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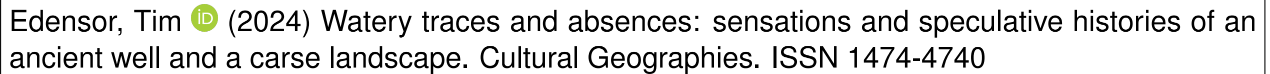

Edensor, Tim (2024) Watery traces and absences: sensations and speculative histories of an ancient well and a carse landscape. Cultural Geographies. ISSN 1474-4740

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/14744740241293784

Publisher: Sage Publications

Version: Published Version

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Watery traces and absences: sensations and speculative histories of an ancient well and a carse landscape

Tim Edensor
Institute of Place Management, Business School, UK

Abstract
This paper explores how mighty earth processes, aquatic agencies and human practical, political, religious, technological, commercial and environmental interventions have shaped and reshaped a now obscure Scottish holy well and the carse landscape to which it belongs. More specifically, I detail the historic pagan rituals, vigilant religious policing, romantic redesign and extensive terraforming that have informed the changing uses and symbolic associations of these watery realms, demonstrating how they testify to ceaselessly changing human-water relations. I explore how an awareness of particular historical events garnered from diverse texts can be supplemented with affective and sensory engagements with the non-human agencies, vestiges and absences of place. Together, they foster intimations and speculative imaginaries that conjure up speculative watery histories and conjectural futures.

Keywords
absences, carse, sensation, traces, water, well

Introduction

After winding through a mistletoe-wreathed, gothic portal to the east of the old Kincardine burial ground, a path meanders along the lower slopes of a long, afforested mound that belongs to the Blair Drummond estate. The route passes through mature woods of lime, sweet chestnut, scots pine, oak and beech, clusters of yew and rhododendron. Honking skeins of geese, buzzards and red kites fly overhead while woodcock, sparrowhawks, tree creepers, long tailed tits, bullfinches, goldfinches and red squirrels flit amongst the foliage. Occasionally, roe deer

Corresponding author:
Tim Edensor, Professor of Social and Cultural Geography, Institute of Place Management, Business School, All Saints Campus, Oxford Road, Manchester M15 6BH, UK.
Email: t.edensor@mmu.ac.uk

bound through the trees. After 600 m, where a grand Cedar of Lebanon spreads its branches in an adjacent field, a left turn towards the slope reveals a still, shallow pool in a shadowy hollow. This is Christ's Well, nine kilometres northwest of Stirling, Scotland.[1] Supplied by an unseen spring, the pond accommodates a small wellhouse. At its apex are two carved stones, one on top of the other. The lower tablet is inscribed with the letters CD and ER, and the date 1690; the higher stone is dated 1678. The wellhouse is partly colonised by small saplings while its crumbling interior walls are coated with moss, lichen and plants; its future appears imperilled. Where the pool meets the ascending slope stands a stone pillar, perhaps the trunk of a fossilised tree; beneath it is a carved stone bowl. Around the pool's edges, ferns spring from thick leaf mould and scattered loose masonry, and a sluggish stream trickles out of the wood (Figures 1 and 2).

The view across the carse, the extensive flood plain, accentuates the gloomy seclusion of this little-known site, and a sense of enclosure is intensified by the well's shady setting in the slope of the hill. A calm quietude prevails; the sounds of birdsong and the wind in the trees are muted. On bright days, flickers of sunlight penetrate through the dense canopy above, greens and browns darken as evening approaches. In winter, the damp, leafy fringes of the pond are adorned with crisp, white tracery. The air is usually thick with moisture. Damp, earthy scents of fungi and leaf mould suffuse the hollow. The unfurling ferns, profuse moss, silver birch saplings and creeping rhododendron add to the medley of surrounding textures sensed while walking, tactile experiences augmented by the squelchy earth and thick layers of decaying leaves underfoot. The limpid pool lures hands to be dipped into its cool waters. Glutinous clumps of frogspawn, skittering water boatmen, and ripples caused by minor breezes and aquatic creatures solicit attentiveness to non-human liveliness and watery agency. Though somewhat clogged with vegetation, the stream slowly trickles from the pond, quietly gurgling. Early morning mist hangs loosely over nearby fields and gathers in the pool's hollow. The rich sensations apprehended at the well foreground how places and landscapes can be experienced through immersive encounter.[2] They trigger an awareness that these are realms co-created by multiple non-human agencies, and here, especially by watery energies, while also stirring an attentiveness to our own animal corporeality. As Abram[3] contends, these sensory interactions with place and non-humans induce us to create stories and images.

This paper explores the shifting ways in which water has shaped this now obscure holy well and the landscape to which it belongs, besides drawing out the sensory experiences of water, and the watery meanings and practices that have circulated here. I detail how a bubbling spring, sacred practices, vigilant religious policing, romantic redesign and swarming non-human agencies have shaped and reshaped the alluring, watery site of Christ's Well. I also discuss how relationships with water in the surrounding landscape have also been transformed by massive geological and aquatic events, human technological, commercial and environmental interventions, and epistemological evaluations. I explore how this historical knowledge aligns with immersive, sensory experience to disclose vestiges that conjure up watery absences.

I adopt an autoethnographic approach, having lingered for many hours at the well over several years under diverse seasonal and weather conditions. Immersive visits in and around the well, walking slowly around the pool, standing still, listening, becoming attuned to the shifting liveliness of water, wind, light, colours and movement has produced a compendium of sensory experiences over time. These sensorially receptive ways of coming to know place and landscape commenced before subsequent research into historical sources – academic accounts, local histories, websites – enhanced understandings about the changing ways in which watery agencies and its manipulation by humans have impacted upon shifting meanings and uses. These historical stories and details

Figure 1. Christ's Well, wellhouse. Photo by author.

meld with sensory experience and imagination in situ to summon up an awareness of watery absences and the humans that once managed, visited and inhabited these aqueous realms. This process exemplifies Lorimer's claim that for many geographers, 'landscape is the arena where pasts seem to pass through the present, and where forms of fieldwork are entwined with archival inquiry',[4] where historical accounts enchant sensory and affective experience and observations and vice versa.

The paper initially details the sacred meanings attributed to springs in pre-Christian times, before investigating the punitive approach of the post-Reformation church towards pilgrims to Christ's Well. Subsequently, I explore its romantic redesign under the stewardship of former landowner and significant Scottish Enlightenment figure, Henry Home, Lord Kames. I then consider the agricultural improvement scheme initiated by Kames that extensively transformed the watery qualities of the carse, before examining how this terraforming – and aqua-forming – endeavour disclosed earlier historical agencies that changed this landscape.

Figure 2. (Continued)

Figure 2. (a) Dated stones, wellhouse, Christ's Well. (b) Fossilised stone pillar and carved bowl, Christ's Well. Photo by author.

Watery traces and absences

Focusing upon water, this paper explores how places and landscapes are continuously emergent and provisional in meaning and function; Christ's Well is such a chronotopical site 'in which temporality takes on palpable form'.[5] In investigating these multiple temporalities, research into the diverse histories of a place can prompt an imaginative encounter in situ, populating it with people and non-human agents from different eras. Such visions can be summoned when coming across material vestiges from the past and attending to the absences they summon up. It is the felt and imagined absences at Christ's Well and its landscape that I focus upon here, generated by material traces, immersive practice and historical accounts.

In recent times, the conceptual exploration of absence has stirred cultural geographers. Frers[6] focuses upon the acute sense of absence that might be triggered by an individual memory of a place or person, by an awareness that a habitually apprehended thing in a familiar location is not there. Conversely, Degnen[7] focuses upon the shared sense of loss that comes from prolonged neighbourly inhabitation in which specific traces and absences are marked in communal ways of knowing and talking about place. As part of a larger motif deployed to repudiate any essentialist alignment between landscape and subject, and critique the overemphasis on the presencing perpetrated in phenomenological enquiry, Wylie[8] discusses how encounters with absences in the landscape are marked by a dislocation that makes a sense of dwelling and belonging elusive. Emphasising this diversity of approaches, DeLyser identifies both the theoretical and methodological pluralism adopted in explorations of absence.[9]

While recognising the impossibility of fully grasping the presences that absences signify, I follow Frers[10] in focusing upon how 'the experience of absence derives its peculiar power from its

embeddedness in the body, in bodily practices, sensual perceptions and emotions'. While the imaginings prompted by these corporeal experiences are invariably speculative, they underpin how encounters with places and landscapes can inspire intimations and visions. A sensory attunement to absences can be supplemented by texts that furnish historical details that might be re-envisioned in place. These intertwinings of sensory, affective impressions and textual passages are akin to the 'spatial hinge' conceived by literary geographers, which 'gives a name to the sensory triggers – aural, gustatory, haptic, olfactory, visual – that allow us to find echoes of texts in places'.[11] While Thurnell contends that literary texts can inspire imaginings anywhere, the historical texts discussed here focus on a particular place and landscape. They resonate with the spatial hinge through which Lovell[12] imagines the site-specific topographies and storied history of Oxford via the fiction of Phillip Pullman. However, in this case, an encounter with texts came after many immersive visits to a well and a landscape about which my historical knowledge was minimal. These histories subsequently deepened and extended my imaginative speculations in combination with sensory and affective stimulations.

In places like Christ's Well that are not presently caught up in extensive transformation, incongruous material remnants of the past linger more prominently, haunting space, as I have discussed elsewhere.[13] Some vestiges have become obscure, unfashionable and obsolete, detached from the networks and ontologies that gave them significance and purpose, while others might be incorporated into new relations and endowed with different meanings. Traces can take many forms: the shape of the land, the remains of grander infrastructures or ensembles, weird objects, evident gaps in the material fabric, repurposed entities, vanished inhabitants, or as redundant vestiges of an obsolescent practice.[14] Moreover, certain remnants may be suddenly unearthed, bestowing new understandings upon place and landscape. These leftovers can render absences acute and foster flights of imagination, enquiry and speculation. As Kaaristo and Visentin insist, 'an absence of something is a form of perception and knowledge that also involves the embodied and sensory'.[15] An attentiveness to traces and absences heightens curiosity about the human and non-human agents that have shaped and changed places and landscapes and bestowed them with significance and value. Moreover, they can consolidate awareness that things have not always been as they are now and will change in the future.[16]

The traces and absences I explore here focus upon watery agency, manipulation and interpretation. In its gaseous, liquid and frozen forms, water has been particularly prominent in shaping the site and landscape explored here, as a vital agent in itself and through its manipulation by humans. Water is essential to ecosystemic processes at different scales, connecting 'the tiniest microbe with human bodies, with ecosystems and with world hydrological systems'.[17] Floods, glaciers, droughts, shifting tidal patterns, rainfall and geological events impact upon landscapes in myriad ways, great and small. The flow of water through rivers and their catchments,[18] streams, lakes and tidal seas has and continues to shape the place and landscape discussed in this paper, carrying matter and energies across space. In this sense, the shape of water is accommodated by what material forms contain it, forms that watery agencies ceaselessly alter as they enter, leave and carve channels. Water engulfs land, saturates ground and humidifies air, springs forth and disappears beneath surfaces, is manifest in dew and mist, pools, evaporates, shimmers and ripples.

Integral to the health of all biological organisms, water permeates and constitutes bodies, irrigates cells, enables the circulation of nutrients and expunges waste, is present in our saliva, tears and sweat and in the bodily fluids of other non-humans. It is thus the very epitome of vitality, ceaselessly circulating across space in perceptible and invisible ways. We drink, bathe, swim in water and are transported across aquatic bodies of varying dimensions by diverse means. It is a milieu for countless non-humans, chemicals and minerals that move through, disperse and settle.

In a more-than-human world, water, besides having its own force, is inextricably entangled with humans in countless, changing and diverse ways. Landscapes have been dynamically produced through a ‘perpetually changing set of social, symbolic, ontological, and material relations through which historical actors – human and nonhuman – are co-constituted’.[19] For a while, humans use water according to their needs and desires, creating aquatic bodies and channels for drinking, transport, irrigation, drainage and waste disposal. These tenuous accomplishments depend upon stable and consistent climates, geologies and sea-levels, and seek to minimise non-human agencies that might disrupt this, including the agencies of water itself. In this paper, the more-than-human, ‘co-evolutionary histories’[20] that have shaped place and landscape focus on the overlooked watery energies, distributions, continuities and transformations, and human attempts to culturally construe and manipulate water and respond to its effects. Yet as with other areas of knowledge about non-humans, water is understood in multiple ways by biologists, conservationists, the religious, environmental managers, resource scientists, agriculturalists, landscape architects, transport logisticians and historians. Accordingly, there is a proliferation of watery stories. Here, I focus on several stories of geohistorical events, human interventions, traces and absences that draw on historical accounts and autoethnographic immersion amongst the ‘infinite entanglements’[21] of water's relationship with a place and a landscape.

Christ's Well as sacred: practices of pilgrimage

Water's elemental and generative properties have been associated with divine agencies across spaces, histories and cultures. Ancestral and supernatural water beings, both vengeful or beneficent, embody water's material characteristics: water can destroy and imperil through inundation but can also cleanse, satiate thirst and create verdant growth. Moreover, it is easy to grasp how the sensory apprehension of water's phenomenal qualities, misty dampness or the limpid stillness of a pool, ‘the mesmerizing shimmer of water surfaces, the excitement of waterfalls, the calming rhythm of waves’[22] might align with mythic and cosmological associations. Such potent effects underline Strang's[23] contention that people ‘are bio-cultural beings, and that human-environmental relationships are composed of interactions between material and social processes’. Human epistemologies, ontologies and relations with water emerge out of material, geographic, cosmological and historical contexts; for instance, the bubbling up of a spring from underground, or its disappearance beneath the earth might readily be interpreted as a sign of supernatural agencies. Affective and sensory experiences of water can thus consolidate shared spiritual beliefs and practices.

Though now named Christ's Well, much older pagan associations focused upon the spring, though what kinds of ancient rites were performed can only be speculated upon, since scant documentation from earlier times remains. However, similar aquatic locations are numerous. Cusack and Wilson[24] state that ‘Scotland is peculiarly rich in sites of water veneration’, while Oestigaard[25] estimates that there may be around 1,000 Scottish holy wells. Such symbolic places belonged to the extensive networks, routes and sites that constitute sacred geographies, conjoining everyday locations, striking landforms and water features. Different religious cultures transform landscapes through the distribution and inscription of sacred sites as well as through dispossession, hierarchical structures and exclusion[26]; as demonstrated below, such places may become the focus of religious contestation at particular historical moments.

The distinctive properties ascribed to different wells influenced the practices undertaken by those seeking the benefits they promised.[27] In Celtic cosmology, wells and springs constituted a portal to another world, were sites for ritual deposition and offered opportunities for healing, regeneration, fertility, fortune and purification. Though much knowledge about such beliefs has been lost, the River Dee retains its association with the Celtic goddess Deva and the River Tay with

the powerful female divinity Tara.[28] The numinous spirits – kelpies, water sprites and faeries – that perhaps presided at Christ's Well informed shared mytho-poetic understandings of landscapes. Constituting powerful presences that might shape the material world and guide humans, watery spirits could travel between earthly and supernatural realms through passages beneath and above the surface.

Infused with phenomenal and spiritual associations, Christ's Well lured many pre-Scottish Reformation pilgrims, who sought cures for lameness, rickets, gout, lunacy, blindness, infertility and diverse agues and palsies. In the gloomy, quiet stillness, sensory inklings instigate visions of ragged pilgrims immersing their pale bodies in the pool's alluring, cleansing spring water, tasting pondweed and mud and minerals, or carrying away the precious liquid in vessels to pour over those unable to visit the well. I imagine them enacting their ancient pagan rituals, mumbling prayers or incanting rites, performing circumambulations, especially during auspicious Celtic festivals such as Beltane and Imbolc. Perhaps they placed votive keepsakes, valuables, clothes, strands of hair and metal objects around the well. Maybe strips of cloth or ribbons were affixed to surrounding shrubs as at other 'clootie wells', customs perpetuated today by neo-pagans, wiccans and neo-Celts at sites such as Munlochy Well in Ross and Cromarty.

The Presbyterian Purge

The rituals and longings that once circulated around the well underpinned a belief in the power of water, an expression of hydrolatry that was part of a wider sacred geography. In early mediaeval times wells might be incorporated into a Manichean landscape in which certain realms hosted inhuman beasts, others offered protection against evil, for elemental forces could signify heavenly or satanic power.[29] Sacred or holy water might keep the Devil at bay, offer cures, and protect families, livestock and property. Many pagan practices – the worship of trees, stones and landforms – were absorbed within Christian rites and remedies. Wells were similarly co-opted as sites for baptism or the washing away of sins, with pagan deities displaced by associations with the Virgin Mary or local saints and miracles,[30] although it is Christ himself after whom the Blair Drummond well has been renamed. In allowing older local, mythic associations to remain and align with Christian theology, the Catholic church became 'imbued with something of a magical aura', claiming for itself the power 'to manipulate aspects of God's supernatural power'.[31]

This broadminded outlook utterly changed following the Scottish Reformation, replaced by a stern, intolerant Presbyterian rule. It was decreed that a relationship with God was to be achieved solely by faith; consequently, a belief in the power of holy water was regarded as sorcery, a popish superstition or diabolical diversion from serious worship. The power of water was restricted to its role in baptism. Claims that either human or non-human agents could work miracles were judged as blasphemous challenges to divine omnipotence. This dogmatism embraced a punitive approach to practices of pilgrimage, ritual and belief that centred upon holy wells.[32] From 1581, local kirks waged a relentless campaign against pilgrims to Christ's Well.

Old parish reports and historical accounts record this zealous crusade. Holder quotes from Menzies Fergusson's 1899 book about a local 16th century minister, Alexander Hume, in which one chapter details dozens of punishments enacted by the newly reformed kirk towards those seeking cures at Christ's Well. A strict order from the Presbytery of Stirling in 1581 required ministers to apprehend any parishioners who had visited the well and command them to repent during church attendance. The campaign intensified in 1583 as elders instructed clergy to impose fines on these 'rascal sort of pepill' for their practice of 'idolatrie or superstitoun'. Subsequently, ministers of nearby churches at Dunblane, Dollar, Kippen, Kilbryde, Kilmadock and St Ninian decreed that these offending pilgrims must attend the kirk barefoot or in sackcloth to repent or

else be imprisoned. Holder[33] describes how pilgrims ‘confessed to praying on their knees, washing their afflicted parts and leaving a piece of clothing or silver behind’ in seeking to cure physical complaints, while Bennett[34] refers to the case of one woman who sought respite because she was ‘sick in her heart and in her head’. Ecclesiastical punishments were assiduous and relentless, often imposed following surreptitious visits to the well by prying church brethren. Bennett, also drawing on Fergusson’s account, describes how ‘the brethren ordains and gives commission to the brothers dwelling in Dunblane or any three of them pass to Christ’s Well this next Saturday evening . . . to espy which persons come to the said Well and report the names of such persons you can get to the brethren’. One account from 1607 luridly claims that nine pilgrims leaving gifts at the well had ‘committed superstition and have dedicated to Satan that thing they have left behind them’.[35] In 1624, the Privy Council declared that visitors to the well must attend church in sackcloth and linen for three successive Sabbaths and pay 20 pounds or else face imprisonment. In 1643, the last punishment is recorded, delivered to a Margaret Ewing who was chastised for taking water from the well to sprinkle on her cattle.[36] These fanatical attacks took their toll: the well lapsed into disuse, its water lost its spiritual potency. In contemporary times, the tree-covered slopes surrounding the pond constitute a dramatic setting in which to imagine the lurking presence of grim-faced, pious presbyterian sentinels, furtively prying upon pilgrims.

Romantic redesign

Despite the fervent Presbyterian denunciation of Christ’s Well as a watery site for renewal and healing, the site was reinvigorated and revalued over one hundred years later. The crumbing stone furniture that still adorns the well is a romantic addition, installed after a more liberal climate prevailed following the influence of Scottish Enlightenment thought between 1700 and 1850. More particularly, nature was reconceived as a paradisical realm in which God’s generosity was revealed, a divine beneficence exemplified, for instance, by the hydrological cycle. These more redemptive religious attitudes were aligned with the contemporaneous upsurge in landscaping, notably of country estates, to express the power, status and taste of wealthy landlords.[37] The manipulation of water as a sensory, reflective, rippling, bubbling, gushing force was integral to the romantic design of these highly managed realms, with expansive human-made lakes augmented by waterfalls, weirs, streams and ponds. Darby[38] discusses how the aesthetic values of the picturesque intersected with a burgeoning antiquarianism to inspire the furnishing of extensively planned landscapes with manufactured ruins, historical relics, druidic temples, grottoes and hermit’s caves. And if ancient relics and sites already existed on a property – like Christ’s Well – landowners were typically eager to showcase them to enhance impressions of the antiquity of their ownership.[39] The adornments to the well were probably installed during the redesign of the Blair Drummond Estate by the dynamic Henry Home (1695–1782), Lord Kames, who inherited the land through marriage.

Kames was a significant intellectual, philosopher and proto sociologist of the Scottish Enlightenment whose influential ideas extended to the principles of literary composition, the stages of human evolution, and the origins of the diverse human races. He was also a prominent judge; most famously, as an anti-slavery advocate, he served on the panel of judges in the landmark case of Joseph Knight vs. John Wedderburn in 1778, which established the illegality of slave ownership in Scotland. Kames was also a keen proponent of landscaping. His remodelled Blair Drummond estate followed emergent aesthetic norms, including the creation of a serpentine lake, formal gardens and lawns, and the planting of deciduous and exotic trees. More pertinently, the values promoted in Kames accounts of garden aesthetics might account for his motivations in redesigning Christ’s Well.

Eighteenth century ideas about landscaping challenged earlier imperatives to follow classical aesthetic principles of harmony, proportion and beauty; they were replaced by an eclectic plurality of designs. While Kames reaffirmed that classical designs were supreme, he advocated a melding of these enduring rules with Romantic elements that, he considered, in being 'inspir'd by fancy and warmed by imagination, grows poetical in design, and picturesque in execution'.[40] As Bending[41] explains, for Kames, great gardens are marked by walking through 'various scenes' designed to stimulate contrasting sensory, emotional and intellectual impressions, 'emotions of grandeur, of sweetness and gaiety, of melancholy, of wildness, and even of surprise or wonder'.[42] While he deemed the refined satisfactions of rational, intellectual reflection to be superior to instinctual, instantaneous and sensational delights, Kames did not seek to eliminate these supposedly baser joys. For he argued that collective and individual advancement could be furthered through 'movement between the sensual pleasures associated with childhood and those more sophisticated pleasures of adulthood and civilisation'.[43] Immersive experiences with the natural world, including of watery pleasures such as those of Christ's Well, would cultivate visual and auditory delights that could be woven back into to the more elevated satisfactions of rational enquiry and cerebral reflection.

Kames wrote that 'regularity is required in that part of the garden which is adjacent to the dwelling-house . . . but (further away from this centre) regularity ought less and less to be studied; for in an extensive plan it hath a fine effect to lead the mind insensibly from regularity to a bold variety'.[44] This accords with the design of the Blair Drummond estate. Beyond the formally laid out geometrical flower beds, clear paths, extensive lawns, walled garden and serpentine lake are informally planted areas of mature woodland criss-crossed by winding paths, including the area in which Christ's Well is located. It is stumbled across unexpectedly, designed to offer a sensory, enchanting, romantic surprise, its quiet, dark waters offering a melancholic frisson.

In its faux dilapidated state, the redesigned Christ's Well would also have resonated with the contemporary craze for picturesque ruins, both artificial and authentic. The melancholic tableau of disparate historical objects from elsewhere, the stone pillar, carved bowl and well house, serve as theatrical props that attract visual attention and stimulate reflexive musings about the past and the significance of the still, limpid pool in and at which they are installed. Kames was fascinated by Celtic myths, and I assume that he was familiar with the particular historical use and meaning of Christ's Well as a sacred site.[45]

Today, the stony furniture summons up the animated figure of Lord Kames as he lingers in this restyled watery realm, content with his romantic adornments. When we run our hands across them, these stony ornaments also solicit a sensory empathy with Kames, his visitors, and the artisans who fashioned and installed them. As Harries[46] maintains, 'touch inaugurates . . . a reflexive appreciation of the bodily experience of dwelling in the world', offering 'a more "proximal" way of knowing which recognizes our sensuous being in the world'.

Improvement: clearing peat from the carse

Besides reconfiguring the appearance of Christ's Well, Kames initiated a far more extensive transformation of the relationship of water to the broader landscape. The view from the well extends across the five to six kilometres of the flat Carse of Stirling, an alluvial flood plain that extends fifty kilometres from Grangemouth in the east to the Lake of Menteith in the west. It is bordered by the River Forth and Gargunnock Hills to the South and the River Teith to the North. The two rivers merge near Stirling before entering the Forth Estuary. The carse is now patterned with the variegated colours of rich, mixed rich farmland composed of pasture, crops and ploughed soil. However, before the late 18th century the prospect would have been very different, for the carse

Figure 3. Kames Memorial, Blair Drummond Estate. Photo by author.

was thickly blanketed in dense, water-saturated peat bog. Lord Kames organised the utter transformation of this expansive peaty landscape (Figure 3).

In his *Historical Law Tracts*,[47] Kames proposes a four-phase model of social evolution wherein humans progress through stages characterised by hunting, pastoralism, agriculture and commerce. About 200 metres to the west of Christ's Well is a squat, pyramidal obelisk towards the top of the mound. An inscription declares that Kames did not lack self-regard but was also keen to improve the lives of others and advance commercial development, to strive towards his fourth stage of human development:

BY HENRY HOME

FOR HIS NEIGHBOURS AS WELL AS FOR HIMSELF

WAS THIS OBELISK ERECTED

GRAFT BENEVOLENCE ON SELF LOVE

THE FRUIT WILL BE DELICIOUS

The sentiments etched on the memorial implicitly refer to Kames' passion for agricultural improvement, his dedication to the application of fertilisers, new crops and animal breeds, crop rotation and other innovative techniques. In his book, *The Gentleman Farmer*,[48] Kames decries the 'indolence of the landholders, the obstinate indocility of the peasantry, and the stupid attachment of both classes to ancient habits and practices', factors that he considers were preventing the development of scientific, more efficient farming methods. He also advocates that the duty of the wealthy landowner is 'to study the good of his people and to do all in his power to make them industrious, and consequently virtuous, and consequently happy',[49] and this included extending land tenure in favourable terms so that farmers' livelihoods were less precarious.

These passionate beliefs motivated the transformation of Kincardine Moss, a large area of peat-covered carseland owned by the Blair Drummond estate, from an unproductive terrain into a highly productive agricultural area. From 1766, Kames encouraged Gaelic speaking former crofters dispossessed during the Highland Clearances to take up thirty-eight-year leases for eight acres of peatland. They would pay no rent for seven years, and thereafter, pay only a modest sum for each acre of land they cleared. By 1811, over 100 houses had been built, with 764 human inhabitants living along with 264 cows, 166 horses and 375 hens, amongst other livestock.[50]

In order to access fertile soil, the new tenants had to arduously toil to remove layers of peat up to six metres deep. Kames organised for the water that saturated the peat to be channelled so that it flowed towards the River Forth to the south, transporting the cut peat away. At the time of Kames death, in 1782, 400 acres of peat bog had been cleared. From 1787, the clearance of the remaining 1,100 acres was accelerated by the installation of a great water wheel that distributed a much larger volume of water across the carse from the River Teith to the Forth, with a substantial, criss-crossing complex of ditches, sluices, reservoirs and pipes (Figure 4).[51]

The Blair Drummond wheel ceased operation in 1839, by which time 'over 20 million cubic yards of moss, vegetation and ancient tree trunks had been excavated'.[52] As a consequence, Alexander Gray[53] considered that the proprietor, Kames' son, 'has now the satisfaction of seeing, instead of the stagnant waters and deceitful quagmires of the moss, the presence, prosperity and happiness of hundreds of his fellow creatures'. The peat layers were removed, along with huge quantities of water that they absorbed, but because other parts of the extensive bog remain, it is easy to imagine what the thickly layered, sodden land once looked like. The remaining conduits that once washed the peat away, some having narrowed but still gently flowing, others abbreviated and still, reflecting the sky above, conjure up the toiling farmers, laboriously slicing and digging the peat and casting it into the streams.

The changing landscape

This landscape-altering peat clearance and drying dramatically impacted upon human relationships with the carse, making it amenable to farming, inhabitation and passage. In addition, discoveries

Figure 4. Remnant water channel, Carse of Stirling. Photo by author.

beneath the peat unexpectedly revealed a wealth of evidence of earlier changes in the landscape, luring researchers from the emergent post-Enlightenment disciplines of archaeology, geology and biology. It notably disclosed the colossal forces through which water had changed the landscape long before human intervention.

First, the impacts of water in its frozen incarnation – glaciation – were disclosed. The long mound at the foot of which the Christ's Well's spring issues forth is composed of boulder clay deposited during the last ice age between 30,000 and 10,000 years ago.[54] Secondly, the presence

of marine sediments laid down between eight to six thousand years ago revealed that the carse was engulfed by a surge of tidal water far inland following the melting of the polar ice caps in the Northern Hemisphere and the consequent rise in sea levels. Embedded in deeper layers of clay were remnants of the briny world that once existed, beds of mussels and oysters, skulls of seals and most spectacularly, in 1824, the skeleton of a humpback whale was discovered close to the Blair Drummond estate. This tidal expanse can be readily imagined when the flatlands of the carse are viewed from the well, and this envisioning is further facilitated by the frequent winter flooding that submerges the fields. Thirdly, between six and four thousand years, as uplift followed the melting of the ice, as Hansom and Evans[55] write, ‘a brackish intertidal environment was progressively replaced by freshwater marshlands with extensive reed beds that were subsequently colonised by grasses, sedges, mosses and, eventually, woodlands’. The subsequent unchecked growth of vegetation above the marine sediments progressively accumulated, and it was this that rotted and was compressed to create the ‘semi-fluid, quaking peat bog four miles wide by fourteen miles long’.[56] These material discoveries unveiled how the agency of water had continuously forged this landscape.

Though Lord Kames successfully created a fertile, prosperous agricultural realm, in retrospect, the peat clearance has been environmentally disastrous. The undrained acres that spread across Flanders Moss to the west, still one of the largest remaining inland peat bogs in Scotland, are now cherished as a richly biodiverse wetland environment that hosts sphagnum moss, sundews and cotton grass. Wading birds flourish, feeding on insects, and moths and amphibians thrive. The rare, tiny ‘jumping’ spider *Heliophanus dampfi* continues to breed on a remnant patch of peatbog adjacent to Blair Drummond, Ochtertyre Moss. This specialist biodiversity is supplemented by wider ecological impacts. Storing twice as much carbon as all the world’s forests, peatlands cover 12% of the land and contain over half of the UK’s carbon storage at nearly six billion tonnes. Accordingly, strenuous efforts to reduce birch and heather colonisation on Flanders Moss are ongoing, and proposed schemes plan to raise the water table to prevent further carbon escape and retain the remaining peat bog’s ecological vitality (Figure 5).

While agricultural developments have dramatically transformed the view of the carse from Christ’s Well over the past 300 years, more recent changes have further altered this vista. Across the fields is a small lake, in the middle of which lies Chimp Island. The primates can be seen cavorting on the wooden scaffolding constructed there, confined there by the water on all sides. They belong to Blair Drummond Safari Park, opened in 1971. As formerly exclusive country estates became financially unviable throughout the 1950s and 60s due to increased taxation, higher labour costs and material decay, landowners sought other commercial uses and visitor attractions were devised. Safari parks promised a novel mode of encountering animals. Car occupants could drive slowly through an estate landscape in their own protective mobile environment, witnessing apparently untamed ‘exotic’ animals close at hand through the ‘crafting of a wild aesthetic’, especially the lion, the archetype of ‘wild and savage animality blood-red in tooth and claw’.[57] The surreal juxtapositions of these creatures with the setting of the landscaped country park, its trees, lawns and big house, with mountains beyond, under often rainy, gloomy Scottish skies, is joltingly eccentric.

Encountering the past: the enduring affordances of Christ’s Well, traces, absences and the multitemporal landscape

This paper has explored how watery traces and absences exemplify how multiple human and non-human agencies make places and landscapes always emergent. Here, I have investigated how

Figure 5. Chimp Island, Blair Drummond Safari Park. Photo by author.

water and land are 'interconnected elements that undergo constant variations, modifications and displacements'.[58] Both water's unmediated agencies and its manipulation by humans have dramatically impacted upon how the landscape has been used, interpreted and experienced.

While some traces and absences are obscure, others are apparent. While there are different methodological ways of exploring absence, as Delyser notes,[59] the approach here privileges sensory immersion and research into historical texts; consequently, a marginal site and overlooked landscape is revealed to be replete with numerous historical absences and vestiges. I now detail three ways in which this exploration has contributed to thinking about absences.

First, by lingering in and around Christ's Well and gazing and walking across its adjacent landscape I have developed a heightened sensorial and affective attunement to place through which vestiges and absences that initially appeared obscure have disclosed unexpected historical details and provoked vivid visions of the past. An array of rich texts that include 18th century philosophical treatises, local histories, and academic accounts from physical geography, anthropology and environmental studies have melded with this in situ immersion to further promote intimations of what is no longer present, acting as a kind of spatial hinge to other times. The absences and traces to which I became attuned has advanced a deeper sense of the pluritemporality of Christ's Well and the carse landscape, an intensified belonging that is charged by the scenes conjured up by the imaginaries[60] that have been fostered by immersion and texts. For once they are noticed and considered, as Michel de Certeau notes, these material residues, apparent incongruities and absences contribute to 'the stories and legends' that haunt space 'like superfluous or additional inhabitants'.[61] As these overlooked dimensions disclose, and as DeLyser observes, an exploration of absences has the potential to expand 'the possibilities for new histories, new stories and new landscapes to emerge'.[62] These stories rebuke more present-oriented narratives of stasis, improvement,

mastery and abundance, emphasising the dynamism and unfixity of place and landscape, while focusing on the overlooked dimensions of place. While certain imaginings are invariably speculative,[63] I consider that my own sensory apprehensions of its watery affordances might resonate with those experienced by earlier visitors to Christ's Well and the carse.

For me, Christ's Well has become imaginatively populated with people and non-humans: the totemic watery pagan beings that belonged to a spiritual domain in which there was no nature-culture divide,[64] the pre-Reformation pilgrims who gathered at the well having followed one of the ancient trails through which sacred sites were reached, the skulking, pious observers who reported the unchristian rituals of later pilgrims, and Lord Kames and the workers who fulfilled his romantic redesign. Across the carse, I envision glaciers, an inland sea, marsh, forest and peat successively clad the land, and from a later era, the water that surged along the channels cut to dispose of the saturated peat, and the energetic directions of Kames and the toil of the Highland farmers in reshaping the landscape.

Second, the relationship between absence and presence has been integral to this account, for while the site and landscape have certainly changed over time, certain consistencies and durabilities remain present. I surmise that the affordances of the pool, its cooling waters and the hollow in which it sits, and the contours and configurations of the landscape, have not dramatically altered over the past millennium. These material and sensory continuities, as Olivier[65] remarks, constitute 'a mass of details which do not date from the past but belong to an "ever-present" with no precise place in time'. Ancient sites such as Christ's Well were regarded as sacred precisely because of their particular watery affordances as well as their proximity to key byways, the provision of seclusion and sufficient space for assembly.[66] Such affordances endure. The views across the flat carse towards the Gargunnock Hills coerce our gaze as they would have directed the eyes of others who passed through this same location centuries ago, even if the scene was subsumed with water or clad in peat bog. Indeed, these consistencies form the foundational ground for visions of these historical elements and facilitate their imaging. Early morning mist, aqueous gurgles, slithery surfaces and damp leaves would similarly have impacted upon sensing bodies over time. At Christ's Well, as Bennett[67] considers, these durable qualities promote a sense of 'a distinct *genius loci* [that] feels to be just beneath the surface' (Figure 6).

Third, a grasp of the incessant changes in form, function and meaning in this dynamic place and landscape that are revealed by traces and absences, solicits speculation about the watery futures that will inevitably transform this realm in new ways. For as Strang[68] advises, 'we are not outside the hydrological cycle but are part of, and heavily influence, its rhythms and circulations', although human impacts may not always pertain. For irrespective of human designs, because water is ceaselessly adaptive, changing direction, form and constituency, certain landforms will disappear and be eroded while new water courses will arise. Different aquatic ecosystems will emerge, the current winter flooding might forewarn of greater future inundation and sea level rises may once create a marine environment deep inland.

The transformations that have been wrought by humans reveal the divergent forms of religious, technocratic, commercial and anthropocentric power that have successively altered the meaning and use of the well and the water on the carse, and resonate with wider historical processes through which watery landscapes have been manipulated. From a retrospective perspective, Lord Kames's project belonged to the trend towards what Savransky[69] calls 'colonial terraforming', through which damming, piping, irrigating and channelling water has transformed lakes, rivers, water tables, marine environments and catchment areas. These scientific, controlling practices have culminated in a series of crises, accelerating the advent of the Anthropocene. The water quality and toxicity of the Forth and Teith rivers are carefully monitored, anthropogenically-caused climate

Figure 6. Section of the pool, Christ's Well. Photo by author.

change has created severe rainstorms that have transformed nearby river courses, and perhaps the remaining peat bogs will dry out, and biological diversity consequently reduced.

However, as knowledge about these malign impacts expands, perhaps the human-water relationship on the carse will change. I consider that watery imaginaries can drive situated ways of knowing and acting. Accordingly, perhaps that which has become absent, like the extinct or threatened species that conservationists refer to as part of a 'shared commons' that has been or might become lost,[70] can impel more urgent action. In contemporary times, the remaining peat bog is

being revalued for its environmental value by conservationists and maybe the water table will be raised to preserve its ecological significance. The seldom visited Christ's Well might become a minor tourist attraction, deemed suitable for archaeological exploration or considered worthy of preservation. An imaginary charged by the absence and traces that pervade this watery site and landscape, I suggest, could inform the development of more sustainable, aesthetically attuned, place-specific and historically informed ways of living with water that might expedite both human and non-human flourishing. A greater attunement to more diverse and richer watery ecologies, aquacultural potentialities, landscape design and recreational opportunities could undergird a greater sensitivity to the place of water and to water in place. Such a re-evaluation could move away from overwhelmingly technocratic, marketized, extractivist, productivist logics and towards more spiritual, intimate and sensuous ways of living with water.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Maarja Kaaristo, three anonymous referees, and Dydia DeLyser for her wise advice and support.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Tim Edensor https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4715-6024

Notes

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Author biography

Tim Edensor is Emeritus Professor of Social and Cultural Geography at the Institute of Place Management, Manchester Metropolitan University. He has recently authored *Stone: Stories of Urban Materiality* (2020) and *Landscape, Materiality and Heritage: An Object Biography* (2022).