

Another 18th-century reference to Arthur's Oven

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The interest of the early antiquaries in the monument known as Arthur's Oven is well documented (Steer 1958; Brown 1974; Steer 1976; Brown & Vasey 1989). Almost certainly a Roman triumphal memorial, the Oven stood on the north bank of the Carron near Stenhousemuir (NGR NS 879 827) until it was demolished in 1743 to provide stone for a mill dam. To supply a measure of poetic justice, the dam itself was washed away soon afterwards. The landowner responsible – Michael Bruce, 6th Baronet of Stenhouse, a 'sordid, insatiable and detestable creature' (Maitland 1757: 214) – was quickly and comprehensively pilloried in antiquarian circles. Moral outrage was earnestly cultivated and esoterically expressed by the likes of William Stukeley, John Clerk and Roger Gale, all notable antiquaries of the time (Brown 1974).

It is perhaps rather less widely known that the Oven's demolition also slighted public sensibilities at a less rarefied level. One articulation of this appears in a broadside published in Edinburgh in 1756 (National Library of Scotland, APS.4.83.4). It takes the form of a poem of seven stanzas, reproduced below, in heroic couplets of iambic quadrameter. The author James Wilson (c 1730–c 1789) was a native of Cumbernauld and usually wrote under the *nom de plume* 'Claudero'; Wilson devoted much of his energy to composing boisterous

verse which eulogised the vanishing fabric of Edinburgh's Old Town (Wilson 1848: 218–21). The main subject of this piece is the Mercat Cross, which was torn down in March 1756 'for the horrid Crime of being an Incumbrance to the Street' (McCulloch 1854–7). The demolition of the cross itself was obviously a sore point:

As soon as the workmen began, which was in the morning of March 13, some gentlemen, who had spent the night over a social bottle, caused wine and glasses to be carried thither, mounted the ancient fabric, and solemnly drank its dirge. The beautiful pillar which stood in the middle, fell and broke to pieces, by one of the pulleys used on that occasion giving way (*Scots Magazine* 1756: 147).

Wilson called his broadside 'The Last Speech and Dying Words Of The Cross of Edinburgh'; as with many of his poems, he 'allowed the expiring relic to speak its own grievances' (Wilson 1848: 219). And as with many of his poems it is 'of no very high order' (Wilson 1848: 218) but makes good reading nevertheless. Towards the end of the first stanza there is a passing allusion to 'Arthur's ov'n' together with a footnote which reads as follows:

A piece of very great antiquity, the property of a gentleman near Falkirk, who destroyed it, to build up a mill-dam-head the river Carron – But the river (swell'd as it were with resentment) soon swept it off.

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The Last Speech and Dying Words, OF THE CROSS of EDINBURGH

Which was hang'd, drawn and quarter'd, on Monday the 15th
March, 1756, for the horrid Crime of being an Incum-
brance to the Street.

YOU sons of *Scotia*, mourn and weep,
Express your grief with sorrow deep;
Let aged Sires be bath'd in tears,
And ev'ry heart be fill'd with fears,
Let rugged rocks with griefs abound,
And echo's multiply the sound;
Let rivers, hills, let woods and plains,
Let morning dews, let winds and rains,
United join to aid my woe,
And loudly mourn my overthrow —
For *Arthur's oo'n**, and *Edinburgh* cross,
Have by new schemers got a tofs;
We heels o'er head are tumbled down,
The modern taste is *London* town.

I was built up in *Gothic* times,
And have stood several hundred reigns;
Sacred my mem'ry and my name,
For Kings and Queens I did proclaim;
I peace and war did oft declare,
And rous'd my country every where;
Your ancestors around me walk'd,
Your kings and nobles 'side me talk'd,
And lads and lasses, with delight,
Set tryst with me to meet at night;
No tryster e're was at a loss,
For why, *I'll meet you at the cross*.
On me great men have lost their lives,
And for a *Maiden* left their wives.
Low rogues likeways oft got a peg,
With turnip, t—d, or rotten egg,
And when the mob did miss their butt,
I was bedaub'd like any slut.
With loyal men, on loyal days,
I dress'd myself in lovely bays,
And with sweet apples treat the crowd,
While they huzza'd around me loud.

Professions many have I seen,
And never have disturbed been:
I've seen the *Tory* party slain,
And *Whigs* exulting o'er the plain;
I've seen again the *Tories* rise,
And with loud shouting pierce the skies,

Then mount the scale, and chace the *Whig*,
From *Pentland-hills* and *Bothwell-brig*.
I've seen the covenants by all sworn,
And likeways seen them burnt and torn,
I neutral stood, as peaceful Quaker,
With neither side was I partaker.

I wish my life had longer been,
That I might greater ferlies seen,
Or else like other things decay,
Which time alone doth waste away.
But since I now must lose my head,
I at my last this lesson read,
"Tho' wealth, and youth, and beauty shine,
"And all the graces round you twine,
"Think on your end, nor proud behave,
"There's nothing sure this side the grave."

You jolly youths, with richest wine,
Who drunk my dirge, for your propine,
I do bequeath my lasting boon,
May heav'n preserve you late and soon;
May royal wine, in royal bowls,
And lovely women, cheer your souls,
Till by old age you gently die,
To live immortal in the sky.

To own my faults I have no will,
For I have done both good and ill:
As to the crime for which I die,
To my last gasp, *Not guilty, I*.

At my destroyers bear no grudge,
Nor do you stain their mason-lodge,
Tho' well may all by-standers see,
That better masons built up me.
The Royal statue in the clois
Will share the fate of me poor cross;
Heavens, earth and seas, all in a range,
Like me will perish for *Exchange*.

CLAUDERO.



* A piece of very great antiquity, the property of a gentleman near Falkirk, who destroyed it, to build up a mill-dam-head the river *Carro*—But this river (swell'd as it were with resentment) soon swept it off.

That tells us nothing new about the Oven, but it does suggest that its loss was not quickly forgotten even outside the *literati*. The presence of the explanatory footnote probably means that the story was not generally as familiar as Stukeley and Clerk might have wished, however. Public reception of Wilson's poem, if it was ever recorded, is sadly untraceable.

'The Last Speech and Dying Words Of The Cross of Edinburgh' (c 1756)

YOU sons of *Scotia*, mourn and weep,
Express your grief with sorrow deep;
Let aged Sires be bath'd in tears,
And ev'ry heart be fill'd with fears,
Let rugged rocks with griefs abound,
And echo's multiply the sound;
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Let morning dews, let winds and rains,
United join to aid my woe,
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We heels o'er head are tumbled down,
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