

### III.

THE SO-CALLED CATRAIL. BY JAMES HEWAT CRAW, F.S.A. SCOT.

"The identity of Junius of the Letters has not called forth greater variety of suggestion than has this mysterious earthwork." What first excited interest some fifty years before the letters were written continues in some ways one of the unsolved mysteries. It is still worth consideration if only to notice some of the fallacies which have been revived from time to time since they were refuted almost sixty years ago.

In many districts of our country, from the South of England northwards, there exist works of unknown antiquity called black-dykes, devil's-dykes, Grim's dykes, and other such names. They consist of a trench with an accompanying mound, of widely varying dimensions, and run across country with a curiously winding course, being frequently traceable for many miles. The stupendous trench and mound of the Cambridgeshire Devil's Dyke, and the long line of Offa's Dyke on the Welsh Marches, are perhaps the best known works of this description.

The most famous in Scotland has become known as the Catrail. The common conception of it is that of a great trench with a mound on either side extending from Peel Fell at the west end of the Cheviot range to the fort and broch at Torwoodlee, near Galashiels. Its course has been supposed to extend with a great curve some fifty miles in length

across the county of Roxburgh by Robert's Linn, The Pike, Northhouse, and Hoscote, entering Selkirkshire near Kingside Loch and crossing Ettrick Water above Gilmanscleuch. The supposed line then crossed Yarrow near the Feus; curving north by Minchmoor, and possibly entering for a space the county of Peebles, it continued along the heights to Linglie Hill opposite the town of Selkirk. From there the course lay by the Howdenpot Burn, Rink, and the outskirts of Galashiels to Torwoodlee.

Of over forty writers who have described the Catrail, it may be sufficient to refer to five, whose work for originality or completeness demands consideration.<sup>1</sup>

(1) Alexander Gordon, in his *Itinerarium Septentrionale* published in 1727, first mentioned the Catrail, stating that no writer had previously described it. At several points he is admitted by subsequent writers to have been mistaken.

(2) George Chalmers, in *Caledonia* (1807), followed Gordon at most points and gave further details of the course. He did not personally survey the ground, and his informant appears to have been frequently misled regarding the character of tracks in the supposed line.

(3) Sir James Murray (then Mr Murray), in a short address to the Hawick Archæological Society in 1864, refuted for the first time many of what I believe to be the fallacies of earlier writers on the subject.

(4) James Smail, in the *History of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club* for 1879, contributed a fuller account of the work than had previously been given. He admits not having read Mr Murray's paper, and adheres to the older theories.

(5) Francis Lynn has given, in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* for 1897-8, the most detailed description of the Catrail, with plans from which one may follow the line he indicates.

Among other writers may be mentioned Professor Veitch, who, in his *History and Poetry of the Scottish Border* (1878), deals chiefly with the name and purpose of the work; and Alexander Jeffrey, who, in *The History and Antiquities of Roxburghshire* (1855) treated the subject on the lines followed by Chalmers, and aroused much discussion at the time.

The conception of a continuous line, or of a series of more or less connected sections forming a unit, appears after considerable investigation to be without foundation and contrary to facts which anyone interested may ascertain for himself.

<sup>1</sup> A full bibliography of the Catrail is given in *Archæologia Æliana*, Third Series, vol. xix. p. 158 (footnote), 1922.

The so-called Catrail may, from the writer's interpretation of such facts, be divided into five parts as follows (fig. 1):—

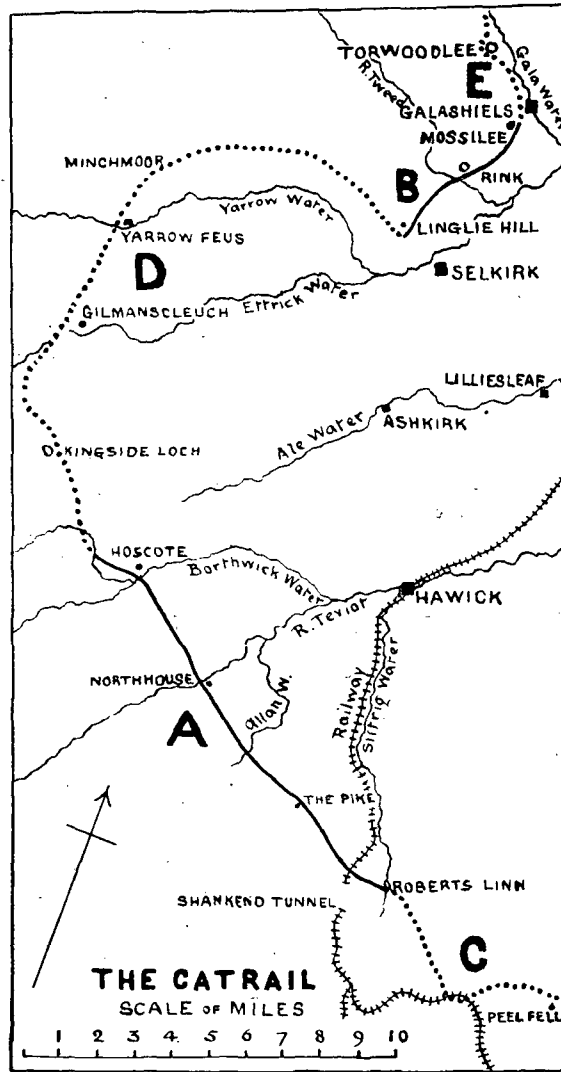


Fig. 1. Map of the Catrail.

(A) The true Catrail, situated in the county of Roxburgh and extending from Robert's Linn (near which it can be seen from the railway a  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile from the north end of Shankend tunnel on the Carlisle line)

to the Hoscote Burn. This black-dyke covers a distance of  $13\frac{1}{2}$  miles, the line for considerable stretches being defined by the course of streams. It seems to be the only work entitled to the name Catrail, which was locally unknown elsewhere till recent times.

(B) The Picts' Work Ditch, to use the local name for this section, extending from Linglie Hill to Mossilee, near Galashiels, a distance of  $4\frac{1}{4}$  miles. This portion is cut in two by the river Tweed, but the two sections are most probably parts of the same work, being in alignment. At the southern extremity on Linglie Hill the end of the trench is neatly rounded off and has no appearance of having been carried further; to test this point more thoroughly, I made a cutting immediately beyond the end of the trench and found the hard subsoil entirely undisturbed by previous excavation. The same result was obtained a  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile further west, where previous writers on the Catrail imagined they found it. The trench for some 40 yards at its termination on Linglie Hill has been only half excavated, suggesting a sudden stoppage of the work. Lynn's supposed line on Cribs Hill near this point is clearly modern. A and B, according to my own judgment, are the only works of any note in the whole line partaking of black-dyke type; the north-west end of the former is some  $13\frac{1}{4}$  miles from the south end of the latter in a direct line, and the course of the two works does not suggest any connection between them.

(C) From Peel Fell to Robert's Linn, a distance of 7 miles, the most ardent supporters have found but meagre fragments, none of which really appears to be of black-dyke type.

(D) Between the Hoscote Burn and Linglie Hill the line is supposed to have taken a wide sweep of  $22\frac{1}{4}$  miles. The great majority of tracks in this section are certainly not black-dykes: the few which are of that character appear to be of much slighter construction than A and B. There can be little doubt that Sir James Murray proved the fallacy of previous writers in regard to this portion. He also ascertained that Sir Walter Scott and Laidlaw, after much search, had come to the conclusion that no such work as the Catrail crossed Selkirkshire. It is inconceivable that a work of such proportions could have been obliterated on the hard moorland of the Selkirkshire hills within a century of Gordon's time.

(E) It is significant that the early writers claim nothing beyond Mossilee. It was not till about 1867 that William Kemp discovered a fragment extending 2 miles to Torwoodlee, which was later followed to the Gala beyond it—a total extension of some 3 miles. It must be admitted that the whole of this portion, which extends through low and mostly cultivated ground, is likely to be less evident than it was

fifty years ago; but for the same reason one would expect it to have been most evident to the earliest investigators. Some of the parts left here are certainly of later date; only one portion (in a strip of wood a  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile south-east of Torwoodlee broch) has much resemblance to a black-dyke, and it is of smaller dimensions than the Mossilee portion.

We thus find ourselves compelled to abandon as a myth the so-called Catrail, with its glamour and mystery, and to consider in its place two portions of black-dyke—the true Catrail and the Picts' Work Ditch—the deepest and most important, if not the longest, of many black-dykes in the Border country. Of the date of these works we have no definite evidence. What was their purpose? That they were roads we cannot suppose: roads keep to hard ground, these do not; roads seek fords, the Catrail at two points makes a sheer drop into a stream; roads do not extend from the head of one stream over a watershed to the head of another with no trace of continuation down the rocky gorge on either side; neither are they carried straight over a ridge like the Pike, where a slight deviation would avoid a climb of 700 feet in little over a  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile, with a troublesome descent on the other side; and finally, they do not run through hill tarns such as that on the north side of Linglie Hill.

That these works were defensive earthworks is almost as unthinkable; their course and construction do not suggest such a purpose. To quote again from Sir Herbert Maxwell, whose words form our introduction: "If that was the origin and purpose of the Catrail, it is to be hoped that the Britons were better Christians than they were military engineers."

We now find ourselves left with the last of the theories regarding these works: that they were merely boundaries. The only objection to this surmise rests on the apparently unnecessary depth and width of the trench for such a purpose, the measurements exceeding at some points 6 feet and 25 feet. If we consider, however, that we know nothing either of the importance which the makers attached to this boundary—if such it were—or of the amount of labour at their command, we shall probably admit that the objection is not sufficient to set aside the theory; and there for the present we must let the matter rest.