I have several times in recent years been asked about the 'Battle of Airthrey'. This was the supposedly decisive battle, taking place around 840 AD, at which the Picts were finally and decisively defeated by a Scots army led by Kenneth McAlpine, leading to the emergence of the new nation of Scotland with Kenneth as the first king. I have carefully explained to the enquirers that I am not a specialists in this early period of Scots history but that even to a non-specialist, it is clear that the battle is mythical. The accounts are based on no reliable historical evidence whatsoever and no serious, modern historian even bothers to mention the battle as a myth to be dismissed.

Nonetheless, some of the enquirers (one of whom claims to have found the battle site) are still convinced that the battle did occur and one has even claimed me as supporting this case. Indeed, the myth is widely believed, at least locally and is mentioned on a number of websites (eg http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Airthrey\_Castle). This short note attempts to dismiss the stories - and should, at least, make my own position clear.

It is almost impossible to trace the origins of myths such as that of the Battle of Airthrey. A good place to start is with Charles Roger, in his *A Week at Bridge of Allan* where, after describing the two standing stones, on the Airthrey estate, close to Bridge of Allan and in the parish of Logie, Roger says that:

no historical account exists directly detailing the circumstances of their erection. It is believed, however, that they had been reared to commemorate the total defeat of the Picts by the Scots under Kenneth Macalpine, in the year 839, and which led to the destruction of the Pictish kingdom. It is beyond doubt that the battle which finally overthrew the Picts, was fought in this vicinity; and it seems probable that the erect stones of Airthrey indicate its scene. According to Hector Boyce, the battle commenced by the Pictish army, which held possession of the town and castle of Stirling, suddenly attacking the Scots in their encampment, who being however prepared for the encounter, completely routed their opponents..

Roger goes on to relate the story to the nearby settlement of Cambuskenneth which he imagines to have been named in honour of the famous king (Roger, 1851, 19). This was very satisfactory of the nascent local tourist industry - which Roger's book was intended to promote. But, anyone reading even this text with a less than credulous eye, will see that some big leaps are being made, from stone to king and to Scottish victory!

Let us now check out what Hector Boyce (or Boece) (1465-1536) has to say. The relevant passage comes in Book X of his *History of Scotland,* as published in the late sixteenth century. He gives circumstantial accounts of several battles around this period. One, which he does not name nor assign a specific location was a decisive Scots victory and:

In their flight the Picts headed for the river Forth (this was in their rear, at no great distance from the battlefield). When they arrived there, the current prevented their escape, and those who did not hurl themselves into the water were put to the sword by their pursuing enemy.

Boece gives no sources for this story. He was writing around 700 years after the events, which he dates to around 839 AD. (Book X, p. 41, http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/boece/10eng.html).

Another sixteenth century historian, George Buchanan, repeats much the same story and is equally vague about sources and locations (James Aikman, 1827. *The History of Scotland Translated from the Latin of George Buchanan,* Volume 1, 266-271). Neither Boece nor Buchanan make the battle near the Forth as the final or decisive battle though both assign the final victory in the wars to the Scots.

The notion that there was a decisive battle, in which MacAlpine founded the nation and established a new and legitimate line of Scots kings, leading down to 'modern' times, had been around for some time before the sixteenth century. For example, the fifteenth century Andrew of Wyntoun's *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland,* says;

Quhen Alpyne this kyng was dede, He left a sowne wes cal'd Kyned,  
Dowchty man he wes and stout, All the Peychtis he put out.  
Gret bataylis than dyd he, To pwt in freedom his cuntre! (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth\_MacAlpin)

Modern historians are rightly sceptical of such tales - and would note the gradual accretion of detail in the later accounts, each fuller than the one before!.

The actual circumstance of the succession of Kenneth to the throne are as obscure as his origins. Doubtless, like other kings of the period, he was a warrior. But there is no contemporary (or even near-contemporary) evidence for him winning a great and decisive battle against the Picts, at Airthrey or any other identifiable place. There were certainly other factors in the eventual Scots dominance, including issues such as inheritance and a preceding weakness at the heart of the Pictish kingdom, exacerbated by Viking incursions. (Duncan A.A.M, 1996. *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom,* Mercat Press, Edinburgh, 56-9).

Clancy and Crawford also emphasise the uncertainties and confusions - and give no hint of a decisive battle by which the Scots overwhelmed the Picts. But they do state:

What is clear from recent work is the later Scottish massaging of the record to enhance the significance of [Kenneth MacAlpine] as the founder of a new dynastic succession, and to emphasise the righteousness of the Scottish cause (T..O.Clancy and B.E.Crawford, 'The Formation of the Scottish Kingdom, in Houston, R.A. & Knox, W.W.J (eds) *The New Penguin History of Scotland, From the Earliest Times to the Present Day,* Penguin, London, p. 61).

To summarise.

There is no substantial evidence that there was a decisive battle between Picts and Scots which lead to the formation of 'Scotland' at this period.

Even if there was such a battle there is no historical or other evidence to link it to Airthrey.

The eventual dominance of the Scots can be explained in other ways.

The myth arose because the thirteenth century Scots found it useful as underpinning their claims of antiquity and righteousness. It was equally useful to fifteenth and sixteenth century propagandists. Since at least the 1850s, it has been used to sustain contemporary tourist interest.

The only authentic record of a 'Battle of Airthrey' relates to a curling match, held on Airthrey Loch in 1838 = curiously, almost exactly 1000 years after the mythic original (http://www.electricscotland.com/history/curling/chapter5.htm)