa, quasi mellifluos favos accurate congessit) (9:14 [trans. 15]; translation modified). The image of John of Fordun that emerges from Bower’s representation is an intellectual equivalent to the raids that Scottish forces undertook throughout the later Middle Ages. Bands of Scottish soldiers would pass through the border counties of England, stealing animals and leaving destruction in their wake. According to Bower, the “venerable priest” (venerabilis presbyter) John of Fordun was equally adept at such raids, hunting out and taking precious stories before returning, richer, to Scotland (9:12 [trans. 14]).

The extended bee metaphor is more than a figure of speech. It can in part be explained by the popularity of the bee as an image of authorship in the Middle Ages. According to Seneca the Younger (2014: 276 [trans. 277]), we should, when considering composition, “follow the example of the bees, . . . who flit about and cull the flowers that are suitable for producing honey, and then arrange and assort in their cells all that they have brought in” (apes, ut aiunt, debemus imitari, quae vagantur et flores ad mel faciendum idoneos carpunt, deinde quicquid attulere, disponunt ac per favos digerunt) (see Carruthers 2008: 237). *Argumentosus* means persuasive, plausible, convincing, or ingeniously contrived, underscoring John of Fordun’s tenacity.⁶ Furthermore, Bower’s bee imagery recalls one of the most famous passages of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*, ca. 1136), an origin story cited by Edward I in his appeal to the papacy supporting suzerainty over Scotland (Ruddick 2013: 69, 172–74; Stones 1965: 97–98). Geoffrey (2007) narrates how Brutus, grandson of Aeneas and a Trojan refugee, washed up on the shore of a land overrun with giants and known as Albion. Brutus cleared the land, and it was renamed Britain in his honor. After colonizing the island, Brutus divided it into

⁶ *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (2018), s.v. “argumentosus.”

three portions—what would become England, Scotland, and Wales—for his sons (Ruddick 2013: 69). In the context of Anglo-Scottish antagonism, Geoffrey's narrative of succession and division cedes dominant control of Britain to England as the first inhabited portion of the island and granted to the eldest son, relegating Scotland and Wales to inferior positions, possessions of the younger siblings (Terrell 2011: 321).

The Trojan origin myth dominated histories of England and became a touchstone for Anglocentric visions of British history with a political afterlife well into the early modern period (see Gillingham 2000; Ingham 2001: esp. 21–50; Ingledeu 1994; Warren 2000). In the *Basilikon Doron*, a mirror for princes written for his son, James VI and I (1599: 99) counsels that “by deuinding your Kingdomes, yee shall leaue the seede of diuisione and discorde among your posteritie.” A line added to the edition of the *Basilikon* printed in London in 1603, the year of James's ascent to the English throne, makes the British context explicit: “as befell to this Ile: by the diuision and assignment thereof, to the three sonnes of *Brutus, Lochrine, Albanact, and Camber*” (James VI and I 1603: 83; quoted in Kerrigan 2008: 17).

Historians in Scotland responded to Geoffrey's Trojan legend by inventing a competing vision of national origin centered on Gaythelos, son of a Greek king, and Scota, daughter of an Egyptian pharaoh, who arrived in Scotland many years before Brutus (see Goldstein 1993; Terrell 2011, 2012; see also Wingfield 2014). Less well known is their grappling with Geoffrey's representation of Britain as an abundant garden. Geoffrey mostly confines the Edenic setting to England. John of Fordun and Walter Bower set out to correct the imbalance and in so doing rewrite the history of Britain.

Geoffrey's (2007: 7) *Historia* begins with Britain's floral and natural harmony, including “flowers of various colors which attract bees to fly to them and gather” (aduolantibus apibus flores diuersorum colorum mella distribuunt), in addition to a wide array of wild beasts and verdant fields.⁷ Geoffrey represents the island as an uncorrupted space, describing the “green meadows pleasantly situated beneath lofty mountains, where clear streams flow in silver rivulets and softly murmur, offering the

⁷ For an analysis of the colonial imagery of this passage, see Staley 2012; for its colonialism, Warren 2000.

assurance of gentle sleep to those who lie by their banks” (prata sub aeriis montibus amoeno situ uirentia, in quibus fontes lucidi, per nitidos riuos leni murmure manantes, pignus suavis soporis in ripis accubantibus irritant). Although we now know that Bower mischaracterizes John of Fordun’s composition process by passing over his use of earlier Scottish chronicles, it is a powerful origin myth (see Royan 2016: 369–70). In portraying Fordun as a bee-raider who travels throughout the island before taking his spoils back to Scotland, Bower foregrounds the political drive behind his project: rather than produce a chronicle to sit beside other examples of British historiography, he builds on the *Chronica gentis Sotorum* to create an aggressive intervention in the Anglocentric historiographical tradition.

How Britain Is Written

Both John of Fordun and Walter Bower draw attention to the lack of knowledge about Scotland in previous works of insular history, in which Scotland appears only as a northern periphery populated by aggressive tribes threatening intermittent invasion. The tradition of representing Britain stretches back to the beginnings of British historiography (see Foot 2019; Otter 1996: 73–75). Chroniclers would start their works with a description of the island to orient the reader and circumscribe the territory of their accounts. First appearing in the fifth- or sixth-century *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae* of Gildas (1978: §3.1), and then included in Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*) in the eighth century, the *descriptio Britanniae* was a mainstay of insular historiography. More than an objective recitation of geographic facts, the topos enfolded political visions for how the realms within Britain should relate to one another. The varied agendas of historians and the changing nature of political community prevent us from dismissing it as a simplistic articulation of “English” dominance at the expense of Wales and Scotland—chroniclers write from their own perspectives, embedded in individual networks of patronage, influence, and affiliation—yet it was an important tool for asserting claims of superiority over the island of Britain. John of Fordun and Walter Bower take up this tradition in the late Middle Ages, using it as a foundation for Scottish history while critiquing the implicit Anglocentrism that had gone before.

Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*, finished in 731, develops the framework first essayed in Gildas, creating a paradigmatic model for insular historiography (see Staley 2012: 15–70). Bede's (1969: 1.1) first chapter locates Britain in relation to the rest of the world and integrates information from Isidore of Seville and Solinus. "Britain," Bede writes, "once called Albion, is an island of the ocean, and lies to the north-west" (*Britannia Oceani insula cui quondam Albion nomen fuit, inter septentrionem et occidentem locata est*). Emphasizing how rich in crops and trees Britain is, Bede draws special attention to its rivers, describing them as remarkable (*praeclara*) and abounding in fish, particularly salmon (*issicio*) and eel (*anguilla*). These rivers provide sustenance and luxury goods, such as the pearls found in mussels. In addition, Britain has "various [other] kinds of shellfish . . . and a great abundance of whelks" (*uariorum generibus concyliorum . . . cocleae satis superque abundantes*). Bede's recitation of the island's natural fecundity is picked up by all following major historians.

The twelfth-century *Historia Anglorum* (*History of the English*) by Henry of Huntingdon (1996: 1.1) reworks Bede's *descriptio* to emphasize Britain's green and pleasant land. Henry's opening ups the ante on Bede's description by introducing Britain in grand tones: no mere island in the ocean, it is "beatissima," the most blessed (*Britannia igitur beatissima est insularum*).⁸ A superlative tone runs through the rest of the first chapter as Henry lauds a place "replete with plentiful streams and woodlands, delightful for its hunting-grounds of wildfowl and game, and teeming with many different kinds of land, sea, and river birds" (*fecunda frugibus et arboribus, copiosa riuus et nemoribus, iocunda uolucrum et ferarum uenatibus, ferax auium multi et diuersi generis, terra et mari et fluuiis*). Where Bede (1969: 1.1) describes the island as having "plenty of both land- and waterfowl of various kinds" (*ferax auium terra marique generis diuersi*), Henry emphasizes their multitude and adds river birds to the list. Henry further differentiates himself from Bede by introducing a new quotation from Solinus that warns of the potential drawbacks of Britain's abundance. Certain parts of the island are so rich in grazing, Solinus states, that it can be necessary to hold cattle back from the pastures;

⁸ Diana Greenway, Henry's modern editor and translator, highlights the extent of his borrowings from Bede by italicizing words quoted from the *Historia ecclesiastica*.

otherwise they may eat to excess. Britain's ecology is a gift that requires stewardship. Britain's marine life is likewise munificent, with "a marvelous profusion of herrings and oysters" (*allegcea et ostrea mire in ea redundant et varia conchiliorum genera*), in addition to the species enumerated by Bede. And then comes the land: "This, the most celebrated of islands, formerly called Albion, later Britain, and now England" (*Hec autem insularum nobilissima cui quondam Albion nomen fuit, postea uero Britannia, nunc autem Anglia*) (1.2). Henry's history of England encompasses five invasions, but the land has remained constant (1.4). It is a kind of history that erases Scotland from Britain and allows England to swallow its northern neighbor, creating a genealogy anointing England heir to the entire island.

Higden's fourteenth-century *Polychronicon* exemplifies a geographic description enfolded with Anglocentric visions of power. In a chapter titled "Concerning Greater Britain Now Called England" ("De Britannia Majori jam Anglia dicta"), Higden's text keeps the constituent nations of Britain apart and makes clear that the English are inheritors of the island and the idea of Britain (Higden et al. 1865–89, 2:2). The first volume of the *Polychronicon* takes an anthropologist's eye to surveying the nations of the world, culminating in a description of Britain—now called England—that firmly situates Higden and his audience within *this* land. Higden brings together numerous sources, including citations from Bede and other historians, to produce a full and complete examination that gives over an entire chapter to Britain's abundance. Higden's description of Britain had a sustained afterlife as it circulated in manuscripts independently from the *Polychronicon*; it was then printed by William Caxton as a stand-alone text, which speaks to its abiding popularity (see Edwards 2019). While historians in England used the tradition of the *descriptio Britanniae* to project England's power within the island, it masked an underlying anxiety. Even though England was the most powerful nation among the realms of Britain, it was peripheral within the medieval world-system (see Lavezzo 2006), and there was always a concern that the balance of insular power could change. For writers in Scotland, this created an opportunity to rewrite the Anglocentric interpretation of British history and to reimagine Scotland as a land of power and diversity resistant to English aggression.

Chapter 1 of book 2 of the *Chronica gentis Scotorum* addresses the geography of Scotland directly. Some historians, John of Fordun (1989, 1:168 [trans. 169]) writes, have described the rivers of Britain as so numerous that they “practically” divide the isle in two. The curious idea that Britain was in fact two islands received a surprising amount of attention in insular intellectual culture. For instance, the fourteenth-century translator John Trevisa (1975, 2:812) depicts Scotland as “a lon [g]e stretching cuntry, as it were a forlonde in þe [ylond] of Bretaigne. And is departede fro norþe Englonde with ryuers and armes of þe see, and is yclosede aboute with Ocean in e[ri]þere syde, and is also departede fro Irlonde wiþ þe see of Ocean” (a long stretching country, as if it were a promontory in the island of Britain. And is separated from northern England with rivers and arms of the sea, and is enclosed with Ocean on either side, and is also separated from Ireland by the sea of Ocean). In his translation of Higden’s *Polychronicon*, Trevisa again writes of “the see, that departeth Engeland and Scotland” (Higden et al. 1865–89, 1:48). The “practically” (*quasi*) of Fordun’s account opens a realm of subjunctive hope and suggests what Katherine H. Terrell (2011: 153) sees as a “potent fantasy of a clearly delineated border.” Yet these historians are wrong, and throughout his chronicle Fordun makes it his task to correct them.

John of Fordun engages in a historiographical wrangling with these previous historians of Britain. In his account of Britain’s early history, he claims that “after the time of giants” (post gigantes) the island acquired two names: Britain and Scotland (Bower 1987–98, 1:168 [trans. 169]). Unlike the teleological triplet used by Henry of Huntingdon, which transitioned from Albion to Britain to England, Fordun insists on the separation of Scotland and Britain. He invokes the twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury as a “true and trustworthy historian of the English” and argues that William does not allow that the whole of Albion is called Britain. “On the contrary,” Fordun continues, “he manifestly records in his writings that it is only the territory of the Britons that is called Britain, as if the land of the Britons[,] or those regions that they themselves ruled over and cultivated, were a separate island cut off from Scotland” (Willelmus itaque Malmesbiriensis verus Anglorum, ut dicitur, et insuspectus historicus non omnem Albionem dici velit Britanniam, ymmo territoria tantummodo Britonum Britanniam, quasi Britonum

terram, sive quas ipsi regiones regnando coluerunt eciam per se velut insulam a Scocia divisam, tradit suas aperte per scripturas) (1:172 [trans. 173]). Yet Fordun also finds in these historians contradictory views about the relationship between Britain and Albion; ultimately he attributes these discrepancies to the maleficent “transcribers of an antagonistic nation” (scribis pocius emule nacionis) (1:174 [trans. 175]). Fordun’s careful distinction between the blameless historians, “who were experts in their field, or rather saints” (ipsarum peritis, ymmo sanctis) and who wrote according to the truth, and later scribes exemplifies his interest in parsing historiographical tradition to create a true record. Through such attention, Fordun creates a history of Scotland that minimizes the importance and influence of an Anglocentric vision of Britain.

Scotland’s being “practically” cleaved from England has a striking visual corollary in medieval maps (Broun 2007: 54–61). For example, the Gough Map (fig. 2), the earliest surviving separate-sheet map of Britain, presents an image of Scotland that resembles a giant thumb protruding from Britain. Made at some point during the fourteenth century in England and revised at times during the fifteenth century, the map dramatizes the contested nature of visualizing Britain in the late Middle Ages (see Delano-Smith 2017). Hadrian’s Wall splits Britain in two as it runs in a straight and continuous line from Newcastle-upon-Tyne to just above Carlisle (fig. 3). The wall was nowhere near as secure and fortified as the original map suggests. While the border it delineates does not accord with the borders of England and Scotland (there is much of fourteenth-century England beyond the wall), it does mark a transition from the densely populated and annotated south of Britain to the sparse north; the Highlands are so empty that the cartographers fill the blank space with animals. According to an erroneous account first given by Gildas, the *murus pictorum* (wall of the Picts), as it was called, was built by the Romans after they returned to reconquer Britain in the fifth century. John of Fordun states that the wall’s modern name is “Thirlit Wall,” meaning punctured or holed, after it was destroyed by combined Scots, Picts, and Irish forces in a battle with the ancient British (ab illis ergo foraminibus hec deinde materia nomen hodiernum assumpsit quod Anglica lingua sonat Thirlic Wal [*var.* Thirlwall] Latina vero Murus dicitur Perforatus) (Bower 1987–98, 2:27). By continuing to represent the wall, medieval cartographers thus inscribe this ancient barrier into

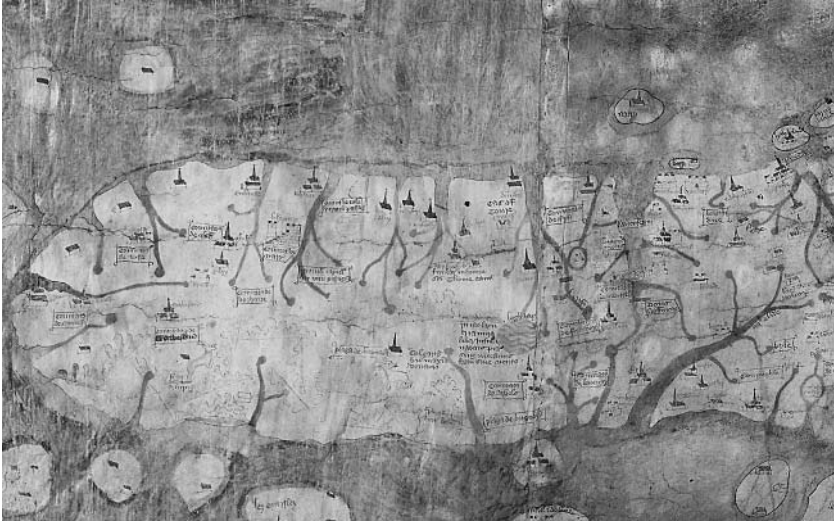


Figure 2. Scotland on the Gough Map (oriented east). Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Gough Gen. Top. 16. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

the landscape. A second barrier is formed by the river Clyde and the Forth, which are shown to entirely divide Scotland from Britain (fig. 3). On the Gough Map a thin strip separating these two is identified as a ford at Drip, a single crossing between the two parts of Britain. As is apparent from the map, these rivers also divide Scotland from itself, leaving behind much of the Borders, not to mention Edinburgh. The Lowlands and Edinburgh had been part of Scotland for centuries, but a resistant historiographical tradition represented the true beginning of Scotland as above the Firth of Forth (Broun 2007: 72). Indeed, during times of war the Forth always provided Scotland with an escape route, and Scottish forces often withdrew to Fife in the face of English aggression. The rivers therefore highlight an imagined split that adds a geographic dimension to the political distance between England and Scotland. John of Fordun and Walter Bower turn these rivers to their advantage by using their defensive capacities, and, through an elaborate list of fish, Bower demonstrates how generative they are as well.

One of the major historiographical tasks Fordun undertakes in writing a universal history of the Scottish people is to expose the paucity of knowledge about the land of Scotland in previous works of history.



Figure 3. Detail showing the Clyde and the Forth dividing Britain (left) and Hadrian's Wall (right). Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Gough Gen. Top. 16. Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

The Gough Map's portrayal of Scotland as an empty space north of bountiful England underscores the power imbalance between the two lands. Each historian weaves his account out of the literary tradition of the *descriptio* of Britain, accumulating new details that tie his chronicle to the contemporary moment. Fordun and Bower intervene in this history by limning the geography and fauna of Scotland.

Fishing for Scotland

Bower signals his additions to Fordun's account by writing *scriptor* (writer) in the margins, followed, where he returns to Fordun's text, by *au[c]tor* (author—a term of greater authority) (see Minnis 2010). One of

Bower's first interjections comes in a chapter concerning the rivers of Britain. The chapter epitomizes the palimpsest nature of medieval historical writing, as Bower takes it wholesale from Fordun's *Chronica*, which in turn is a series of extracts from Geoffrey's *Historia* that assert the geographic near separation of Scotland from Britain. Quoting Geoffrey's description of the rivers of Britain, Fordun finds it unbelievable that Geoffrey has not mentioned the great rivers of Scotland: if he were truly interested in the rivers of Britain, surely he wouldn't forget the Forth, Esk, Clyde, and Tay? For "[they] are much bigger than the rivers mentioned above, have more fish in them, are of higher quality and are all together more productive for all purposes" (que multo supradictis ampliora sunt fluviis, piscosiora, meliora necnon utilitatibus cunctis fecundiora) (1:170 [trans. 171]). Here Fordun takes to task the partiality of Geoffrey's history and, by extension, the historiographical tradition of which Geoffrey forms a crucial part: "If he meant the whole of Albion by the word 'Britain,' he would certainly not have passed over in silence the rivers of Scotland" (Verum si totam Albionem Britanniam diceret, flumina Scocie). Thus Fordun challenges the delimited nature of Geoffrey's account of Britain, which claims to be about the whole island but in fact ignores the northern part. In transcribing this passage, Bower takes it on himself to educate his readers in the rainbow world of Scottish marine life (Bower 1987–98, 1:172 [trans. 173]):

And apart from these [the Forth, Esk, Clyde, and Tay] there are many other rivers that are more useful than the rivers of Britain mentioned above for their shellfish, sea fish and freshwater fish, [Scriptor:] such as crayfish, oysters, whelks [?], cod, turbot, skate, sturgeon, salmon, lampreys, eels, crabs, conger-eels, mussels, carp [?], cockle-shells, sea-eels, mackerel [?], pike, murena, whiting, scallops, mullets, herring, trout and the like.

[Et preter hec alia quam plura que fluminibus Britannie superius dictis conchelinis sunt et marinis piscibus [Scriptor:] utpote polipis, ostreis, helcis, kilionibus, turbotis, ragadiis, rumbis, salmonibus, lampredis, anguillis, cancris, congruis, conchis, carpetis, cocleis, congeris, combonibus, luciis, murenis, merlinis, pectinibus, mullonibus, allecibus, trutis et similibus.]

By any metric, this is an extraordinary list. Bower expands Fordun's account of these rivers to underscore the folly of Geoffrey's mistake. The

list of fish is a philological treasure trove, perhaps the most detailed list of fish in any medieval chronicle. It is an act of *amplificatio*, a rhetorical technique in which an author expands on certain topics to differentiate himself from his source and show his skill as a composer.⁹ But the list is also a key strategy for writing the place of Scotland in relation to Britain.

Bower reveals himself to be an expert in marine life. There are many delights to be found in explicating the names Bower includes, particularly as he carefully distinguishes between fish often treated as equivalent by less skilled hands. For instance, the *Promptorium parvulorum*, an Anglo-Latin dictionary compiled around the same time as the *Scotichronicon*, lists both *murena* and *lampreda* as translations of “lawmpery.” Murena and lampreys look similar, and throughout the Middle Ages they were often confused (Wille 2007). According to Henry of Huntingdon (1996: 7.43n285), Henry I died after eating “carnes murenarum”—“traditionally translated,” according to Diana Greenway, Henry’s modern editor and translator, as “the flesh of lampreys.” Bower does not make such an amateur error: his *lampreda* is assuredly separate from his *murena*. It is no surprise, then, that Bower shows similar attention to detail when deploying a fishy comparison. In a later chapter concerning the double-dealing of Edward III, Bower (1987–98, 7:85–87) expands his specific criticism of the English king to reflect more broadly on the duplicitous character of the English: “Just as[,] if you want to hold an eel or a small murena close in your hands, the stronger you press, the more quickly it slips away, so is it with the English [*de Anglis*] as it is with eels [*de anguillis*]” (Ut si velis anguillam aut murenulam strictis tenere manibus, quanto forcius presseris tanto cicius elabitur, quia sic est de Anglis, quemadmodum de anguillis). Even as Bower punningly denigrates the English, he carefully distinguishes between eels, marking his expertise.

After his account of the rivers, Bower’s (1987–98, 1:182 [trans. 183]) next interjection again emphasizes Scotland’s marine life. Where Fordun provides an overview of the realm’s fauna—“Its grassy soil supports cattle and wild beasts; it is rich in milk and wool, and has a great variety of fish from sea, river and loch” (Tellus herbosa pecudum altrix et ferarum, lactis et lane dives, piscibus marinis, fluvialibus et lacualibus multiplex et multipliciter opulenta)—Bower inserts a paragraph limning Scotland’s

⁹ On rhetoric and word lists, see Copeland 2011.

cornucopia of fish. “Among all the regions of the world,” he writes, “Scotland is said to abound in multiplicity of fish” (Inter omnes mundi regiones in multiplicitate piscium Scotia fertur habundare). To support this claim, he includes a quatrain describing the products of regions of the world that ends “England is swimming in beer, Scotland in fish” (Anglia servisia, Scotia pisce natat). Here Bower uses zeugma to exploit the metaphorical valences of swimming, representing the English as drunkards and the Scottish as stewards of natural abundance. In addition to fish, Fordun draws attention to Scotland’s bird life: “Outstanding there are noble falcons, high-flying and high-spirited, and hawks that excel in very great courage” (Multimodis eciam volatilibus est insignis. Falcones ibi nobiles altissimi volatus et animositatis egregie, sunt et accipitres audacitate permaxima prestantes). The early books of the *Scotichronicon* thus tie Scottish identity to Scotland’s natural resources, indexing a plenitude unmentioned by English historians and demonstrating the deficient knowledge of Scotland among Anglocentric historians.

Later, in book 12, Bower (1987–98, 6:406 [trans. 407]) brings together these two defining features of Scotland’s ecosystem. In a series of chapters describing the land, people, and wildlife of Ireland, he adds a rare moment of eyewitness testimony that anchors the text in St. Andrews. Much of Bower’s account of Ireland comprises quotations of Gerald of Wales’s twelfth-century *Topographia Hibernia* (*Topography of Ireland*). After inserting a long extract describing the barnacle goose, a bird that Gerald claims develops not from an egg but from a barnacle (see Beare 1997), Bower affirms this phenomenon by drawing on his own experience: “Even I, the writer of this book, have with my own eyes once seen at St. Andrews more than a thousand tiny bodies of birds of this kind hanging down from a single and large piece of seaweed on the shore, enclosed in shells and already formed. . . . I have once seen something very like that, as did many along with me, on the island of Inchcolm” (Vidi eciam et ego conscriptor huius libri . . . cum oculis meis semel in Sancto Andrea plusquam mille minuta huiusmodi avium corpora in litore maris ab una protela et grandi alga dependencia, testis inclusa et iam formata. Consimile quid vidi, et multi mecum, semel in Emonia insula). Bower twice draws his narrative away from Ireland and toward Scotland by including evidence from St. Andrews and the isle of Inchcolm.

What for Gerald is an example of Ireland's marvelous fauna is for Bower a further example of Scotland's natural abundance.

Bower's expert knowledge of Scottish marine life is so detailed that the chronicle's modern editors note how it could form the basis of a study of the medieval Scottish fish trade (Bower 1987–98, 1:334n43). Bower would have been responsible for the economic well-being of Inchcolm Abbey as its prior, and the fish trade may have been an important source of the abbey's income. Moreover, fish was at the forefront of the royal court's mind during Bower's time as a councillor and was an important topic for economic policy. As part of James I's court, Bower would have been privy to discussions about Scotland's economy and about James's attempts to reform and kick-start it after years of internecine conflict had brought it to ruin. Fish was a significant part of these plans, as it represented one of Scotland's staple exports, alongside wool, woollens, and hides. Scottish salmon, in particular, was a major export, and consumers in the Baltic lands, Germany, France, and the Low Countries could rely on a steady supply.¹⁰ As the fifteenth-century chronicler and antiquary William Worcester (1969: 72 [trans. 73]) notes, the river Tweed is "full of the best salmon" (*plena salmonibus optimis*). Moreover, the levies raised against Scottish ships according to the *Liber Albus*, the first book of English common law, show that the Scottish fish trade was established enough to warrant specific treatment (Riley 1859–62, 3:71 [Latin on 1:376]).¹¹ It should also be noted that, except for haddock, the fish subject to levies in the *Liber Albus* are included in Bower's list. Closer to home, there is also an entry in the Exchequer Rolls of Scotland for fish in 1373 (1878, 451; see also 368, 369) that itemizes a curtailed, but still quite impressively broad, array of fish. Here we find an inventory listing "oysters, lampreys, herring, white fish, cod, salmon, and turbot" (*et in ostreis,*

¹⁰ On Scotland's salmon, see Stevenson 2014: 175–76; on the Scottish fish trade more broadly, see Frankot 2017.

¹¹ "Furthermore, the ship of Scotland that brings salmon, [shall give] two salmon; and if it brings salmon and cod, [it shall give] one salmon and one cod; and if salmon and haddock, one salmon and thirteen haddock; if all are haddock, twenty-six haddock; if all are herring, one hundred herring, except for salted herring; and it shall give for the vessel two pence" (*Item, navis de Scotia quae ducit salmonem, ii salmones; si salmonem et mulvellum, unum salmonem et unum mulvellum; si salmonem et haddock, unum salmonem et xiii haddocos; si totum haddocum xxvi haddocos; si totum allec, c allecia, excepto allece salso; et navis dabit ii denarios*) (translation modified).

lampredis, allecibus, albis piscibus, moruellis, salmonibus, et turbotis) — all fish listed by Bower, if we take “albis piscibus” to mean whiting, which Bower calls *merlinus*. These examples corroborate Bower’s expert knowledge and demonstrate how his list advertises an important part of Scotland’s economy and self-sufficiency. These fish are all found in Scotland’s waters; they are not brought into the country through trade. During his reign James I sought to raise income by introducing new levies on these goods—the levies had remained at the same rate since David II had set them in the fourteenth century—and in his first parliament as king in 1424 James legislated new requirements that all nets used in fresh water should have a mesh of at least three inches (Nicholson 1974: 305, 307).

Bower’s attention to Scotland’s rivers and fish corrects the silence of previous historians. The fishery anchors a sense of place that cannot be uprooted from the realm and is an eloquent response to documents such as the Gough Map that portray Scotland as a mostly blank space. Yet in the context of Bower’s broader historiographical theory, these inventories exemplify how the *Scotichronicon* centralizes information about the nation. Bower (1987–98, 8:338 [trans. 339]; translation modified) concludes the *Scotichronicon* with a call for the institutionalization of history writing, outlining a program that he has heard other nations (including England) follow: “Each monastery founded by kings should have its scribe or writer appointed from among the community, who should make a dated record of all notable incidents during a king’s reign, at least in the kingdom and neighboring ones, according to the truth of the matter” (Quod unumquodque monasterium a regibus fundatum haberet de ipso loco suum certum scribam vel scriptorem, qui omnia notabilia tempore regis saltem in regno vel e vicinis contingencia secundum quod veritas facti se haberet cum data annotaret). Then, when the king dies, a council will be convened and, through a careful process of collation, an official chronicle of the reign produced. As Terrell (2011: 334) argues, Bower’s proposal for “state-sponsored” historiography is designed to reinforce the nation and national identity. The note of paranoia introduced by the (ultimately false) reference to England’s program of national historiography raises the political stakes of the project. The *Scotichronicon* models such a chronicle, absorbing pockets of information about the nation into a single text and institutionalizing

knowledge. But the centralizing urge of the *Scotichronicon* brings people as well as animals under a central power. For instance, in his account of the coronation of Alexander III, Bower uses the vernacular to represent the imbalanced power dynamics between the king of Scotland and the Gaelic-speaking Highlands. Bower stages a meeting between a Gaelic poet and the king in which the poet recites a genealogy of the kings of Scotland. The scene, vividly represented in the manuscript housed at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, shows the poet in a pose of supplication before the king, who is bedecked with the symbols of state (see Higgitt 1998: 172–74). Beside the Highlander’s head is a scroll on which is written an extract in Gaelic from the genealogy in the text: “Benach de re albane alex[ander] mak alex[ander]” (God bless the king of Albany, Alexander son of Alexander) (5:295 [trans. 294]). This scene could be taken to legitimate Alexander’s role as king, but because the poet is presenting a genealogy of kings, it also announces Alexander’s authority and the subordination of the Gaelic communities of Scotland to the centralizing power of the king.

Bower portrays the *Scotichronicon* as containing useful material relevant to a broad swath of Scottish society. A preface attached to the Corpus Christi text, the most authoritative manuscript of the chronicle, tells us that rulers will find out how to avoid war, religious will learn the basics of monastic life, the laity will discern valuable lessons in leading a virtuous life, and preachers will encounter tales useful for their sermons. Moreover, kings will become more cautious, religious will be instructed more in accordance with their rule, and “all those who are depressed will be given over to joy by reading it” (quotquot tedio affecti lectura eius leticie condonentur) (Bower 1987–98, 9:8 [trans. 9]). Bower’s expansive aims go farther than many other chronicles in his milieu. In the preface to the *Polychronicon*, for instance, Higden cultivates a more modest disposition. He insists that his friends had to persuade him to write the history and that his role is simply to compile information drawn from previous authorities (Higden et al. 1865–89, 1:2–20 [trans. 3–21]). The name of Bower’s chronicle, evoking but superseding Higden’s earlier effort, indicates the scale of Bower’s ambition. By producing a book of the Scottish people from the fabric of insular historiography, Bower rewrites the history of Britain to vaunt the place of Scotland within the island.

Conclusion

Written long before the Act of Union in 1707 officially subsumed Scotland within the political entity of Great Britain, Bower's work is nevertheless part of the resistance to English expansionism. This essay has focused on how Bower, like John of Fordun before him, uses geography to contest the Anglocentric tradition of insular writing. Rather than abandon the tradition outright, these historians position themselves as competitors who know more and can write more about Scotland than any of their predecessors could hope to do. Scotland contains multitudes of resources, a plenitude previously overlooked, that it is Bower's duty to represent. Although there were no official institutional ties uniting the nations of Britain in the Middle Ages, the debates that define insular politics today—particularly around English overreach—resonated throughout the period, amplified by military action and perpetuated through historical writing and cartography.

The historical writing of Bower and Fordun sheds light on the Anglocentric vision that remains powerful in present-day debates about British unity. In this field it can be represented by Georg Lukács's treatment of Walter Scott as a chronicler of Britain. Scott is central to Lukács's foundational study of the historical novel, as *Waverley* is widely seen as the genre's first expression in English. Lukács (1962: 30–62) thus builds his account of the relationship between the historical novel and the nation around Scott's imagining of the British past. But Anthony Jarrells (2015) argues that by focusing on Scott as a British writer, Lukács misses Scott's deep engagement with Scotland. So, for instance, in Scott's introduction to *The Tales of My Landlord* series, the author figure Jedediah Cleishbotham claims that he finds a greater variety of people in his home of Gandercleugh "than if I had sought them out by my own painful travel and bodily labour" (quoted in 114). As Jarrells notes, this orientation "looks out not towards nation but rather to the diversity within Scotland itself and to the points of contact such diversity allows with other parts of the world" (114). Late-medieval chronicles suggest that the rich sense of place ventriloquized by Scott is neither a discovery of the nineteenth century nor a trait embedded solely in Scott's vision but rather is a constituent part of medieval Scottish literary history handed down and sustained by later generations. Attending to the long history of these debates both reveals and counteracts the Anglocentrism of insular literary history.

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