

THE MEIKLE FERRY DISASTER

Many years ago a crofter of the Lechnich, Edderton, had the gift of second sight to a remarkable degree and was able to predict death with such accuracy that most of his neighbours avoided him whenever possible. He is reputed to have foretold "a time when the young would wear seaweed in their hair and the shores of the Firth would resound with the keening of the bereaved", a prediction now accepted as referring to the Meikle Ferry Disaster.

Wednesday, 16th August, 1809 was the day of the Tain Lammis Fair, an event which attracted many people throughout the North-east, and a number of them, mainly young people, were gathered that day on the North shore of the Dornoch Firth to catch the ferry instead of taking the long route round by Bonar and Ardgay. The crossing, although only half a mile wide, was not without risk from the strong currents and tides which race through the narrows and, although a bigger vessel was in use to cope with the crowd, these boats were never kept in a very seaworthy condition.

The weather was calm but there was a swell running and when the overloaded ferry was about a hundred yards out she began to take in water. An attempt was made to put about and return to the North shore but the manoeuvre caused water to pour over the gunwales and, in panic, the passengers all moved to one side. This sudden shift of weight caused the boat to capsize and, with screams of terror and despair, all those on board were thrown into the waters of the Firth, some of them trapped under the upturned hull. According to witnesses, the sounds of the people in the water lasted only very briefly and within a few minutes all was silent. Some managed to cling to the bottom of the hull and one or two managed to swim ashore but, of the hundred and eleven passengers and crew who set out, ninety-nine perished in full view of the horror-stricken people on the shore.

It is said, principally by sailors who may be trying to allay their own fears, that drowning is one of the more comfortable ways of passing from this world to the next and, indeed, many who have been brought back from the brink have borne this out. Among such was Hugh McCulloch who, as a boy, narrowly escaped death by drowning and described the experience as being "like falling into a gentle sleep". He claimed that, given his choice of deaths, he would wish for drowning, little thinking that this would come true when he became one of the victims at Meikle Ferry.

At that time communities were close-knit, with younger generations accepting it as their duty to honour and look after the elderly, and the extent of the personal tragedy and distress caused by the drownings is difficult for us to appreciate nowadays. Many were left destitute and dependent on charity, a condition dreaded by Highlanders who, in those days, still retained some of the pride and independent spirit of their forebears, despite the indignities and cruelty imposed on them after the fortyfive rebellion and the barbarity of the clearances which they were then being forced to suffer. Some families lost two or even three children, while many children were left without either a father or a mother, one infant losing both, and the keening of the bereaved was, indeed, heard around the shores of the Dornoch Firth for many days as the dead were washed up with the seaweed.

The Edderton Seer's prediction was not, however, the only supernatural occurrence connected with the tragedy. One of the last bodies to be found was that of Hugh McCulloch who is said to have appeared in a dream to a friend of his, telling him where his body was to be found and adding that it would be intact and uneaten by fish. The following day a search party found the location and the condition of McCulloch's body to be exactly as revealed in the dream.