

WEATHER RECORDS FOR CENTRAL SCOTLAND 1651-1659: THE DIARIES OF JOHN LAMONT AND JOHN NICHOLL

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Introduction

The study of historical climatology in Scotland is in its infancy. Libraries abound with records of past weather but very rarely have these been investigated. Often, these accounts hidden away in dusty shelves provide fascinating insights into the weather experienced by our ancestors. In our modern world we often consider the context of our present climate within the notion of "global warming". We often read that the climate and weather that we experience is extremely benign compared to the harsh conditions that our predecessors experience during the so-called "Little Ice Age" that took place during the 14th- 19th centuries. Yet we know very little about the day to day weather of the "Little Ice Age". For Scotland, much of this information remains unexplored and hidden away in diaries and letters in various archives scattered around the country.

Two men who kept such diaries during the 17th century are John Lamont and John Nicholl. John Lamont was a farmer at Newton in Kennoway Parish in Fife. He kept a diary for the period 1649-1671 within which descriptions of past weather are scattered around accounts of his personal life. Similarly John Nicholl, also from Fife, kept a diary for the period 1650-1667. These two diaries cover some momentous times in Scotland's political history yet within them are unique and precious records of past weather. In the following sections, transcriptions of these accounts are given for the decade 1651-1659. They provide vivid accounts of weather conditions during a decade within the "Little Ice Age". They show very clearly, for example in their descriptions of a drought year, that severe cold was not a characteristic feature and, in so doing, provide a poignant reminder that climate change is an extremely complex process. I quote the accounts verbatim for purposes of precision and accuracy and also to enable the reader to step briefly into the lives of two extraordinary people. Only the words in italics have been added to their accounts

1651 This year a severe famine is reported in Nicoll's Diary (pp. 74-75) "...Much pepill killed this yeir in Scotland, and the riches of this natioun robbed and spoyled out of the toun of Dundie, eftir the storming, quahairin the famin wer hid for saiffie. Great dearth this yeir, the boll of beir being at twentie pund Scottis the boll in mony pairtes of the cuntrey".

1652 This year was characterised by an extremely severe summer drought and a plentiful harvest. Lamont records (pp.45-50) "...All this summer ther was ane extraordinary great drought throwout the wholle kingdome, with great heate, fewe rains; the corns generallie both short and thin, the best grounds worst cornes. (Ther be none liueing that remembers a dryer summer); the grasse brunt vp, the blowms of the pease wallowed (withered) a fourtnight before

Lammis, wheras some years they continowe till Michelmisse. In November. and December "...The wheat, after it was sowed, did spring againe in seuerall places in the shyre of Fyfe, betuixt 9 and 12 dayes; about this tyme also, the greatest pairt of all the tries, whither fruit tries of other tries, begane to bud againe. The whine generallie did blome, and some brome also, in some places. The veilet also had its floure, (which is not ordinar till March); the fege trie young feggs; the cawes also, in some places, begane to gather sticks to ther old nests; strawberries leaues blomed the first of Jan. 1653.

Nicoll (pp. 98-103) states that, "... In Julij, 1652, the cornes being neir ripe, much thame wer schorne; and, in the beginning of August, het harvest; the soomer this yeir being exceiding het and fair, the lyke quhairf wes nevir sene in this cuntrey, for the quhilk thair wes much scheiring in Julij the same yeir. This yeir, Michaelmes moone, 1652, wes not sene the space of nyne dayis or thairby, albeit the sky all that tyme wes very cleir, and the weather very fair. This wes for nyne dayis eftir the change. I can not omitt the remembrance of this rair and singular yeir 1652, quihilk not onlie productit ane airlie harvest, sum cornes being ryped and schorne in Junij, (yit not much,) yit in mony pairtes in Julij, and all in August, without weit, storme, and tempest; bot also yeir productit ripe wyneberries and graps, and abundance of Scottis chestanes oppinlie fauld at the mercat croce of Edinburgh, and bakin in paistes at bankettis.

This yeir, be ressoun of the continuall heattis all the monethis till the end of December, and eftir that to the 3 of Januar 1653, and of the extraordinair fair weather during that tyme, was the occasioun that the fruit treys to bud and flourische, and sum of thame to bring furth fruitt, albeit not in perfection; fouldes began to big thair nestis, and lay eggis evin at or neir Martymes; swa that this yeir in effect productit twa someris. 21 of November 1652. Thair fell out great thunder and fyre at and about four in the morning, being Sunday, quhilk brak doun a freat pairt of the steipill of Dyfert, and rent asunder the stanes thairf. Much micht be spokin of the heat and fair weather of this yeir 1652, quhich productit mony rarities as is befor mentionat. Amongis utheris, I can not forget to set doun heir that, upone the 27 of November this yeir, sellettis and sybees wer oppinlie cryed and sauld in Edinburgh; and ficklyke fresche hering, indured, and wer oppinlie sauld in November 1652, December, and a great pairt of Januar thaireftir, in anno 1653, abundantlie plentifull and chaip.

1653 Lamont (pp.63) describes the summer of 1653 as "...generally through all Scotland, the corns were att a great rate: beare, oatts, and pease being 11, 12, 13 lib. the bolle; wheate 14 and 15 lib. the bolle; bot after the crope was brought in to the corne yeards, (this crope being more plentifull and large, both in corne and stra, blissed be God, then hath beine for seuerall yeares preceeding), the prices fell strangelie, to the admiration of many, so that from Michelmis 1653 till the end of the yeare, beare, oatts, and pease, was at 4 lib. and 4 lib. 10s. att most; wheat 7 and 8 the bolle; cheese, this summer at 30s. the stone, and the best at 40s. the stone, wooll at 7 and 8 lib. the stone, and the darrest at 12 lib. and 20 marke the stone. Things continued at the cheapnesse, or rather cheaper, oatts beign at 5 marke the bolle, and 12 bolls for 10; till Mairtimis 1655.

Nicoll (pp. 112-120) reports that at the end of August "...and many dayis of September 1653, thair wer great windis, stormes, and tempestis, almoist throw all Ewrop, both be sea and land, be ressoun quhair of mony schips, barks, and veschellis did perische. This yeir 1653 haid plenty of cornes and very chaip. The meall of the best foirt at 4 lib the boll. The quheit, beir, peas, and beanis proportionallie. The harvest and winter very dry, so that fra October 1653, till the 15 of Marche thaireftir, in anno 1654, thair wes not full sevin schouris, as salbe declairit in the awin place: besyde, this harvest and winter wes exceiding hett; sa that in effect thair wes no winter, the season being both warme and dry.

1654 We turn to Lamont (pp.76-81) for descriptions of the weather of 1654, "...Ther was mutch old corne standing in many of the barne yeards of Fyfe, the like of which was not feine for the space of many yeares before, viz. at Lundie, 7 large oatte stackes, 1 pease stacke, besyde seuerall oatte stackes; at Gilston, (for it was set this 1654 yeare to one Jhone Mairtin, wha laboured before, Blebo in Fyfe); at Largo, seuerall stackes; at Athernie, 4 or 5; at Sconie some; at Drameldrie, in David Auchmuties, some; also att Balgromo, and diuers other places. Also, Agust 1, 1655, ther was some old oatte stackes standing in the barne yearde of Lundy, viz. of the crope 1653. In November ther was seuerall great wynds, so that vp and doune the Firth ther perished severall small vessells; in some the men were safe, in others the men were lost. It blewe doune also some great tries, viz. in Lundie and Largo. 24 Nou. Ther perished a ship neare Inchcome, leaden with iron and lint; the men were safe, and some of the goods. This month ther was a party of Middeltons forces taken by the English vpon the braes of Angus, they being pursued thrie days, the snow being thicke; namlie, the Lord Kinnoule, Lord Didope, Charles Arskine, Kellies brother, Lo. Coll. Mercer, and 16 more officers, with 62 souldiers.

John Nicoll (pp. 122-139) adds that, "...This last winter, in anno 1653, and all Januar, Februar, and till the 21 of Marche 1654, wes exceiding dry and fair wethir, sa that fra October 1653, till the 21 of Marche thaireftir, in anno 1654, thair wer not above fex schoures of weit or snow, and twa of these schoures fell out on twa severall Sondagis, sua that in effect thair were twa someris. On the 13 Junij 1654 greyne peyis oppinlie sauld in Edinburgh full and ryp. Lykewyse chereyis rype and great sauld at the same tyme, and sum dayis of befoir. On the 24 Julij, cornes wer schorne about Edinburgh; not much this day, bot it fell out that in the end of that moneth, and in the begynning of August, thair wes much scheiring. This former 1654 product much abundance of cornes, and much abundance of fruite, in all the corneris of the land, and exceiding chaip, as the lyke was nevir sene in this natioun.

All this somer and harvest, anno 1654, thair fell out ane exceiding great drouth throw all the pairtes of Lothiane, and from Berwick to Glasgow, bot speciallie about Edinburgh, quhairin all the wellis wer dried up, sa that the inhabitantes could not get sufficient for ordoring thair meatt, and watter could be fund. Notwithstanding all the west cuntrey, from Glasgow to the Rynes of Galloway, haid moir nor ordiner abundance of rayne and weitt. During October 1654, "... All this tyme, and sensyne, thair continued great drouth in

all the wellis in Edinburgh, and throgh all the land of Lothiane, so that the pepill in Edinburgh wer constrayned to go abroad the space of ane myle, befor thai could get ony cleane watter, ather for brewing of aill or beir, or for thair pott meitt. Later, in November 1654 (p.143) ... thair wes great stormes both by sea and land, quhairin sindry schipes and barkis, cuming and going to and fra France, Spayne, England, Yreland, Flanderis, Swaydin, and uther pairtes in Europ, wer caft away and perished; much skaith also done be land both to man and beast.

1655 Lamont" (pp.91-95) reports that during August, "...All this monthe for the most pairt were many great rayns: Bot about the end of the month they encreased greatlie, so that the bourns ran downe some shorne cornes in severall places; also the bowes of some bridges in Louthian, as also a pairt of some mylls ther; and att St Androus, a pairt of a mille that belongs to Nyddie, called Gappies Mille, as also the Bow Bridge att the shoares of St Androus; and att Lundie Mille, the water entred the mille doore, beate stronglie vpon the walls of the houses ther, ran ouer the head of the bridge, it being higher, by a foote or halfe a foote, then the bridge it selfe; ran away some of the strapping stone att Nether Largo, which had beine unremoved for the space of many yeares before. All this was done by the violence and speate of the rayne water. *During October*, "...there were many great and excessive rayns, so that together ther was not two dayes wherin ther was not some rayne, by reason of which several houses of the meaner sort of peopell did fall downe to the grounde. He describes how on December 10th, "... being Moneday - all that day, for the most pairt, it did snow, bot at night ther fell extraordinary mutch snow, and all that night ther blew a great wynde, which occasioned great losse and damage to the shyre of Fyfe, both by sea and land. As for the sea, it did flow far aboue its [ordinar] limits and bankes, so that if it had beine...to be a deipe neipe tyde...(as some thinke, it wold exceided Cori [vreckan]...were many small barkes and other vessels that perished, even laying in harbrees, as in Enster, Dysert 20, Craill 30. Also piers were doung downein severall places, as in St Androus, Enster, Craill, Weymes, Leith; a pairt of the Salt girnell in Leuen broken downe; many sheipe, in seuerall places, ouerblown by the snow and perished; some lesser houses blownen downe; severall tries, in severall places, blownen ouer and broken by the violence of this storme; also several salt panns wronged, both in Fyfe and Louthian syde.

Nicoll (pp. 149-156) describes February 1655 as, "...wes exceiding foull and filthie wether, so that nather plewing, harrowing, nor sawing could be haid for the great and frequency raynes that fell out. It is thocht, that this moneth of Februar and a pairt of Marche following producty moir weit and foull weather nor the twa yeiris preceeding, viz. The yeris of our Lord 1653 and 1654, these two yeris being exceiding het and dry yeiris, and abundantlie fruitfull. Farder, it wald be remembered, that at this tyme, viz. Both befor Lambes and thaireftir, in this anno 1655, thair fell out extraordinier schouers of weit and rayne, quhairof the lyke wes seldome sene, continuuing mony nyghtes and dayis togidder without intermissioun, to the great destruction of that crop and cornes than growand, batterand the famin to the ground, and destroyand

alluterlie all the crop of peyis. This unseasonable season pat mony in fear of dearth and famyne, and justlie; because plentie of victuell wes comptit a plaig to many, quha haiffing great stoir of victuell, could not haiff such pryces thairfoir as in the lait yeiris preceding. For these thrie yeiris bypast, the victuell of all foirtes wes exceiding chaipe by expectatioun, viz the best peck of meill in the mercat of Edinburgh being sauld and bocht for ane groat, and sumtyme for thrie schilling and ane plak; and being bocht in bollis wes sumtyme sauld for fyftir schilling, and sum uther tymes for xlvijis; the boll of quheit for four pund; the boll beir our pund, and much les in sum pairtes; and so the rest accordingle. Bot immediatlie eftie this extraordiner rayne, the mercattis did ryse, for this unseasonable weddir pat mony in fear of dearth and famyne.

He adds (pp. 171-172) that "...About the fyftene day of *November* 1655, fell out ane great froast, and within few dayis thaireftir a storme and tempest of snow; and upone the tent day of December thaireftir, being ane Monounday, the storme increst and became so fearche and violent, the wind being at the north east, that in this so violent a storme thair perished great numberis of schips, both in Scotland and England, and many hard by us heir at Mussilburgh, Newhavin, Bryntyland, and upone all the sea coistis both north and south. Great numberis of pepill, bestiall, and guidis perished in this storme alsweill be sea as by land. The lyke storme wes not sene by the space of many yeiris befor; no, not that great storme that did arryse at the death of King James the Sext did not equall this storme. This froast continued undissolvit fra the tent of November till the twenty day of December thaireftir, at quihilk tyme thair fell out a quyet and ane calme thow, without ony kynd of weit. There were great alteratioun of the pryces of victuell this yeir, the pryces in the foir end of the yeir being exceiding chaip, and chaiper nor in mony scoir of yeiris befor; bot the weit and cold wethir, falling out in the spring and somer in great abundance, maid the mercattis to arryse to the triple and quadruple pryce and gif the money haid not bene skant, it haid bene far derar. Ceffis and excysis multiplied, both upone menis persones and eftaites, as wes wonderfull.

1656 February 1656 is described by Nicholl (pp.174-189) as "...ane exceiding fair moneth, verry dry, warme, with a pleasant seasonable raine. The Spring this yeir wes very unko and unseasonable, be beffoun of the frequent frostis and rayne, exceiding much during the monethis of Marche and Apryll, quihilk the pepill of the cuntrey to fear famyn and dearth. The ministrie of the Presbytrie of Lothiane, taking this to thair consideratioun, did conclude a Fast to be keiped in the begynning of Maj; quihilk wes keipit in all the kirkis of this Presbytrie; and albeit with great waiknes, yit it wantit not the awin happy effect and blissing, for fra that day of humiliatioun the Lord did produce much fair and plesant weather for many dayis thaireftir following. This yeir 1656 producit abundance of bestiall, such as hors, nolt, scheip, and sum of these at ane verry easie pryce, albeit much death among the scheip this yeir. A guid mart kow wes sold for sextene pund, these bestiall being abundant and the money exceiding skant. Anent the fische this yeir, they wer also very plentifull. And albeit the West sea hering, this yeir and mony yeiris befor, left thair awin loches, viz Lochfyne and Lochlong, yit they come into the river of Clyd, quhair

in abundance thai wer takin and slayne, exceding fyne, great, and fresche; and continewit fresche and oppinlie sold very callor, almoist all winter, evin till mony dayis of Januar 1657. Thair wer also exceding great numberis of salmound and all uther soirt of fische takin and killed this yeir.

1657 Nicoll's diary entry for 1657 (pp. 201-8) notes that, "...At this tyme, and by the space of many yeirs of befoir, the Toun of Edinburgh wes destitute of watter to serve thair housis, and thair toun wellis wer dried up, so that the inhabitantis could not be servite for want. The Toun, taking this to thair consideratioun, they concludit to dry the South loche, and to essay, gif the drying up of that loch micht help this evill. And for this end, they delt with the English sodgeris to cast trinsches about this loch, for gadding the watter thairto for the use of the Toun; quhilkes Englische sodgeris began thair wark upone the 3 day of August being Monday, the yeir of God 1657; and endit upone both sydes of the loch, befoir the twentie day of September, except a lytill parcell not above the lenth of a pair of buttes, quhilk wes left to be finiched and outred by fyve pure Scottis misterfull men for thair livelihood. The harvest wes exceding pleasant, and the cornes throw the haill natioun win and brocht in to the berne and berne yarid long befoir Michaelmes, and sum befoir the last of August, this yeir 1657. The victuell this yeir wes verrie guid, weill win, and very chaip. The somer being het and dry, and the harvest exceding pleasant and airtie. All cornes for the maist pairt wer brocht in to the berne and berne yaird befoir the last of September this yeir.

1658 Nicoll (pp. 212-4) describes how "...this Februar 1658, and be the space of ane moneth and ane half befoir, viz the haill moneth of Januar, and half of December preceeding, wes exceding seasonable, full of frost and snow; quhilk frost and snow dissolvit with ane calme thow, without weit or tempest, yit exceding cold. Bot the moneth of Marche following, and much of Apryll wes bitter, and exceding scharp weather, mixt with frost, the wind continuin all that space in the eist and north eist. And farder, till the 20 day of Maij verrie cold weather. And farder, much cold weather thaireftir till the midst of Junij. This cold and unseasonable spring producit much diseases among the pepill through many parties of this natioun; speciellie of cold humoris upone the bodyes of wemen and men, quhair of few in the kingdome wer eximed. Besyde, that the cornes and gers wer far behind the ordiner tyme of growing; the wind still blowing out of the eist and benorth be the space of mony monethis. In the end of Maij 1658, fresche hering, great and fair, wer takin at Dumbar, and sold in the mercat and streitis of Edinburgh, quhilk we interpret to be ominis, far by the cours of nature, and the cours of tyme and season of the yeir, the lyke nevir being sene of befoir.

Lamont (pp.110) describes how on December 16 "...Ther was a great tempest of raine and wynde, so that the waters increased exceedingly. That afternoone two ladds were drowned in that bourne that comes downe betuixt Hatton and Lundy; the one lived in Overpratous, and the other in Monthyriue, ther names were....Foggo ...That afternoone, with others, they were comeing from a buriall that had beine att Largow chruich, and crossing the bridge ther,

the trie being lowse, ther foote slipped, and fell in the water, so that these that were present could not recover them, because of the violence of the speate water, (for att this time ther was great abundance of snow on the grounde). Also, the same day, the sea overflowed some of its bankes, so that it bracke downe some houses in Buckheaven, also some standarts of the timber of the salt pannels, both the Weyms and Kirkekaldie; also the waters marred diuers pairts of the high way betuixt Leuen and Kirkekaldie.

1659 John Nicholl (p.225-250) describes how at the start of this year, "...Their wes in this moneth of Januar 1659, greatt and admirable tem pestis of wind, almoist throgth all this moneth, bot speciallie upone the 22 and 23 dayis of the same; quhairin the storme so increst upone the said 23, being ane Sunday, that the pepill in the Gray Freir kirk, being at sermond, wer forcit, all of thame and thair minister Mr Robert Traill, to flie out of the church for feir of their lyves. This tempest of wind continued mony dayis thaireftir. At this tyme, also, (*August and September*), thair fell out feirfull deluges and inundatiounes in Scotland, quhilk with thair effectis, sallbe noted in the end of the yeir.

That no sooner wes the viij d the pynt begun to be exactit, quhilk wes upone the first of September 1659, to the great hurt of the subiectis, bot immediatlie thaireftir the Lord did manifest his anger in sending down ane unhard and unkoth storme of wind and weit, be the space of thrie dayis and thrie nyctes, viz the secund, thrid, fourt, and fyft dayis of September, quhairby not onlie sindry housis in and upone the Watter of Leith, with ellivin myles belonging to Edinburgh, and fyve belonging to Heriotes Hospitall, with thair dammes, water-gangis, tymber and stone workis, the haill quheillis of thair myles, tymber graith, and haill uther warkes wer destroyed and violentlie takin away be these great diludges of watteris; bot lykewyse the haill tounes about sufferit the lyke dampnage, sik as Leith and Leith Harborie, Mussilburgh, Fifecherraw, Hadingtoun, Dalkeith, Leswaid, to the great admiratioun of many, evin of such persones as ar of greatest aige. So that the distressir and povertie of this natioun did still increse.

Lamont" (pp.117-8) records that on "...June 8 being Wedensday, ther was a great tempest of wynde all that day. In some places it brake tries, and blew up others by the roots; also ane English vessell, of ane indifferent burden, being laden with great salt, meade up hir towes (weighed anchor) in Leith rode, and came downe and perished at the harbour of the Ellie, bot the men (which were bot few, the rest being ashoare) were safe. Ane other vessell, comeing south with victuall, was forced to cast some of hir loadnen in the sea, by reason of the vehemency of the tempest, etc. On July 31, the communion was given att Largo, by Mr Ja. Makgill,...Also that Sabath night, and on Moneday, ther was a terribell tempest of rayne and wynde, so that bot a few were abell to come to the Monedays exercise, because the waters were not rydabell. In Lowthian, divers persons had much of ther corne sanded, by breaking forth of the waters, especially these upon the water of Leith. The rains are again reported for August 1, "...being Moneday, and Sept. 5 being Moneday also, ther was great rains, which did great dammage in Lowthian to many poore peopell; bot

specially upon the water of Leith, and the water of Elke at Dalkeith, many mills were thrown downe and spoyled, and mutch corne sanded. Nicoll describes how "...the late summer was generally very bad: in August and September, thair fell out feirfull deluges and inundations in Scotland'. He also describes the damage done by the gales of September 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th. Crops and 16 mills on the Leith were destroyed. Lamont, too, notes the 'great dammage upon the water of Leith, and the water of Eske at Dalkeith' caused by these storms.

References

John Lamont Diary of John Lamont of Newton 1649-1671 *National Library of Scotland, Maitland Club*, 7, pp.45-214.

John Nicoll A Diary of Public Transactions and other occurrences, chiefly in Scotland, 1650-1667 *National Library of Scotland, Bannatyne Club*, pp. 74-453.

BOOK REVIEW

Stirling Bridge & Falkirk 1297-98: William Wallace's rebellion. Pete Armstrong, illustrated by Angus McBride. Osprey Publishing. 96pp. ISBN 1 84176 510 4. £12.99.

With a strikingly illustrated cover akin to the author's *Bannockburn 1314* which we reviewed in FNH vol 25, this is a very readable presentation of two outstanding events, the stunningly victorious battle of Stirling Bridge, and the outstandingly disastrous battle of Falkirk. Osprey, Armstrong and the illustrators have made two eye-catching books to draw attention to these important events in Scotland's turbulent frustrating history, and to tempt the reader further into some of the many other treatments of the Wallace rebellion, academic, literary, popular, in print from the 15th century Fordun and Blind Harry, and on to the approaching commemorations of the 700th anniversary of his violent death in 2005.