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## *'Skelbo & the Sutherlands of Duffus*

*talk by*

*Malcolm Bangor Jones*

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What I'd like to do tonight is just to give you an inkling of some of the background associated with Skelbo, because I'm sure you all know Skelbo, a very important historic site in Sutherland, a medieval castle with this very special manor house, house of Skelbo, as part of that complex. The Skelbo estate, although obviously centred in the parish of Dornoch, it actually included lands in the parishes of Creagh, Rogart, Clyne and Kildonan. So quite an extensive estate.

If we think back in time into the 17th century, when my story starts, you think of how Sutherland divided up into the Mackays in the province of Strathnaver and the Macleods in the west, a much smaller clan. The old Earldom was in the east, but also with a number of other blocks of landowners from the Ross of Balnagown in the parish of Creagh through to Skelbo. Up until 1715 it was indeed quite a significant estate, but we have to remember that the main base of the estate was in Duffus in Morayshire. We are talking about the Sutherlands of Duffus.



And this really gives us a clue as to why the manor house, if I may call it that, survived for so long. Although some accounts will say that Skelbo was the main house of the family, I'm pretty convinced that in fact the family were running two estates, if you like, in Morayshire and in Sutherland, but that Duffus in Morayshire was their main base. They spent time in Sutherland, they visited frequently, but Duffus was their main base.

And from 1715 when the estate was forfeited until 1787 it was actually a bankrupt estate. But again it was a separate estate, although latterly the Sutherland interest, that's the family of the Earls of Sutherland, that interest began to predominate. So this background is quite important as to why that building survived, because really one wouldn't necessarily expect it to be there. You try and think of other instances when I'm sure the Sutherlands of Duffus, had they only lived in Sutherland they would have swept it away at some stage and built themselves a much sort of posher, up to date, more fashionable house. But the fact is they lived in Duffus in Morayshire, it was their second base, and then they got involved in the rising of the Fifteen and the estate was forfeited. So a special history which in a sense explains why it's there. I just want to begin with rehearsing some of this background.

It's all a bit of names and dates, a little bit tedious. But what I'm trying to do tonight is just to give you an idea, and forget some of the names and dates, but just to give you an idea of what the documents can tell us. There are lots of big gaps, it's quite a complicated story, and I'm not going to burden you with all the twists and turns tonight.

I'm sorry I didn't bring enough handouts with me, I was carrying them on a train, that's my excuse. But all I've done is just to print out one or two documents here, they're mainly late 17th, early 18th century documents, with a few transcriptions. There are lots of errors in the transcriptions, this is because I did them around about four o'clock in the morning, when I was over in Canada. I was still on UK time and so I had a four- or five-hour spare before breakfast. So don't spread these around too freely, because there are a lot of mistakes which I noticed on the way up. That's part of the entertainment, if you like. It's just to give you a flavour of some of the documents and the correspondence of this period.

So we're talking about the Sutherlands of Duffus. They were really one of the most important cadet families of the House of Sutherland. In 1360, William Earl of Sutherland granted the

Barony of Torbol to his brother Nicholas, this Grant was confirmed by the King, but he later obtained the lands of Duffus in Morayshire through marriage. So right at the beginning, in the 14th century, we have then a cadet of the House of Sutherland sort of spread-eagled across this Moray Firth. Not a great dividing, I mean, we all know how, in a sense, the sea unites, and people could travel backwards and forwards relatively easily.

The lands of Skelbo had been in the possession of the de Moravia family, later the Morays of Corbyn, before passing to the Cairns by marriage. And in 1529, William Sutherland of Duffus bought Skelbo from John Cairn. Sutherland, however, was murdered the following year in Thurso, probably by a bunch of clerics.

During the wars, the revolutionary wars of the 17th century and the 1640s, the family started out as Covenanters, but then sort of moved across to becoming Royalists, rather like Montrose. And indeed Alexander Sutherland, was created Lord Duffus by Charles II in about 1650. You can hopefully follow some of these one or two names here as we sort of take the story forward.

James succeeded as second Lord Duffus as 1674, but already the estate finances seemed to be under some sort of pressure. And indeed they worsened when he murdered one of his creditors in 1688, William Ross, younger of Kindeace. His mother-in-law, who was the Countess of Seaforth, was very sympathetic. She was actually a sister of Sir George Mackenzie of Tarbert, later the first Earl of Cromarty. And indeed she probably had some of the qualities of her brother. The clan Ross demanded justice and Duffus fled south in search of a pardon.

And his mother-in-law wrote a very characteristic letter to him saying that he must write to his wife, Meg, frequently to assure her of his health. The Mackenzies, she said, had much better skill in such affairs and they were convinced that Duffus had been provoked and had acted in his own self-defence. For certainly he had been killed if it had not fallen out as it did. He should take care of himself for Meg's cause and the baby's. Many a man has fallen in such an accident, worse than your circumstances was, yet have been at peace with God and all the world and lived very happily for all that. Very sound advice in troubled times.

Well what happened of course was that a considerable proportion of the estate became subject to wadsets. I have to bore you and explain a little bit perhaps about what a wadset is. Essentially it's a sort of form of mortgage. The creditor or lender was given possession of land and property. They should actually just be given full possession of land and in a sense take the risk of raising the rents from the tenants. They had the power to enter and remove tenants and supposedly they were meant to take the risk of that. But in some instances they merely had a right to so much money out of the rents of the land. Unlike some estates, most of the Skelbo wadsetters were resident. In other words they lived on their wadset lands. Although they often had a number of farms in their possession and obviously some of those farms would be under tenants.

So just to give you some of the wadsets and perhaps a few of the details which you can find in these documents. We can actually go right back to 1584 for one wadset and this was granted of Proncy Castle, Toon as it's written, and this was to John Chisholm in Auchan Cheshire. We have to remember of course that in the 16th century the Sutherland Earldom

had gone to the Gordons. So Duffus, although he was a cadet of the family of Sutherland, the Earls of Sutherland, to whom he was a feudal vassal, were by then the Gordons. So this document of 1584, which is granted by Duffus to this John Chisholm, it talks about, *'It shall not be leasoned to ye, said John, to sell nor disbone the lands, or any part thereof, to any of the surnames of Gordon or Murray, nor bring or any of them in possession of the same by the setting of Tax, Lang or Short'*. Nor in fact was John allowed to have anybody in service as domestics or cutters of the name of Gordon or Murray.

Later on, from the 1670s, there's a whole raft of these wadsets given out. I will just pick one of them just to give you a small example of what's happening. In 1687, an Alexander Sutherland in Clyne, for a loan of 4,000 mercs, it was given a wadset of Grudy and the Bray of Grudy in Strath Brora. Now as was quite common, a few years later, because he made a number of further loans to Duffus, the sort of contract was renegotiated and not only did he get possession of Grudy and Bray Grudy, but also the lands of Mornes. And he had all right *'to the rents, excepting the leading of the custom peats, formerly in use of payment for all the said lands, to the place of Skelbo, yearly, according to use and want'*. So there we have lands a fair distance away from Skelbo, and although this wadsetter is given full possession of these lands, he is still responsible for bringing loads of peats to the place of Skelbo. In other words, the house of Skelbo.

Well, after James, Lord Duffus, died in 1705, things really began to unravel. And his son, Kenneth, he didn't claim title to the lands. He went off to become a naval captain. He was quite a brave man, and in 1711, he took part in an engagement with a number of French privateers. He was taken prisoner, but only after receiving five bullets in his body. As is often the case, there was a scheme to try and buy up the debts on the estate, and this was involving his younger brother. This often took place, I mean, if one suffers exploring the history of the Mackenzies, many of the Mackenzie families were also in great debt and the schemes in which they tried to keep their estates to themselves and out of the hands of their creditors, were very complicated, very hard to follow. But this particular scheme appeared to be unsuccessful, and the creditors began to take possession of the estate. At that moment, Kenneth decided to take part in the Jacobite Rising of the Fifteen, and he joined up with his relative Seaforth, and indeed in October 1715, he was sent with 300 men to proclaim the King in Tain. It was said that *'My Lord Duffus arrived at Tain at twelve o'clock of the forenoon and proclaimed his majesty, assisted by the magistrates at the Mercan Cross, with ringing of bells and all other solemnities that the place could afford, and thereafter drink several loyal healths. Which most of the magistrates and council did very cheerfully.'* Duffus followed with Seaforth, and a number of Mackenzie regiments to join up with the Earl of Mar at Perth. A description says, *'Following Seaforth came the man who had earlier undertaken to raze the whole of Sutherland against its Earl, the great Lord Duffus, on a Galloway of thirty shillings, as poor as he went north, nobody having taken the least notice of him of all those thousands he proposed to bring out'*.

Well he was there at the Battle of Sheriff Mure, but later he escaped, managed to get over onto the continent. He was thinking of surrendering himself but was sort of captured by a British consul abroad and brought back for trial. Fortunately the main state trials had finished, and he was eventually pardoned in 1717. But in the meantime, the Earl of Sutherland had claimed his estate as superior, that is his estate in Sutherland not obviously his estate in Morayshire, that was sold.

So the Earl of Sutherland has to go through a whole lot of legal rigmarole to actually get possession, and he brings actions against the tenants and he tries to sort of put his own man in charge. Eventually in 1719 he is actually awarded the estate, but under burden of the debts, and these are very considerable. So the Earl of Sutherland rather stuck himself for funds, in a rather difficult position, and this situation goes on and on and on.

Through the 1730s an attempt is made to bring the estate to the sale. that collapses. The Earl has no funds. The whole process falls asleep, as it's technically known, for several years. Really it isn't until the 1760s that things actually start to get going and are brought to a conclusion about 20 years later. That is in 1787 the estate is finally sold and bought for the Sutherland family. So it is an extraordinary period, essentially from 1723 to 1787, that the estate is a bankrupt estate, administered through the Court of Session by a series of Factors.

Obviously the various creditors have quite an interest in the running of the estate, and as I said earlier, the Earls of Sutherland, the family of Sutherland, and latterly the tutors. They had quite an influence, if you like, on what happened, because by then they were sort of the principal creditors. One of the big factors behind this sort of long, lengthy, drawn-out process was the position of the various wadsetters. To some extent they were sitting pretty, because as the value of land, in other words, as rent rose, they were still in possession, and were gaining.

But many of them in fact were themselves suffering from the effects of their creditors. So you have a rather complex situation, that people who are creditors of the estate, they have wadsets. They themselves have creditors pressing on them, and some of these wadsetters, the Sutherlands of Bray Groody for instance, they have a wadset. They themselves grant another wadset to one of their own creditors. I won't bore you any more, but it's hard going to understand exactly what's happening.

But I just want to quote, this is from a memorial which is put to the family of Sutherland by the Sutherlands of Evelix. They are in a bad place. This is 1772.

*'They truly regretted that they had for so long had disputes with the noble family, whose countenance and patronage it was natural to them to wish for and expect. But that has not been the case. The Earl himself had acquired a debt against the family and what had happened was that the Sutherlands, they had had to move out of their principal residence and they had gone up to Dalnamay.*

*They had been kept out of possession of their family house and labouring and reduced to hardships which a gentleman is ashamed to own and not to be conceived by any whose happier fate keeps far removed from such miseries. And the old man was in a very poor state. He was reduced to a most miserable situation, having no access to any of those subjects for furnishing the necessities of life.*

*He was used with affluence in his youth and being now near 70 years old he may say that to dig he cannot and to beg he is ashamed. His funds being locked up, he has not had access to as much clothing as secures him from the inclemency of the weather or for as much maintenance as will afford his family bread and water. And he hopes that the tutors of the family of Sutherland will help him and he says his only son is*

*encouraged to go to the West Indies and they hope they will give a few pounds to help him, to rig him out'.*

And indeed James Sutherland, the sort of commissioner of the estate, who was living at Dunrobin, he reported to the family lawyer in Edinburgh that this really was the situation and that a few days ago he had given the old man some meal to prevent the family from starving. For those of you who are lucky enough to have a copy, we're just going to have a quick look. This is an account, 1680, an estate account to Skelbo.

Don't worry if you haven't a copy, you're going to hear me a little more. We're lucky in some respects that the information on Skelbo begins to pick up round about the 1670s, 1680s. We really don't have anything comparable for the Sutherland estate, really until about 1700.

So there is a sort of a window here if you like and it's not much of a window but it's better than nothing. We have some Factors accounts and we have various sort of vouchers which go with the account, some stray sort of letters and things, which give us an idea of how the estate sort of worked in this period before 1715 when it was forfeited. So this is an account for the Factor.

The beginning of it obviously is to do with the charge, that's what the Factor has to produce, what he's charged with, and this gives, it's not a rental, it doesn't get names, but it gives the various sums of money which are due by the various townships, starting at Invershin, because they had the lands of Invershin, and Achinduich. There was the alehouse of Invershin which paid two stone of tallow and the lands paid a sort of mixture of vital, that is to say usually beer, corn and also money. And then we have places like, this is really, I'm sorry, I'm pandering to my hosts, but we also have places like Kilfedermoor, somewhere further away in the Strathburgh direction, set for four penny lands, this pays at Whitsunday six bowls, two furloughs and three pecks. Which counted at four pounds, three shillings and four pence per bowl.

Now, all these monetary figures are pound Scots, twelve-pound Scots to a pound sterling, remember that. We have the Isles of Kilfeder in quarter land and we have various other lands, the factor has to reduce the rents of, Kilfeder Beg, we have things like the Manes of Skelbo, that isn't detailed but it says there's half a penny land of the Manes set to John McCallum. There's an alehouse of the Manes which pays a stone of tallow and a dozen of hens.

The mill of Skelbo also pays a dozen of hens and ten marks of money, a mark was thirteen shillings and four pence Scots. So, we then move on to obviously the discharge which you've got a bit of it here. You'll notice that quite a few of these are for creditors.

Lord Duffers has given somebody a bond and now they're getting the interest on the bond. Andrew Sutherland of Pitgrudy, a year's annual rent. We have John Gray of Arbol in Russia who's collector of the tax, the cess, that had to be paid.

Interesting things. We have Alexander Ross of East Fearn, timber bought from my lord's use, probably from Strath Carron. Further on, and I'm now going to continue beyond sort of what you have, we have a whole host of payments which I think are of great interest and you'll forgive me for just running through them.

The ferryman at the Little Ferry, a bowl of tinned meal. Now, I should have re-rounded that, but obviously the various farms, they had to pay meal as rent, but they also paid meal in tinned because Duffers had a right to that. So, a wadsetter could actually still be paying tinned meal to Duffers. So, here's an example of the ferryman being given some meal. This is as a yearly pension. The word pension is quite frequently used. It sort of means, in the sense of a salary. We have the clerk, Alexander Manson, the clerk at my lord's court. That would have been the sort of Bailey court to administer the estate, see that people didn't misbehave, and if they did, to punish them. To fine them, usually, because the idea of a Bailly court was to be another source of money. We have horses and oxen for the mains. We have two pounds of hops to brew the marked beer.

Robert Black, when he was sent to Ross to choose the timber, paid to one of the tenants for a mare bought by my lord. Three men that went to Inverness with the cows bought by John Thompson. I think John Thompson was based over at Duffers. *'To my lord's house, 15 cows, whereof one of them was a milk cow. The rest killed at 20 mercs the piece. Taken up from the tenants and put in the sheep cot, 118 wedders. To the shepherd for a plaid'*. That was his usual sort of salary.

36 stone and a half stone and a half quarter of butter delivered to my lord's house. Now, the difficulty here, of course, is where is my lord's house? Is it Skelbo or is it Duffers? Sometimes it's clear that we're talking about Skelbo, sometimes it's not so clear. Three stone and 12 pound of anise, which I assume is aniseed, to my lady. Three stone and 10-pound sugar to my lady. To a new oak cask to keep the anise and sugar. Grey cloth to the servants by my lady's order when she went south. A bowl of salt to my lord's house. A lint wheel to my lady. 270 hens taken from the tenants at two shillings a piece.

Then there is also the various lands which are without tenants, because obviously the fletcher didn't have to produce any rents for those lands, but he had to list all the lay land. And I'll just give you one example. *'There was lay and groody ayn-farding land, which is to be deduced for the Whitsunday. There is lay and taken away with the water in Kilfedder, in Strath Uli, three penny land'*. Obviously quite a serious business there. Loss of land in that particular part of the empire. All the furthest flung part. *'Paid to Thomas King, my lord's falconer, by order from my lord'*. Well, that's all the money side.

There is then a very similar account for the meal, payable by the various farms, that obviously also had to be accounted for by the fletcher. There's a significant sum, something like 438 bowls of meal, which was due, and obviously this was all paid out. I will just quote one or two. Obviously some of it, significant amounts were sent off to Morayshire. There were payments to, for instance, John Ross, the minister at Dornoch, as part of his stipend. There was some meal due to the Earl of Sutherland, made in malt for the house. March beer again, to my lord's groom for the horses, to the hens and turkeys, to Thomas Stewan, the potter (I think this is the porter), the doorkeeper of the house, to three boats and some poor women, by my lady's desire. Now that's conflating two things.

The estate, like other estates, like the Sutherland estate, had a number of fishing boats, obviously to provide fish for the house, and also to carry things when they needed something brought round the coast or indeed perhaps taken across to Moray. They would have boats and the usual system was, on the Sutherland estate they were kept at Golspie, about three

or four boats, and the Earls used to pay for their maintenance. But the other side of it was that the men had to be on hand to carry things. So that's what probably that's about. To the poor at several times, to the chef for his pension, to a Murray boat that came with the oats, and then we have another one, to the fishers of Skelbo several times, to the woman that keeps the goose and hens, to Paul Macphail for keeping the young wood of Achinduich as pension, and you'll know the woods of Achinduich because they're still fine woods to this day. Right, that's the end of that account.

Don't worry too much about the next one. I just wanted to give you some idea of the material one has to struggle with and try and make sense of. This is in 1697 when William Sutherland took over the Mains of Skelbo. And so there was a valuation, both of the corns, and you'll find following on from that, a valuation of the livestock. I've just given you a little taster again it's extraordinary, all the different colours of cattle and indeed colours of horses as well. I should just explain the account of the corns. You'll notice that there is both the main crops oats and barley for beer. There is, in one of the other accounts, a mention of peas, but I think the statement was effectively that the amount of produce of the sowing was no more than the seed which had been put in the ground. So peas appear to have been grown, but apparently not too successfully. So this is just a valuation of the corn crop. It's a proof, and the way the proof worked was that they took every twentieth sheaf and thrashed it out. In other words, you did a sample of the total and you worked out by that way what the total harvest was. The next step was obviously to manufacture meal from the oats. This particular account is interesting, if you are interested in these things and I know not everybody is, but it talks about two bowls of the oats were taken and made into meal, and these two bowls gave of good meal one bowl, one peck, one lippy. That's not a bad return. On very good land, you'd expect to get a ratio of almost one to one. In other words, one bowl of oats would give you one bowl of oatmeal.

When you had a very poor crop, as in 1782, you could have one bowl of oats would give you a very, very small quantity of oatmeal. So it's an indication of the quality of the crop. Going with this, just to continue the corn theme, just the odd receipt, a little scrap of paper, it's a receipt by James Fraser, the master of the Swan of Fraserburgh. In 1689, he was at the river and port of Ferry Oones in Sutherland, and he stated that Alexander Sutherland of Proncy had been instructed by Lord Duffus to ship about 400 bowls of bear for the use of John Murray, a merchant of Edinburgh. And this cargo was actually made up of 338 bowls for Lord Duffus and the remainder for Proncy. And then at the bottom it said, *'God send the good ship to her designed port'*.

There's another very similar sort of receipt; this was actually signed at Skelbo in 1698. It was Alexander Stevenson who was skipper of the Janet of Dundee and he granted a receipt that he had received 237 bowls of good and sufficient bear merchant vital of the growth and product of the barony of Skelbo. And he was taking this down to Leith to be given to Master Smith, brewer at Edinburgh. The trouble is, I've been merrily just talking about bowls of bear and things, we don't actually know what this means exactly sort of what quantity we're talking about.

There was a receipt a couple of years later which talks about three score bowls of good and sufficient bear of the growth of our lands in Sutherland and measure with the ordinary measure of Skelbo. Who knows what the ordinary measure of Skelbo, what does this mean?



There were all sorts of measures going on at this time. It might have been nine stones, might not have been.

The period of the sequestration from the 1720s through to 1787, there was a huge quantity of material and one could spend years going through it. One's sanity would indeed be tested. There was a whole succession of factors. They often appointed sub-factors. They fell out with their sub-factors. The sub-factors fell behind and then when they actually came to account they often accounted 20 years after they should have done. By then of course things had got in a dreadful mess. And they have got in a mess since because you can pick up a bundle of receipts and although there are little numbers hidden away here and there you seem to find that things have just been scattered about from different bundles and indeed different boxes in all sorts of places. So there is actually material relating to Skelbo, certainly in four collections, that is leaving out the immense amount of court material which exists as well. Anyhow, let's just dive in and we're at 1724.

A man called Sir Thomas Calder is factor. He was a massive sort of merchant who actually had many salmon fishings all around the coast of Easter Ross in particular. But he obviously had a man on the ground who was Gordon of Embo and he writes to Embo and he says *'I don't doubt of your activity and doing everything for recovering the rents. I very much approve of your overture of taking security from such that the tenants as you know are good and are not able just now to pay. But then let it be as short a term as possible'*. And then he mentions that the creditors are obliged to the captain for his improvements. Now who is the captain? This is Captain David Ross who by then was living in Roshan. He had been put in by the Earl of Sutherland initially and he'd actually made some improvements at Morvich. So we have a very early example of sort of agricultural improvements taking place in the 1720s draining and enclosing at Morvich. This is the same David Ross who I believe condemned the last witch.

Calder goes on to Embo and talks about getting cows out of Skelbo. He says they're rather expensive at £12 each but have them by the end of the month because there's a great store of fine grass waiting for them in Moray shire. And then he says you must take the trouble to send 'scallop' (a Gaelic word for a servant) manservant of your own straight to this house with them since our fellows knows nothing about driving cattle. Poor Embo he tried to take possession of the mains of Skelbo and the house he actually lost money. He bought cows and horses to stock the lands but then it turned out he was a great loser.

So anyhow we have these various accounts and I don't know how many of you have seen this particular volume but somebody foolishly took the time to extract the building accounts for Skelbo house. I'm not going to go through them now because they're all here but I'm just going to draw attention to one or two things you'll see in the last part of our little handout.

I've just given you an example of the sort of thing one can come across and this is by Benjamin Bethune a glazier in Dornoch for glass work to the house of Skelbo. Obviously quite a few repairs were necessary both new windows, a lot of glass, some lead and indeed some of the wires to hold them in. And we get mention of various different rooms, the dining room the east room and so on, to a casement window repaired in my lord's room in 1760. Eric Sutherland of Duffers who had actually been in possession of the Mains of Skelbo for a time, gave up and a new tenant was found who complained bitterly about the condition of the buildings. Indeed they were inspected and found that *'they were all in bad repair and no corn*

*could be safely kept in either barns or granary being in a ruinous condition, and it's said the excessive high wind on the 27th of December took the roof and part of the walls of the gurnal had fallen and the other houses much damaged'.*

Well because this was an estate under bankruptcy and the Sutherland family were treating it very carefully it really wasn't until the late 1760s that anything was done. By then it was said that the house had become so ruinous and decayed that it must soon fall to the ground unless it is immediately repaired. At last in 1770 work began although the task turned out to be much greater than anybody had anticipated. It was said that the wood part of the roof was so rotten that when an attempt was made to take it down the hole tumbled in and destroyed all the ceilings and on examination the whole back wall of the house which had long been propped. On removing the buttresses it was discovered they were altogether faulty. So a major repair was carried out which probably put it in a condition which allowed it to survive and become part of the farm buildings. I think, if I remember rightly, I'm sure you'll know better. that latterly in the 19th century it was a blacksmith shop so in other words a use was found for it and it kept standing.

I'm very conscious that I have outstayed my time and so I'm going to sit down and thank you for being so patient.

Thank you