

SKELBO AND THE SUTHERLANDS OF DUFFUS

BY

KATHLEEN LYON

## SKELBO

On a height above the road that skirts the shores of Loch Fleet, in Sutherland, stands Skelbo Castle; a natural fortress from its situation guarding the approaches to the Little Ferry and once second in importance only to Dunrobin, the stronghold of the Earls of Sutherland.

Before 1816, when the long embankment of the Mound was built to carry Telford's new road across the marshy head of the loch, the Little Ferry was the principal route for all traffic north and south along the coast. Once the ferryman's boat must have been in constant demand, now the ferry is a solitary place, a few whitewashed houses reflected in the narrow strip of water at the entrance to the loch, and a wide view of the hills beyond.

Those who climb the road that leads to the castle, will find the broken walls of a strong keep, part of the curtain wall, a courtyard blocked with rubble from fallen buildings and behind this an old mansion house, with crow-stepped gables, its windows gaping and the interior gutted. In Sutherland, the homes of the 18th century lairds and tacksmen have been so completely rebuilt that they have kept only the old names; this house is the only one left to give any idea how primitive was the accommodation required by a family once owning vast estates in the county.

Round this old castle cling some of the most dramatic stories in the history of Sutherland, from the days when the Norsemen landed at the Little Ferry, and were brought to battle by Sir Richard de Moravia, who dwelt at Skelbo, right up to the middle of the 18th century, when the old mansion-house was the home of Eric Sutherland of Duffus, the impoverished son of the third Lord Duffus. His Jacobite sympathies had led him to join the Rising of 1715, and he lost both title and estates in the subsequent reprisals.

The castle dates back to the early part of the thirteenth century, when Hugo Freskyn, Thane of Sutherland, granted his lands of Skelbo to Gilbert de Moravia, afterwards Bishop of Caithness. Gilbert received these lands, not as a representative of the Church, but as a private individual, with power to bestow them on his heirs, and when he became Bishop, he made them over to his brother, Sir Richard.\*

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\* It was at Skelbo in 1290 that the Scottish Commissioners were staying overnight, on their way north to meet the Maid of Norway, when news came of her death. They stayed two nights at Skelbo, in consultation with the English Commissioners, and then rode on to Wick, presumably to obtain proof of her death on board ship near Orkney.

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The Moravia family possessed Skelbo for upwards of two hundred years, when it passed to the Kynnards, through the marriage of Thomas Kynnard to Egida, daughter and heiress of Walter Murray of Skelbo and Culbin. In 1529, it was sold by John Kynnard for 2,300 merks to William Sutherland of Duffus, kinsman to the Earl of Sutherland, who with this acquisition, rounded off his estates, which included some of the fairest parts of Sutherland. The Duffus family had need of this strong fortress in their frequent quarrels with their neighbours. Many a warlike expedition must have clattered down the road leading to the

shore; many a prisoner and spoil of gear and cattle have been driven within the now crumbling walls that are all that is left of the 'Pyle' of Skelbo.

Hardly had William Sutherland completed his purchase, when the whole county was thrown into an uproar by his murder at Thurso by the Clan Gunn. Andrew Stuart, Bishop of Caithness, seems to have had a hand in this crime, and the Earl of Sutherland took the Bishop's part in the ensuing troubles when William Sutherland's heir, disdaining all offers of compensation, tried to avenge his father's death. High-handed methods, however, only landed him in an Edinburgh jail, where he was forced to come to terms with the Bishop, in order to regain his liberty.

The war was carried on by his son, who allied himself with the Earl of Caithness, the bitterest enemy of the Earl of Sutherland, and this in spite of the fact that the Duffus were bound to give service to the Earl for Skelbo. It was an alliance that brought them neither good fame nor profit, and was to keep the country in a turmoil for two generations.

It culminated in the attack on Dornoch, made in 1570, by Alexander Sutherland of Duffus and his brother, aided by the Master of Caithness and Y (Hugh or Aodh) Mackay and supported by the riff-raff of the two counties. Dornoch was burnt and plundered, the supporters of the Earl of Sutherland retiring to the tower of the cathedral, where they held out for a week. At length a truce was arranged and hostages given, but the Duffus completed their crimes by beheading the hostages "against all humanitie and the law of nations". Sir Robert Gordon, the historian, relates with evident relish that immediately after this crime, the Laird of Duffus "seikened and never rose again out of his bed, through the sting of conscience which he conceived and through the strange visions which appeared unto him for being accessorie and participant of the shedding of their blood."

A new generation grew up, and henceforth the Sutherlands of Duffus lived on more amicable terms with their feudal superior, though not neglecting any offence offered by less powerful neighbours.

In the Civil Wars they at first adhered to the Covenant, but in 1650, Sir Alexander Sutherland crossed over to Holland and joined King Charles II, who raised him to the peerage as Lord Duffus. The title, however, did not advance the fortunes of the family: like many others loyalty to the Stuarts was to cost them dear. Lord Duffus held Perth for King Charles, and for this he was fined £1500 by Cromwell as an 'Act of Grace' when he took the city. This was an immense sum in those days, and if paid in full, no doubt involved the estates in difficulties, which increased when his son James succeeded. The second Lord Duffus was extravagant, and in a quarrel with one of his creditors ran him through the body. For this he had to fly the country, though he afterwards obtained a pardon and returned.

It is from about this time that the old mansion house at Skelbo was supposed to date.\* It is a stark enough building when one considers the fine houses that were going up further south,

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\* Modern experts suggest around 1590 for its construction.

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houses that were to form the character of Scottish architecture for the next hundred years. The ground floor of this old house consists of two vaulted rooms, in one of which there is a large fireplace, now blocked by a disused forge. The vaulting is similar to that in Ardvreck Castle, Assynt, and dates from the same period. The rooms above were reached by an outside stair. A plan of a later date shows only three rooms on the first floor and three attics above; but now the partitioning walls have gone and the sun pours in through gaping windows. Even for those days it can never have been a luxurious home, but it must at least have been a great improvement on the discomforts of a mediaeval keep.

Kenneth Sutherland, the third Lord Duffus served as an Officer in the Navy. He joined the Rising of 1715 and for this he was imprisoned in the Tower, his title was attainted and the estates sequestrated. The estates however, were so heavily in debt that they were claimed by the creditors, and by the Earl of Sutherland, who claimed possession under the Act by which 'forfeited lands, holden of any Subject Superior, were granted to the Superior remaining loyal'. For the next forty years, lawsuits between the various claimants flew about like leaves in autumn, and meanwhile the estates were administered by a Factor appointed by the Government. After his release from the Tower, Kenneth Sutherland went abroad; he became a Flag Officer in the Russian Navy, and died in 1734.

His son Eric succeeded to a barren inheritance. His claim to have the title restored was refused by the Government, but he was allowed to return to Skelbo, which he held as a Tack (tenancy on a long lease). He and his wife, Elizabeth Dunbar of Hempriggs, brought up their five children in the old mansion-house. The title was accorded them by all their neighbours, by whom they were much liked, and who were compassionate for the misfortunes that had overwhelmed the family. It is chiefly their memory that seems to haunt the old place. The silent house was once busy with their comings and goings, and the ferryman, who carried all the Skelbo folk across the Little Ferry for the payment of a boll of meal a year, must have been hard put to it to make a profit on his labours.

But for Lord Duffus himself, care and anxiety can never have been far away. It may be supposed that he still had hopes of recovering his title and estates; for in the '45, when the Jacobites entered Sutherland, fearful that he might be suspected of his father's Stuart sympathies, he left Skelbo, and retired to Ackergil in Caithness;\* from there he wrote letters

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\* Skelbo, however, played its part in the '45 Rising: a Jacobite garrison held the castle for a while, and a ship load of arms and ammunition came into Loch Fleet, and was unloaded into Skelbo. But the garrison later moved to Dunrobin, and when a force set off for Culloden in 1746, it was intercepted at Culmaily by government militia from Rogart and put to flight.

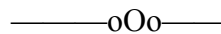
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testifying his loyalty to King George. But whatever hopes he may have had, he was destined to see them vanish for ever, and in 1760, he abandoned all his rights to the Earl of Sutherland for £1000. At his death in 1768, his whole estate was returned at less than £300.

The next occupant of the old house was William Sutherland of Sciberscross, Sheriff Depute for Sutherland and Caithness, he who was said to have been the handsomest and most accomplished man in the North. It seems the house was much in need of repair and for the Sheriff it had to be re-roofed and slated, the ceilings plastered and new windows put into the garrets. No wonder Lord Duffus had apologised for "the badness of this house" in a letter,

written in 1759, to the Earl bidding him to dinner "with a friend to two more". But Sciberscross made few complaints, he was more agitated about the state of the jail in Dornoch, which prisoners could break out of as they pleased. But he too was a hospitable man, and all those strange characters who made up the society of eighteenth century Sutherland, must have climbed the grass-grown road to visit the Sheriff, who, whether he was writing his letters 'with a glass of good claret warming at the fire', setting out for Caithness in the dead of winter, or watching for his boat sailing up the coast with all the new furniture he had ordered from the South, seems always to have been an amiable soul.

With his death, in 1787, the history of Skelbo as a home closes. Most likely the castle was used as a quarry for the new farm buildings erected in 1811, for Pennant describes Skelbo in 1770 as a 'great pile of buildings' and it is now a mere shell. The old house stands forlorn and empty. Rain and snow fall through the roof onto bare rafters below. In the centre of the enclosure lies an immense boulder, as if concealing some long-forgotten mystery. But anyone who likes to let his imagination summon up the past can look towards the narrow waters of the Little Ferry and see the ships of the Norse invader as they race towards the shore; or hear as an echo borne on the wind the shouts of clansmen gathering for a raid, or mingling with the sound of the shepherd whistling to his dogs in the fields below.



#### APPENDIX AND HISTORICAL NOTES

BY

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Dr Douglas Simpson, in an article in *Scottish Notes and Queries*, 1924 quoted by Dr Bentinck in his book "Dornoch Cathedral and Parish" 1926, page 423 ff, gives us a technical description of Skelbo Castle.

He calls it "a fine example of an early Norman fortress of the mount-and-bailey type", and the manor house as "a dignified example of the latest development of Scottish baronial architecture, when the castellated features, such as corbelled turrets, were being dropped".

On the age of the castle, he says: "The original masonry of the castle shows a very marked character and bears evidence of considerable antiquity. It is strongly built of horizontal slabs low in the course, with wide joints infilled by rough mortar in which shells have been freely used. Occasionally it is varied by large boulders.

"As to the date of this original stonework, it is hard to form an opinion, owing to the absence of mouldings or other distinctive detail.

"The type of castle, with its keep-tower and barmkin wall, is one that came into use during the 14th century, after the War of Independence. The simplicity of the design, the scarcity of mural chambers, and the character of the masonry might well betoken this century. On the other hand, the walls are thinner than usual in castles of that date; but this might be accounted for by the uncommon strength and inaccessibility of the site, the walls being everywhere built along steep banks that rendered mining or battering operations impossible.

"The lack of vaulting in the keep is paralleled by other 14th century castles in the north, such as Forse, Braal and Oldwick.

"From the absence of bonding between the curtain walls and the keep, and the fact that the lean-to structure against the west wall, though abutting on the keep, is built with a thick gable of its own, it may be conjectured that the curtain walls were the first to be built, while the mount still retained its timber superstructure, and that the latter was replaced by the stone tower. This was quite a usual mode of procedure.

"A large section of the north curtain has been rebuilt in masonry of a quite different aspect, exhibiting the rubble-work with frequent small pinnings, usual in 16th-17th century work in the north. The same kind of stone-work appears in the house on the west side."

Dr Simpson dates the manor house, a plain oblong building of two storeys standing at the south-west corner of the courtyard, as being from the 17th century; some modern opinion puts it a little earlier, around 1590.

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## SKELBO - HISTORICAL NOTES

The long history of Skelbo in Sutherland and the North is linked with the history of Scotland, England and Europe. This is a brief summary.

1 The name of Skelbo shows that it was an important farmstead of the early Viking age, built around 850. It means "farmstead of shells" or possibly "of shell sand".

2 In 1211 Hugo Freskyn gave Skelbo to his kinsman, Gilbert of Moray, later to become St Gilbert. He made it over to his brother Richard in 1223; Richard was probably killed in the Battle of Embo in 1245, when a band of pirates landed at Little Ferry.

3 In 1290 the Scottish and English Commissioners were at Skelbo, to meet the young Queen of Scotland, the Maid of Norway, who was to marry the heir to the throne of England. It was at Skelbo that they heard of her death in Orkney. This link to the history of both Scotland and England would justify the preservation of Skelbo as a National Monument.

4 In the 15th century Skelbo passed by marriage from the clan Moray - the lineage of Hugo Freskyn - to the chief of Kynnaired, whose possession caused dispute with John, 8th Earl of Sutherland, Over-Lord of Skelbo. His spouse was killed near Skelbo.

5 In 1529 Skelbo passed from the Kynnaireds to the Sutherlands of Duffus, kinsmen of the Earls of Sutherland. Alexander Sutherland of Duffus was knighted by Charles I, before 1643. Lord Duffus accompanied Charles II returning from exile in the Netherlands to Scotland, 1650. That same year Skelbo was reinforced as a garrison of the Earl of Sutherland, whose army came from Skelbo and elsewhere to partake in the battle of Carbisdale which ended the fatal campaign of Montrose and its army marching south from Caithness. Montrose was captured in Sutherland and executed in Edinburgh.

6 In 1654 General Middleton stored army supplies in Skelbo Castle after his landing near the castle at Little Ferry. Lord Duffus, supporting Charles II, joined General Middleton and the Earl of Glencairn in the rising against Cromwell which was centred on Dornoch but defeated at Dalnaspidal. In the 17th century, Skelbo was frequently at the centre of feuding between the clansmen of Gordon and Sutherland.

7 In 1715 at Tain, Kenneth 3rd Lord Duffus with hundreds of Jacobites proclaimed King James VIII. After the defeat of the Jacobites, Skelbo was forfeited. Lord Duffus fled through Caithness to Sweden. Seized in Hamburg and imprisoned in the Tower of London he was freed without trial in 1717 returning to exile. In Russia, Lord Duffus served the Czar as a naval commander. He died in St Petersburg c 1734. His son Eric lived at Skelbo. A fine painting of the 3rd Lord Duffus, the exiled laird of Skelbo in Highland dress is kept in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh.

8 In 1746 the Earl of Cromarty and his Jacobite army occupied Skelbo Castle. They captured four Hanoverian ships with arms at Little Ferry and moved to Dunrobin where the Earl surrendered to the Earl of Sutherland's militia. This prevented them from partaking in the battle of Culloden which may have influenced the outcome.

9        In 1747 at Skelbo Lady Duffus wrote to the Earl of Sutherland about his motherless daughter. The child in her care was making good progress. This letter gives a vivid impression of domestic life at Skelbo Castle. In 1757 the laird of Duffus and Skelbo wrote to the Earl of Sutherland's factor about the condition of the Mansion House, the kiln and the girnell. The roof at the north end of the house was beyond repair. By 1769 the castle was ruinous. Skelbo was sold by the 4th Lord Duffus in 1787, to whom the forfeited title was restored by Parliament, 1826. The baronial title of Skelbo reverted to the Countess of Sutherland, 1804.

(From Sir William Eraser, 'The Sutherland Book', Edinburgh, 1884; and other sources).