

Cattle in a landscape: two bovine public artworks in northeast Scotland by Dr Andrew Whitehouse (2013)

The 1992 film *Vacas (Cows)* by the Basque director Julio Medém narrates the history of a community in northern Spain from the late 19th century up until the Spanish Civil War. This history is bound up with the cattle that live alongside people, cattle that change as new breeds arrive and that suffer alongside the suffering of humans. Most distinctly though, Medém incorporates cows as modest witnesses to the ongoing unfolding of human affairs, quietly and inscrutably keeping watch and taking note of the follies and triumphs of the community. In the northeast of Scotland, two bovine public artworks also bear witness to stories from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Alford Bull celebrates the development of the Aberdeen Angus breed, whilst the Turra Coo commemorates a famous victory of the people of Turriff over government bureaucracy. Comparing these two artworks invites an exploration of the local narratives that make them and of bovine-human relations more generally, both past and present. As public artworks these cattle also exist within a wider agricultural landscape and, as well as being fashioned by artists,¹ they are also produced by Alese and Jeremy Eric, the two cattle from which the sculptures, in different ways, emerged.

Narratives of people and cattle

The Alford Bull is a bronze sculpture by David Annand, completed in 2001. It stands in a lay-by on the A944, greeting motorists as they arrive into the village of Alford. The bull stands on a low plinth with its head turned pointedly towards the road as if scrutinising travellers as they pass by. The origins of the sculpture lie in a meeting of the Alford Marketing Group in 1998, who decided that something needed to be created to celebrate the area's role in developing the Aberdeen Angus. The breed was developed in the mid-19th century by a local tenant farmer, William McCombie, a man featured on a plinth next to the Bull, as well as in a display at the Alford Museum honouring the sculpture and the breed. McCombie, who later became a notable politician, was encouraged by the burgeoning steamship-driven market in fattened cattle to develop the Aberdeen Angus by selecting the best animals from other local farms and those from pioneering Angus breeders. The tasty marbled meat of the breed has remained in heavy demand since. Annand's sculpture is modelled on Jeremy Eric, a prize bull, painstakingly moulded in clay and then cast at the Powderhall Bronze Foundry in Edinburgh. It was unveiled by Prince Charles with the Queen Mother, who was a keen breeder, in attendance.

The Turra Coo was also forged at Powderhall and was created by David Blyth, Charles Engebretson and Virginia Hutchison in 2010. The sculpture, publicly funded at the instigation of the Turriff Tourism Action Group, commemorates an event that took place in Turriff exactly a century ago. In 1913 the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd-George, introduced National Insurance for

¹ I would like to thank David Blyth and David Annand for taking the time to discuss their works with me. I would also like to thank Dr Anne Douglas for her role in setting up this project.

all workers. Farmers in Turriff were incensed by this move, complaining that they were charged too much for a service they were much less likely to use than industrial workers. The issue came to a head when local farmer Robert Paterson declined to approve the insurance cards of his workers. The Sherriff's Officer moved to confiscate property from Paterson but the only readily moveable item was the family's Ayrshire Shorthorn cow. The cow was eventually put up for auction but escaped before eventually being sold in Aberdeen. It was then bought back by farmers in Turriff and returned to Paterson. On its return it was paraded through the crowded streets, emblazoned with the slogan 'Free!! Divn't ye wish that ye were me.'

The story celebrated in the sculpture is bound up with the equally distinctive story of its creation. The sculpture is based on the body of an Ayrshire Shorthorn called Alese, who bore a strong resemblance to the original Turra Coo. Alese was an over-age cow who, as required by legislation, was about to go to slaughter when the artists bought her. After spending a final Christmas with her calf, Alese was humanely euthanized by a vet. The artists then transformed her into a taxidermied model from which a mould was made. By repurposing the life of Alese, the sculpture mingles the resistance to bureaucratic imposition in the story of the Turra Coo with contemporary narratives of biosecurity and the micro-regulation of the lives of domestic animals. The sculpture is at once of Paterson's iconic heroine of local independence and Alese, the cow who had grown too old for the demands of 21st century production.

Cattle in a landscape

The two sculptures provide some obvious points of contrast: beef/ dairy, bull/cow, breed/individual. But these contrasts can also serve to distil a broader picture of cattle and people in northeast Scotland, both in the past and present. These artworks reveal something of how people, animals, land, science and politics intermingle and how these interconnections can be both homely and unsettling. As the two cattle look out at us, we might find ourselves considering the world they witness.

The Alford Bull's location at the edge of the village creates a link between the people of the community and the green hills above, where cattle still graze. As the lay-by is on the left, it's easier to stop for a closer look if you're on your way into Alford. Getting a good idea of what an Aberdeen Angus is all about is perhaps considered helpful before you meet the rest of the locals. On my visit, a car load of travellers posed for playful photos with the Bull, having fun with a big beast that looks stern but doesn't lash out. The breadth of the Bull is its most striking physical quality, particularly the thickness of neck and head. Its height is less remarkable but is accentuated by the small plinth (not a feature that Annand chose to include). Though it only adds a few inches, this gives the sculpture a more imposing feel, rising above rather than alongside the viewer. It changes it from a bull by the road to a monument for a breed. Indeed the Alford Bull exudes a sense of *pedigree*, both from its impressive physique and the plinths that adorn the low wall around the lay-by. Not only do these extol the virtues of the breed, they also note the royal patronage and list the most notable families and organisations who funded the sculpture, a McCombie amongst them. The great English cattle breeder Robert Bakewell was perhaps the first to realise that pedigree in the form of interconnected names was a lucrative commodity. The Alford Bull also gains added value through the spelling out of its connections and pedigree.

The setting for the Turra Coo is altogether more urban, being right in the heart of Turriff, and the sculpture is also, in every sense, less *bullish*. The site has become known as 'Coo Corner', right along the small town's high street. Garlanded with floral wreaths and daubed with the 'Free!!' slogan, the Coo stands rather tentatively with a cautious look sideways. There is no plinth to elevate it up from the street – this is down on the ground and at the level of the people it represents. A few metal hoof-prints trail back from the sculpture and signposts to Lendrum, where Paterson farmed, Aberdeen and London draw out the Coo's geographical connections. Her sideways glance doesn't really face the observer from most directions, conveying a coyness reminiscent of the photographs of the original Turra Coo as it was paraded through the crowds. This 'coo of the people' – unveiled, I'd guess with enthusiasm, by Alec Salmond – is positioned at the heart of the human community rather than in between the people of the village and the cattle of the fields. On my visit, local people milled about past the Coo in brisk, weekday afternoon fashion and one imagines the odd bit of *horseplay* alongside her as the pubs turn out of an evening. The juxtaposition of the ordinary cow in an atypical setting brings out the exceptionalism of the story, its modest resistance to greater powers that originated far from home.

Up close, the realness of the Turra Coo is remarkable. The dense swirls of Alese's hair on her hide give a tactile impression of animality that makes the sculpture feel less like a monument and more like a real, individual cow. As Blyth told me, knowing Alese in life helped to bring her back in a new life in the sculpture. Both he and Annand were aided in their work by farmers, who offered their own expert eye over the works-in-progress. Whilst both pieces represent something more than an individual animal, the individuality of the animals on which they were modelled is very apparent. For Annand, the role of Jeremy Eric was crucial, to the extent that the sculpture is, for the artist, more about this individual bull with its own idiosyncrasies as the breed. The clay-moulded surface gives a quite different tactile sense to the Turra Coo but it's the bulk and weight that come to the fore. Annand told me that Jeremy Eric once butted him as he was working on the model, the force and weight in that thick neck and head rendered vividly tangible. The sculpture retains the potentiality of size, but not of action. It gets us closer to the physicality of a bull but no nearer the possible consequences.

The proximity to cattle that the sculptures facilitate a sense of is a reminder of how our lives, even in rural areas, are often at a remove from the animal realities of modern farming. The original Turra Coo was a humble family cow, the sort that many would once have interacted with daily. Specialisation in farming and the growth of consumer possibilities now means that the only cows many people witness are pictures on milk cartons or distant shapes in fields they drive past. These sculptures remind us of the real presence and liveliness of animals and their obscured centrality in our own lives. These iconic cattle are beasts that local communities rightly claim associations with, but both these sculptures are real enough to emphasise the cautious distance that has become a more commonplace reality. By creating public art with cattle, they remind us that messier, hairier, more volatile cattle are less tolerated in public places or, for most of us, in close physical, proximity to our own lives.

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