Surfing and Modernity in the North of Scotland

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By

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It has taken a long time for this book to be completed. I first started researching it in mid-2015 – as a follow-up to my first book, released two years earlier – and writing is finally being completed at the outset of 2024. Working on this book took place around full-time undergraduate and postgraduate teaching commitments, other research commitments, my duties as Chair and Secretary of the British Society of Sports History, various editorial commitments, and changing global circumstances. Scotland and the UK were much different in December 2015: whilst Donald Trump's election as US President in 2016 mattered from an emotional level, the UK vote that same year to leave the European Union has influenced the content and tone of some of what you read here. Additionally, I might have completed this earlier were it not for the COVID-19 pandemic: I received a sabbatical from the University of Edinburgh in early 2020 to work on the book for three months (and into a summer without teaching), but Scotland's first lockdown from late March 2020 onwards changed my planned arrangements considerably. One of the themes of this book is mobility: in the past decade, I have learned not to take *my* mobility and privilege for granted.

Now that I am finished with this book, it is necessary to thank some of the people who made it happen. First and foremost is my partner, Kayleigh Hirst. Typically, partners are left for the end of acknowledgements chapters, but Kayleigh's professional expertise assisted me immeasurably with this book especially regarding transcribing, editing, and proofreading: I could not have completed this without her, and that is before discussing the emotional support involved in writing a book.

Next, it is important to thank a variety of individuals at the University of Edinburgh, Moray House School of Education and Sport: for their support, their interest, and their advice. This includes my colleagues at the Edinburgh Critical Studies of Sport (ECSS) research group: Dr John Kelly, Dr Jung Woo Lee, and Dr Pippa Chapman. It is also worth thanking Professor John Sproule, who always gave good advice on funding applications and other things. Thanks also go to my line managers during this time – Dr Simon Coleman, Dr Christine Nash, and Dr Alan MacPherson – who not only supported a sabbatical and funding applications in concert with this research, but increasingly over the years acknowledged the

importance of monographs as a form of historical knowledge, as well as the time needed to complete them. I am also grateful to Professor Ailsa Niven and Dr Tony Turner for their approval of my ethics application for this project, as well as Lilias Fraser, formerly based in the Research and Knowledge Exchange Office at the School, for her assistance with funding applications.

As far as my duties at Edinburgh are concerned, it is also worth thanking a few students who I supervised on BSc and MSc dissertations on lifestyle sport and/or tourism, all of whom came up with excellent ideas of their own, and challenged me to consider a wider range of themes: Zhe Chen, Amy Gorman, Dan (Jessie) He, Olli Korpimäki, and Ri Zhou. Additionally, it is worth singling out two students whose work was especially inspirational: Prevail Harmony and Yingying Zhang.

Thanks also are given to another University team: that of the University of the Highlands and Islands, Centre for History. Professor David Worthington, head of the centre, was instrumental in organising the Firths and Fjords conference in Dornoch in 2016, where I first presented research from this book; the conference has since acted as a galvanising force in the emerging field of coastal studies. Thanks also go to two UHI Centre for History alumna, Dr Linda Ross and Dr Wade Cormack, for their suggestions and support with my research. On that same note, it also worth thanking the officers of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies for inviting me to speak at their online 2021 conference and encouraging me to publish in their journal *Northern Studies*: special thanks go to Dr Ian Giles, Dr Christian Cooijmans, and Dr Kathrin Zickermann. The support of individuals and institutions involved in studying the north of Scotland's history has been heartening indeed.

For any number of reasons, it is also worth thanking the following individuals for inviting me for talks on this research, for giving me helpful feedback and suggestions, and sometimes for giving me primary-source material and policy literature: William Watson at the Scottish Surfing Federation; Eann Sinclair at Highlands and Islands Enterprise; Magnus Davidson at Dounreay Site Restoration Ltd.; Dr Shona Turnbull at Highland Council; Dr Joan Ormrod; Dr Kass Gibson; Dr Malcolm MacLean; Professor Erwei Dong; Dr Lyndsey Stoodley; and Dr Charlotte Lauder.

I want to thank the staff at the following libraries and archives for their assistance and patience: the Moray House Library, University of Edinburgh; the University of Edinburgh Main Library; the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh; the Highland Archive Centre, Inverness; Thurso Library; Wick Library; Nucleus: the Nuclear and Caithness Archive, Wick; the British Library, London; the National Archives, Kew, London; and the staff at

Wavelength, who let me visit their offices in Newquay. Special thanks also go to Jonathan Slee at the Information Commissioner's Office, who assisted me with an FOIA request to view Nuclear Decommissioning Authority documents which were, for a time, held by the UK Ministry of Defence.

Finally, words cannot express my gratitude to the interviewees over the past decade who let me into their homes, who had tea, coffee, and dinner with me, and taught me a great deal about their love of surfing and the sea, about Caithness and Sutherland, and about life in general. It is likely that surfers, and residents of the north of Scotland more generally, might write a very different book to this one; but here, I have sought to represent the truth as I understand it, and why surfing and the north coast matter.

Matthew L. McDowell
Falkirk
31 January 2024

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE END OF THE ROAD

The north coast of Scotland is one of the premier surfing destinations in the United Kingdom, and indeed in the north of Europe. A town like Thurso, at least superficially, could not be any more different from Newquay in Cornwall, the assumed centre of English/UK surf culture. Google Maps states that the drive between Newquay and Thurso (in a very conservative estimate) takes about thirteen-and-a-half hours; which, whilst not long compared to great distances which Australians or American surfers might drive for a day at the beach, is nevertheless a mighty voyage on the motorways of England and central Scotland, and eventually through the A-roads of the Scottish Highlands. The drive intersects through many different geographies and histories; and, while both Newquay and Thurso may both be a part of some vaguely-defined global surf culture, almost no one in either Scotland or the rest of the UK who was not a surfer would immediately link these two very different coastal towns in any way – provided one has even heard of *both* towns. Nevertheless, the premise that the waves at Thurso represented the end of a journey, and the actualisation of a dream, formed the basis of *The Endless Winter* a 2012 film by Matt Crocker and James Dean which aired on Channel 4. The film was essentially a road trip from Cornwall (with many detours along the way) to find Britain's most perfect wave, with the final destination being the north coast.[1] However, tourists driving on the North Coast 500, the recently rebranded, over-congested network of roads which form the primary coastal road network of the Highlands, may be blissfully unaware that they are passing by this perfect wave. Meanwhile, residents of Thurso and surrounding communities in the ancient counties of Caithness and Sutherland, are likely to view their homes as the *start* of the journey, not the end of the road.

Strictly speaking, this is not a book about surfing. There is little in this book about technique; and, whilst there are certainly discussions about the

[1] Mark Harris and Mitch Corbett, *The Endless Winter* (2012).

senses that surfers might feel, it does not seek to replicate the indescribable feeling of being in a barrel or suffering a wipe-out. This is, rather, a contemporary history of surfing's relationship with a set of communities in the north of Scotland. Whether one believes surfing to be a leisure activity, a sport, or a state of mind, its existence in the north of Scotland is nevertheless reflective of incredible social and economic changes which have happened in the region, and in Scotland more generally, since the end of the Second World War. This book is not strictly a social history, or a cultural one, or an economic or even a political one, but all of these approaches are nevertheless used here analyse surfing's relationship with these changes.

Of course, surfing itself *will* be discussed, but cold-water surfing subverts many of the stereotypes one associates with global surf culture. Surfing in the north of Scotland, as ever, has been viewed as an *aspirational* activity; but here, the activity has additionally been viewed as *respectable*, and even a desirable way to change the narrative about the region. The long arm of modern history has indelibly linked Caithness and Sutherland with rural depopulation and absentee landlordism; but, paradoxically, surfing's arrival has much to do with the coming of heavy industry and nuclear energy, a seemingly contradictory relationship. As in much of the rest of the country, however, heavy industry in the north of Scotland has declined – even its biggest industry, oil, has felt that pinch – but the questionable and often destructive environmental and economic legacies of nuclear power have not affected the popularity of surfing, even as some of the most popular waves can be found next to the now-decommissioned Dounreay nuclear research facility. And, as smart phones have made the dissemination of surfing conditions instantly available, and platforms like Instagram beam images of Thurso East, Brims Ness, and Melvich around the world in an instant, one can argue that never have more people in the world been aware of the north of Scotland's waves than right now in 2023. This has happened in parallel to the increasing competitive nature of surfing, which became an Olympic discipline for the 2020 Olympics. Thus, this book uses surfing to provide an alternative history of a region, and even a nation itself, and a guide for how industrial regions in "remoted" areas have attempted to manage rapid social and economic change. It additionally presents a means of transcending the limitations of traditional archival material when writing regional histories: this is, after all, far from just a mere book about surfing.

Previous literature and media

For the most part, this book will eschew continual in-text references to academic authors – except in Chapter 10, where it will become necessary to discuss authors' specific works in relation to how shifts in Scottish identity have related to the history of surfing in the north. It is, however, necessary to discuss where this work fits in with previous literature: on the history of surfing and on the history of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.

There are no other book-length published, academic histories of surfing in Scotland, or in the United Kingdom more broadly. It is perhaps significant that, with the notable exception of Joan Ormrod and Julie Ripley, the majority of academic and popular literature on surfing (including on surfing in the UK) is dominated by authors who surf themselves. Indeed, in separate articles, Jon Anderson, Clifton Evers, and Georgina Roy set different precedents for understanding surfing primarily as an activity defined by (often highly gender-specific) understandings of sense, space, and emotion.[2] I, on the other hand, have never been surfing in my life; and indeed, this book is not just about surfers and their perspectives, but also about the people, communities, and economies they have interacted with, and how surfers have themselves been reflective of changes in the Highlands and Islands, Scotland, and the UK over the past sixty years. It is important to note that not all researchers of "action" sports are participants, and positionality shifts perspectives, rather than invalidates them: no single approach is "better" or "worse".[3]

Ormrod's 2007 PhD thesis is the most direct precedent for the research here: it examined place- and identity-making during the early years of British surf culture during the twentieth century.[4] Julie Ripley's 2018 PhD thesis on surfing attire and heritage in Cornwall additionally provides

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[2] Jon Anderson, "Exploring the space between words and meaning: Understanding the relational sensibility of surf spaces," *Emotion, Space and Society* 10 (2014); Clifton Evers, "How to surf," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 30, no. 3 (2015): 229-43; Georgina Roy, "'Taking emotions seriously': Feeling female and becoming-surfing through UK Surf Space," *Emotion, Space and Society* 12 (2014): 41-48.

[3] Holly Thorpe et al, "Looking Back, Moving Forward? Reflections from Early Action Sport Researchers," in *Women in Action Sport Cultures: Identity, Politics and Experience*, eds. Holly Thorpe and Rebecca Olive (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 23-44.

[4] Joan Ormrod, "Expressions of Place and Identities in British Surfing" (PhD thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2007). Idem., "Surf Rhetoric in American and British Surfing Magazines Between 1965 and 1976," *Sport in History* 27, no. 1 (2007): 88-109.

research on the history of surfing and (in particular) surf fashion.[5] Along with Ormrod, Scott Laderman's 2014 book *Empire in Waves: A Political History of Surfing* was also a more archival-based work whose author does not purport to be an insider.[6] This is in marked contrast to perhaps the most celebrated and influential academic text on the subject: Douglas Booth's 2008 book *Australian Beach Cultures: The History of Sun, Sand and Surf*, a text whose author intertwines their own life story from the subject.[7] Booth's and Laderman's approaches are equally as valid (and equally as objective), but the north coast of Scotland is a very different place from Australia, and this book is additionally likely to be very different than the kind of history (or piece of academic literature full stop) that might be written by a surfer. Within Booth's work, a more appropriate template for this research is his more recent 2021 book *Bondi Beach: Representations of an Iconic Australian*, which examines surfing as the most recent arrival of a much longer thread of history along the famed coastal stretch of suburban Sydney.[8] However, for all that Bondi and the north coast of Scotland might share some similarities, including the presence of surfing, they must both be understood within very different historical, social, and geographical contexts.

Indeed, beyond academia, perhaps the most notable history of surfing in the UK comes from Roger Mansfield, the Cornish surf pioneer whose 2011 book *The Surfing Tribe: A History of Surfing in Britain* provides a thorough linear account of the early years of UK surfing, with chapters from regionally-based contributors who were also prominent surfers in local surf scenes.[9] Certainly, surfer and author Chris Nelson's 2010 book *Cold Water Souls: In Search of Surfing's Cold Water Pioneers* also features a chapter on the north of Scotland, with significant discussion of the history of the surf scene surrounding Thurso.[10]

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[5] Julie Ripley, "Surf's us: constructing surfing identities through clothing culture in Cornwall" (PhD thesis, University of the Arts London and Falmouth University). Idem., "Swimming Stars of the Silver Screen and the Construction of Gender in the British Surf, 1890-1967," *Journal of Dress History* 3, no. 4 (2019): 71-104.

[6] Scott Laderman, *Empire in Waves: A Political History of Surfing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

[7] Douglas Booth, *Australian Beach Cultures: The History of Sun, Sand and Surf* (London: Routledge, 2008).

[8] Idem., *Bondi Beach: Representations of an Iconic Australian* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991).

[9] Roger Mansfield, *The Surfing Tribe: A History of Surfing in Britain* (Newquay: Orca Publishing, 2011).

[10] Chris Nelson: *Cold Water Souls: In Search of Surfing's Cold Water Pioneers* (Bath: Footprint, 2010), 180-211.

In general, Scottish surfing's history is covered in a mostly general sense by surfers themselves: certainly, the Scottish Surfing Federation's (SSF) website, at the time of writing, has a narrative history of Scottish surfing (reproduced from an historic account written in a 2013 strategy document), whilst the 2011 "pure surf" film *Through the Whisky Barrel*, directed by Allyn Harper (a former media officer of the SSF), interviews many of the surviving, as well as younger, members of the Scottish surfing scene, including the north coast.[11] Scotland's surfing history was also partially covered by The First Wave, a National Lottery Heritage-funded oral history project which was still decidedly centred on the south-west of England: some of these interviews include those used by Crockett and Dean in *The Endless Winter*. (I will return to The First Wave further on.)[12] Perhaps the best equivalent for this volume, however, is the 2023 book *Surfing Scotland*, written by Malcolm Findlay and Andy Bennetts, two early leading lights of the SSF.[13] It is fairly easy to argue that their book is a more complete history of Scottish surfing that mine purports to be.

Surfing, though, is only one part of the equation regarding this book, for the activity/sport itself is used as a lens for examining the post-Second World War history of the north of Scotland. In terms of my own perspective, it is worth noting that, just as I am not a surfer, I am also not from the Highlands and Islands. Certainly, there has been previous academic work on the history of sport of Gaelic Scotland, inclusive of the north of Scotland.[14] In terms of book-length texts on the subject, three of the most significant authors remain 1) Grant Jarvie, author of 1991's *Highland*

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[11] "History," Scottish Surfing Federation, date unknown, http://thessf.com/about/history/, accessed 9 February 2023; William Watson, "The Scottish Surfing Federation (1975-2012)" (Scottish Surfing Federation, 2013); Allyn Harper, *Through the Whisky Barrel* (2011).

[12] *The First Wave*, https://thefirstwave.co.uk/.

[13] Malcolm Findlay and Andy Bennetts, *Surfing Scotland: Sixty years of surfing in the cold water kingdom* (self-published, 2023).

[14] Lorna Jackson, "Patriotism or Pleasure? The nineteenth century Volunteer Force as a vehicle for rural working-class male sport," *Sports Historian* 19, no. 1 (1999): 125-39; Idem., "Sport and Patronage: Evidence from Nineteenth Century Argyllshire," *Sports Historian* 18, no. 2 (1998): 95-106; Idem., "Sport and Scottish Gaeldom in Argyllshire 1790-1900," in *Sport in the Making of Celtic Cultures*, ed. Grant Jarvie (London: Leicester University Press, 1999), 26-40; Idem. and Grant Jarvie, "Deer Forests, Sporting Estates and the Aristocracy," *Sports Historian* 18, no. 1 (1998): 24-54; Hamish Telfer, "Play, customs and popular culture of west coast communities 1840-1900," in *Scottish Sport in the Making of the Nation: Ninety-Minute Patriots?*, eds. Grant Jarvie and Graham Walker (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1994), 113-24.

Games: The Making of the Myth (a book which is both about the Highlands and Islands and Highland*ism*), 2) broadcaster Hugh Dan MacLennan, author of several books and a PhD thesis on shinty, and 3) Irene Reid, whose 2000 PhD examined shinty's relationship with nationalism.[15]

Of course, "North of Scotland" studies, as its own academic field, has existed for some time: the journal *Northern Scotland* was formed in 1972, and has served as an indication that the north of Scotland has unique issues in its history and sociology which differ from the rest of the country, and that "history" in "north of Scotland" studies has an interdisciplinary element. In a 2012 article, Donna Heddle, whilst confirming much of this, additionally noted that "northern Scottish studies" was coming of age and being institutionalised, particularly regarding the creation of the University of the Highlands and Islands, its partner institutions, and taught degree programmes which stressed a dynamic and modern north of Scotland.[16] Certainly, recent precedents for this book exist in a 2017 edited collection by David Worthington, *The New Coastal History*, which featured a significant north of Scotland element, and David Gange's 2019 book *The Frayed Atlantic Edge*, which attempted to discuss the collective history of the UK's and Ireland's coasts, from the author's vantage point within a kayak.[17] Indeed, these texts posit the north of Scotland and its coasts as dynamic, constantly changing, and *thoroughly modern* – far removed from the common stereotype

[15] Grant Jarvie, *Highland Games: The Making of the Myth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991); Hugh Dan MacLennan, *Shinty! Celebrating 100 Years of the Camanachd Association* (Inverness: The Camanachd Association, 1993); Idem., *Not An Orchid…* (Inverness: Kessock Communications, 1995); Idem., "Shinty dies hard: 'Scotland's national game': a re-assessment and re-definition, with particular reference to its survival and development in the nineteenth century in Australia, Canada, England and Ireland" (PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1998); Irene A. Reid, "Shinty, Nationalism and Cultural Identity, 1835-1939: A Critical Analysis" (PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 2000); Idem., "Shinty, Nationalism and Celtic Politics, 1870-1922," *Sports Historian* 18, no. 2 (1998): 107-30; Idem., "Shinty, Nationalism and National Autonomy, 1887-1928," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 30, no. 17 (2013): 2098-114.

[16] Donna Heddle, "'The North Wind Doth Blow': A New Agenda for Northern Scottish Studies," *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies* 23, no. 2 (2012): 119-28.

[17] David Worthington, "Introducing the New Coastal History: Cultural and Environmental Perspectives from Scotland and Beyond," in *The New Coastal History: Cultural and Environmental Perspectives from Scotland and Beyond*, ed. David Worthington (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 3-30; David Gange, *The Frayed Atlantic Edge: A Historian's Journey from Shetland to the Channel* (London: William Collins, 2019).

Figure 1-1: Balnakiel Beach. Photo by author, November 2022.

of them as being "remote" from Scotland's and the UK's capitals and major economic areas.

In general, in the past thirty years, rather than "water" it is "land" which has been the dominant (and most contested) subject of history books on the modern north of Scotland, in particular the Highland Clearances, including those which took place in Sutherland, and their economic and political aftermaths.[18] The post-Second World War Highlands and Islands have

[18] James Hunter, *Set Adrift Upon the World: The Sutherland Clearances* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2016); Eric Richards, *The Highland Clearances*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2013); T.M. Devine, *Clanship to Crofters' War: The Social Transformation of the Scottish Highlands* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); Ewen Cameron, *Land for the People? The British Government and the Scottish Highlands, c. 1880-1930* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1996); Annie Tindley, *The Sutherland Estate, 1850-1920: Aristocratic Decline, Estate Management and Land Reform* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).

rarely been touched on in published books; except, perhaps, for James Hunter's modern history of the region, written in 1999.[19] Regarding the subject of my book, modern Caithness in particular has been underserved as a topic for study in its own right; and, as the construction and staffing of the Dounreay Experimental Reactor Establishment (DERE) from the 1950s onwards was in large part responsible for surfing's presence on the north coast, it is fitting that Linda Ross's 2019 PhD thesis on the coming of Dounreay and the growth of Thurso, serves as one of the most important reference points for this work.[20] Both of our works discuss, from a contemporary historical perspective, a new north of Scotland which emerged after 1945, one based on a new kind of technological modernity and (class) mobility, but one whose relative successes have produced problems and traumas of their own. Ross's and my own work, being historical works in focus, differ from the two other major relevant studies on contemporary Caithness: Kimberley Masson's 2009 PhD thesis and ethnography of the ancient county, and Rebecca Senior's 2015 anthropology PhD on the coming of wind power – the latter of which includes discussions of surfers' understanding of wind and climate.[21]

Methodology

Douglas Booth, perhaps surfing's foremost academic historian, has also led the charge against what he views as uncritical uses of archival material by other academic historians.[22] He has been soundly critiqued by Martin Johnes (amongst others); and, whilst I still very much agree with Johnes that reputable academic historians are almost always aware of the limitations of archival evidence, my perspective is somewhat different from a decade ago when I released *A Cultural History of Association Football in Scotland,*

[19] James Hunter, *Last of the Free: A Millennial History of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1999).
[20] Linda M Ross, "'Nuclear fission and social fusion': the impact of Dounreay Experimental Establishment on Caithness, 1953-1966," PhD thesis, University of the Highlands and Islands, 2019; Idem., "Dounreay: Creating the Nuclear North," *Scottish Historical Review* C, no. 252 (2021): 82-108.
[21] Kimberley Masson, "Kinship and belonging in the 'land of strangers': An ethnography of Caithness, North Scotland," PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2009; Rebecca Louise Senior, "Anthropology in the wind: people, power, and environment in Caithness, Scotland." PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2015.
[22] Douglas Booth, "Sites of Truth or Metaphors of Power? Refiguring the Archive," *Sport in History* 26, no. 1 (2006): 91-109.

1865-1902.[23] Perhaps Booth's scepticism about archives, and indeed reconstructive history, arises from his research on surfing. Late nineteenth-century Scottish football, unlike late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century Scottish surfing, has a very large body of historic newspaper and archival evidence for historians to work with; here, historians struggle to draw conclusions from such a large body of evidence. The historian of Scottish surfing has different problems: very few regular Scottish-based periodicals were sold publicly, little exhaustive local newspaper coverage, minimal and often patronising (if not in all cases) national newspaper coverage, and tourist literature which only sporadically (and belatedly) recognised that surfing existed. Interviews and web-based research, then, helped to bridge some of these gaps. An appropriate lens through which to view the north of Scotland' surf scene might be David Whyte, whose recent work on "saltwater citizenship" on the contemporary Irish coast articulates the dynamic political and bureaucratic dilemmas of the people discussed in this book. Whyte's research uses interviews explicitly to tease out surfers' changing relationships with state power that cannot easily be articulated by official or traditional source material.[24]

The base of this book is still formed largely around archival research: namely, in the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh, the British Library in London, Nucleus: The Nuclear and Caithness Archives in Wick, the Highland Archive Centre in Inverness, the National Archives in Kew, and in one case on the shelves of the beachside Newquay offices of *Wavelength*, one of the UK's primary surfing periodicals. The latter, the UK's longest-running surfing magazine, was consulted, along with previous titles like *Surf Scene* and *Surf Magazine*. Additionally, other publications, notably the British Surfing Association's official publication *Groundswell* and Surfers Against Sewage organ *Pipeline* (later *Pipeline News*), were also used. My research also included even more obscure Scottish titles, such as *Point Break*, the Edinburgh scene's semi-regular periodical issued during the 1970s. In addition, the Scottish Surfing Federation kindly allowed me to view their official newsletters from the 1990s. (Regarding the SSF documents: I have anonymised names and personal details when individuals make angry, critical, or derogatory comments about other individuals.) Additional research took place in local newspapers the *John o'Groat*

[23] Martin Johnes, "Archives, Truths and the Historian at Work: A Reply to Douglas Booth's 'Refiguring the Archive,'" *Sport in History* 27, no. 1 (2007): 127-35; Matthew L McDowell, *A Cultural History of Association Football in Scotland*, 1865-1902 (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2013).

[24] David Whyte, "Belonging in the Ocean: Surfing, ocean power, and saltwater citizenship in Ireland," *Anthropological Notebooks* 25, no. 2 (2019): 13-33.

Journal and *Caithness Courier*, particularly from 1980 through 2000: these were not papers which covered surfing in painstaking detail (at least not in comparison to other sports), but surfing shows up at the edges of conversation, especially in the context of events, tourism, and public relations. Additionally, I was able to view correspondence relating to surfing's relationship with local government during the 1980s; and, via a Freedom of Information request to the Ministry of Defence, I was eventually able to view documents, based at Kew, pertaining to the Dounreay facility and economic development. I also made successful Freedom of Information requests to EventScotland for details of events in the north of Scotland associated with surfing equipment and clothing manufacturer O'Neill.

Additionally, however, from 2017 through 2021, I performed 21 separate interviews with 18 separate interviewees. 13 of these interviews took place in person in Thurso, with another two taking part in the Edinburgh area. Four of these interviews took part over the telephone, with another two occurring on Skype. Most of the people interviewed – fifteen – either surfed in the north of Scotland, or assisted in the activity's development and infrastructure; others were involved in some way in tourism, hospitality, and policymaking. Interviewees are mostly anonymised, unless individuals have consented to being de-anonymised (namely, in this book, for the purposes of ensuring that certain individuals are credited with relevant historic events). For those interviewees I do credit with innovations, I obscure the specific date of their interview, while using the full date when their contributions are anonymised.

This book also utilises online research in historical and contemporary newspapers, periodicals, and news agencies, as well as (local) government websites and social media. It has been significant, of course, that over the past twenty years Scotland has had only has one broadsheet journalist who covers adventure sport: Roger Cox, of *The Scotsman*. As the popularity and influence of print journalism has plummeted, online news outlets have also covered the area. Within wider Scottish popular culture, surfing has (sometimes grudgingly) begun to be acknowledged; governments' and official agencies' relationships with surfing have similarly occurred at a distance, and thus the material written about it is limited. In this book, social media is used in a largely supporting role – this is first and foremost a *history* book, rather than a *media* one – but much as with periodicals' treatments of the region, it can be outsiders to the north of Scotland who have dominated the content produced on its surfing scene, and this has obvious implications for how historians interpret how this region has been consumed. As such, in this research I have also examined films: both ones for television, and what

might be called “pure surf” films – less distributed films whose primary viewers are surfers, and which conform to surfers’ values and aesthetics.

CHAPTER 2

ORIGINS

The twenty-first century social institution of surfing is a product of modernity, of artificially-fixed beaches and coastlines.[1] Caithness and Sutherland might have a few of those (and some of them are lovely), but its most celebrated site, Thurso East, appears at the end of a muddy, semi-macadamised track dotted with cowpats, and down to a group of wet rocks, just before the reef break itself. The sights can arguably be best seen from the water itself: Thurso Castle, the green hills to the east and west, the town of Thurso, the port of Scrabster, and its lighthouse at Holborn Head, and in the distance the Old Man of Hoy – itself a magnet for climbers and a different kind of "adventure" sport[2] – and the Orkney Islands. Surfing is arguably an anomalous activity on the Pentland Firth: it was a body of water used for fishing, and for commerce, and it was a careful negotiation with constant danger that was at odds with the seeming recklessness of surfing. Its incongruousness with the landscape, weather, and culture of the north of Scotland was part of the attraction for surfers: it was a place to get away, and to commune with nature. However, despite being at the edge of the UK's transport networks, this was not the wilderness that some tourist surfers implied it to be, and many were mindful that, despite the incredible scenery, a dying nuclear power plant sat right next door. Neither was the Pentland Firth, a busy shipping corridor between Russia, Scandinavia, and North America, an empty stretch of water. This constant duality forms part of the backdrop to how surfing ended up in Caithness and Sutherland in the first place, and how it continues to be linked to other processes of modernity.

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[1] John R. Gillis: *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 149-55.

[2] Paul Gilchrist, "Reality TV on the Rock Face: Climbing the Old Man of Hoy," *Sport in History* 27, no. 1 (2007): 44-63.

The UK and Scotland in the surfing universe

Non-surfing readers will probably have a very clear pre-conceived idea of the symbolism of surf culture: its style, its "film," its "music", its language, and its rhetoric of freedom and discovery. Many will also, at least at first, associate surfing with sun and heat. The surf-referencing songs of the Beach Boys and Jan and Dean will no doubt come to mind, as will a wide range of popular movies, from *Gidget* to *Point Break* to *Blue Crush*. However, the media within what are typically referred to as "lifestyle" or "adventure" sports interacts very little with these popular images: they do, however, stress an ideal of surfing as utopian, free, and daring; ultimately, as a passport to self-discovery. Crucial to this is who produces and features in surf media. From the famous 1966 Bruce Brown documentary *The Endless Summer* onwards, the main participants are often white, middle-class men who "discover" different people and cultures.[3] Surfing's evolution as an aspirational sport/activity, perceived to be indicative of Western (male) privilege, is inherently linked to colonialism and empire, even in its explicit rhetoric of "discovery." Much like polo and lacrosse, surfing was appropriated from conquered peoples.[4] The activity was popularised in the United States, in part, as a result of the US's annexation of Hawaii in 1898. "Board riding" was a popular activity amongst native Hawaiians, both as recreation and as something perceived to indicate social status. It quickly earned the opprobrium of Christian missionaries for its mixed-gender participation and its performance in the nude. However, during the subsequent years of US rule in Hawaii, the activity was used as a means of selling the territory and populating it with white Christian settlers from the mainland US. Paradoxically, this iteration of surfing was popularised around the world through figures such as Duke Kahanamoku, surfing's first global superstar, a native Hawaiian who used his fame as a gold medal winner in freestyle swimming at the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm to market surfing.[5] White Australians had practiced some form of surf bathing since the 1880s, but Kahanamoku's visit in 1914-15 introduced the

[3] Belinda Wheaton, *The Cultural Politics of Lifestyle Sports* (London: Routledge, 2013); Joan Ormrod, "*Endless Summer* (1964): Consuming Waves and Surfing the Frontier," *Film & History* 35, no. 1 (2005): 39-51.
[4] Patrick McDevitt, "The King of Sports: Polo in late Victorian and Edwardian India," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 20, no. 1 (2003): 1-27; Michael A. Salter, "*Baggataway* to Lacrosse: A Case Study in Acculturation," *Canadian Journal of the History of Sport* 26, no. 2 (1995): 49-64.
[5] Laderman, *Empire in Waves*, 8-40.

wave-riding surfboard.[6] While Australian surf culture was born on beaches which were heavily segregated by race/ethnicity and class, in another major surfing nation, South Africa (made famous by *The Endless Summer*), this division was enshrined in law via Apartheid in 1960, and *de facto* segregation had existed long before then. Surfing was first noted on South African beaches in 1897, and was especially popular on Durban's beach; but, as in almost all other sports, separate surfing governing bodies existed for different racial categories, and restrictions on beach space necessarily constricted (but did not completely suppress) the growth of a Black surfing culture until "beach Apartheid" was ended in 1989.[7]

It is difficult to pin down when and how exactly surfing first ended up on the shores of Great Britain and Ireland, but most "origin" stories revolve around the movement of people between different parts of the British Empire. Given the origins of surfing, it is perhaps not coincidental that the aristocracy is credited with playing a part in popularising it. In popular culture, it is the late Edward George William Omar Coventry, Viscount Deerhurst (better known as Ted Deerhurst) who stands out: a nobleman who went on to become one of the first globally-recognised British surfers during the 1970s and 1980s.[8] *The Endless Winter*'s directors also discuss then-Prince Charles' (now King Charles III) love of surfing while attending university at Aberystwyth University in Wales.[9] One *Surfer's Path* article from November 1998 credited an earlier Prince of Wales/Duke of Rothesay, Prince Edward Albert – the future King Edward VIII – with being the first British person to stand up and ride a surfboard, on exactly 13 April 1920, in the company of Duke Kahanamoku in Hawaii.[10]

This is more a story than a purposeful attempt to write an origin, however: in both the academic literature and in surfers' own histories, no *definitive* single moment or individual is given sole credit. As in any sport, it is the creation of institutions rather than individual initiative that is easier to pinpoint. Britain's first surf culture centred on Cornwall and Devon; and,

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[6] Booth, *Australian Beach Cultures*, 36-40.

[7] Glen Thompson, "Reimagining Surf City: surfing and the making of the post-apartheid beach in South Africa," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 28, no. 15: 2115-29; Idem., "Otelo Burning and Zulu surfing histories," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 26, no. 3 (2014): 324-40; Idem. "Surfing, gender and politics: Identity and society in the history of South African surfing culture in the twentieth-century" (PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2015).

[8] Andy Martin, "Obituaries: Viscount Deerhurst," *The Independent*, 18 October 1997.

[9] Crocker and Dean, *The Endless Winter*.

[10] Anon., "Duke and the Prince," *The Surfer's Path* 9 (November 1998).

almost certainly, two-way traffic with South Africa and Australia was crucial to the activity's initial introduction. Here, it was thought to be introduced by returning soldiers who were stationed in South Africa during the Second South African War and First World War, but some accounts state that it was, in fact, Cornish miners who journeyed to South Africa, the Antipodes, and the Americas, and who returned to Cornwall, who introduced bellyboarding to the region.[11] A considerable amount of surf bathing took place along Cornwall and Devon beaches during the 1920s and 1930s, so much so that guidebooks on the southwest of England from the 1920s made references to surfing.[12] However, very little, if any of this, would have been surfing while standing up: Cornwall surfers Pip Staffieri and Jimmy Dix are given credit for being the first to do so in 1937 (Dix's board was provided by Kahanamoku himself), but this particular feature was institutionalised in 1944 by two Royal Australian Air Force personnel based at Newquay during the Second World War, who organised a surf carnival to be held on 3 September 1944 (which was eventually cancelled due to a lack of waves). Stand-up surfing's popularity in the southwest coincided with the formation of a surf rescue club affiliated with the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia, at Bude, north Cornwall, in 1953. This was started by Allan Kennedy, an employee of the Australian High Commission, who strong-armed the local council into helping fund it. Kennedy soon helped establish the Brighton Surf Lifesaving Club on the South Coast in 1954; and, most crucially, an organisation with national pretensions: the Surf Life Saving Association of Great Britain (SLSA), in 1955, headquartered at St. Agnes, Cornwall. Kennedy's position at Australia House was crucial in helping to solidify links with Australian surfing and life saving, in terms of rules, practice, and personnel. However, there were still key differences, most notably the large proportion of women who were members of the SLSA.[13]

Some crucial developments in British surfing did not happen in Great Britain. At least some took place in Jersey. Kennedy visited Jersey during the 1950s, and was instrumental in setting up lifesaving clubs via Australian methods and personnel.[14] However, one of the first clubs dedicated strictly to surfing was formed on Jersey in 1959, and it was the outcome of the work of three South African lifesavers – Cliff Honeysett, Bobby Burdon, and

[11] Ormrod, "Expressions of Place and Identities in British Surfing," 80-100; Ripley, "Surf's us," 147-63.
[12] Ormrod, "Expressions of Place and Identities in British Surfing", 80-100
[13] Ibid., 101-09; Ed Jaggard, "From Bondi to Bude: Allan Kennedy and the Exportation of Australian Surf Lifesaving to Britain in the 1950s," *Sport in History* 31, no. 1 (2011): 62-83.
[14] Jaggard, "From Bondi to Bude," 76-79.

Leonard "Shorty" Bronkhorst – who had arrived the year before at Parkin's Holiday Camp at Plémont, in Jersey, and were given jobs as lifesavers by the camp manager (another South African). These three men were crucial in teaching Jersey residents, and to designing and shaping long boards.[15] While Jersey was often the first port of call for travelling surfers from Europe and Australia, Newquay in Cornwall was the cultural and infrastructural heart of *British* surfing: by the early 1960s, tourist audiences in Newquay could watch nightly demonstrations by surf lifeguards, with their new Malibu long boards, giving surfing the spectator entertainment value it previously lacked. This rather exhibitionist scene was thus more directly linked to American influence and the more obvious elements of what was thought to be California beach culture.[16] It is perhaps significant that British beach culture, while not directly sharing the worst elements of racial segregation which pervaded beach spaces in South Africa and Australia, nevertheless adopted an activity that was not politically insignificant, particularly within Britain's class system. Jersey's beaches catered to a wealthier demographic, and into the late 1970s were known for turning away "surf bums" – unemployed surfers who were often categorised as delinquent by the authorities.[17] Many UK surf scenes existed within areas of heavy industry, most notably that of south Wales: one of the first women to win European championships, Welsh and British champion Linda Sharp, learned to surf during the late 1960s and early 1970s on the shores of Aberavon, heavily polluted due to the presence of a nearby British Steel works.[18] *The Endless Winter*'s visit to Brighton linked its scene to less of a hippie vibe, and one more indicative of the tensions of the "mods" and "rockers" tribes for which the Sussex beach was more known.[19]

Technology played a part in helping to expand the surfing map beyond these locales, and accordingly fueled different philosophical routes of travel, in terms of what surfing's purpose was thought to be. American short board designs first arrived in the UK in mid-1960s. This meant that, for the first time, surfers would be able to ride within the hollows of tube waves.[20] It also more directly linked surfing with another emerging sport/activity – skateboarding – in terms of how surfers could perform more agile manoeuvres with their legs and feet. Skateboarding's birth in 1920-30s California was closely linked with the local rise of surfing; and similarly, in the early 1970s,

[15] Mansfield, *The Surfing Tribe*, 34-44.
[16] Ormrod, "Surf Rhetoric," 88-91.
[17] Idem., "British Surfing," 158-62.
[18] Mansfield, *The Surfing Tribe*, 110-27, 178.
[19] Crocker and Dean, *The Endless Winter*.
[20] Ormrod, "Surf Rhetoric," 93.

the development of more durable polyurethane wheels on skateboards considerably enlarged the territory on which the activity could take place.[21] *The Endless Winter*'s directors singled out Brighton as a place where the surfing and skateboarding scenes were virtually inseparable.[22] The British Surfing Association (BSA) was founded in 1966: and, for the first time, a central body sought to introduce rules and officialdom for competitions. The BSA was also crucial in helping to impart technique, and create surfing schools.[23]

Every bit as important as the development of a governing body, however, was the development of a British surf media. In the 1960s, individual British surfers were heavily influenced by the American *Surfer* and *Surfing* magazines: both functioned as chronicles of surfers' travels, with beautiful photography, profiles of star surfers, and articles written by surfers themselves. By the 1970s, these magazines had become very romantic in their depiction of "soul surfing" as an activity, not as a competitive sport or as middle-class entertainment: of course, this detachment ironically signaled the middle-class values of its overwhelmingly male authors, a detachment often enhanced by the consumption of drugs. The sunny portrait of surfing offered by these publications was not harmonious with the cold, wet climates of much of Britain and Ireland, and beaches in Wales, Scotland, and the northeast of England where surfing breaks sat shoulder to shoulder with heavy industry. A new crop of British magazines of infrequent publication and short shelf lives came onto the scene during the late 1960s and 1970s: *British Surfer* (1969), *Surf UK* (1969), *Surfing UK* (1969), *Point Break* (1974) and most prominently *Surf* (1974-78) and later *Surf Scene* (1980-89). These publications went about creating an indigenous British surf rhetoric that, while based very much around many of the same motifs of discovery and self-fulfillment as the overseas magazines, intertwined them with a self-deprecating emphasis on the "reality" and practicality of surfing in the British Isles. Even in articles about overseas "surfaris," British surfer-authors strove to include problems about weather (and dressing up for surfing in the cold seas), localism, disappointment with the waves, and other issues, rather than present pristine pictures of surfers in wilderness.[24] At their most progressive, however, these periodicals were still overwhelmingly

[21] Iain Borden, *Skateboarding and the City: A Complete History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 6-18.
[22] Crocker and Dean, *The Endless Winter*.
[23] Ormrod, "Surf Rhetoric."
[24] Ibid.

the products of middle-class men.[25] And, aside from Edinburgh's limited-circulation *Point Break*, all were based in the southwest of England and catered largely to an audience based in the south, despite purporting to represent all of the UK. Within surf media, this would change very little: British surfing's most permanent and successful title, *Wavelength*, was born in 1982, but the Newquay-based publication discussed (and still discusses) *trips to* Scotland. The same applied for *The Surfer's Path*, a more critical, less surfing-industry oriented publication started by Alex Dick-Read in 1997, and wound down in 2014.[26] At the time of writing, however, the title was recently resurrected. A new kind of Cornish surf fashion was consolidated in the 1980s, albeit with a heavy influence from Australia: not just due to the warm climate of both, or due to the recent loosening of holiday visa restrictions to the country, but also the UK popularity of Australian soap operas such as *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* which featured sun and surf.[27] Post-1945 UK surfing must be understood as the product of increasing and interrelated social, class, *and geographic* mobility: in part helped by a shifting economy, but also by the existence and attainability of cars and vans.[28] Surfing here was *aspirational*; it was reflective of a post-war Britain on the move.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Scotland had two notable surf scenes: one based in the capital, Edinburgh, and another in Fraserburgh, Aberdeenshire, a fishing town on the northeast coast not commonly thought of as any kind of holiday destination. Fraserburgh had a group of resident men who surfed the breaks at the town beach: here, its first known surfer is credited by Findlay and Bennetts as fisherman Wullie Tait, who allowed locals to rent a longboard which he brought back from a holiday in California.[29] Edinburgh's scene, on the other hand, was based around its universities, in particular Napier College, where a surf club of around ten men existed by 1975. These, however, were still small scenes, and in general, Scottish surfing circa 1970 was a very disparate affair. With the

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[25] Ibid., Belinda Wheaton, "Lifestyle sport magazines and the discourses of sporting masculinity," *The Sociological Review* 51, no. 1 (2003): 193-221.
[26] Tetsuhiko Endo, "*The Surfer's Path*: An Obituary," *The Inertia*, 28 December 2013, https://www.theinertia.com/surf/the-surfers-path-an-obituary/, accessed 28 June 2018.
[27] Ripley, "Surf's us," 164-209.
[28] Simon Gunn, "Spatial Mobility in Later Twentieth-Century Britain," *Contemporary British History* 36, no. 1 (2022): 1-22; Christina de Bellaigue, Helena Mills, and Eve Worth, "'Rags to Riches?' New Histories of Social Mobility in Modern Britain – Introduction," *Cultural and Social History* 16, no. 1 (2019): 1-11.
[29] Findlay and Bennetts, *Surfing Scotland*, 35-37.