

Timber Floating: An Early Record on the Tay, and The Use of Coracles or Currachs

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[An article by Alexander Fenton, 'The Currach in Scotland, with Notes on the Floating of Timber', appeared in *Scottish Studies* 16 (1972), pp. 61–81. In the following paper some new Scottish evidence is presented and discussed, and some Welsh parallels provided. Edd.]

For centuries men have used the rivers of Scotland as a convenient means of moving timber from the more inaccessible regions to the points of sale, conversion or manufacture. Tree trunks were floated down, either as loose logs, or bound together in small rafts. An instance of the floating of timber on the Tay in 1503 was recorded by Anderson (1967: I. 224); he gives details also of floating operations in the Spey, Beaully, Tay and Dee in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (*op. cit.*: II. 101–9).

One of the earliest but quite detailed accounts of timber-floating in Scotland occurs in the form of an aside by a Scottish humanist in an extremely rare book on quite a different subject, and it has therefore been overlooked by forest historians and ethnologists. The author of the book, Florentius Volusenus (Florence Wilson) of Elgin, was born in Morayshire *c.* 1500 and died *c.* 1551 (the dates are uncertain). In 1528–9 (or 1534–5: this date too is uncertain), he published a Latin commentary on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* ('Dream of Scipio'), entitled *Scholia seu commentarium epitome in Scipionis Somnium*, which was printed by Robert Redman at London. Only one copy of this book is known to survive in Britain, and that is in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

In his book, Wilson refers to the description of the deafening cataracts on the Nile, and then goes on:

Est et hujis generis in septentrionali Britannia (Scotiam vocant) flumen nomine (si memini) Taia ubi accolae excisas in sylva arbores in flumen vicinum (nam aliter propter commode in urbem invehī non possunt) illis accolae (sunt silvestre hominum genus) superimpositi et tanquam navi vecti per illa fluminis praecipitantia magno spectantium stupore delabuntur incolumes (Wilson 1529 [?] sig. Di^r).

This passage may be translated as follows:

There is, if my memory serves me well, a river of much this kind in Northern Britain (they call it Scotland), the Tay, where the local people throw the trees, which they have cut down

in the forest, into the river nearby (for they would not be able to transport them to town very easily otherwise) and then placing themselves upon these trees (they are very much men of the forest) they are wont to ride as if they were on a boat over the rapids and, to the great amazement of the onlookers, sail downstream quite safely.

This account is interesting because of its graphic detail, showing that the loose floating of long logs or whole stems was already a common practice on the Tay by the early sixteenth century. As a young man Wilson had obviously seen and been impressed by the skill and daring of the Tayside timber-floaters, riding the logs in the manner of the white-water lumberjacks of North America in more recent times.

It is probable that Scottish rivers were used for moving timber in this way long before this first recorded description, as was certainly the case in Wales. Timber felled on the Welsh and English sides of the river Wye, for example, was floated downstream to Chepstow, where there was a 'Raft Street' as early as 1456 (Waters 1958: 93). The river Severn was the chief means of extracting wood from the forests of Montgomeryshire and Shropshire: in the thirteenth century fines were levied for any raft of firewood or timber that struck the piers of Montford bridge near Shrewsbury (Davies 1934, 1936).

The use of currachs (coracles) in floating operations on the Spey early in the eighteenth century when London-based companies were exploiting the pine forests of Scotland (described by Fenton, 1972) has an interesting contemporary parallel in Wales. When John Vaughan of the Golden Grove estate in Carmarthenshire sold a large amount of his wood to Richard Chitty, a timber merchant from Singleton (Sussex) in 1757, the timber was floated down the river Towy to the town of Carmarthen (Jones 1964). The floating of valuable hardwood timber was always attended by the risk of theft as well as the natural dangers of sinking and stranding; accordingly, Chitty prudently hired the local 'Corackle Men' to guide and accompany the floating timber. These Towy coracle men proved to be hard bargainers, asking an 'exorbitant price per Tonn'; but the logging and timber-floating operation was eventually carried out, over a period of several years.

The currach or coracle was not an ideal craft for timber-floating operations: on Scottish rivers its use was superseded by floating loose timber, or large independent rafts, without using currachs for escort or towing. The Welsh coracle too was not designed for timber floating, and the Golden Grove operation appears to be the only recorded instance of its use for that purpose on rivers in Wales.

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