

'The Drifty Days'

A Climate Crisis of 1673-4

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Introduction

This article grew out of work on Liddesdale, which occupies the valleys of the Liddell and Hermitage Waters, running south to the English border at Kershopefoot. Liddesdale was assimilated into the Buccleuch estate from the 1590s. The rent rose from £3658 in 1625 to £19,181 in 1673¹ consequent on new modes of capitalisation and specialisation in sheep farming; but in 1674 the rent crashed to £10,814, recovering slowly by about 1681. Rents also fell steeply in other sheep-raising parts of the Buccleuch Borders estates: in Eskdalemuir from £8210 in 1673 to £4120 in 1674; in Ewesdale from £7749 in 1673 to £5069 in 1674; in Ettrick Forest and Kirkurd from £23,779 in 1672 to £11,035 in 1674. Farms were left empty or were stocked with sheep seized to cover outstanding rent. In the arable areas around Hawick, however, rent reductions in 1674 were modest, though following further severe falls in 1675 some farms were empty here, too.²

The cause of the crash was the climate crisis locally known as the Drifty Days, a period of heavy snowfall and massive losses amongst sheep flocks in early 1674 which became the subject of folk-tales.³ Modern accounts usually describe it as a disaster for the Borders, but detail is sparse; the most recent book on Scots climate notes a period of 'blizzard-like conditions' in the Borders in early 1674 but has no further detail.⁴ This article questions whether the crisis was indeed localised. What sources might reveal a diffuse national crisis? If bad weather was widespread, why has the Borders experience dominated the story? How did people (from government to the poor) deal with it?

The Historical Sources

The Buccleuch accounts show that the crisis affected a substantial region, but the variability between pastoral and arable areas hints at complexity. Unfortunately, no other set of Scottish estate papers has comparable depth in terms of time span and accounting detail. There are hints from other estate papers gathered during the author's previous researches and from the National Records of Scotland (NRS) digital catalogue using search terms such as 'storm' (the commonest contemporary word for any severe weather), 'snow' and 'frost', for the period 1673-4; but altogether it amounts to very little.

A Peebles source describes extensive livestock losses (particularly of sheep) concluding, 'It was universal, and many people were almost starved for want of fuel for fire'.⁵ However, published extracts of the records for the burghs of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Kirkintilloch, Stirling and Lanark revealed nothing. Archival sources show that the Edinburgh authorities acted against an attempt to 'prey on the poor' and exploit high prices in 1674 and the Stirling accounts record efforts to deal with the ice on the river, during the 'great frost'.⁶ Such lean pickings do not encourage further search of manuscript burgh records. The crisis is not mentioned in the parliamentary

records. On 18 March 1674, the Privy Council, more akin to a day-to-day 'government' of Scotland than parliament, deferred the sittings of the justiciary courts 'by reason of the unseasonableness of the weather'; it later slightly eased restrictions on grain and livestock imports.⁷

A selection of diaries and personal account books, such as that of Cunningham of Craighead are not helpful.⁸ A few letters, written from Scotland to Andrew Russell, a Stirling man who moved from Edinburgh to Rotterdam in early 1674, give hints of the problems.⁹ The two most comprehensive accounts of the contemporary weather, by Law and by Scrymgeour, will be introduced below.¹⁰ However, the minutes of the kirk session of Castleton parish, which covered the Liddesdale estate, provide several glimpses of the weather. From 16 November 1673 when there was a 'thin meeting' on account of the thaw, till 22 March 1674 when it was 'still ill weather', most meetings were abandoned or sparsely attended on account of the adverse weather; even on 26 April there was 'no meeting for the weather'. Then, on 21 June 1674, the session distributed meal provided by the Duke of Buccleuch to the poor.¹¹

Kirk records from across Scotland were searched from May 1673 to May 1674, these dates forming arbitrary limits to keep the exercise within bounds. Some 58 parishes and 25 presbyteries, stretching from the Borders to Orkney, revealed relevant evidence. Poor coverage for Dumfries, Galloway, Wigtown and Ayrshire is particularly regrettable as these areas are thought to have suffered badly;¹² records are also sparse or lacking for the West Highlands, Western Isles and Shetland. Conversely, Aberdeenshire and neighbouring counties are well represented. The commonest reports are of meetings and services cancelled, postponed or disrupted by the weather, notices of fasts aiming to avert divine wrath seen as the cause of the bad weather, and finally, of charity collected and distributed to the suffering.

The pattern of disruption is complex. The presbytery of Caithness, which met in Thurso eight times between May and November 1673, could not meet in December or January 'because of the extra-ordinarie storme'. It met again on 4 February but on 4 March there was 'No meeting because of the long continuance of the vehement storm'.¹³ However, other northern presbyteries (Inverness, Forres and Dingwall) met regularly.¹⁴ Even the presbytery of Lorn, the most Highland area for which records survive, met in January, March and April without commenting on the weather¹⁵ though that does not necessarily mean that the weather was benign. Even in remote areas, weather was but one reason for absences; others included sickness, age, business elsewhere, and short winter days. Travel was clearly less of an issue for Lowland, urban parishes, where services and sessions were often held without recorded interruption, albeit the congregation might observe a fast or collect for the poor. So, the minutes provide an overview, albeit fragmentary.

The Harvest of 1673

The impact of the severe winter was exacerbated by the poor harvest of 1673. Grain prices, mainly fixed in the spring of 1674, doubled or almost doubled in Ayr and Glasgow, Perth, Fife, Edinburgh, Haddington and Linlithgow. Such high prices, unknown for many years previously, did not return to base for two years. The high prices, however, do not just reflect the poor harvest but also winter stock losses and the late arrival of spring in 1674 with consequent fears for the harvest. Beef and mutton prices in Aberdeen remained stable in 1674 and 1675, though it is difficult to assess the significance of such isolated data – indeed, for farmers with stock to sell, high prices would be a boon.¹⁶ Scrymgeour, a lawyer working for the Buccleuch estate, outlines poor weather through the summer of 1673 when the harvest was ‘not very good’, though grain captured during the Dutch war then helped to keep prices down. Robert Law in his *Memorials* (1819) says that the wet summer of 1673 endangered the harvest, which was very late; severe winds experienced across Britain and Ireland in October shook grain from the ear, leading to great losses.¹⁷

The kirk records amplify those hints. As early as 25 May the presbytery of Mortlach was unable to meet on account of the weather; the meeting at Haddington in July was disrupted by ‘the great storme that day’.¹⁸ At Edinkillie by 24 August the poor were already ‘crying for help’; a week later there was no collection there ‘in regard to the violence of the weather and paucity of people’.¹⁹ Fearful for the harvest the Presbytery of Jedburgh and the archdiocese of Glasgow ordered fasts in August and September.²⁰ A fast was also observed at Avendale where the session mentioned ‘uncleaness’, impiety and a recent murder as causes of God’s wrath, manifest in ‘the unseasonableness of the weather’.²¹ On 24 September, at Peebles, several ministers were absent and the people ‘all very busie about ye harvest’.²² Further fasts are recorded at Ayr, Clatt, Dyce, Foveran and Longside; indeed, they were probably ubiquitous across Scotland as the weather remained so threatening.²³

The wetness, noted by Law and Scrymgeour, was widespread. At Inverurie the fast was ‘because of the great raines which are continuing upon the cornes’.²⁴ At Ellon and Pitsligo it was ‘to remove that judgement of rotting rains from the corns and to crown the harvest’, though at Pitsligo a woman who gathered up some of her neighbour’s corn, scattered by the wind, was reproved for breach of the sabbath.²⁵ At Dalziel the fast on 14 September was on account of ‘greate raines of long continuance almost all summer withal cold and windie, that threaten the harvest’.²⁶ No sermon was held at Haddington on 30 September ‘because of a great flood’.²⁷ At Crail on 28 September harvest workers threatened to ‘leave the corns uncut’ and flee the parish if they were punished for sabbath breach; the session backed down.²⁸

At Cullen on 3 October 1673, the minister preached in the morning but ‘no afternoon sermon, the weather being foull’.²⁹ At Largo, on 5 October, ‘being a stormie day’ only 7s was collected from the few people present.³⁰ None of the kirk sources mention the ‘great wind’ of 15 October referred to by Law, but in a more normal year the harvest would have been over by that date. Fasts for the ‘untymeous’ harvest continued, particularly in the north east.³¹ At Fraserburgh on 26 October the sermon was on Joel, 1-4 ‘That which the palmerworm hath left hath the locust eaten ...’³² The minister of Fintray chose another doom-laden text from Joel.³³ Significantly, thanksgivings for the harvest continued into November.³⁴ At

Ellon on 9 November there was ‘a thin convention’ on account of the ‘great storm of snow’.³⁵ At Fordyce on 12 November several ministers were absent as the day was stormy.³⁶ At Castleton, where a thanksgiving for the harvest was reported in early November, the session meeting was ‘thin ... for the thaw’ on 16 November.³⁷ Meetings and services sparsely attended or disrupted continued until the end of the year at Hutton and Fishwick, Arbroath, Kemnay, Linlithgow and Rayne.³⁸

January 1674

Law describes ‘great storms and snow; the wind fra the east’ in early January, the bad weather continuing into February. Scrymgeour says there was ‘no frost nor snow’ from early November till 16 January when heavy snowfall began, continuing till 23 January, when much of the lower ground thawed, the frost then returning until 8 February.³⁹ The kirk records suggest that the picture was patchy in early January, worst in the north. The Presbytery of Caithness did not meet in December or early January because of the storm.⁴⁰ Around 60 widely-scattered parishes record services and sessional meetings on 4 January but the day was stormy at Drainie and ‘foull’ at Boharm and Dundurcas, where there was a small congregation and no collection.⁴¹ Humbie session met on 5 January, Kirkcaldy, Mauchline and Tranent on the following day when the presbytery of Dingwall also met without comment.⁴² On 11 January, six sessions met, at Shapinsay (Orkney) after an extended interval ‘because of the tempestuousness of the weather’⁴³ but elsewhere, without comment. On 12 January Corstorphine, Leuchars and Kelso all met, but on 14 January the presbyteries of Paisley and Fordoun were inquorate because of the storm, also the presbytery of Ellon ‘by reason of the storme of weather by wind and raine’.⁴⁴

On 18 January congregations were sparse, collections were deferred or sessions abandoned on account of the weather at Humbie, Innerwick, Swinton and Castleton.⁴⁵ At Jedburgh some people were now in extreme poverty.⁴⁶ Meetings of the Presbyteries of Meigle (20 January) and Ellon (21 January, deferred from the previous week) were sparsely attended.⁴⁷ On 21 January, Robert Turnbull, writing from Stirling, hoped that better weather ‘after so much foull’ would soon curtail expensive delays to a voyage.⁴⁸ On 22 January, Perth announced a special collection for the poor.⁴⁹ The session of Duns excused an accused woman from attending because of the storm on 24 January and for four weeks afterwards. At St Vigean on 25 January the session allowed an extra dollar for the poor



Fig. 1: Stirling Castle, December 2009. It takes a good breakfast and warm clothing to make this scene beautiful. Photograph by John G Harrison.

'because of this necessitous and stormy tyme'.⁵⁰ Additional aid was also distributed at Liff and Benvie; at Innerwick the special collection was again delayed; and at Kildrummy and Castleton meetings were disrupted. On 30 January storm damage to the Earl of Caithness's house required repair and provisions were needed to save the servants there from starvation.⁵¹

February 1674

Law reports 'great stormes and bad weather' throughout February with 'a great storm of snow and a vehement frost' from 20 February, continuing till 29 March. Fresh water and the earth itself were frozen; livestock, particularly sheep, died in the snow. Scrymgeour, having identified the earlier frost, snow and partial thaw notes that on 8 February there was heavy snow which 'drifted on' for the following week and a 'vehement frost' which continued until mid March.⁵² The kirk records confirm this widespread, grim picture. On Sunday 1 February services or meetings were disrupted at Scoonie, Ellon and Balingry in Fife, at Duns in East Lothian, at Castleton (Roxburghshire), at Alyth and Cortachy (Perthshire/Angus) and at Fintray, Kemnay, Peterculter, Dyce and Kinnell (all in the north east). A frequent complaint was of sparse attendance by congregations and elders on a 'foul' day.⁵³

At Dumbarton on 3 February 'being so extream stormie' ministers and witnesses were absent.⁵⁴ On 8 February business was again disrupted at Cortachy, at St Vigeans (Angus), Rafford (Moray) and Fogue (Aberdeenshire) and at Duns and Castleton (Borders). On 11 February, the minister assigned to preach at the Presbytery of St Andrews was absent whilst those who had missed the previous meeting were excused 'it being almost impossible for them to have travelled'.⁵⁵ On 12 February, at Perth, the session supplemented the earlier collection from reserves on account of the numbers and great needs of the poor.⁵⁶ On 15 February disruption continued at Castleton, Duns, Cortachy (Angus) and at Boharm, Kildrummy and Rayne in the north east. At Crail (Fife), the storm prevented the minister's return from a business trip from 17 to 22 Feb.⁵⁷

Law's great storm of snow on 20 February is not noted in the kirk records but there was no preaching at Holm (Orkney) on 22 February 'the weather being tempestuous' and at Thurso 'no sederunt in respect of the badness of the weather'.⁵⁸ Weather, usually described as 'stormie', impacted meetings at Ellon, Boharm, Kildrummy, Fintray, Dunbarney, Longforgan, St Vigeans, Balingry, Largo, North Berwick, Duns and Castleton. Where services were held, attendances were often low and collections small. On 25 February, a meeting of the presbytery of Paisley was cancelled due to storminess and that of the presbytery of Perth was postponed until 18 March as 'the brethren could not travel'. The following day, the Presbytery of Dundee curtailed business, partly in response to the weather.⁵⁹

March 1674

The 'vehement frost' continued into March. Scrymgeour has the thaw in some places as early as 17 March, but Law says that until 29 March 'all fresh waters was frozin', ploughing was delayed, there was some loss of human life as well as of livestock, Scrymgeour particularly emphasizing sheep 'in the south'.⁶⁰ The first day of the month, 1 March, again saw no preaching at Holm (Orkney) and bad weather at Thurso.⁶¹ At Fintray the weather was 'rather worse than better'⁶² and services and sessions were disrupted at Pitligo, Rayne, Dyce, St Vigeans and Alyth. At Largo the collection was tiny on a

stormy day.⁶³ At both Trinity Gask and Balingry services for the small congregations were moved to the minister's manse on account of the cold.⁶⁴ The storm forced abandonment of the presbytery at Aberlour on 2 March.⁶⁵

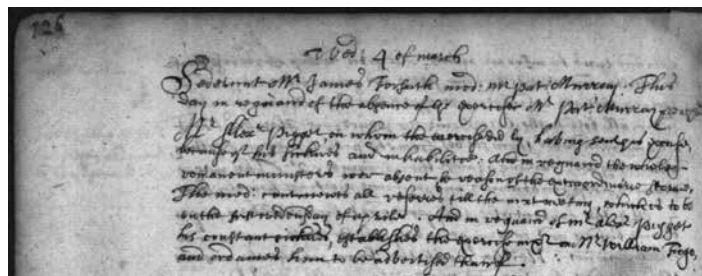


Fig.2: Business at Stirling Presbytery was abandoned on 4 March 1674 'be reason of the extraordinarie storme'. CH2/722/2 Courtesy of Stirling Council Archives.



Fig.3: The Forth frozen above Stirling Bridge, January 2010 (as in March 1674). Photograph by John G Harrison.

On 4 March the laird of Glenorchy wrote from Edinburgh: 'I am grievd for the judgement like storm here. I pray God divert it for the lyk was never seen her in this season'.⁶⁶ That day, meetings of the presbyteries of Stirling, Fordoun, Peebles and Linlithgow were abandoned or curtailed on account of 'extraordinarie' weather; at St Andrews, the meeting was delayed because of 'the greatnes of the storme and the impossibilitie of traveling' so that 'non came to towne'.⁶⁷ One minister intimated 'his inability to travel in such cold weather' to Forfar.⁶⁸ On 7 March Colin Campbell could not get from central Perthshire to Perth because of snow.⁶⁹ The sessional meetings at Dyce and Kirkwall on 8 March were abandoned because of the weather. At Kirkwall parents were reprov'd for allowing children to play snowballs.⁷⁰ At Trinity Gask the preaching was again in the manse; at Alyth business was curtailed by 'the extreme cold'; and at Castleton there was 'a thin meeting' on account of the storm. On 9 March at Aberdeen, a collection of £271 was raised to relieve the 'great penury of the poor' in the present storm.⁷¹

On 10 March meetings were disrupted at Kemnay and at Ellon by 'the tempest and storme of snow'.⁷² That day, Robert Turnbull wrote from Stirling 'our water is all frozen over so that ye cannot expect your meal in haste'.⁷³ During this 'great frost' Stirling Council paid for cutting stones to break the ice at Stirling Bridge – a procedure repeated in 1683-4 at considerable risk, though for obscure reasons⁷⁴ This freezing is crucial evidence as the tidal Forth at Stirling habitually



Fig.4: Allan Water in spate following the thaw in 2010. Similar spates in March 1674 caused new disruption. Photograph by John G Harrison.

freezes only after prolonged spells of very cold weather. December 2009 and January 2010 were the coldest two months in Scotland since records began in 1912, with daytime temperatures down to minus 12 C; the Forth froze at Stirling Bridge on 10 January 2010.⁷⁵

Also on 10 March 1674, the presbytery of Aberdeen, considering the 'long continuance of the storme in this season' appointed a fast to be held on 22 March.⁷⁶ Mid month, a fast was called at Kilwinning.⁷⁷ By that time the Duchess of Buccleuch was concerned about the impact of her tenants' losses on revenues for the coming year.⁷⁸ On 15 March fasts were held in parishes across the north east. Efforts at poor relief were increasing, too, but the weather continued to impact attendance and collections, the reason at Ellon 'being a great storm' whilst at Castleton it was a 'thin meeting for storme'.⁷⁹ But at Trinity Gask, with the storm receding, the preaching returned to the kirk whilst at Lilliesleaf it was 'ane tempestuous day by reason of the breake of the long storme, since the beginning of January'.⁸⁰ So, patchily, the conditions were ameliorating rather earlier than Scrymgeour thought.

On 18 March the presbytery of Dunblane deferred some business 'in this long, sad season' and appointed a fast, to be on a sabbath 'because of the throng of labour'.⁸¹ But, despite these signs of spring, on 19 March 'by reason of the unseasonableness of the weather', the Privy Council deferred the impending circuit courts.⁸² On 22 March, at Rayne, as the weather improved, arrangements were made for catechising those too sick or weak to attend during the storm. But at Kelso, on 23 March a presbyterial fast was held for 'the grievous sins of the land and the calamities and ruine brought upon many families by the great and long continowd storme, ..., no season for the seed as yet appearing'.⁸³

The presbytery of Auchterarder also ordained a fast on 24 March 'that the Lord may continue to be gracious to ye Land and leave ane blessing behind him in giving seasonable weather that ye husbandmen may cast ye seids in ye ground wt hope ... of a plentiful harvest'. At Ellon several were absent from the presbytery on 25 March because of 'the speatt of water after the break of the storme', one minister appearing on the wrong side of the stream but unable to cross.⁸⁴ The 'extraordinarie storme, having lasted long', the presbytery of Duns had not met from 13 January to 31 March.⁸⁵

April 1674 and Later

Law says that the late seed time and poor summer caused a late harvest and high prices. Scrymgeour reports rain and snow for ten days from 2 April though it then became 'pretty fair and dry' but with snow persisting on the hills. It 'proved a very ill seed tyme', remaining cold and windy into early May, leading to a late, difficult harvest in 1674.⁸⁶ At Whitekirk on 9 April, several ministers were 'deteined by the storme and the ryseing of the waters [which] were unpassable'. Heavy rain also 'made the waters impassible' at Fordoun on 22 April. The session of Castleton still could not meet on 26 April on account of the weather. At Alford travel on horse or on foot was impossible from 17 December 1673 until 8 April 1674.⁸⁷

Fast days resumed during April, often on the sabbath to avoid hindering the work of seedtime.⁸⁸ The Avendale session describes 'the desolation of many families up and doune the land ... occasioned by the late extraordinarie storme, the lyke whereof hath not been in the memory of any man living'.⁸⁹ Dalziel session records 'the loss of sheep and other cattell, the starving condition of many families throughout the land because thereof and the death of many others by reason of a great storme of snow and frost that lay a great part of the winter and for most till beginning of May'.⁹⁰ On 20 April, though, when the worst of the weather was past, it was noted that the poor were starving at Kelso.⁹¹ Around that time, the Edinburgh authorities moved to punish a man who, hoping to profit from rising prices, refused to sell his grain stocks.⁹²

Dealing with the Crisis and its Aftermath

Limited grain imports (normally banned) were allowed in July 1674 by which time reserves were running low. Later the Privy Council allowed the Buccleuch estate to import cattle and horses from Ireland to replace those lost, though the estate was later fined for breaching the conditions applied. They also deferred court sittings scheduled for 1674 due to the adverse weather.⁹³ But, otherwise, the response was entirely down to local agencies.

In March 1674 the Duchess of Buccleuch (in Whitehall) was aware of the impact the 'great frost and snow' would have on the 'poore tenants' though her primary concern was for her own revenues.⁹⁴ By early May 1674, when new leases were due to be agreed, many Buccleuch farms were abandoned, others leased at greatly reduced rents or stocked with animals appropriated from bankrupt tenants, whose stock became a nucleus for recovery.⁹⁵ Not until 1681 did the total rental recover to 1673 levels. The nearby estate of Harden also had 'waste' farms and rent arrears.⁹⁶ For both estates, the impact was much less on the grain-growing areas, such as the Buccleuch lands around Hawick. On 30 March in Caithness, at the other extremity of the Scottish mainland, Colin Campbell reported on the 'sad and deplorable' situation whereby tenants could not pay their rent, cows were weak and dying and could not be fit to be driven south until July; seed (consumed during the shortage) needed to be replaced or land would be 'displenished'. On 9 April 'a sad year' for the north of Scotland, including the Caithness lands, was anticipated.⁹⁷

Poverty and Charity

Personal charity, as recorded in the accounts of Cunningham of Craigend, Lauder of Fountainhall and Erskine of Mar, continued, though without any mention of the crisis or indication of whether total giving rose or fell.⁹⁸ In November

1673 the Synod of Ross issued a proclamation against 'vagabond beggars'. Reports of vagrancy increased through the winter and, for example, in February 1674 the session of Saltoun gave 7s sterling to 'our poor' and 8d to the 'common beggars'.⁹⁹ A much fuller study, over a longer time scale, would be needed to bring together and assess such details. At Edinkillie, in August 1673, a new list of poor was made when they came 'crying' to the session for help; but the next week, with violent weather and few people in the kirk, there was no collection. Many parishes, like Liff and Benvie, drew up new lists of poor 'that they may have something to help them in the winter season'.¹⁰⁰ At Falkland, in December 1673, people were exhorted to 'mend their charity'.¹⁰¹ There were special collections in Perth and Aberdeen, the latter for the 'great penury of the poor because of the storm'.¹⁰² At Tayport-on-Craig the archbishop gave £26 which was distributed to the poor on 15 March;¹⁰³ perhaps similar gifts elsewhere were made but are unrecorded. Most parishes distributed only cash but oatmeal, coal, shoes and clothes are also mentioned. At St Vigeans Alexander Murison gave a firlot of meal in March. In Castleton, meal given by the Duke of Buccleuch was distributed in July 1674.¹⁰⁴

When there was no reserve fund weekly collections were often distributed immediately, for example at Forgue and Rattray. At Leuchars in November and Ellon in December, nothing remained in the box once the poor had been paid.¹⁰⁵ At Alyth, in February 1674, steps were taken to bring in income due on bonds. At Kelso, in April 1674, to meet the 'necessities of the poor that are in a starving condition' the session tried to get better security for the capital sums owed and to bring in the interest payments.¹⁰⁶ Often the goods of beneficiaries who died were forfeit to the session.¹⁰⁷ As has been seen, bad weather reduced congregations and collections, as at Largo on 5 Oct 1673, and on 19 January, 22 February and 1 March 1674. So, as the weather became worse, the resources got smaller. Lack of a minister could mean fewer services, fewer collections and exhaustion of the funds, as at Prestonpans.¹⁰⁸ But, despite the pressures, not all charitable effort went to famine relief. Presbyteries sometimes organized collections for foreigners (French, Hungarian; some religious refugees) during the period, whilst a collection initiated in 1672 for the crew of a Glasgow ship captured and enslaved by the Turks continued throughout the crisis, with generosity encouraged as a Christian duty.¹⁰⁹ Significant sums were raised for this purpose, but at Mauchline, where a massive £75 was raised, only £60 was sent, with the balance kept for the local poor.¹¹⁰

Travel, Migration, Vagrancy and Death

Rain, snow, wind and severe frost all impeded travel, and not just to presbyterial meetings. However, James Gordon wrote several letters from Aberdeen to Edinburgh through January and February 1674, reporting on goods moving by land and sea. He left Aberdeen for the country between 2 and 5 February. None of his letters mentions major concerns about weather. In January, Robert Turnbull reports a voyage delayed by bad weather. The carrier lost some butter between Edinburgh and Glasgow in early February 'because of the storm' and the frozen river impeded shipping on the Forth. But otherwise, posts and goods continued to pass throughout January, February and March between Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Stirling.¹¹¹

Migration and reports of casual begging both increased,

particularly in upland parishes such as Yester, but less so in the towns. However, it was not until 1675 that there was an obvious increase in mortalities, probably resulting from a combination of late seed time and bad harvest in 1674 with additional disease factors.¹¹²

Understanding the Crisis

Both Law and Scrimgeour note that the wind was easterly throughout the worst of the winter. Both comment on storms on the east coasts of England and Scotland and Law mentions problems in Ireland. The kirk records see it as a Scottish – indeed, often a purely parochial – concern. However, the crisis was clearly part of the global climate crisis of the seventeenth century.¹¹³

Contemporaries interpreted it as divine retribution for sinfulness. Days of fasting and humiliation aimed to divert God's wrath. At Fintray on 26 October 1673 the minister preached on Joel 2, verses 12 and 13 ('...turn ye even unto me with all your heart and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning'). The following March he chose Hosea, 7, verses 13 and 14 ('Woe unto them for they have fled from me ...').¹¹⁴ At Rayne on 15 March, the text (Luke 13 verses 1 and 2) was aimed at 'stirring up the people to repentance for the unseasonable weather'.¹¹⁵ For the laird of Glenorchy, in early March, it was a 'judgement like storm' – 'the lyk was never seen her in this season'.¹¹⁶

Conclusions

There is no reason to doubt these claims of uniqueness – and no society is prepared for unique circumstances. At Avendale and at Duns the storm was 'extraordinaire' and at Fintray it was unprecedented in living memory. For the presbytery of Dunblane, in March, it was 'this long sad season'.¹¹⁷ And, as we have seen, it was nationwide, though the impact of the late seedtime was in most areas perhaps more important than the extreme winter cold. So why has the Borders experience lingered in folk-memory? Data gathered following further heavy losses on the Buccleuch estates in 1681 show that sheep outnumbered cattle by almost 22:1 in all parts of the Borders estate except the arable areas around Hawick: in Liddesdale by 18:1; and in Teviotdalehead by 70:1.¹¹⁸ Sheep are uniquely vulnerable to heavy snow. Others experienced similar weather, but specialization, which had so increased rents over the previous fifty years, had also brought a massive risk.

Two further general points are worth noting. Archival sources can illuminate (sometimes vividly) a topic which was certainly not the primary concern of their creators. Other interesting topics illuminated in this way include ministerial ill-health and the choice of sermon texts. Local sources, with parochial concerns, can be used to provide a mosaic illustrative of a national crisis.

Acknowledgements

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