

ORAL HISTORY AT BENNACHIE

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INTRODUCTION

The oral history research carried out so far at Bennachie contains rich insights into its landscapes and people. Personal narratives, family genealogies and attitudes towards the landscape have begun to emerge. In it there is potential not only for some fascinating historical content but also for understanding how oral history can link people in the community together for the present and future. At this stage we can start to draw out some significant themes and evaluate the methods with a view towards setting out the possibilities for future work. To begin however I want to reflect on some of the conceptual issues in oral history research that have been influential in our work.

The concepts are important because oral history is not a purely objective research technique, and we have to be aware of the choices being made as we engage in it. For example, there are a wide variety of topics that could be relevant to the Bennachie Landscapes Project (BLP). Should we seek family histories relating to the 19th century Colony site, or explore people's memories of their own lives around Bennachie – their life histories – that relate to more recent years? This partly depends on how we understand oral history itself.

In my discipline of social anthropology, early proponents saw oral history as a way of creating a historical record for non-literate societies around the world. The anthropologist-historian Jan Vansina, working in central Africa, coined the term 'chain of testimonies' to describe how a kernel of truth might survive as traditional stories were retold generation by generation (Vansina, 1965). By that reckoning we might hope to explore events far back in time, but it raises the question of what kind of 'truth' should we aim to discover. More recently scholars have recognised that oral history can be about much more than the narrow search for facts. Ruth Finnegan explores oral traditions as an art form, including how the 'performance' of oral traditions makes them meaningful in the present. From a research perspective that can also include questions of politics and power: 'the production and consumption of art forms are a proper focus of study (not just their style, meaning or earlier history), leading to questions of how particular forms were composed and circulated, in what conditions, by and to whom, and in whose interests' (Finnegan, 1992, 36).

More straightforwardly, oral history has been used to explore aspects of people's past that may be unrecorded elsewhere. Historian Paul Thompson (1988) argues that the main benefit of using oral history in these circumstances is in the construction of 'alternative histories' to those produced by elites and preserved in their documents (Thompson, 1988). It can be a social history that includes the voices of those involved, or memories of them, rather than relying just on statistics or written sources that usually had very different purposes (as useful as they may also be). This is perhaps the clearest of our goals at Bennachie as we seek to uncover the stories of the ordinary people that may otherwise be lost. Even so, when we analyse the recordings to seek information on the past we also need to consider how the stories have come to be told, and the meaning they have for those who tell them and listen to them in the present.

METHODS

The oral history strand of the Bennachie Landscapes Project has a context in research recently carried out by the University of Aberdeen, involving the PhD fieldwork by Jennifer Fagen of the University's Elphinstone Institute and also a short series of interviews carried out by myself on behalf of the Bailies of Bennachie around 2007. The aim of this stage of the work has been to develop 'community-led' oral history, which has involved sharing skills and the involvement of community volunteers in carrying out some of the interviewing.

In May 2012 we ran a workshop at the Bennachie Centre with six participants that discussed key approaches and skills in oral history. This was followed on June 23 by the centrepiece of this stage of the research, a community oral history day entitled 'Soup and a Blether', at which most of the recordings from this stage of the research were made. People attended as a result of direct invitations from us, a leaflet campaign in local shops and libraries and a press release that was picked up by local media. We also approached a small number of other visitors to the Centre on the day. A feature of the day was a specially installed internet wi-fi connection at the Bennachie Centre that allowed for two interviews to take place via Skype. All respondents gave verbal or written consent (written for interviews in person) for the recordings to be used as part of the Bennachie Landscapes Project. The recording was carried out by myself, Jennifer Fagen and Michael Neely, while James Mackay has also been active before and after the community day in June. We used hand-held stereo digital voice recorders from the Olympus range costing around £50 each.

The resulting audio mp3 files were transcribed by Jennifer Clarke, a postgraduate student at the University of Aberdeen, thanks to funds from the 2012 Arts and Humanities Research Council project. A middle path has been taken between a highly rigorous transcript in which each sound is typed out and pauses carefully marked, and a more standardised version which would be easier to read but would lose much of the flavour of rhythm and accent in the speech. Researchers who may wish to listen for more subtle aspects of the recordings than have been transcribed will be able to access the recordings themselves. Printed copies of the transcripts are stored in the Bailies archive at the Bennachie Centre, and the digital files will be kept initially by the Bennachie Landscapes Project.

For the most part we used what is known as ‘semi-structured’ interviewing, which means we neither stuck to a pre-designed questionnaire format nor held entirely unstructured and free-flowing conversations. Instead, interviewers usually had in mind a set of topics or themes that they were interested in hearing about, but also allowed interviewees to express themselves in the way they wished. During the oral history day this required improvisation on the part of the interviewers as we were not sure in advance who we were going to talk to. The plan so far has been to cover a wide range of people and topics to see where the possible interest for the Bennachie Landscapes Project may lie. Some of the highlights and key themes are presented here.

THE RECORDINGS: PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND LIFE HISTORIES

The boundary between oral history research and exploring someone’s recent or present life is not a hard and fast one, and we can use the term ‘life history’ for a conversation that covers the range of a person’s life. Speaking with younger people at Bennachie can be useful for gaining perspectives on recent changes on the hill as well as getting a sense of current life there. During the community oral history day there were some interesting perspectives from people in this group. I asked one visitor to the hill about his perception of changes to the hill in the ten years that he had been coming.

“We were talking about it while we were on the hill today, looking at the state of the paths, I do remember the first time we came here there was quite a lot of path building going on, and picking our way through big bags of boulders and things like that, and over the years

of being here, the path network has firmed up and become, as one of my friends described it, like a European Alpine path compared to a sort of normal boggy single track path that in Scotland, is typified.”

Another respondent, a woman in her late 20s whose first memory was from about the age of nine, agreed:

“There are so many more paths, to walk on now. I remember always stumbling on the rocks and stones and things, but then today coming out, and being able to use a buggy to go round the path, which is fantastic, which is great obviously for the younger generations. But I only walked up it about two weekends ago, and it’s still as good a feeling now getting to the top, as it was when, you know, when I was young. So it’s always like an achievement!”

These responses are certainly testament to the work carried out by the Forestry Commission and the Bailies that has changed the experience of being on the hill. But as part of longer conversations they also show how aspects of the landscape are reflected on in temporal terms, as both speakers consider the past paths in relation to ‘today’, and in the second draws together a childhood memory, a visit two weekends ago, and her experience today.

The second speaker also recounted another common theme in which the ‘pull’ of the Bennachie landscape is felt almost in bodily as well as emotional terms.

“So you were just saying that you moved up here when you were a kid?”
 “Seven, yeah. And we would drive past Bennachie every day, almost, for work and school and things, and it was such an imposing sight. But now that I’ve moved away from the area and I come back and visit home, it’s the moment you see it in the distance, you kind of know that home is not very far away, and it’s got a lot of good memories. And, now as an adult, we walk up here all the time, whenever we can, we get back into the area.”

This account is mirrored in Bailies stalwart James Mackay’s story of his first connections with Bennachie, as seen from the train when travelling between Inverness and Aberdeen in his student days. The tale, which I recorded with him in

2007, continues with his first ascent that was as memorable for the way he got to Bennachie as much as the walk when he was there.

“I was very interested in mountains and hills, being a Highlander. And as I went back and forth on the train at term times, in the region of Oyne I saw this fine-looking hill, inquired what it was, was told that was Bennachie. Then when I was a student I was, well I did my degree in Botany and so I chose a particular mountain plant as my honours thesis, the crowberry, which grows in high mountains, so I thought well what’s the nearest high mountain to Aberdeen, and of course it’s Bennachie and I went out one day on the bus with a fellow student, lassie, for the day on Bennachie. And then at that time of course I had no thought that I would ever be staying in Aberdeenshire. I was keen to get back and teach in Highland schools. But that wasn’t the way things worked out, so I did my last teaching practice as a student at Inverurie Academy, so that was a job going at the time. (...)

And so, I started at Inverurie Academy August 1956 and the first Saturday that I was there I went across the road, I was staying in what was called the Central Temperance Hotel, which is now where the Inverurie Herald, no wait a minute, it’s across from the banks of Urie, er, David’s would it be now? Shops change, but anyway, across the road there was the Garioch, the Cycling Centre of the Garioch, John Benzie, he had a garage and he had a cycle place. So I went across and spoke to old John Benzie and I said ‘can I hire a bike?’ and he said ‘laddie we dinna hire bikes here.’ But he said, I explained what I was wanting and he said ‘well look, see that een, her in the corner there, you can hae it for a sixpence.’ And er, he said ‘the brakes are nae very good’, well I discovered when I got out to the A96, there was a lot of other deficiencies on the bike, but anyway. That got me through to the Rowan Tree car park, and I left it there. Climbed Bennachie and got back in time for my lunch. So that was er, I suppose I was hooked from that time on.”

A direct perspective on the sense of the Bennachie landscape as home was provided by James's good friend Algy Watson. Algy is now sadly no longer with us, but myself and Jennifer Fagen both carried out interviews with him. To Jennifer he explained,

"I'm what in the North-East we call hame-draachtit, that means we are drawn to home. Bennachie has drawn me."

James' story of seeing and visiting Bennachie takes us further back through the decades and we can begin to see how 'life history' interviews can take on broader relevance. As a further example, during the community oral history day of June 2012 Alexander Hay, who grew up on the farm of Keithney near Burnhervie, told us of seeing a fire at Bennachie in the 1960s:

"I mind one fire happening in March, it was March, and it came right down just the valley, down the side of Bennachie."

"Was that a particularly dry March?"

"Aye it was, a dry March. As I remember being, it was busy seeding the grain, putting in the grain crop, and we could see the flames, we could see the smoke, and we just seen it coming along the side of the hill, and the flames, almost coming round further, ye ken? I cannae remember about it, if there were a lot of beaters trying to put it out, or what happened. I remember the fire, that was in, I think, it must have been in the '60s. Heather burning. It wisnae right up to top. It was just kind of in the valley, it came round the valley bit you see, It was between Millstone and Bennachie, it was just right round. It wis just the heather that was burning. But there was some trees got burned, there was some got burned. Oh yes. That's the biggest fire that I've seen on Bennachie, It's just dry. It was people that was, been burning, been burning gorse or something by the roadsides or something. It just got, they couldnae control it - you ken how a fire starts, and it just got bigger and bigger, you see."

I have put this fire story together from the transcript that showed more conversational to-and-fro, as an example of making a story more easily readable for this format. Mr Hay then talked about another interesting landscape practice, and here I will include the fuller transcript in which he converses with three other speakers:

“But, er, the roadsides an’ that, used to be all cut, all the broom, you see they used to use all the broom for putting in the bottom of the haystacks, and corn stacks, you see, they used to cut the roadsides with the broom and that kept them all tidy, you ken?”

1 - ‘Well they don’t do that anymore.’

“No”.

2 - “Why did they put them at the bottom of the haystacks?”

“Well it kept the hay off the ground, the very bottom of the ground.”

3 - “Keep it dry.”

“See, it gets wet. Keeps it dry. It’s a foundation, just like putting a foundation.”

These kind of memories show the potential for more ‘factual’ information to come through in this research that might suggest connections to archival and archaeological work. In 2007 I went to visit Alan Mackie, also sadly now passed away, on his farm in Fetternear. He had written in advance a narrative of Bennachie memories, and he began the session by reading it out in an oral performance. This part, which is about half the total, describes a walk he took as a young boy from his farm to Bennachie, including a meeting with the last of the Bennachie colonists, George Esson.

“We left home here [Burnside Farm] and the path took us up through the wood. This was in the early 1930s. We came out at Blindburn, up past Dalfling, along the top of the fields at Mains of Afforsk. We then went onto Bennachie at that point. There was not much trees, mostly all heather. Cross the track that goes from Woodend to Glenton and Monymusk. This I believe is a drovers road that they drove the cattle to Alford, from Chapel of Garioch. We crossed the fields at Woodend and onto the hill near to the Gouk Stone. This was a stone I believe where the cuckoo perched. The route then took us up past Esson’s Croft. The path at that time went close past the cottage door. His house and steading was thatched with heather. Geordie Esson, a man I had never spoke to, but at that time if a man older than you didn’t speak to you, you didn’t speak to them! Geordie Esson was a strange man but I believe he was very clever. I heard he spent part of his early days in America. He was a mason and dry stone dyker. Much of the work can still be seen in the surrounding area, but sadly most of the dykes have fallen into ruin.

I can remember his croft with his small fields, two of corn, one of hay, one of turnips, his brown cow and two calves grazing in the field. When I first saw him he was getting quite frail, but he still managed to work his croft. The heavy work such as ploughing and other heavy work was done by a neighbour. The path then took us up onto the hill. When we went up it was about the month of June when the blaeberrries were mostly ripe. Then we went back in September and came upon small patches of cranberries. There were not many paths at that time on the hill, and they were very rough. But the sight from the Mither Tap was wonderful, looking over Oldmeldrum, and onto Aberdeen over Alford and Rhynie. We could also see the Foudland Hill where my people belong to.”

This is a carefully crafted tale, the style of which contrasts with more off-the-cuff stories such as that of from Mr Hay who saw the fire in the 1960s (Alan Mackie also described Bennachie fires in 1933, 1949 and 1960). But within both there is lots of historical detail – the use of broom in haystacks, an old route up Bennachie, and the details of George Esson’s croft, for example – that are interesting in themselves and useful as part of a wider study of landscape in the area.

FAMILY AND GENEALOGICAL NARRATIVES

Family stories are another ‘genre’ that comes through in our research, and they have the potential to reach into the more distant past than a single life history. Jennifer Fagen’s PhD research has shown the wide range of family connections that people make with Bennachie, both to the Colony and the surrounding area. Bennachie emerges as a kind of anchor for a sense of identity and belonging, or a marker of home as the interviews quoted earlier show. Using Skype in the community oral history day, we spoke with Elsa Collecutt of Tauranga in New Zealand, whose mother was from Chapel of Garioch. Elsa described how her mother when a young girl became orphaned and was fostered into a home on the Pittodrie estate at the foot of Bennachie. This is based on a transcript of our conversation that Elsa has edited and added to.

“My mother Martha Hunter was orphaned by the time she was six. That left five children who lived in the care of their grandmother originally.

As there was no financial support in those days I found out when doing family research that the five children were originally put into 'the poor house.' This is something my mother never told me. Whether or not she put it out of her mind or as a six year old, she may not have remembered. Later the children were fostered out. The two girls, my mother and the sister was Helen, were placed in the care of an unmarried mother, who had three children of her own. For many years the girls were treated like servants. The two boys likewise were placed in care not far from the girls. The eldest sister at 13 sent to work in Aberdeen as a domestic servant.

The girls had to do all the unpleasant tasks around the place. One regular chore was cleaning the family shoes and placing them next to the fireplace. Mother recalled that one night she got out of bed, possibly sleep-walking, cleaned the shoes once more, and replacing them in their usual place. She remembered quite vividly at the end of the task awaking to the sound of laughter, before being told "Get yourself back to bed." Once a year somebody from the equivalent to the social welfare would visit and check on the girls, and of course ask them how they were. Too timid to say otherwise, they replied "absolutely fine." One thing which is hard to credit was the constant reminder of the girls' position in the family. The sisters were never ever, except when the welfare visited, to sit at the table with the family. All meals were served and eaten standing along a sideboard, often a plate of porridge which was hastily eaten when they ran home from school at lunchtime. Gulped down and then back to school again.

The sisters had a really strong bond and would often console each other. When life got really bad mother would go out and look over to Bennachie, and day dream, and think, "one day, when I grow up, I'm going to climb that mountain." Perhaps looking at the mountains was a comfort thing, but it did play a large part in her life. Many years later Mother made a scrap book for my children when they were young, one page featured a picture of Bennachie (I'm not sure where she got the picture from) alongside which in her own writing: "This was a mountain not far from where I lived as a little girl. I used to tell myself when I grew up I would climb that mountain."

Elsa's mother never did climb Bennachie. At the age of 14 she moved into domestic service for a family of furriers in Aberdeen. In 1929 she paid around £5 for the passage to Australia and shortly afterwards moved to New Zealand, never returning to Scotland. For many years a sign on Elsa's parents' house bore the name Bennachie, which Elsa now keeps. In 2003, some nine years after the death of her mother, Elsa visited Scotland, attended a family reunion in Turriff, and, in a poignant gesture, left a pair of gloves belonging to her mother on Bennachie.

A final example from our research so far is another Antipodean connection, this time one that goes back to the Bennachie Colony. Jennifer Fagen made contact with a number of Colony descendants, living both locally and far afield, and especially those who have been doing their own genealogical research. During the community oral history day we arranged a further Skype conversation with Jennie Jones of Melbourne, Australia. Amongst her direct forebears is John Gardiner (1819-1908) whose parents Arthur and Gilchrist Gardiner lived close to Bennachie at Bograxie. In the 1830s they moved on to the hill itself, appearing in the 1841 census as resident there. Two of John's sisters, Elizabeth and Margaret, also moved into the Colony (their story is detailed in Fagen, 2011). John emigrated from Scotland shortly after his marriage to Isabella Abernethy in 1842, and their first four children were born in Tasmania. Jennie wrote an account of how she came to research her family history and pointed out some of the highlights of John Gardiner's life:

“I have found that John Gardiner has possibly led a most extraordinary life and may have been the first person to find gold in Tasmania. His time in the Hamilton, Victoria district was when one of Australia's worst bushfires swept the state, known as Black Thursday. On to Ballarat at the time of the Eureka Stockade, when the miners revolted against the payment of licence fees and then to Strathbogie where the bushranger Ned Kelly and his gang frequently roamed the ranges. Not to mention being a pioneer of new settlements in both Tasmania and Victoria helping to build a nation. What an interesting fellow he would have been to have a yarn with.”

Although it is not known whether John himself lived at the Colony or why he left Scotland, it gives an insight into the kind of life that an Aberdeenshire immigrant to the New World could lead at this time. These people, including Elsa's mother, would have often remembered the now far-away landscapes of their upbringing,

while those remaining behind would be imagining the new places being lived in by their relations. The memory and imagination of landscape – its affectual relations – must have been tied up with kinship bonds, even where those families had had a difficult past, and this signals the significance of family history for understanding landscape. In the present, the range of archival resources now available also enable people to make connections across different places and times. During our Skype conversation in the oral history day, Jennie, myself and Jennifer Fagen also spoke with John Greenhorn, who currently resides at Bograxie and has been researching its previous inhabitants. Jennie and John were in contact through a genealogy website, part of a community of people putting together family histories and apparently small stories that can nonetheless speak to much larger historical themes.

In all the excerpts presented here, the links between evidential accounts of the past and more historiographical reflections – on what it means to carry out heritage research – start to come through. Finding the story of previous generations and conveying one's own memories of the landscape are ways of creating an identity in the present as well as learning a narrative of the past. One overall point is that seemingly 'factual' accounts should be recognised as being embedded in processes of culture, just as the more obviously reflexive narratives involve the creation of identity and different versions of the past (for more on this, see Schneider 2002). Indeed, we could even think about the ways that each material practice in the landscape creates its own world of meaningful inhabitation for those involved in it. Oral history can help disclose and convey those worlds for others.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR ORAL HISTORY AT BENNACHIE

The oral history at Bennachie is part of the larger multidisciplinary research effort described in these pages. Rather than setting the oral history apart from archival history or archaeology, the most fruitful results will be probably gained from tracking the connections and complementarities from the different approaches. Oral historical studies have not often been integrated in this way and there is plenty of wider significance in this regard for our landscape research at Bennachie. Jennifer Fagen's work at Bennachie takes an inter-disciplinary approach in exploring ethnographic, oral historical and documentary history and many of the themes in the Bennachie Landscapes Project will share that way of working.

In this paper I have constructed a rough typology of accounts from the last ten or twenty years, through to older people's memories going back to the early to

mid-twentieth century, and then to a combination of family stories and genealogical research that can take us to the 19th century. Other Bennachie stories – the legend of Jock of Bennachie for example – certainly have deeper routes than that. Many are recounted in McConnachie's book *Bennachie* (McConnachie, 1890) and survive in versions today that would be well worth exploring. So while we generally do not have the time depth of archival and archaeological methodologies, there is some overlap. Where particular landscape practices are described orally it may well be that insight is gained into the material remains of archaeology or written archival records. Personal voices convey the reality of living in a landscape in a very powerful way. They remind us that people in the past as well as the present would have been full of personality and individuality, making their own choices and judgements, rather than just being representatives of a particular social class, culture, or ecological niche.

The next stages of analysis may include considering the material more thematically. There will be plenty of interest in pursuing direct oral history and genealogy links to the Colony for example, but other questions could cross-cut the decades and centuries. How do people remember their journeys on Bennachie and what were the significant paths and tracks? What activities in the landscape do people remember, and how do they tie in with different land use and access regimes? How have people's perceptions of the hill included ideas of heritage and identity? These, and likely many others, are all potentially rich lines of oral history research that would contribute to an understanding of landscape at Bennachie more generally.

Furthering the community-led aspect of the process will be a matter of encouraging participation in all stages of the research, hopefully towards a 'snowball' effect where the number of interviews increases and some interviewees themselves become interviewers. There is also great potential for schools involvement where children can carry out interviews with elderly relatives. The efforts of all the team so far should be acknowledged in helping get the research off the ground, and we look forward to increasing participation in the months to come.

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