The Currach in Scotland

with Notes on the Floating of Timber

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This modest craft (probably the simplest of a range including larger, rowing and sailing boats designed for the open seas) once played a vital role in the life of these islands, and provides a link between the boat-building traditions of prehistoric Europe and some recent survivals in the northern circumpolar regions. *Ed.*

The kind of boat to which the name currach was generally applied in Scotland appears to have died out in the course of the eighteenth century. Even on the River Spey, where it was once probably more common than on any other Scottish river, by 1775 the currach had already become a rarity (Shaw 1775:164), and by the 1790s only one was known to survive in the parish of Cromdale (Grant 1794:134). It is therefore remarkable that a single example of the currach still remains in the country. Now preserved at Elgin, in the Museum of the Elgin Society, this was mentioned in 1912 as the last currach to be used in Scotland (Wallace [1915]:364), having been presented some years previously by a Mr Grant, Mains of Advie, Moray, who had found it under the rafters of his farm buildings in central Strathspey. Neither its history nor the exact dates of its finding and donation seem to be recorded.

This Strathspey currach has been described previously by James Hornell in his pioneer study of the coracles and curraghs of Britain and Ireland (Hornell 1938: section 2, 297–302; 1946:129–30) but only, it would seem, on the basis of a photograph (plate I) and details supplied to him in 1935 by W. E. Watson, then honorary curator of the Elgin Museum. In November 1970, however, when conservation treatment was given to the currach by John A. Brown, chief technician in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, an opportunity was taken to subject it to detailed technical examination. As a result of these investigations, the earlier description must now be somewhat modified. In the following notes, this Spey currach is first described technically, and then placed in its historical and functional setting.

Description

The Gunwale W. E. Watson, and following him Hornell, said that the gunwale was 'made up of several lengths of round sticks forming a bundle of three from ½ inch to an 1 inch diameter lapped and tied at the various places where a join occurs, some of the ties being from 7 to 9 inches apart, and secured by several turns of cord made

of horse hair' (Watson 1935: letter, 30 October). In fact, the gunwale is formed of a single pliant rod whose maximum diameter is $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches, with tapered ends overlapped over a distance of 47 inches across the chord of the arc. An additional rod about 24 inches long (also measured across the chord of the arc), is bound to the centre of the overlap by three lashings of slender withy, and a further two withy-lashings grip the ends of the gunwale rod, making a total of five lashings (Fig. 1). The lashings are

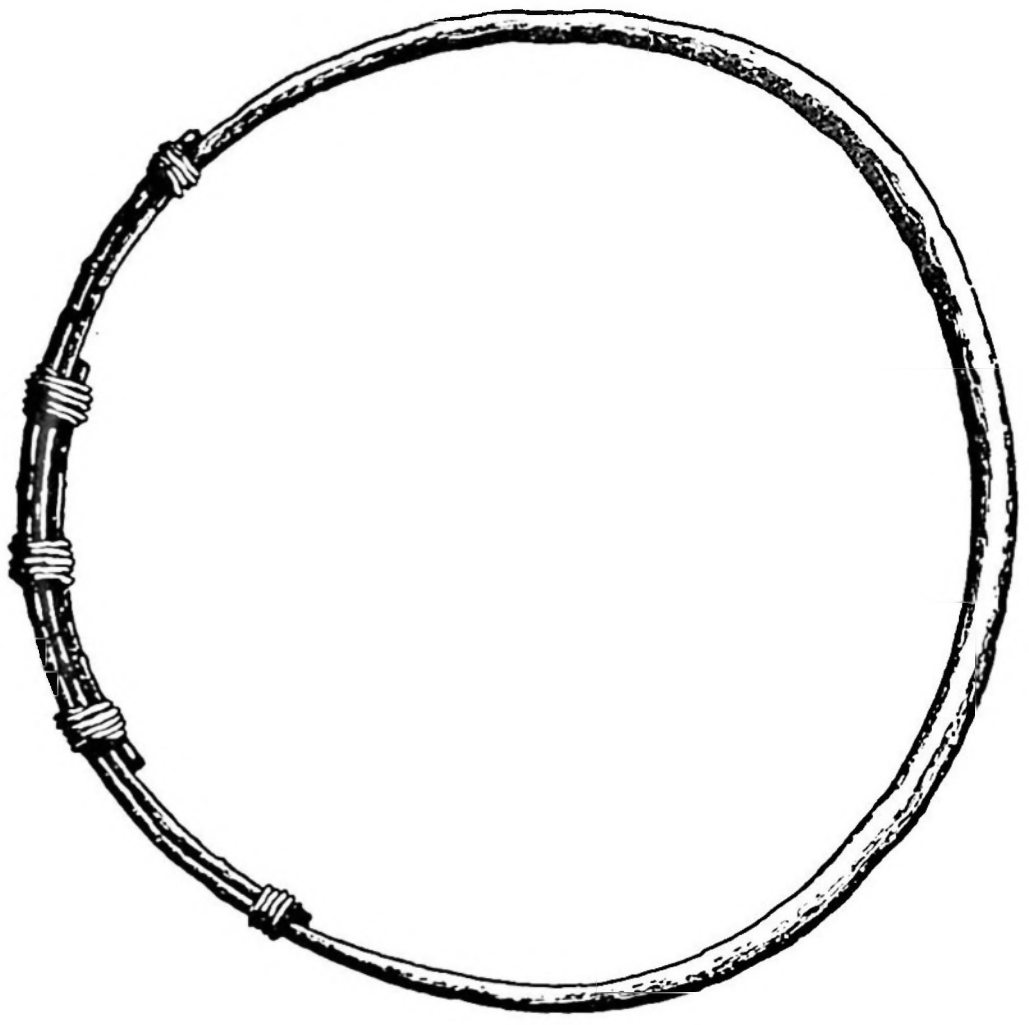

FIG. 1 The gunwale, made of a single rod whose overlapped ends are strengthened by an extra length of rod. The bindings are of withy. (Drawn by John A. Brown, 1971)

formed by winding the withy round four or five times and tucking in the loose ends (Fig. 2). Watson did not mention these withy lashings, but Hornell must have spotted them from the photograph, for he observed that 'at every place where the end of one stick is overlapped, a slender withy is twisted round several times and made fast', adding that some of these ties were 'further secured by a few turns of horse-hair cord' (Hornell 1938: Section 2, 300; and Plate I, Fig. 2). The completed gunwale as it now stands forms a rough circle measuring 54 inches across from the middle lashing, and 57 inches the other way across.

PLATE I The last surviving Scottish Currach. A photograph taken (by B. Wilken, Elgin) for James Hornell in 1935, showing the Currach (max. diam. 57 in.) and paddle (3 ft. 9 in.) found at Mains of Advie in Strathspey, preserved in Elgin Museum. (By courtesy of Miss E. I. Rhynas, Hon. Curator of the Museum.)

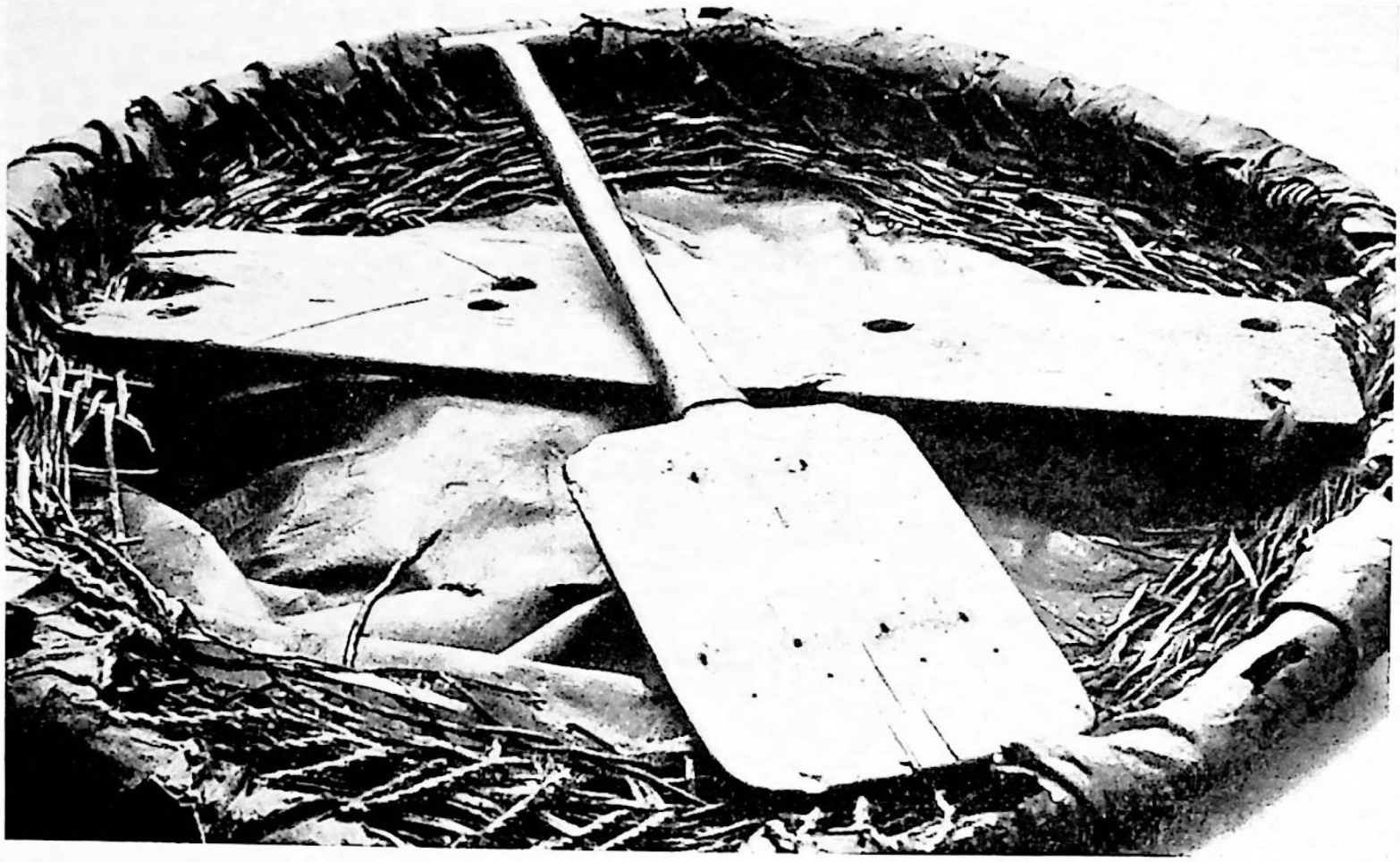

PLATE IIa The Strathspey Currach: detail showing the paddle and seat.

PLATE IIb The Strathspey Currach: detail showing woven frame of rods, and horse-hair ties for the hide. Note slit in hide (on rim), sewn up with leather thongs. (Photographs: A Fenton, National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, Nov. 1970.)

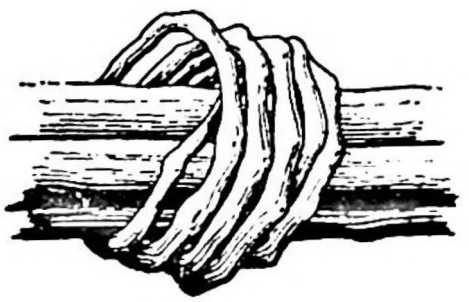

FIG. 2 Detail of withy lashings on the gunwale. (Drawn by John A. Brown, 1971)

Attachment of the Hide to the Gunwale The stout, one-piece hide that forms the body of the currach is fastened to the gunwale by loops of light-coloured, two-stranded ropes of horse-hair: this is strong and tough, without a tendency to shrink or stretch. It is clear that, in constructing the currach, the wicker frame was lashed to the gunwale before the hide went on, by means of the horse-hair bindings referred to by both Watson and Hornell. There is no more integral link than this between the framework and the wooden part of the gunwale. The hide was stretched over the frame and its edges turned over the gunwale in a series of folds, to make it lie properly. The turned-over edges were pierced at intervals, and through the openings was passed the lacing of horse-hair rope. The lacing did not go round the gunwale but was kept entirely to the inside of the currach, where it was passed in a series of long loops down and behind each doubled warp of the wicker frame (Fig. 3). Since the upper edge of the frame rests

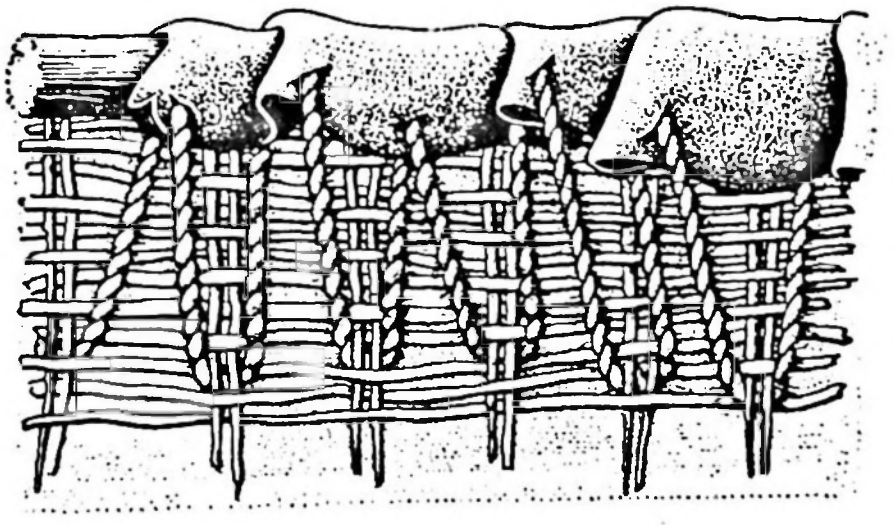

FIG. 3 The horse hair lacing looped under the warp. (Drawn by John A. Brown, 1971)

against the outside of the gunwale, this method of lacing then held hide, gunwale and frame in firm union.

At one point on the gunwale there is the remaining part of a loop of twisted withy rope (Fig. 4). Perhaps this formed part of the binding by which the seat was secured; though it may have been part of a guiding rope if, as seems likely, this currach was formerly used in connection with the floating of timber down the River Spey.

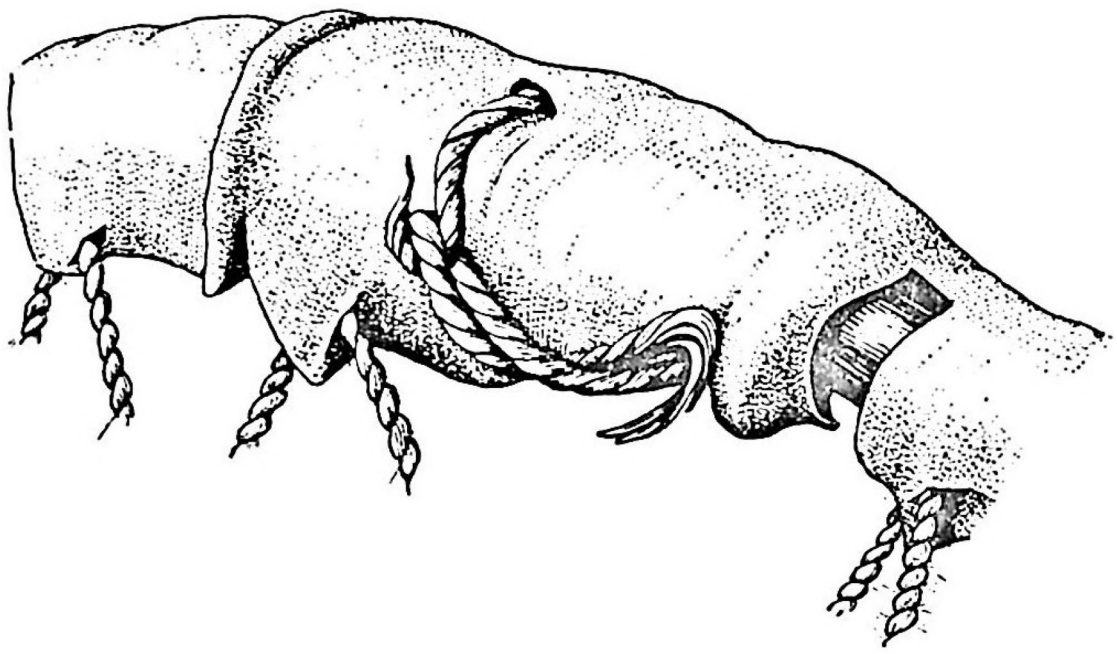

FIG. 4 The twisted withy rope on the gunwale. (Drawn by John A. Brown, 1971)

The Wicker Frame Unfortunately the lower part of the wicker frame is missing and there is no direct means of ascertaining fully its original appearance. Hornell pointed out that instead of being composed of two series of widely separated laths or pliant rods interlaced at right angles (like all his other British or Irish examples), the frame here is of true wicker basketwork; the main ribs—the warp—are arranged in numerous, closely set pairs which radiated from and must have crossed what was the centre of the bottom, outwards to the gunwale periphery. On this many-rayed star the weft is woven in tightly-packed concentric rings, as in a wicket basket. It is notable that the paired warp-units are made from slender withies of twig thickness (about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch in diameter), similar to those forming the weft. The latter have been split before use, and generally those of the warp are also in a split condition. They appear to be of willow, and still retain the bark (Hornell 1936: Section 2, 300).

The warps, set at an average distance of 8 to 9 inches apart, number about sixty. Because of the slimness of the warps, even when doubled as they are here, it is likely that to give the framework the necessary bearing strength, the weft was intertwined with the warp right to the bottom, and not just for a few inches below the gunwale as happens in the eastern Irish (Boyne) type of currach (Hornell 1938: Section 4, 154).

However, it is difficult to accept Hornell's suggestion that all the warp withies crossed at the bottom, for the result would have been a lumpy and unworkmanlike bundle at this point. Thus, either the basketwork frame did not extend all the way to the bottom, or (more likely) a good number of the warps must have tapered off before reaching the bottom. To judge by the lie of the warps it is scarcely likely that they were arranged in two series of parallels at right angles to each other, in the manner of the recent Boyne currach (Plate III), which, in making the body, had the ends of the warp rods thrust into the ground in an oval of the appropriate size, and then the basketwork weft was woven round them. The resemblance between this basketwork weft and that of the Spey currach is probably accidental, however, since it seems certain that the whole body of the latter must originally have been filled in. The intertwining of the weft is carried out alternately over and under the warp, in the usual basketry fashion (Fig. 5), and the weft withies occasionally also pass between the two parts of a warp.

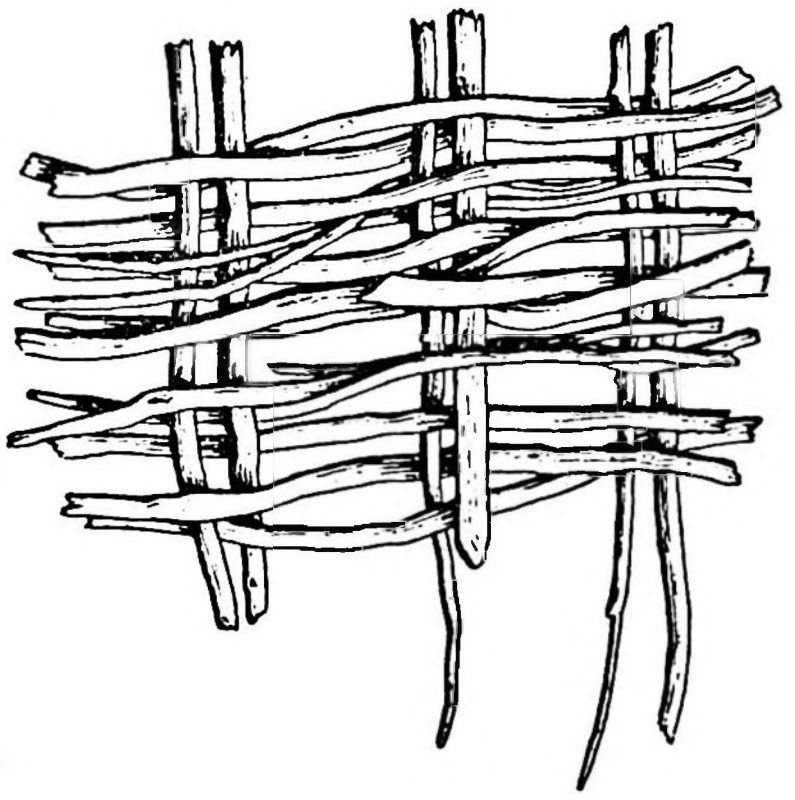

FIG. 5 The double warp, and the weft, all of wicker. (Drawn by John A. Brown, 1971)

The Hide The hide is in one piece, though its original rounded form has been compressed and wrinkled beyond easy restoration. As a result it is impossible to determine the original depth. While still in use, presumably, several small tears or cuts have been sewn together by means of leather thongs, and the bottom contains a small patch sewn on by thongs. Longer slits along the outer edges and top of the gunwale have been sewn in such a way that the open lips lie inwards. The originally hair-covered surface of the hide was kept to the inside. (See Plate IIb.)

The Seat The wooden seat is 3 feet 9 inches long, 11 inches wide and just over $\frac{3}{4}$ inch

thick. Its edges are rounded through wear. There are two holes at each end—one end being broken—and a loop of horse-hair rope remains in one of the holes (Plate IIa). The seat must have been lashed on to the currach framework, though at what point is uncertain. There are also three holes in the centre of the seat, grouped two and one. Possibly these contained a carrying band for overland transport on the human back. Conceivably, one end of the band passed through the single hole, with the knot uppermost. The other end could then go down through one of the paired holes and back up through the other, giving a possibility of ready adjustment to the size of the loop.

The Paddle The wooden paddle resembles a spade with a large flat, wooden blade, a T-handle and a slightly flattened shaft. The overall length is 3 feet 9 inches, and the blade measures 17 inches long by 11 inches wide (Plate IIa). The whole is cut out of one piece of wood, of the same overall dimensions as the seat. There is a metal loop of unexplained use round the base of the shaft, and traces of other metal strips on the blade, presumably added to resist splitting of the wood. This paddle is unusual because of its great breadth, suggesting that it was more adapted to a scooping than figure-of-eight motion.

The Currach and its Function

The type of sea-going, 'boat-shaped', currach for rowing or sailing referred to in the early literature (*cf.* Plummer and Earle 1899, 2: 103–5; Marcus 1953: 105–14), used for trading, sea-transport and ferrying, does not fall to be considered here. For the round (or oval), Spey-type currach with which this note is solely concerned, documentary evidence begins to appear in the fifteenth century and runs on till the end of the eighteenth century. The primary functions of these rounded currachs was fishing for salmon, ferrying, and (for a limited period) the floating of timber down the River Spey.

There is little to suggest any common use of currachs after the mid-eighteenth century, and even the occasional sporadic survival had been consigned to the barn rafters, it seems, by about 1800. The floating of logs on the Spey probably led to a longer-continuing use of currachs there than anywhere else in Scotland. It also seems—though the limited range of sources does not provide enough data for a firm judgment—as if the use of the currach on the Spey may always have been more common there than on most other rivers in Scotland. An early record, of the year 1487, explicitly relates to a grant of net-fishing rights near the mouth of this river: 'piscationem unius rethis [= net] in aqua de Speya, vocati *le Currachnet* de Garmoutht' (Paul 1882: 362).

A number of entries in the Rental of Dunkeld diocese show that currach fishing was taking place on the River Tay in the early sixteenth century. In 1507 is recorded the purchase for 8s. 2d. of two 'currokis,' also described as *duorum caraborum*, one of the hides received from the diocesan steward and handed over to Malcolm and Finlay Fischeour 'to be made'. In 1508–9, James Butter got an 8s. hide for a currach, and

another ox-hide of the same value in 1510. Also in 1510 a hide for a 'currok' was bought for 10s. 4d., and another was barked and fitted for 2s. In 1511, two currachs were purchased for William Fischer at 20s. 9d., and another for James Butter at 8s. An ox-hide to finish a currach was bought for 10s. in 1512 (*per empcionem vnius pellis boum pro confectione lie corrok, x*^{s}). In 1558, a 'courrok' cost 20s. (Hannay 1915:66, 93, 110, 117, 124, 133, 355; see also *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue, s.v.*) Another record of currach-fishing, apparently in Glendochart, dated 1594, relates to the loan to a neighbour by a MacNab (in Innishewan) of a 'currok and other graith [= gear] . . . to slay the reid fische' (Breadalbane: fo. 59). From the contexts of these references it can be seen that fishing was carried on in the lochs and rivers by estate fishermen using currachs and hempen nets, as well as with hooks and lines.

A fuller account of the appearance and use of contemporary currachs was given by Hector Boece in 1527, though with no precise geographical location beyond the fact that he was speaking of Highland Scotland:

> How may thair be ane greter ingine than to make ane bait [= boat] of ane bull hid, bound with na thing bot wandis. This bait is callit ane currok; with the quhilk thay fische salmond, and sum time passis ouir [= over] gret rivers thairwith; and, quhen thay have done thair fisching, thay beir it to ony place, on thair bak, quhare thay pleis (Brown 1893:101).

Here are assembled the characteristic features of the currach used on inland waters: the structure of hide and wands, and the method of transport on the back, along with its common functions of fishing and ferrying. Further sources for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries emphasise the currach's use in fishing, though this may be due merely to the fact that the references come from texts concerned with fishing rights. In 1542 Patrick Bishop of Moray granted a charter to Duncan, a son of the chief of Grant, to fish with nets, 'wachsperis [*i.e.* a form of leister-spear] and currokis' on the water of Spey, presumably at his estate of Easter Elchies (Fraser 1883, 3:371). In February 1569, Alexander Clark wrote an informative letter to the Countess of Moray,

> to know your plesour and will of your fishing of the twa part cobyll of Spey . . . I have thought it best that James Anderson be dischergit, quha was ane of the fischerres and of quhom your Ladyschip wos plenteous, and that David Mawer and this my servand namyt James Wilson have the charge . . . attour it will pleis your Ladyschip writ and command your said chamerlen to mak the sett of your currokis, [*i.e.* the letting of currach-fishing rights] for now is the tym of yeir, and that he tak gud caution of them, and to poynd for that quhilk restit over his last yeir, [*i.e.* for rent arrears] and siclik may pleis you writ to my Lord Huntle desyring his Lordschip to command all his tenentes of the Engye [= Enzie barony] and otheris his Lordschips landis, that thai mak na impedyment to your Ladyschipis currokis, and that na pokerrs [= poke-net fishers] nor speir men [= leister-fishers] cum in your wateris, quhilk wilbe ane great ais for your ladyschipis currokmen . . . (Historical MSS. 1877:650/1).

There continued to be problems with Huntly, for in 1586 there was an action between the Countess (now married to the Earl of Argyll) and the Earl of Huntly, because the Earl and his fishers had prevented the Countess's fishers

> to use the fischeing of ane twa pairt coble and tuelff corukis of salmound fischeing upoun the Watter of Spay... bot als than onputt his coblis and currochis upoun the saidis fischeingis, and swa, as is allegeit, molestit hir thairin (Masson 1881:86).

In 1617 reference was made to '*lie cobill-fishing* super dicta aqua [the Spey], una cum *lie cobill, currochc et speir-fishingis* super eadem . . .' (Thomson 1892:634/2). In 1684 the Marquis of Huntly got the right to use cruives (*i.e.* fixed salmon-traps) on the Spey, within certain bounds where he formerly had a general right of fishing, and where the Earl of Fife's predecessors had a right of currach-fishing (Ogilvie 1778:54).

Whilst these sources show that currachs were used in conjunction with nets for fishing salmon in lochs and rivers, alongside or as a complement to cobles, and that currachmen appear to have been estate employees rather than fishers on their own account, nevertheless information about the form and construction of the craft is not found in legal records; and while drawings of coble-fishing scenes appear in Slezer's *Theatrum Scotiae* of 1693, he has no view of the Spey, and in no case does a currach appear in his engraved views.

The use of coracles, the Welsh equivalent of the Scottish currach, in commercial salmon-fishing at the present day, together with the netting methods employed there, have, however, lately been described (Jenkins 1971:38–42).

Currach-fishing went on in Scotland into the eighteenth century, and various estates remained jealous of their salmon-fishing rights. In August 1705, for example, John Grant Makalaster in Burnsyd and others in Cromdale were fined £50 'for abusing of the laird of Grant's currock fishing upon Spey by ther blaseing of the water [= using burning torches] in the summer time taking of salmon' (Cramond 1897:19). As late as 1778, it was found by the Court of Session that 'the Earl of Fife's right of fishing with currochs only, was no bar to the crown's granting to the Duke of Gordon a right of cruive-fishing within the bounds', and the Earl of Fife was anxious to ensure that an opening would be left in the cruive dyke to permit the passage of his currachs.[1] At the same time it was stated that 'an inferior heritor having only a right of currock-fishing may have this right extended by the crown to a coble or general fishing' (Ogilvie 1778:55–6). Lord Fife's plea for keeping a passage open was not accepted, however, and by 1781 it could be said that formerly a passage had been left at one side of the cruive to allow 'the currochs or small boats used by the Highlanders to pass' (Morison 1805, 29:12820).

As a rule the Scottish currachs held one occupant, but a writer (who knew them only as inland vessels), commented in the early eighteenth-century that the currachs 'made use of as yet in some places in *Scotland*' could conveniently hold only two men at once (Innes 1729:2. 660). The Rev Dr John Bethune, born in Kintail in 1746, wrote

a letter on 22 May 1798 in which he stated that the currach was formerly in widespread use in the Highlands as a ferryboat on rivers and small creeks.

> It was constructed of a round form and of a Sort of Wicker-work, for the greater Buoyancy, and covered outwardly with green Hides. Two or three passengers, according to its Size, entered into it, and paddled forward as they cou'd . . . In the West Highlands of Ross-shire, where I was born, the *Courich* was very commonly used, and I have known some People who had seen it, tho' it had been disused before my Time. In my Day [*c.* 1760] it had given place to a sort of *Canoe* called *Ammir, i.e. Trough.* This was nothing more than the hollowed Trunk of a great Tree; and even this, I believe, is now laid aside. I have been Passenger crossing a River in the *Ammir* tho' I did not much covet the Situation. It was also employed in fishing the Rivers, and in it I have seen the fearless and dextrous Highlander, from his ticklish footing, flinging the Spear out of his hands to a considerable distance, and arresting the Salmon which was darting along with great Swiftness! The man standing in the *Ammir* holds the Oar by the middle; and with it, paddling on each Side, alternately; proceeds with Surprising velocity (Joass 1881:179–80).

This question of the use of a dug-out canoe, or *ammir* (Gaelic *amar* = trough), is a matter for separate investigation, though it seems scarcely credible that the dug-out canoe should have been introduced to replace the currach in Wester Ross about the year 1700. There is some evidence for the use of dug-out canoes for ferry-boats in Moidart as late as the mid-eighteenth century (MacDonald 1889:195) and it may be that, of these two kinds of primeval vessel, the currach disappeared a little earlier than the dug-out in the West Highlands, or at least in some parts of the region. The mere bulk of the dug-out would enhance its chances of survival in a period of change.

The remaining evidence for the use of the currach as a ferry-boat is slight and indirect, apart from documents already quoted.

Turning to Gaelic oral tradition there was a prophesy, attributed to the sixteenth-century seer known as 'Coinneach Odhar', which foretold misfortune for the MacLeod of Skye, reaching a climax when the fairy flag of the clan was taken out of its iron chest: 'then the glory of the MacLeod family should depart—a great part of the estate should be sold to others, so that a small "curragh", or boat, would carry all gentlemen of the name of Macleod across Loch Dunvegan in Skye' (Macleod 1876, 1:334; Mackenzie 1878:48). This, according to the currach capacities so far noted, would amount to no more than two or three men.

Another oral source purports to describe how Allan Macrory, fourth chief of Clanranald of Moidart, seized the Mackintosh chief in his island castle in Loch Moy in eastern Inverness-shire. The event, if historical, would have occurred about the end of the fifteenth century. Clanranald 'had carried with him several boats made of hides, and easily transported, these he launched under night and stormed the castle' (Anon. 1819:83).

Finally, there is the tale of the Two Brothers, relating to the Ross of Mull:

> At the time of this incident, the few families there had no boats, but one day they saw an object approaching them from the mainland, and as it drew near, they compared it to a horse with a tree standing on its back, but as it neared the shore it proved to be a boat covered with hides, with one man on it, with some drink with him and a quantity of hazel nuts for food. On account of his wicker-boat being covered with hides they called him 'The cowhide man . . .' He had come from Ardencaple in the district of Lorn . . . A year later another boat came, making shore at Loch Spelve, which also had one man in it and he was named 'The one in the skin coverings'. He was the brother of the one who had previously arrived (MacLean 1923, 1:140).

Though of uncertain chronology, the story at least seems to establish for the Argyll area the wicker frame, the hide covering, and the one-man crew.

Apart from such sources,[2] there is little positive evidence from the western or northern Highlands, though enough exists to suggest that before the mid-eighteenth century the currach was relatively common there, especially as a ferry boat.

The currach is also frequently mentioned in Gaelic songs (Carmichael 1928, 2:265), and familiarity with the word currach in the west is further suggested by its occurrence in place-names, though these may refer rather to the boat-shaped, rowing currach. For example, it is said that when Columba landed in Iona, he buried the currach in which he arrived above the beach, to remove any temptation to use it for returning to Ireland: the place of burial is still called Port a Churaich ('the harbour of the currach'), and there is a long, boat-shaped ridge there, called An Curach. Carmichael also mentions a small, grassless island on the east side of Barra named An Curachan ('the little currach').

Currachs and the Spey Timber-Trade

By the opening of the eighteenth century a different use for the currach, though apparently not very long-lived, had made its appearance in the records. This was in helping to guide logs or sawn deals that were being floated down the Spey and its main tributaries. Commercial exploitation of the pine-forests of Strathspey and Rothiemurchus was already attempted early in the previous century (Murray 1883:57) and the currachers' part in transporting timber to the Spey estuary—some twenty or thirty miles—is explicitly mentioned in a letter the Earl of Findlater received from Castle Grant in 1701:

> . . . since [the chief of] Grant was not vritn to anent woode libertie, I cam allongs to inquere annent the samen at young Grant, to whom his father hath givn the disposeing of the woods; and he sayes that he will have three pounds Scotis mōey [= money] for ech tree, and this is besyds the payt for cutting, leadeing to the vater, and the currachers pains for transporting them to the bote off Bog [= a ford on the Spey, at Gordon Castle], so yt I judge or the great trees be there they will stand your Lo. [= Lordship] four poundis Scotis the peice (Grant 1912:329–330).

PLATE III An Irish river-curragh in construction, near Oldbridge on the Boyne, about 1930. The framework, of hazel, is made by placing the warp rods in the ground and bending them to cross the others at right angles. A wicker gunwale is then woven into place. (Photograph by courtesy of Dr A. T. Lucas, Director, National Museum of Ireland.)

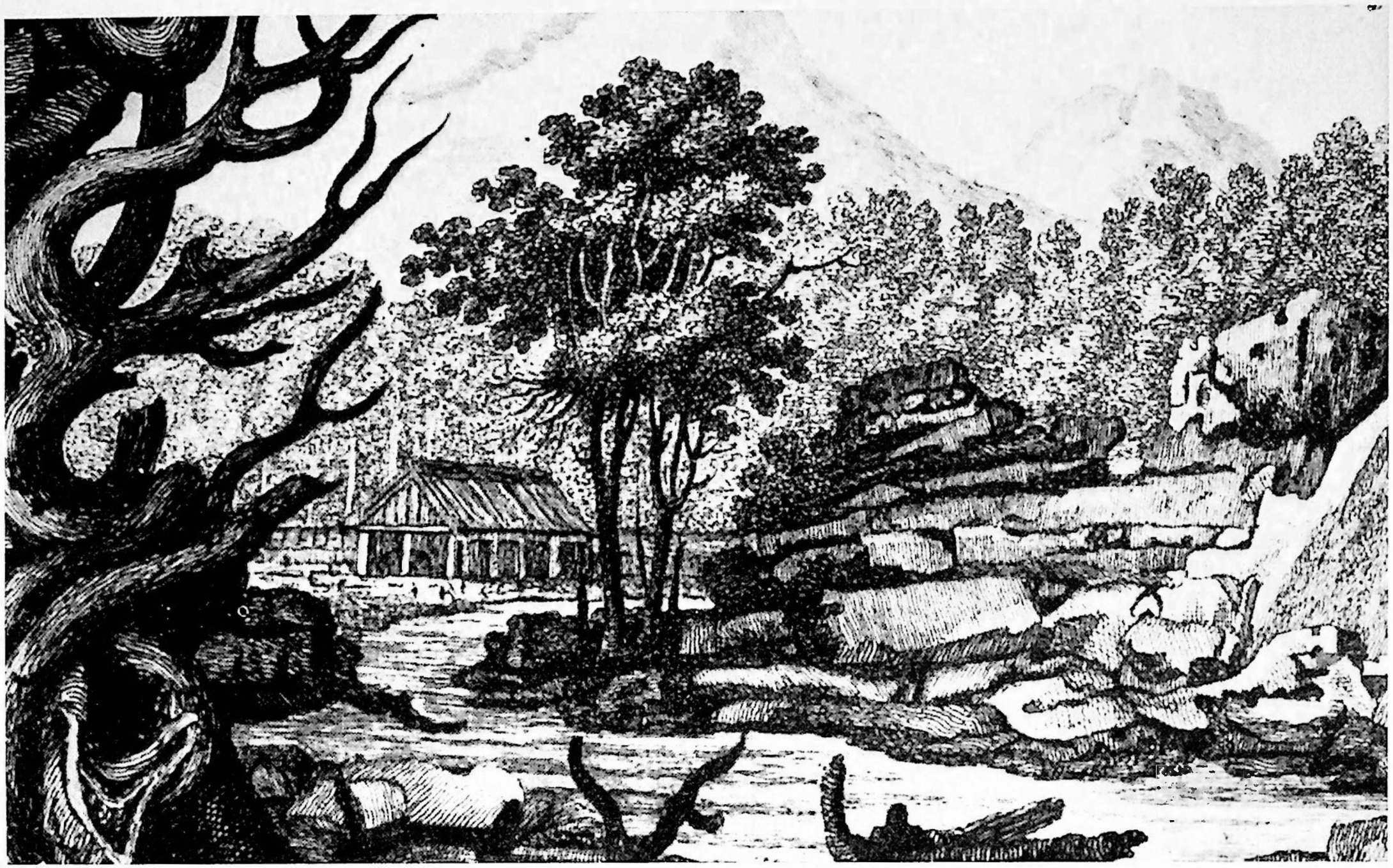

PLATE IV 'Glenmore South of the Saw Mill', 1786. Detail of engraving after an original drawing by Rev. Charles Cordiner, minister of Banff, from *Remarkable Ruins, and Romantic Prospects of North Britain*, 1788.

We do not know how much earlier than this currachs were used in floating timber on the Spey. If the traditional evidence which follows could be taken at its face value, the association of currach-men with the timber-trade could hardly be earlier than the early eighteenth-century; but, in fact, Alastair Mor na Curach was probably concerned in the great expansion of the trade around the year 1730, and therefore not of the first generation of such 'currachers'. The story goes that

> two families of Grant, named Mor (big) and Odhar (pale or of yellow complexion), who lived at Tulchan, on the Spey, were the first who ventured on this perilous voyage. The first raft consisted of eight trees, fastened together by a hair rope. One or two men went into the Curach to guide the raft, others from the shore, with ropes fastened to the tail end of the raft, acted as a rudder. On the second trip a dozen trees were brought down. The Curach was always carried back from the mouth of the Spey on the back of a stalwart Highlander, who had obtained the name of Alister Mor na Curach. This worthy occupied the farm of Dalcroy, on the Spey, and lived to the age of 106 years. ('Glenmore' 1859:41–6)

It was said in the mid nineteenth-century, that Alastair Mor's currach was till then in the possession of his great-great-grandson, William Grant of Dalchroy ('Glenmore' 1859: 44).[3]

Only a small load could be floated behind a currach, up to ten or twelve dozen deal planks, bound together with a rope. One man sat on the wooden seat in the currach, a paddle in his hand, and the guide-rope attached to the float had a running loop which passed round the knee of the currachman. If the load jammed against an obstruction, he had only to loose the knot to free the currach, and so prevent it from sinking in the current. He could then paddle back upstream to free the timber, and so get on his way again. The rope may not always have been looped round the paddler's knee, for according to one account, 'in floating timber, a rope is fixed to the float, and the rower holds it in one hand, and with the other manages the paddle; he keeps the float in deep water, and brings it to shore when he will; in returning home, he carries the machine [*i.e.* the currach] on his shoulders, or on a horse' (Shaw 1775:164–5).

This also shows that one-armed paddling was possible, perhaps in the manner described by Hornell, referring to downstream paddling on the River Teifi: one hand gripped the shaft of the paddle a little below its middle, palm inwards; the upper part of the shaft lay along the forearm, the top end pressing against the outer side of the upper arm. 'Thus disposed the arm has good control of the paddle and can work it in the figure-of-eight tractor stroke with the minimum of exertion' (Hornell 1938: Section 1, 26; Plate I, Fig. 1).

The Spey currach in the late eighteenth-century, was 'made of a hide, in the shape, and about the size of a small brewing-kettle [*i.e.* cauldron], broader above than below, with ribs or hoops of wood in the inside, and a cross-stick for the man to sit on'. The currachs were so light that the men carried them home from Speymouth on their backs. One still survived in the parish of Cromdale in 1794. (Grant 1794:134).

Although the example now in the Elgin Museum is round, apparently like most of the currachs described in Scottish documentary sources, the careful Lachlan Shaw gives a rather different account of the Spey currach:

> in shape oval, near three feet broad, and four long; a small keel runs from the head to the stern; a few ribbs are placed across the keel, and a ring of pliable wood around the lip of it. The whole machine is covered with the rough hide of an Ox or a Horse; the seat is in the middle, it carries but one person, or if a second goes into it to be wafted over a river, he stands behind the rower, leaning on his shoulders. (Shaw 1775:164).

Shaw's statement seems precise enough but, while there are parallels to this oblong shape in the river coracles of Wales and England, nevertheless keels are non-existent, even in the Irish 'boat'-shaped curraghs. Hornell therefore considered that this was an error; but Shaw, a native of the region, was writing at a time when currachs were still not yet obsolete, and his statement must be respected. Probably he was using the term 'keel' in a loose manner for an internal spar that ran length-wise (*i.e.* keelson), as a means of giving support to the side ribs of the currach.

An intensification in the use of currachs for floating timber evidently took place after 1728, when the Grant chief sold to the London-based York Buildings Company, for £7,000 sterling, 60,000 trees 'of the best and choicest of the fir woods besouth the river Spey . . . lying in the united parishes of Abernethy and Kincairn [= Kincardine], with power to them to cut, sell, and transport, and to their own use and behoof apply the said trees at their own charge and risque within seventeen years' (Forsyth 1895–9: 187). Having the woods was one thing, but getting the trees out was another. Edmund Burt, who was travelling in the area at the period of the sale, had no illusions. As far as he was concerned, no trees 'will pay for felling, and removing over Rocks, Bogs, Precipices and Conveyance by rocky Rivers, except such as are near the Sea-Coast, and hardly those; as I believe the *York-Buildings Company* will find in the Conclusion' (Burt 1759, 2:7). However, the Company pressed on with its activities, and having obtained the use of existing sawmills on the River Nethy, went on to build more. In its early days, the Company used eighteen currachs in floating small rafts of sawn deal, but progress was slow. However, the poet Aaron Hill, who was working for the Company, evolved a method of constructing a large raft, 'consisting of two or three branders [= crossbars] of spars in the bottom joined end to end, with iron or other loups, and a rope through them, and conducted by two men, one at each end, who have each a seat and oar, with which they help the raft in the proper direction.' The rafts could carry from £10 to £20 worth of timber, and the average cost per raft per journey was £1.10/- (Grant 1794:134). These larger rafts, however, were impeded in their journey by certain rocks, but Hill again showed his ingenuity by 'making immense fires on the rocks when the stream was low, and then throwing water on the heated surface. The stone was thus calcined or fractured, and rendered easy of removal' (Forsyth 1895–9:189). Just as the fixed salmon-cruives had inhibited the passing of

currachs, so also did they affect the rafts. In 1782 this had led to a legal contest between the laird of Grant and the Duke of Gordon. It was held that the superior heritors of the Spey, in which the Duke had a right of cruive-fishing, had equally a right of floating rafts of timber down the river, and that the cruive-dyke built across the river should not be allowed to obstruct the exercise of the right to float timber. Previous dykes had been of loose stones that could give way when a raft came against them, but now 'a solid and permanent massive wall was erected, reaching from bank to bank.' According to an interlocutor pronounced by the whole Lords, both rights were valid, and floating was allowed freely from 26 August to 15 May. Between the last day of March and 15 May, however, at least 4 hours' notice of floating had to be given to the tacksman of the Duke's cruive-fishing, or their manager personally, between sunrise and sunset, so that arrangements could be made to open the cruives to let the floats pass. According to a further interlocutor, floating was required to be carried on only between sunrise and sunset, and floats had to pass through the cruives seriatim, at a suitable place pointed out by the Duke's fishers (Paton 1851, 2:582).

The change from the currach to the fabricated log-raft with its guides aboard was no doubt partly due to reasons of safety, but more to economics, especially after some rock clearance had taken place. On the Spey the change-over to rafts appears to have been complete within a few years after the Company started to exploit the forest in 1728.

On other Scottish rivers rafting was also carried on, though nowhere else, it seems, are currachs mentioned in this context. In the seventeenth century timber-floating occurred in many parts of the Highlands (Stevens and Carlisle 1959:116–72 *passim*; Smout 1960:3–13.). A report of 1726 referring to Creich and other woods in Sutherland mentions the floating of logs to the sea, and another of 1752 tells of quantities of illegally-felled timber from Glenmoriston being floated down Loch Ness. Logs were also floated on the River Dee from the estates of Dalmore, Inverey, and Braemore, and there was a convenient sawmill at the Linn of Dee (Anderson 1967, I:473). On the River Tay, there is a record of a rock having been blown up at the Linn on the Stobhall side in 1785, to facilitate the upstream swimming of fish and the downstream floating of timber from the Highland forests (Hunter 1883:354–5), and in the same year the fir wood of Glenmore in the Spey valley was bought from the Duke of Gordon by an English company from Hull, who made roads in order to get it to the river, 'where it admits of rafts.' It was used for the masts of ships as well as for planks (Newte 1791:162). In Inverness-shire, trees cut in the parish of Kilmorack were felled, cut into logs 10 to 12 feet long, and carried by horses to the Rivers Glass, Camrich, and Beauly, where they were floated for 30 or 40 miles to the Aigas saw-mill, which had been operating since 1765. Here they were sawn in the mill, which consisted of three sheds, in all about 126 feet long. Seven saws were driven by four water wheels, about 4 feet deep by 2 feet 8 inches broad. The wheels, turned by water from a dam, could turn at 80 to 90 revolutions a minute, and a saw in good order could slice a 10 or 12 foot log in 4 minutes.

The cut planks and deals had to be carried about 3 miles by land to get past a waterfall, before they were finally floated in rafts down the Beauly for storage in a woodyard at Lovat, in Kirkhill parish, till shipped in vessels of 50–90 tons burden to Leith or London (Fraser 1794:523–4; Grant and Leslie 1798:230).

For some inland forests, like the Black Wood of Rannoch, the problems of timber extraction were considerable. A Company that bought part of this wood in the early nineteenth century had to indulge in quite extensive engineering:

> Canals were formed along the brow of the hill, with lochs or basins at fixed intervals on each level, into which the timber was floated for collection. About one mile from the loch, a long sluice was constructed, down which the heavy trees were slipped one by one, a man being perched upon a tree to signal by a loud whistle when the log was launched. The trees sometimes came down this great incline with such force that they broke into splinters on the passage, many went into the loch with such tremendous precipitation that they stuck as fast as stakes in deep water, while the sheer weight of not a few caused them to sink to the bottom, never to rise again. The trees which found their way in safety into the loch, were bound into rafts, to undergo a dangerous passage down the Tummel and the Tay. Even some of the rafts which reached the Firth of Tay in safety, floated away to the German Ocean and were lost, some of them being found stranded on the shores of Holland (Hunter 1883:413).

In the end, the Company was forced to abandon the task.

Floating, therefore, was not uncommon on suitable rivers, and no doubt other examples could be cited, but the Spey was the river on which it was carried on most intensively, and indeed the only river where currachs are so far known to have played a part in this. Aaron Hill's rafts for moving timber from the Grant's woods of Abernethy have already been described. A lot of timber was also floated from the Duke of Gordon's fir-woods of Glenmore after 1786. They were well situated for water transport down a tributary to the Spey. It was reported that:

> The quantity of spars, deals, logs, masts and ship-timber, which they send to Garmouth or Speymouth yearly, is immense, and every stage of the process of manufactory, brings money to the country; generally once a year, they send down Spey a loose float, as they call it, of about 12,000 pieces of timber, of various kinds; whence they send it to England, or sell it round the coast. For some years, they have sent great numbers of small masts or yards to England to the King's yards, and other places, and have built about 20 vessels of various burdens at Garmouth or Speymouth, all of Glenmore fir. . . . The fir-woods of this country exceed all the natural fir-woods in Scotland put together, without comparison. Sir James Grant's woods of Abernethy, of many miles circumference; next, the Duke of Gordon's, in Glenmore; then Mr. Grant of Rothiemurchus's, who is supposed to have more trees than either of them; then the Duke's again; after that, the Laird of McIntosh's in Glenfishy, all in a line, of about 20 miles in length, on the south side of Spey . . . Besides, Sir James Grant has another wood, of an excellent quality, . . . on the river Dulnan (Grant 1794:135–6).

According to another source, loose floats could number up to 20,000 logs and spars, and were accompanied by 50 to 80 men, who went along the riversides with long poles, pushing the timber off when it stuck. They got 1s. 2d. a day, besides whisky (Grant and Leslie 1798:99). The rafts themselves, however, were for sawn timber, and might consist of 50–60 spars bound together, on which deals and other sawn timber were laid. The men who took them down to Garmouth then returned, carrying on their shoulders the ropes and iron hooks used in making the rafts (Robertson 1794, quoted in Anderson 1967, 1:475). The logs in question, measuring 10–20 feet in length by 12–18 inches in diameter, cost 1s. the solid foot; spar wood of the same length, about 7 inches in diameter, 7d. the solid foot; planks 10 inches broad and 12 feet long, cost 3s. the piece if 3 inches thick, and 2s. if 2 inches; deals 1¼ inches thick by 8 broad and 12 feet long, cost 1s. each (Grant and Leslie 1798:100). The kind of wood-built saw-mill in which the planks were cut was drawn in Glenmore in 1786 (Plate 4).

The floaters' life and work was vividly described by Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchus as she remembered it in 1813, and though what she says applies to rafts, it must be equally valid for the days when currachs were in use. In the remoter glens, dams were made at the lower ends of lakes, and sluice-gates fitted so that a sufficient supply of water could be depended on when logs were to be sent down. On the day of the run, some of the woodmen rolled logs into the water by means of levers, others shoved them off with long poles into the current, and

> they were then taken in charge by the most picturesque group of all, the youngest and most active, each supplied with a *clip*, a very long pole, thin and flexible at one end, generally a young tall tree; a sharp hook was fixed to the bending point, and with this, skipping from rock to stump, over brooks and through briers, this agile band followed the log-laden current, ready to pounce on any stray lumbering victim that was in any manner checked in its progress.

Some streams took the wood straight to the Spey. Others passed first through a loch and, in that case, light rafts of logs had to be made, and paddled or speared across by a man standing on each. The rafts were then dismantled, and the logs either held for the sawmill, or sent on as individual units to the Spey, where the Spey floaters took charge of them. These men mostly came from near Ballindalloch, a certain number of families specialising in the job:

> They came up in the season, at the first hint of a *spate* . . . A large bothy was built for them at the mouth of the Druie in a fashion that suited themselves; a fire on a stone hearth in the middle of the floor, a hole in the very centre of the roof just over it where some of the smoke got out, heather spread on the ground, no window, and there, after their hard day's work, they lay down for the night, in their wet clothes—for they had been perhaps hours in the river—each man's feet to the fire, each man's plaid round his chest, a circle of wearied bodies half stupefied by whisky, enveloped in a cloud of steam and sleeping soundly till morning.

They made the large log rafts for a log run themselves.

> Work started with a morning dram, handed round by a lad with a small cask on his back, and a horn cup in his hand that held a gill; another gill apiece was distributed when work was done. At noon, a dram was part of the meal of bannock and cheese that the men carried with them.

Once the logs from the glens reached the Spey, they were

> seized on by the Ballindalloch men, bored at each end by an auger, two deep holes made into which iron plugs were hammered, the plugs having eyes through which well-twisted wattles were passed, thus binding any given number together. When a raft of proper size was thus formed it lay by the bank of the river awaiting its covering; this was produced from the logs left at the saw-mills, generally in the water in a pool formed to hold them. As they were required by the workmen, they were brought close by means of the clip, and then by the help of levers rolled up an inclined plane and on to the platform under the saw; two hooks attached to cables kept the log in its place, the sluice was then opened, down poured the water, the great wheel turned, the platform moved slowly on with the log, the saw frame worked up and down, every cut slicing the log deeper till the whole length fell off. The four outsides were cut off first; they were called 'backs', and very few of them went down to Garmouth; they were mostly used at home for country purposes, such as fencing, out-offices, roofing, or firing; out-houses were even made of them. The squared logs were then cut up regularly into deals and carted off to the rafts where they were laid as a sort of flooring. Two rude gears for the oars completed the appointments of a Spey float. The men had a wet berth of it, the water shipping in, or, more properly, over, at every lurch; yet they liked the life, and it paid them well. (Grant 1960:152–4, 160–1).

There were occasionally lighter moments in the hard life of the floater, if an oral tale may be believed. The story relates that his chief, the laird of Grant, was

> in company of English friends, admiring the shipping on the Thames, when one of the Englishmen said to the laird—'I suppose you have nothing like that on your puny Spey.' Grant's Highland pride was roused, and he retorted—'I have a subject on the Spey who, in a boat of bullock's hide, would outstrip any of your craft.' The Englishman smiled, and a money bet was made on the spot. The Laird of Grant undertook to have his man and the boat on the Thames on a certain day. The young man who volunteered [an eighteen year old youth from Tulchan—one of the 'Mors' or 'Odhars'] took his currach to London, and in the presence of a great crowd of spectators, the Strathspey man soon outpaced his rivals in his light craft. The stake was paid to the Laird of Grant, and a bonnet full of gold coins was given to the boatman, who said he had no use for them, and handed them to his Chief to give to Lady Grant for pin-money ('Glenmore' 1859:41–6).

Illogically, perhaps, in the light of this victory, Wallace goes on to say that the currach was disused after people were able to make better boats (Wallace [1915]:365).

Terminology

The term '*currach*' is used throughout this paper, in spite of the fact that Hornell restricts that word to the boat-shaped, rowing currachs of Ireland, and reserves 'coracle' (which derives from a Welsh variant in *-l*) for the small, round or oval craft of Wales, England, and Scotland. In no single original Scottish source does the word coracle appear, and it seems preferable, therefore, to use the native term in this regional study. The Scots Gaelic form, *currach*, is glossed by Dwelly (1948: *s.v.*) as a 'boat made of wicker, and covered with skins or hides . . . once much in use in the Western Isles . . .' In Scotland the same word seems formerly to have been used for the sea-going (rowing) curragh, as well as for the small inland (or estuarine) craft described above. Incidentally, the diagram which Dwelly gives of a circular currach with a wooden seat and broad, spade-shaped paddle, so much resembles the currach from Mains of Advie that it is impossible to avoid thinking that they are one and the same. Dwelly makes no comment on this point beyond the comprehensive one that 'the whole of the illustrations, with one or two exceptions, have been specially drawn for the work.' His dictionary first appeared between 1901 and 1911, that is, just about the time of the 'discovery' of the Advie currach.

The only other recorded Scots Gaelic term used in relation to a currach is *crannaghal*, 'the framework', now restricted in sense in Uist to 'a frail boat' (Dwelly *s.v. Curach*). It is unparalleled in the Irish terms for a currach and its parts, listed by Hornell (1938, Section 5:37–8). The Welsh terms are listed by Jackson (1933:312–13).

Conclusion

The Strathspey currach preserved in the Elgin Museum, the last of its kind in Scotland, is thus a lone survivor representing an ancient tradition. Just as the men of Ironbridge on the Severn used a coracle in the shape of a shallow, oval bowl where great manoeuvreability was required, for example when catching rabbits marooned during floods (Hornell 1938, Section 2:270–1), so the similar shape of the only surviving Scottish currach may be due to a comparable need in relation to the floating of timber. In view of Shaw's description of a more elongated form, it is reasonable to speculate on the possibility of there having been a different shape of currach used for salmon-fishing with nets in rather earlier times, equivalent to the blunt-ended coracles of the Welsh and English rivers. In either case, however, the one-hide size, allowing a maximum diameter or length of between four and five feet, appears to have been standard for inland waters. As yet we have virtually no information about sea-going currachs in Scotland.

The currach is a relic of a form of water transport that has a long history in Scotland, as well as in other parts of these islands and beyond, to which the epithet primitive

might well be applied. It is, therefore, remarkable that its last burst of life on the Spey, to which the currach had by then perhaps become largely restricted, was caused by the semi-industrial activities of a London company in the years following 1728.

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NOTES

1 Mr Ian Grant (Scottish Record Office) has kindly supplied the following particulars concerning the geographical location of the currach-fishing rights referred to:

The Duke of Gordon's cruives lay, as shown on a plan (SRO RHP 287) surveyed in October 1760 by Peter May, in one of the interminable salmon-fishing disputes concerning the Spey about the Rock of Ordiequish (Ordnance Survey, 6 inch, revised 1955, Elgin, Sheet 29), in that part of the River described by May as the 'Currach coble'. This is shown as running from Ballhagarty's Gavin, lying a short distance above Culfoldie down to the Kirk of Speymouth. From the Gavin down to the Burn of Ailly (now Red Burn), the west bank of the Spey was then owned by Sir Robert Gordon of Gordonstoun, and the east bank by the Duke of Gordon. From the Burn downwards most of the west bank was owned by Lord Fife, though the Duke held a stretch opposite Gordon Castle.

Mr Grant has also drawn our attention to an early reference, of 1539, to the floating yearly of 8 score of Rothiemurchus 'fyr sparris sufficient to be gestis [= joists]', or at least as many as the owner's predecessors used to deliver 'upon the water syde of Spey beneth the kyrk of Rothymurchous ... quhair thai may be eiselye cassin in the said water of Spey in flott or utherwayis as salbe thocht speidfull' (Innes 1837: 420).

2 'Traditional' sources, though sometimes invaluable, have many pitfalls for this type of study. Hornell quoted from MacGregor (1933: 34–5) a tale of a Clanranald chief who, on hearing his death foretold, had a cowhide currach made to bear him away for ever from his stronghold in Benbecula. Hornell (1938: sec. 2, 298–9) mistakenly assigned the tale to 1745, and thought this was evidence for the 'use of hide-covered coracles in the Hebrides [in] the middle of the eighteenth century'. The use of hide currachs there down to that period, and even later, is indeed a possibility; but, as Mr Angus John MacDonald has pointed out to us, the confused version of the tale given by MacGregor evidently derives from a Gaelic text first printed in 1875 by the great collector Alexander Carmichael, and later reprinted with a translation, along with another inferior English version ('Sithiche' 1912:348 and 350). Carmichael's text reveals that the tale refers to medieval times; and Clanranald's boat merely figures as a '*coit*', with no indication of its construction. This ambiguous term formerly signified a dug-out canoe, at least in Ireland down to the seventeenth century, where it was the normal boat for inland transport. The killing of the cow, mentioned in the other version, surely implies neither the covering of a currach, nor a propitiatory sacrifice (as suggested by the 1912 commentator), but the provisioning of the chief's boat (his 'galley' is referred to) before his long voyage.—Ed.

3 Though on opposite banks of the Spey, Dalchroy and Mains of Advie are within a mile of each other, and were within the (combined) parish of Cromdale (Shaw 1775: 34), where one currach is said

to have survived in 1794 (Grant 1794: 194). As Alastair Mor's currach is stated to have been extant in the middle of last century, and that from Advie was described in 1912 as the last of the Spey currachs, there seems a possibility that it is, in fact, Alastair Mor's vessel that is the subject of this article.—Ed.

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