Solway Country

Land, Life and Livelihood in the Western Border Region of England and Scotland

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Solway Country

In memory of my parents
William Rule Scott and Nella Maria Pieri
A native son and an adopted daughter of the Solway Country

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PREFACE

This modest volume slowly gestated within me for many years but until my recent retirement from a busy academic career whose preoccupations took me in altogether different directions I could never find the time to bring it into life. I present it now as a book that I wrote entirely for my own pleasure and edification, but that may also appeal to readers with a personal or intellectual interest in the extraordinarily rich physical and human attributes of the lands around the inner Solway Firth, or what I refer to in these pages as the "Solway Country." At the same time, the book is much more than simply a catalogue of factual information about this part of the world, for it also seeks to show in interpretative terms how the interacting phenomena of land, life and livelihood have evolved in the Solway Country over the centuries, and how this complex process of unfolding has produced a peculiar kind of composite region with a highly distinctive meaning and identity.

As I argue in the chapters that follow, the Solway Country represents a geographic entity with a significant degree of internal regional coherence, even as it is at the same time split by the Anglo-Scottish border into two contrasting but complementary sub-units. Because of this division, there is a persistent tendency for those who write on various aspects of the region to deal with its English and Scottish components as essentially separate and incommensurable entities. By the same token, the published work on the region is for the most part deeply riven into two more or less non-communicating literatures that pay little heed to the common features that extend across both shores of the Solway Firth. My objective in this book is to present the evolution and structure of the region as a meaningful whole, and coincidentally to offer a description of its history and geography that goes far beyond this debilitating rupture. Now that the people of Scotland have clearly expressed their desire to remain part of the United Kingdom it seems more than ever opportune to present a picture of the region in its simultaneously bipartite and yet unified totality.

The Solway Country has always represented a little-known corner of Britain, and apart from Brian Blake's excellent but now outdated book, *The Solway Firth*, published in 1955, there is little in the way of synthetic overviews of this captivating region. Certainly, the Solway Country has never received as much attention as the two popular tourist destinations to

which it lies adjacent, namely, the Lake District to the south and the Scottish Border Counties to the northeast. That said, there is a fascinating and long-standing body of enquiry on different aspects of the region's development and internal order. Over the last few decades, moreover, a growing number of university researchers and a veritable army of amateur antiquarians, archaeologists, environmentalists, etymologists, geographers, genealogists, historians, and others have added enormously to our knowledge of the region's physical and human dimensions. Much of the writing of these workers has been published in two serial publications, both originating in the nineteenth century and still regularly published today, namely, the *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* and the *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*. These publications remain by far the most authoritative and detailed sources of information about the Solway Country, and as any quick perusal of the following pages will reveal, the contents of the present book depend to an enormous degree on the copious testimony that they offer. More generally, I owe a very significant debt of gratitude to all those many individuals, past and present, whose enquiries have laid the essential foundations of my own work and whose insights have helped to guide me time and time again into fruitful lines of investigation. The references contained within the book are an indication of the abundance and diversity of these antecedents. I also want to thank the unfailingly helpful staff of Carlisle Public Library, the Cumbria Archive Centre, the Ewart Library of Dumfries, and the Dumfries and Galloway Archives. Lastly, I am especially obliged to Matt Zebrowski, resident cartographer in the Department of Geography at the University of California – Los Angeles for the excellent maps and diagrams that accompany the text.

The book will appeal, I hope, to those who already have some direct experience of the pleasures and satisfactions offered by acquaintance with the Solway Country. It will also have some more than passing interest for the even wider public that is increasingly attuned to the enjoyment of local history and geography as well as to the rewards of informed examination and discovery of the treasures of the British landscape, both rural and urban. In addition, the book is addressed to all those diverse professional scholars for whom local studies are of interest and significance not only for their own sake but also as vehicles of reflection on the much wider canvas of human life in general. In any case, I am delighted to share this very personal exploration with the public at large in the hope that some will discover as they peruse it an echo of the same fascination with the Solway Country that has motivated me to write it.

For the convenience of the reader, endnotes are placed at the end of each chapter. A gazetteer of places mentioned in the text together with Ordnance Survey grid references is presented at the back of the book.

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CHAPTER ONE

IN SEARCH OF THE SOLWAY COUNTRY

Region, Place, Landscape

There is a unique but elusive type of satisfaction that derives from the contemplation of the intimate history and geography of particular localities. This sentiment is often notably intense when the encounter is direct via immediate observation, but also even when it takes the indirect form of scrutinizing maps, photographs, archival materials, and the musings of retired academics. On certain occasions, an encounter of this sort results in a moment of crystallization in the mind of the observer when the diverse details of local history and geography seem to take on definite articulation and focus. I mean by this an informed recognition of a coherent local identity, embodied in the landscape, and expressed in a distinctive regional character. Relph has referred to a similar process that occurs when the amalgam of physical features, historical residues, and visible marks of human life that make up the landscape crystallize into "a sense of place."[1] Over a century ago, the French geographer, Paul Vidal de la Blache, proposed the complementary idea that selected regions are endowed with personality reflecting the impress of human affairs on the land, and he expressed this notion of personality in the metaphorical guise of "a medallion struck in the image of a people."[2]

I offer these remarks at the outset because they are so apposite to the tract of land that I refer to in these pages as the *Solway Country.* This undeservedly disregarded area lying around the shores of the Solway Firth possesses a personality that vigorously affirms itself by virtue of its unusual degree of physical symmetry and the exceptional human drama of conflict and conquest, adversity and accomplishment, that has unfolded across its surface from time immemorial. However, like any other multifaceted regional entity, the Solway Country inevitably resists hard and fast definition. In particular, while it unquestionably represents a distinctive object of attention and intellectual appreciation, its outer borders are never anything but an indeterminate zone of transition. Figure 1.1 depicts the Solway Firth and its surrounding lowlands in the context of

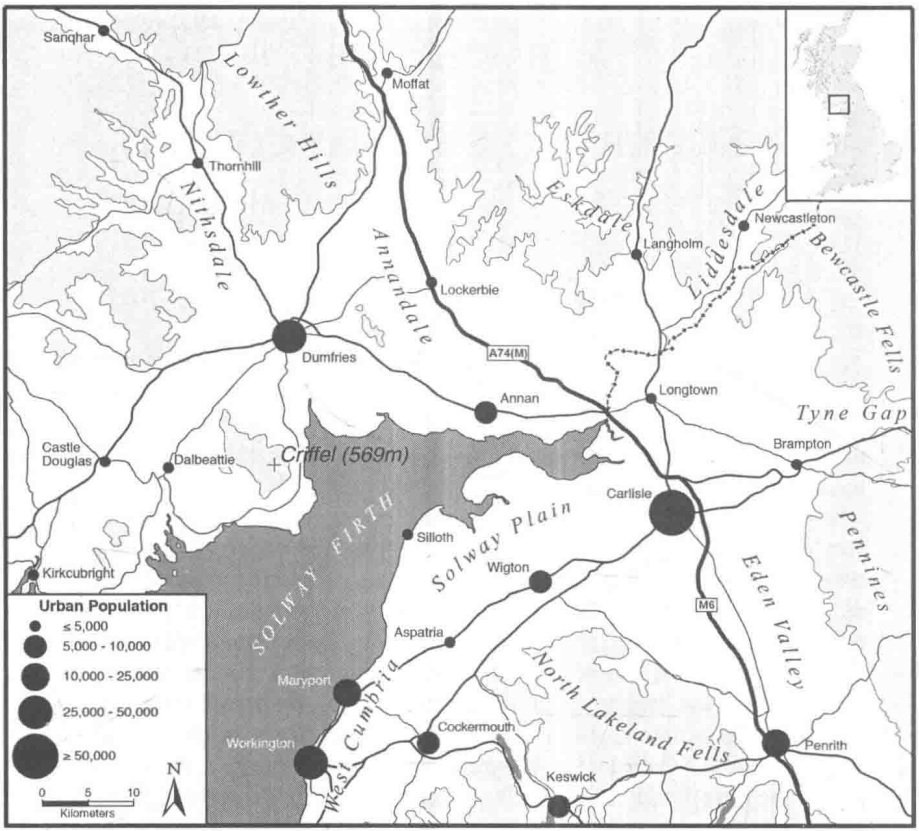

Figure 1.1. General situation map showing the Solway Country and its immediately surrounding area. Urban population figures are for 2011. Land over 200 metres above sea level is shaded.

their wider geographical situation. The lowlands thus identified form a shallow basin constituting the essential terrain of the Solway Country. The edges of this basin rise towards the Lake District Massif in the south, towards the Pennines and the Bewcastle Fells in the east, and towards the Southern Uplands of Scotland in the north. As we follow the Solway coast to the south, the region fades imperceptibly into West Cumbria, and as we move westwards along the northern shore of the Firth we come eventually to the old county of Wigtownshire in Galloway. However, I shall take it that West Cumbria and Wigtownshire lie for the most part outside the terms of reference of this book. The former area is an old and now

exhausted focus of coal mining and steel production and represents a highly idiosyncratic spatial formation in its own right; the latter has its own peculiar cultural and political history that distinguishes it in many different ways from the region under consideration here. The core area of the Solway Country proper, then, can be identified more or less with the lowlands that surround the inner or upper Solway Firth (comprising an area that is approximately 90 kilometres from east to west and 60 kilometres from north to south). But again, and in the spirit of these remarks about the necessary fuzziness of the region's boundaries, the discussion in the present book will range over narrower or wider expanses of terrain relative to this benchmark identification, depending on the specific topic in view.

In spite of the many features that constitute the unifying identity of the Solway Country's landscape, the region is fragmented into a diversity of administrative units that in different ways may be thought to compromise its alleged identity. The southern portion of the region is contained within the former county of Cumberland, which itself was absorbed into the newly constituted county of Cumbria after the local government reforms of the early 1970s. The northern half of the region coincides with part of the old counties of Dumfriesshire and Kirkcudbrightshire (or the Stewartry as the latter is sometimes referred to[3]), though these administrative units (along with Wigtownshire) were also abolished in the early 1970s and assimilated into the new Dumfries and Galloway Council Area. In addition, a small sliver of land in the northeast corner of the Solway Country, corresponding with Liddesdale, or the valley of the Liddel, lies in the former county of Roxburghshire, which has now been absorbed into the Scottish Borders Council Area. An even greater source of divergence is the fact that the Solway Country is riven into separate English and Scottish entities by the border that extends through the region southwards and westwards downstream along the Kershope Burn, Liddel Water, the Rivers Esk and Sark and then through the main channel of the Solway estuary. Even so, and without in any sense repudiating the dual English-Scottish qualities of the region, its frontier character can be seen as contributing to a joint identity covering both of its national segments just as much as it represents a symptom of cleavage.

To begin with, the English and Scottish portions of the region share in a strikingly unified physical setting comprising the glaciated lowlands encircling the inner Solway Firth with its distinctive peat bogs and coastal marshlands. There is also a strong though remote historical connection between both halves based on their joint incorporation into the early kingdoms of Strathclyde and Reghed and on their unification under the rule of David I of Scotland. Then again, over most of the medieval period,

when the border represented a strong line of political cleavage, the English and Scottish halves of the region were caught up in a peculiar but extraordinarily intense form of parasitic interdependence as represented by so-called *reiving* activities focused on mutual plunder and rapine. This in turn gave rise to a complex web of local social and political arrangements—both formal and informal—purporting to impose some semblance of cross-border control over the resulting anarchy. The same anarchical conditions gave birth to a shared culture of heroism and lament embodied in the ballads of the Anglo-Scottish borderlands. Since the Union of the Crowns in 1603 and the Union of the Parliaments in 1707, the border, has effectively lost any meaning as a barrier to social and economic interaction between the two halves of the Solway Country, despite the administrative devolution that occurred in 1998. The Scottish referendum of September 18th 2014 in favour of remaining inside the United Kingdom has reconfirmed this openness even though further transfers of administrative responsibility from Whitehall to Holyrood are almost certain to ensue. Perhaps even more significantly almost two-thirds of the voters in the Dumfries and Galloway Council Area opted for union. Thus, while unquestionable differences between the two main segments of the region can be detected, the Solway Country retains an overall regional coherence rooted in physical geography, in a common set of historical and cultural references, in many current similarities of social and economic life, and even in the ancient rivalries that once kept its northern and southern portions locked together in a kind of febrile symbiosis. There is therefore much to be said for considering this little-known but alluring part of the British Isles as a geographical unit in its own right, and much to be gained from reflection on the formation of its unique landscape comprising a fusion of visible features rooted in both geological and historical time and repeatedly refashioned over extended periods of turbulent political division and reconsolidation.

The Land and the Sea

The Solway Country can be epitomized in physical terms as an extended concavity in the landscape, or perhaps more accurately, as a funnel-shaped area opening up steadily to the west and southwest. Roughly one-fifth of this area is occupied by the estuary of the Solway Firth, with the rest comprising for the most part a gently shelving land surface rising from sea level to approximately 200 metres at its highest extremities.