Oliver Castle, Upper Tweeddale
William Patterson, *Scottish Place-Name Society*

There are some certainties about Oliver Castle in Upper Tweeddale. It was the name of a barony already in 1253, when grants of lands in Tweeddale to David Graham were confirmed by Alexander III.[1] The first surviving record of the name as a place where people lived is from 1200 × 1209, when *Adam et Cosouold filii Muryn aput castrum Oliueri* ('Adam and Cososwald, sons of Muirenn, at Oliver's castle') were among the witnesses to boundaries of Stobo PEB in upper Tweeddale, an estate belonging to the bishop of Glasgow.[2]

Nineteenth-century antiquarians, followed by later local histories and family histories, have treated it as equally certain that Oliver Castle was a stronghold built in the 12th century by an Oliver Fraser whose family had been settled for some time in East Lothian and who must have been the ancestor of later Frasers who are securely on record in Tweeddale. The castle is generally assumed to have been at Nether Oliver, NT0995 2506, on the western flank of the Tweed valley opposite the confluence of the Talla Water. On the opposite, southern side of the Bield Burn, at NT097 249, are the remains of a laird's house with lintel dated 1734, close to a later house still in use and now called plainly Oliver House. These two locations are indicated on Blaeu's map of 1654 by *N[ether] Oliver Castel* and *O[ver] Oliffer Castell*, respectively north-east and south-west of a tributary stream, which must be the Bield Burn. Below Over Oliver, beside the main A701 road at NT09970 24787, the house known for centuries as The Bield has evolved from a 17th- and 18th-century inn that perhaps incorporates remains of a 17th-century tower. On the opposite bank of the Tweed, in a tongue of land between the converging Tweed and Talla Water, the parish church of Tweedsmuir, a 19th-century structure that replaced a mid 17th-century building,[3] stands on a mound that the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS, now subsumed in Historic Environment Scotland, HES) considered but rejected as a possible motte.[4]

None of the sites other than Nether Oliver thus gives any indication that it could have been the location for a 12th-century castle built by an incoming Anglo-Norman magnate. At that period it would typically have been of motte-and-bailey design, of which there are several examples in neighbouring Annandale but only one known in Peeblesshire, at Peebles itself. As such, or if a stone castle had been

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1 *RRS* iv 1, no. 19.

2 *Glasg. Reg.*, no. 104.

3 Built for the new parish of Tweedsmuir, created by division of the very large parish of Drumelzier.

4 CANMORE at <https://canmore.org.uk/site/49796/tweedsmuir-quarter-knowe>.

built directly on firm elevated ground, it would have been likely to leave visible traces till the present day. However, the archaeological information provided by Historic Environment Scotland[5] indicates that the much disturbed and stone-robbed remains present on the knoll are those of a substantial fort, of a 'period unassigned'. It reports also that:

> ... Elsewhere in the interior, and spreading over the defences on to the ground to the SW of the fort, there are numerous banks, stony foundations and excavated hollows all of which are clearly later in date than the fort. ... The site is traditionally supposed to have been occupied by the medieval castle of Oliver, which is mentioned in a document of c.1200. To judge from surface indications, however, none of the more recent remains seems likely to have formed part of a medieval castle, and without excavation, it is impossible to confirm the traditional identification of the site' (as reported by RCAHMS in 1967, following visits in 1960 and 1961).

CANMORE also reports that, after a further visit in 1974,

> The remains of this fort are as described. The date of the later buildings and enclosures can only be determined by excavation, but it seems unlikely that they are associated with a medieval castle.

Given this lack of a verified 12th-century castle at the customarily assumed site or in its vicinity, the tradition of 'Oliver Fraser's castle' as the fortified *caput* of a barony is very much put in question. As for our 12th-century 'Oliver Fraser', it turns out that he is equally elusive.

There undoubtedly were land-holding Frasers in East Lothian by the end of the 12th century. An Oliver son of Kilvert, who has been widely assumed to have been a Fraser, granted to Newbattle Abbey land at Hailes in the Tyne valley east of Haddington ELO; this charter, *Carta Olyueri [filii] kylward*, is dated to 1179 × 1189.[6] Not earlier than 1179, but possibly as late as the early 13th-century, Adam son of Udard confirmed to Newbattle Abbey land at Hailes next to the land of Bearford that Oliver had granted to them;[7] Bernard Fraser, Master of the Nuns of Haddington, was a witness and Adam refers to *Olyuerus* as his *auunculus* ('uncle'). The next charter in the register is Earl Patrick's confirmation of the ploughgate that *Olyuerus kyluerti filius* had granted and no. 76 is *Carta Ade filii Vdardi* in increment of the grant made by *Olyvuerus auunculus meus*. No. 77 is *Carta Ade Fraser*, confirming that Adam is indeed a Fraser and referring again to Oliver as his *auunculus*. No. 78, *Carta laurentii fraser*, dated c. 1190 × 1231, confirms the grants

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5 CANMORE at <https://canmore.org.uk/site/48510/oliver-castle>.

6 *Newb. Reg.*, no. 73.

7 *Newb. Reg.*, no. 74.

by *Olyverus auunculus patris mei* ('Oliver uncle of my father') and by *Adam pater meus* ('Adam my father').

However *Olyuerus* is never accorded a surname and there is never any indication that *auunculus* in this instance is a father's brother, making Oliver implicitly a Fraser, rather than a mother's brother – which is the original Latin meaning of the term, father's brother being *patruus*, although both meanings converged in French *oncle*. Although it is not impossible that *castrum Oliueri* as recorded in 1200 × 1219 was named for a non-Fraser Oliver whose existence has not survived in written record, it may be noted that Oliver at the period in question was still a very rare name in Scotland,[8] just beginning its currency due to the popularity of a group of *chansons de geste*, especially the 'Song of Roland', in which *Olivier* was at first Roland's adversary and then his wise and faithful ally. On the contrary the personal names associated with that place in the first reference to it typify the ethnic and linguistic mix in the recent past of the district, contriving to show four languages in three names: biblical Hebrew (Adam), Cumbric and Old English (Cososwald) and presumably Gaelic (Muirenn). A similar pot-pourri appears in other names of local witnesses: Paitin and Gilla Muire sons of Kercau, and Gilla Crist son of Uhting. The confirmation of 1253 of lands held by David Graham,[9] which names Oliver Castle as a barony, mentions *Minnauer* (apparently adjacent Menzion) as having belonged to Henry of Ashkirk near Selkirk.

If, as the visible archaeological remains suggest, there was no 12th-century castle at the reputed site, it is highly implausible that a novel personal name of French origin would have been attached to prehistoric or early medieval remains by the early 13th century. Because of the importance of Olivier in the romances, a possibility to be considered is a place-name of literary motivation, on the lines of the several instances of *castellum puellarum* 'maidens' castle'. There are 'Oliver'-named places in Wiltshire, England, and in County Limerick, Ireland. However, the Irish instance is a country seat founded in the 17th century by a Captain Robert Oliver, who coincidentally was an officer in Oliver Cromwell's army.[10] Oliver's Castle in Wiltshire, also known as Oliver's Camp, is a 'slight univallate' hill fort on a spectacular escarpment which figured in the Battle of Roundway Down in 1643, when fleeing parliamentary cavalry plunged disastrously over the scarp. It may actually have been used as a camp by soldiers in the Civil War.[11] Given the close

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8 Dr Matthew Hammond, pers. comm., who provided much useful information on the documentation of Frasers in Tweeddale.

9 *RRS* iv, no. 19.

10 NUI Galway Landed Estates Database, at <http://landedestates.nuigalway.ie/LandedEstates/jsp/estate-show.jsp?id=2421>; 'Abandoned Ireland' website, at <http://www.abandonedireland.com/Castle_Oliver.html>.

11 Report on the area of the battle for English Heritage: <https://content.historicengland.

association with Oliver Cromwell's army, although he was not personally present, it would be a most remarkable coincidence if the hill fort had already been named for the literary Oliver or any other Oliver.[12]

An at least indirect interest in upper Tweeddale by a Fraser is suggested by the presence of *Gilleb*[*ertus*] *Freser* as a witness to a grant of land to the chapel of *Broctun* (Broughton PEB) as dependent on the parish church of Stobo, in the presence of Bishop Jocelin of Glasgow and other witnesses whose places of residence indicate that they were fairly local to that part of the bishopric.[13] This is dated 1175 × 1180. However, his transactions on surviving record[14] concern land in Roxburgh and his other roles as witness concern land in Berwickshire and East Lothian, and there is nothing to indicate any connection to an ancestor or contemporary called 'Oliver' in upper Tweeddale. An early 13th-century Bernard Fraser is a prolific grantor and more prolific witness in surviving documents, but always within East Lothian or Berwickshire with a possible outlier in Roxburghshire.[15]

With a firm date of 28 August 1241 King Alexander II commanded a group of magnates including Gilbert Fraser, sheriff of Traquair, to inquire into an extent of land at Leithen Hopes near Innerleithen.[16] On 18 November 1259 another inquest was held, into the lands of Kailzie near Peebles. This confirmed that the findings of a previous inquest held by a Gilbert Fraser, now titled sheriff of Peebles, were sound.[17] By 21 July 1256 a Simon Fraser had succeeded Gilbert as sheriff of Traquair (*Tracquare*).[18] These are firm proofs of a Fraser presence in Tweeddale by the mid 13th century, but it may be noted that the places with enough prestige to name a sheriffdom were Traquair and Peebles, not the Oliver['s] Castle where by the antiquarian tradition the head of the Frasers in Tweeddale should have bequeathed a relatively modern castle of at least motte-and-bailey type. Although Simon Fraser son of Simon Fraser held land at South Kingledoors (on the west side of the Tweed north of Oliver Castle) around 1300,[19] this seems to have been a Fraser acquisition since 1214 × 1225, when Adam of Hastings granted to Arbroath

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org.uk/content/docs/battlefields/roundway.pdf>, especially fifth page.

12 For a more personal view on the place and its name by archaeologist Prof. Howard Williams: <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2016/04/03/olivers-camp-olivers-castle/>.

13 *Glasgow Reg.*, no. 48.

14 *PoMS* 2012 at <http://db.poms.ac.uk/record/person/5885/#>.

15 *PoMS* 2012 at <http://db.poms.ac.uk/record/person/11520/#>.

16 *RRS* iii, no. 279.

17 *PoMS* 2012 at <http://db.poms.ac.uk/record/source/4323/>; *APS i*, 98–99.

18 *Midl Chrs., Soltre* no. 41.

19 *Melr. Lib.*, no. 355; dated to 1291 × 1306.

Abbey part of his lands at Kingledoors.[20] West of Drumelzier, in 1270 × 1272 John Fraser of Glenholm, a clerk in the diocese of Glasgow, granted to Scone Abbey his and his predecessors' right to the patronage of the chapel of St Cuthbert at Glenholm PEB.[21] Not long after this, Tweeddale Frasers, presumably heirs to the sheriffs of Traquair or Peebles, were briefly prominent in the turbulent history of Scotland in the decades around 1300 before lack of male heirs resulted in the passing of most of the Fraser lands in Tweeddale to the control of other families linked by marriage to Fraser daughters.

In summary, therefore, without modern excavation it is not certain that there can have been no 12th- or very early 13th-century castle near Tweedsmuir village, but for the present it seems highly unlikely. Equally, given the patchiness of early records it cannot be certain that there was by the very early 13th century no magnate with the French name Oliver/*Olivier* in upper Tweeddale, after whom Oliver Castle could be named. However, evidence for this is so tenuous, if not non-existent, that it can no longer be taken as a presumption.

In this light it may be worthwhile seeking alternative possibilities for the place-name. The *castrum* of the Latin form of the name must have represented at the beginning of the 13th century either a current perception of what was visible at, most likely, Nether Oliver, or a tradition of what visible lumps and bumps had formerly been. *Castrum*, like castle, implies a fortified place. A somewhat analogous case in the 'Old North' for a 'castle' name for a place with formerly visible ground disturbance and an antiquarian belief in a medieval stronghold, but no confirmation by archaeology of occupation other than Romano-British,[22] is to be found at Castle Hewin,[23] on a ridge adjoining a significant route, in Cumberland (NY485 462). According to a late 18th-century writer local tradition made it a stronghold of 'King Ewaine',[24] a name which has invited association with historic and 'Arthurian' legendary figures named with various spellings such as *Owain*, *Ywain*, *Yvain*, or *Ewain*.

Given the dates of the first records, it may be an open question whether this naming was (1) the work of Cumbric-speakers and based on their own traditions, (2) the result of association with a visibly ancient site made arbitrarily by an elite

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20 *Arbr. Liber* i, no. 122.

21 *PoMS* 2012 at <http://db.poms.ac.uk/record/person/3487/#>; *Scone Lib.*, nos. 119 and 119A.

22 This need not preclude post-Roman occupation: O'Sullivan 1985, 21.

23 *Castelewyn*(*e*) 1272, 1285, 1338, 1357 *The Place-Names of Cumberland* Vol. 1, 202.

24 'Gatehouse' gazetteer for fortifications in England: <http://www.gatehouse-gazetteer.info/English%20sites/377.html>; Historical Gazetteer of England's Place-Names at <http://placenames.org.uk/browse/mads/epns-deep-20-c-mappedname-001482>.

familiar with the French romances, or (3) made in awareness of both the courtly romances and local tales of the remote past, in which interest might have been raised by the pseudo-historic works of Geoffrey of Monmouth. In the first of these scenarios the 'castle' in all recorded occurrences of the name would have replaced a Cumbric term for a fortified place, maintaining the order of generic and specific. It would be difficult to place credence in the second of these scenarios.

In the case of the Tweeddale name, *castrum* and its translation as *castel*/ castle may have replaced an earlier vernacular term: either Old English *ceaster*, the origin of the 'chester' used in the naming of a great number of prehistoric to early medieval earthworks in the landscape of southern Scotland; or more likely without that intermediary a Cumbric **caer*, **dinas* or **din*. The *Oliueri* (genitive) of the earliest record points to understanding at the time that the place was associated with a person, rather than named for a physical feature. However, whereas at Castle Hewin a cross-fertilisation of French romance and local tradition might have served to motivate naming after *Owain*/*Yvain*, such considerations could not have led to naming a place in Tweeddale after the literary paladin Oliver. If there is nothing convincing to place an actual or even a literary Oliver at *castrum Oliueri*, it is worth bearing in mind that by the time of the document the personal name from the *Chanson de Roland* could have been familiar enough for a very similar older name to be assimilated to it by users of Old French, without consciously alluding to the doomed hero of Roncesvalles. It is notable that witnesses to a Holyrood Abbey charter of the early to mid 13th century, 'poss. × ca. 1211', included both a Roland, knight, and an Oliver, seneschal.[25]

One Old English personal name stands out as similar enough to Oliver to be perhaps assimilated to it: *Ælfhere*; but there is reason to look somewhat further into the past for a name and a historic context that could have been associated in local tradition with the defensive works and would fit better with a Cumbric term for such a place.

In the scant and largely historically dubious Welsh records of the 'Men of the North' much attention has been given to a battle dated to 572 or thereabout and located just over the Border in Arthuret parish, now subsumed in the City of Carlisle District. For some the greatest interest is that this battle was stated to have made Merlin mad. For the purposes of this article the greatest interest is in the names of the enemies of the *Guendoleu* (modern spelling Gwenddolau) who was slain in the battle and who is almost certainly the eponym of Carwinley (*Karwindelhov* 1202), a minor place-name in Arthuret parish near the confluence of the River Esk and the Liddel Water.

The A, B and C MSS of the Welsh Latin Chronicles (*Annales Cambriae*) all mention the battle, B giving most detail; A and B follow similar courses and C is

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25 *PoMS* 2012 at <http://db.poms.ac.uk/record/source/5339/>; *Holy. Lib.*, App. II, no. 6.

substantially different in its content. Although it might be suspected that greater detail would be due to later and dubious insertions, opinion may actually favour B as being less prone to demonstrable error and corruption than A.[26] The A version merely states *Bellum armterid* (often modernised as Arfderydd, for the name of the battle, surviving as the parish name Arthuret). Version B gives *Bellum erderit inter filios elifer et Guendoleu filium keidiau in quo bello Guendoleu cecidit merlinus insanus effectus est* 'Battle of Arthuret between the sons of Elifer and Gwenddolau son of Ceidiaw, in which Gwenddolau fell [and] Merlin was made mad'. Version C simply notes *Bellum arderit*. Six years later A records *Guurci et peretur moritur* (with incorrect singular for plural verb), while B adds significant detail (with correct Latin plural): *Gurgi et peretur filii elifer moriuntur* 'Gwrgi and Peredur, sons of *Elifer*, die'.

These characters, and the battle, must have figured heavily in the history and enduring legend of the Men of the North, as there are further references in Welsh sources. The Harleian Genealogies, found in a manuscript with Version A of *Annales Cambriae*, give a brief genealogy for *Gurci ha Peretur mepion eleuther cascord maur* ... with *Coylhen* as first named ancestor. The epithet for *Eleuther / Elifer*, 'of the great retinue', suggests that he was renowned for the size and power of his warband. Another brief genealogy also naming *Coel* as the founder of the dynasty but with different names in the middle is found in *Bonhed Gwyr y Gogled* (Bonedd Gwŷr y Gogledd, 'Descent of the Men of the North'): *Gurgi ha Pheretur meibon Eliffer Gosgorduaur mab Arthwys mab Keneu mab Coel*, 'Gwrgi and Peredur, sons of *Eliffer* of the great retinue ...'. In an imaginary 'Conversation of Myrddin and Taliesin', *Ymddiddan Myrddin a Thaliesin*, in the Black Book of Carmarthen, is a prophecy of the deaths of seven sons of *Eliffer* in the Wood of Caledon; this poem probably took its form in the late 11th century.[27] Also in manuscripts from the high Middle Ages and certainly not reliable history, but referring to events that may have been believed to have actually happened long before, are references in Welsh Triads (*Trioedd Ynys Prydein*) to Arfderydd and its antagonists.

One of the Three Prostrate (or humiliated) Chieftains (Triad 8)[28] is *Gwgawn Gwron mab Peredur mab Elifer Gosgor(d)uawr*, 'Gwgon Gwron son of Peredur son of *Elifer* of the great retinue'. Rachel Bromwich's explanation for this prostration is that these chieftains failed in asserting their territorial rights, and that in Gwgon Gwron's case this misfortune may have been due to pressure from the advancing English. In Triad 29, Three Faithful (loyal) Warbands, the warband of *Gwendolew ap Keidiaw yn Arderyd* continued the battle for a fortnight and a month after their

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26 Gough-Cooper 2012 and 2016.

27 Koch 2006, 1322.

28 Bromwich 2006, 15–16, 62–69.

lord was slain; and in Triad 30, Three Faithless (disloyal) Warbands, there is an explanation for the deaths of Gwrgi and Peredur some years later: [*t*]*eulu Gwrgi a Pheredur, a adawssant eu harglwyd yg Caer Greu, ac oet ymlad udunt drannoeth ac Eda Glinvawr. Ac yna y llas ell deu.* ('Warband of Gwrgi and Peredur, who abandoned their lord at Caer Greu, when they had an appointment to fight the next day with Eda Great-Knee. And there both were slain.')[29]

Given the small scale of the native polities in late 6th-century Britain, the perceived importance for later Welsh writers of the slaughter at Arfderydd may have been as the start of a chain of disastrous events affecting a much wider area in the following generations. If Gwenddolau's realm was around the head of the Solway Firth, his rivals for territory and overlordship, other than the English-speaking Bernicians established to his east, would have been to his south, north and north-west. It is not inconceivable that political boundaries in the region still reflected those of the *Carvetii* ('deer folk' who had a civitas in the Cumberland of the late Roman Empire), *Anauionenses* (named from the River Annan or its goddess) and *Selgovae* ('hunters'; probably in the central Borders, but not the eponym of Selkirk).

In this wider region the ridge (Pont's *Annand head*)[30] which marks the watershed between Annan and Tweed, with the Clyde rising close to the west, is one of the most eligible physical features to mark an enduring boundary. In his study of 'The Men of the North' Tim Clarkson makes the pertinent observation, in searching for a home for the geographically obscure but important native kingdom of Rheged: 'Another void occupies the uplands where both Tweed and Clyde begin their journeys, a region supporting an elite presence attested by inscribed stones but to which no named kingdom can be assigned with confidence'[31]. However, rather than placing Urien of Rheged here it is perhaps not outrageous to envisage that this was the land of a successful mid-6th century native ruler called *Elifer*, who may have been dead or retired from military action when his sons defeated the rival Gwenddolau with great slaughter of his men at Arfderydd – only to lose their own lives a few years later, with *Elifer*'s grandson Gwgon Gwron ceding the territory or at least part of it to aggressively expanding Bernicians in the following generation around or after 600.

If today's Carwinley has carried for over fourteen centuries a memory of the loser of one of the most notable battles between Britons in the 6th century, it would not be altogether surprising if the illustrious father of the victorious brothers were

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29 This cannot be Ida, the first named king of English Bernicia, who was already dead before the battle at Arfderydd, but could be a chronologically muddled allusion, or a kinsman of the same name.

30 Pont MS map 34.

31 Clarkson 2010, 47.

remembered in the name of a fortified place associated with him, a **Caer Elifer*. The use of a generic + personal name formula for a **caer*, **din* or **dinas* by association with the once renowned Elifer would be of the same pattern, clearly, as Carwinley; but also other certain or probable instances such as Carruthers in Middlebie parish DMF (*Caer Ruther* 1350).[32] In the same county adjoining Peeblesshire the use of 'castle' to refer to an undoubted ancient fort would have a parallel in Woody Castle close to the north-west of Lochmaben.[33] The name of Carstairs LAN in upper Clydesdale probably refers to the Roman fort at Castledykes, and has an unusual history in written record. Although its modern form which suggests derivation from **caer* has prevailed since the late 16th century[34], its earliest written forms have *Castel-*.[35] Since it would be difficult to derive *Car-* from *Castel-* by plausible sound changes, a possible explanation is that the Cumbric name with **Caer-* survived for centuries in parallel with the 'learned' form, in local usage.

In the light of this discussion of the background to 'Oliver's Castle', *Castrum Oliueri*, a previous incarnation as a **caer* (or less likely a **din* or **dinas*) *Elifer* is suggested as a more plausible, though necessarily tentative and unprovable, explanation than is provided by the antiquarian tradition of castle-building by an 'Oliver Fraser'.

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32 Watson *CPNS*, 368. There is a deserted village at NY250 807 (CANMORE <https://canmore.org.uk/site/67196/carruthers-general>), with small earthwork 'Settlements' in the vicinity.

33 CANMORE: <https://canmore.org.uk/site/66277/woodycastle>.

34 *Carstaris* 1579 *RMS* iv, no. 2881; *Kaerstarys* 1590s Pont MS map 34; *Carstairs* 1755 Roy Military Survey; *Carstairs* 1816 William Forrest 'The county of Lanark from actual survey'.

35 *Casteltarres* 1153 × 1165 *Glas. Reg.* no. 26; *Casteltarras* 1175 *Glas. Reg.* no. 32; *Casteltares'* c. 1223 × 1225 *Paisley Reg.*, 212; *Casteltarris* 1245 *Kelso Lib.* i, no. 281.

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Mrs. Bartlett called other names. My name was not there. Then I heard it. The last group: "Mauro, Juliette, Richard, Karina." How could I be in that group — Mauro couldn't speak English properly, Juliette always wore long skirts and never jeans, and Richard wore strange clothes. Oh, how I wanted to be with my friends! I walked up to Mrs. Bartlett. She looked at me and knew what I was there for. "I know what you want, Karina," she said, "but your group needs you. I want you to help them to get good marks on this task.