

# DORNOCH HERITAGE SOCIETY

presents

A George Dempster Bicentenary  
Celebration



at

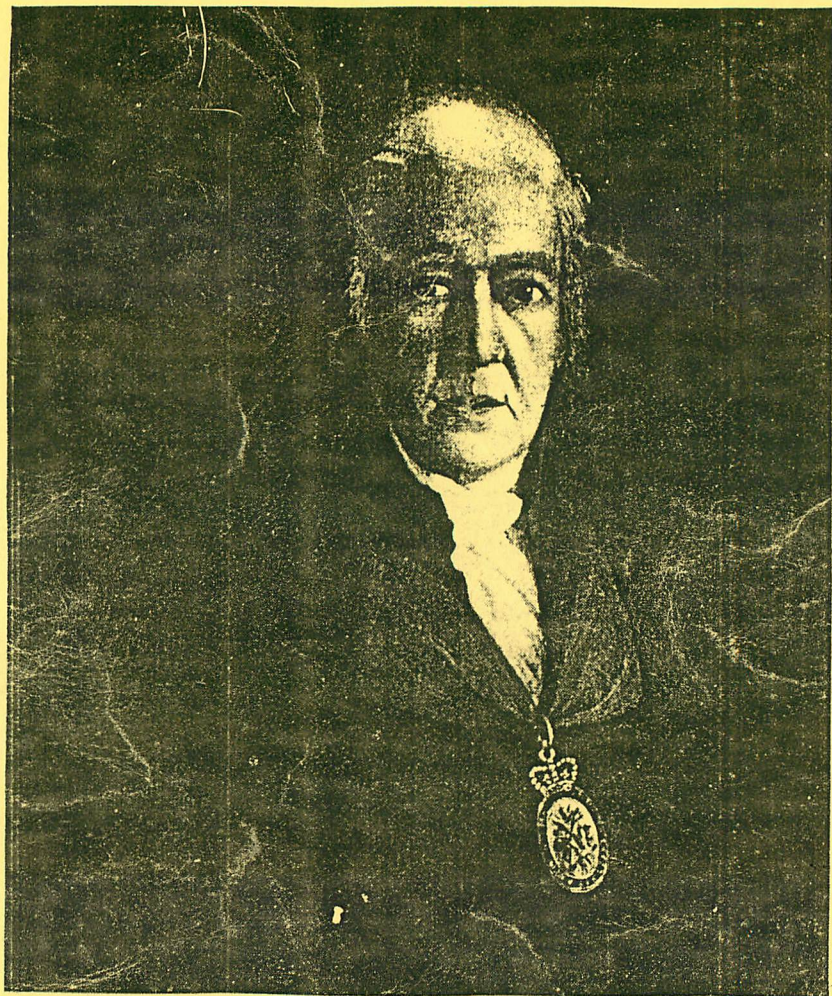
Skibo Castle

(By kind permission of  
Derek Holt of Skibo)

on

Thursday 4th. September 1986

## PROGRAMME



PORTRAIT OF GEORGE DEMPSTER IN OLD AGE

By J. T. NAIRNE

In the Scottish National Portrait Gallery

7-00 p.m. A WALK ROUND SKIBO CASTLE GARDENS  
CONDUCTED BY ITS PRESENT OWNER DEREK HOLT  
OF SKIBO

7-20 p.m. RECEPTION INSIDE CASTLE

7-30 p.m. LECTURE IN DRAWING ROOM,  
'GEORGE DEMPSTER OF SKIBO'  
LECTURER - MR. ANTHONY COOKE, DUNDEE UNIVERSITY.

8-00 p.m. TEA (SERVED IN SMALL DINING ROOM)

8-45 p.m. TOUR OF LIBRARY AND MAIN DINING ROOM  
CONDUCTED BY MRS. RANDALL

9-15 p.m. AN ANTHOLOGY OF SCOTTISH MUSIC FROM MEDIEVAL  
TO MODERN TIMES

### ARTISTES

ALIX GOSKIRK — SOPRANO  
STUART RATHIE — TENOR  
RODERICK MACLEAN — PIANO  
DONALD GOSKIRK — VIOLIN

(TIMES ARE APPROXIMATE)

GEORGE DEMPSTER of SKIBO

by: MR Anthony Cooke, University of Dundee.

Born 1732 at Dundee, "In a close off High Street," - a noble lodging of the day, son of John Dempster and Isobel Ogilvy. Lived later at "Dunnichen", north of Dundee, which house demolished in 1966. He was of the 'Landed Gentry' associated with trade. His money came from his grandfather, George Dempster, an Episcopalian, land-owner, Corn Factor and Corn Merchant. His grandfather was involved in the "Meal Riots", and owned ships to export his corn. John Dempster died within a year or so of inheriting George's estates, and George, the grand-son was only 22 when he, in turn, fell heir to the estates. He went to Dundee Grammar School and then to the University of Dundee where studied for the Bar, and was admitted to the Faculty of Advocates 1755. James Boswell, an early friend, and David Haig (?), and Robertson the Historian and Adam Ferguson were among the people whom George Dempster mingled with in the background. He was a solid, worthy citizen - MP. 1761 for St Andrews Burghs (ie: St Andrews, Dundee, Perth and Cupar, Fife). Sceptical re religion - Dr Johnson thought that he was a very dangerous man on account of his anti-religion & anti-monarchy tendencies. Later, when the French Revolution broke out, he became a moderate. He was 30 years in Parliament, was a Whig, but independent, and his only office was Secretary to the Order of the Thistle. He was never well-in enough with the establishment to get given an office. He was anti-George III, and in favour of agriculture and industrial improvement. He was a Director of the East India Company, a Town Councillor of Dundee, Provost of St Andrews, and founded the Dundee Bank, which amalgamated with Royal Bank of Scotland

From 50's - he left Parliament at 58 - and detached himself from public life in order to attend to his estates. He married Rose Hemming, dau of famous planter Richard Hemming, and settled in Skibo, and began to prefer Skibo. Boswell, writing of the young Dempster as an agreeable person, fine sense, sweet disposition etc etc. Dempster weakness was drink - "My tongue rattles in my mouth like two dice in a box." Became more established in 1786 when he bought Skibo estate. He began taking an interest in the Highlands - fishing - lighthouses - roads etc. He introduced his half-brother, Captain Dempster - Skelbo and Pubrosic.

The Skibo estate was 18,000 acres from Ardnacolle to Port Leek. 200 families on the estates. Miserable state these families lived in. Great plans to improve Skibo - Cottonmills at Spinningdale - he interested a group of Glasgow gentlemen, including David Dale to the spinning of cotton by Jemmes, and vessels of up to 50 tons burden could land at Spinningdale, or another village, 2 miles down the loch. What he was trying to do was to do away with all the feudal obligations and dues and to give the people long leases and trying to raise the quality of life for these people. The former owning his own land was important to him, and his approach to this was to give them long leases.

The introduction of Border Sheep into the Highlands - folk being moved off the land - it was a great loss to individual or country. He gave them spinning wheels and looms in their houses, rather than to round them up into a village - he was a far-sighted man - he wanted a balanced Highland economy. ——— to tenants - long leases alternating through manufacturing

Stanley scheme, developing in Perthshire same time (1786). Duke of Atholl clearing Glen Tilt at that time. Not successful commercial and economic times. Spinningdale was burned down 1806 and never rebuilt, though a long way ahead.

Dempster wrote facetious poems to the peers 1809 - Fought to stop the Clearances.

He was very self-effacing and self-denigrating man. When someone was writing up his life he destroyed a lot of his papers at this point.

He was a creature of his time, and stalwart - great foresight, and thought he had not been a success in life.

Burns - Kilmarock Edition published some years gave him the accolade, "A True Blue Scot"  
[I. Bell]

Sealing = "getting out"

948 Sigurd.

1245 Bishop ?

1650 ?

Mr Anthony Cooke, Dundee University

GEORGE DEMPSTER.

[Mr Cooke]

Born December 1732 in Greys Close off Dundee High Street, son of George Dempster and Isobel Ogilvie. George Dempster, Senior was killed by a fall from a horse. Educated at Dundee Grammar School; Matriculated at St Andrew's University but took no degree there, but qualified in law at Edinburgh University, and admitted to the Faculty of Advocates, Edinburgh 1755. He referred to Dundee as "The Dirty Hole where I was born"

His grandfather built the mansion house of Dunnichen, fifteen miles outside Dundee towards Farfar - big estate there.

1720 a Meal Mob attacked two of his father's boats in Dundee Harbour and destroyed them.

In 1756 set out with friends on a Grand Tour of Europe, getting as far as Paris. They ran out of funds and had to return to Scotland.

In 1761 became Member of Parliament for Perth Boroughs - which included Perth, Dundee, St Andrew etc - to accomplish which he had to raise £10,000 deposit to gain his seat. He had to sell off lots of his grandfather's estate at Dunnichen to raise this, and came to resent this heavy expenditure later in life. He sat in Parliament from 1761-1790 as a Whig, gaining for himself the epithet "Honest George". His only office in Parliament was to become Secretary to the Scots Order of the Thistle.

He was on the side of the American Colonists in the War of Independence. He was an active supporter of Agricultural Improvements, and of Security of Tenure for the peasants. He became a director of the East India Company, the founding light behind the British Fisheries Society, <sup>of which he was an active member.</sup> Town Councillor of Dundee for a long time.

In 1763 he founded the Dundee Banking Company

He met James Boswell, Dr Johnson's biographer, who thought highly of him, describing him as "The most agreeably fine, sweet disposition and the mind of a gentleman". However his agnostic views and atheism antagonised Johnson towards him, who was not impressed on account of his anti-religion, and had no time for him. People were expected to drink a lot in those days, and drunken behaviour was socially tolerated, and this also mitigated against Dempster who was not so inclined. Dempster was more impressed with Johnson than vice versa.

Dempster was regarded as a figure of Scottish Enlightenment, mildly Republican, and anti-monarchy (probably because it was George III) and faintly Nationalistic.

Adam Ferguson was his life-long friend, and William Robertson

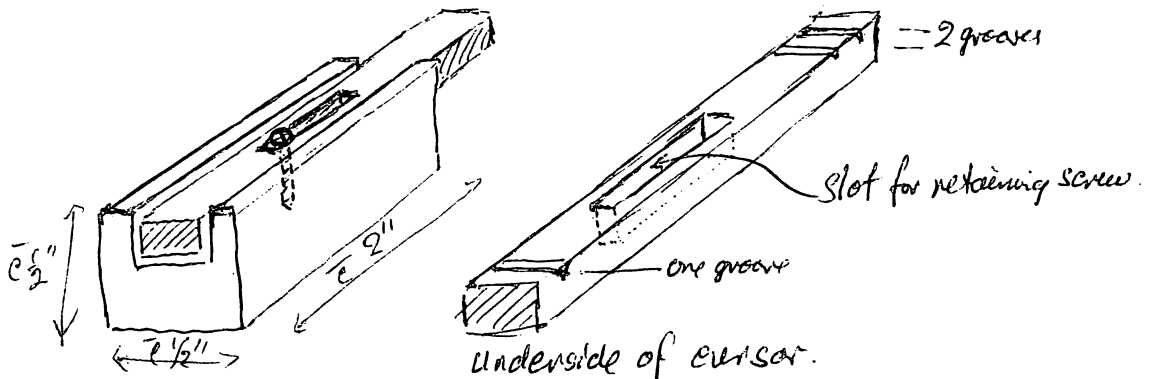
He became alarmed by the growing body of violence and bloodshed in Paris - which largely tempered his ideas in this direction.

He married in London to Rose Hemming, daughter of a Jamaican M.P. They had no family and she died in 1810. Dempster died in 1818 aged 86 years and was buried at Letham. His dwindled estate reverted to his sister.

On his estate at Dunnichen he practised his attitude towards the freeing of his tenants of from feudal duties, and the promotion of their Security of Tenure. He tried to give the small-holders some degree of self-government, and turned more towards the management of his estate.

1786 bought Skibo Estate in Sutherland. Interested in industry, he tried to bring the Cotton industry to Sutherland, and in 1786 became also a partner in the Stanley Mills at same time. In 1786 a good spinner could earn from 2/6 to 3/- per week

1788 laid out village of Letham, starting a fortnightly market for yarn, cloth etc, abolished the meal and barley rent substituting a money one. He formulated a Constitution for the people of Letham with a committee of nine, elected annually to form the Letham Tenants Committee, which is still functioning today (1986). He instituted a system of Voting Sticks — little rectangular section bits of wood about 2 inches or so long with a deep square section groove in which another piece of wood slid up and down, retained by a central screw-nail. This stick protruded from the end of the body of the voting stick, having a single notch in the underside at one end, and a double notch at the other. The committee members voted for or against by protruding either the single or double notched end and handing the stick in — thus ensuring a secret ballot:—



His half-brother, Captain Robert Dempster — George Dempster bought Palmorie estate for him in October ~~1785~~ 1785. Had to borrow money to pay for the two estates — and had to move on his men Palmorie for his half brother, the Captain.

He was astonished that Skibo had a far better climate than Dundee, and he had the gardeners at each place recording the temperatures throughout the year, and Dunnichen was  $4\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$  on average lower than Skibo throughout the year. Cereals grew well at Skibo then, and he talks of the "Numbing Cold" of Dunnichen. He installed a form of central heating — sort of "Hot Air Tiles" — at Springdale and Dunnichen — an oven with a chimney like ~~the~~ vertical tunnel of which hot air ducts permeated the building to heat it.

August 1787 — plans for his estate at Skibo — agricultural improvements by enclosure, and afforestation. In Skibo he abolished the personal service tradition and replaced it by a monetary rental. He described the "wretched habitations" on the estate, and remarked on the fact that the men go south for summer work — the women following for the harvest — then return to sit-out the winter around their peat fires!

Group of Glasgow men put forward £3000 to float the Spinningdale Mill, in Scotland, and installed spinning-jenets worked by water-wheel.

Dempster was against sheep, as he saw sheep replacing people in the country -- but he reckoned sheep were better than black cattle. He was much against the clearing of the land for sheep farming. He observed the, "Incompatibility between sheep, people and trees".

He was impressed with the mountainous parts of Spain and Switzerland, where a free and industrious people worked and were happy -- and encouraged the same system for Scotland. Became interested in building roads in the Highlands, but he was a voice shouting in the wilderness -- much ahead of his time. He encouraged cotton-spinning industry instead of sheep and cattle farming.

His friend, Robertson, at that time told him of a lot of recruiting of soldiers for the Army -- "Hardly a man, of the gentry, young or old who had not gone to the Army, and hardly a common man that had not accompanied them".

Disillusioned, in old age, no family to leave things to, and family dissidence -- his nephew died in 1801, and half-brother, the Captain, was lost at sea in 1801. He regarded Skibo as very much in the Dempster family -- made it over to Harriet Soper, whose husband took over the name. Soper-Dempster sold Skibo in (was it 1856?)

Keen sense of humour -- Dempster wrote satirical poems -- indeed wrote out his own obituary, satirically.

Robert Burns was impressed by George Dempster, and called him a "True Blue Scot". Sir John Sinclair -- of the Statistical Accounts -- a Caithness landowner -- referred to Dempster as a "Truly respectable -- excellent scholar -- accomplished gentleman and a benevolent man and a good, and interesting speaker". But he was an obscure figure -- there was no mention of him at the Edinburgh Enlightenment Festival (??).

1800 Spinningdale became bankrupt -- taken over, and hand-loom weavers brought in

1806 Spinningdale burned down.

David Dale (partner) (fellow partner in British Lending Society)	} Partners in the Balno Spinning Coy. £6,000 capital, near Spinningdale from 1794
George McIntosh, Glasgow (partner) (do --- do)	
George Dempster of Skibo (partner)	
Captain Dempster, Halfbrodie (partner)	

Water supply from Milldale Loch.

Raw materials -- cotton -- brought in by boat.

Manufacturers gave work to the poorest inhabitants. Never any profit.

The building ruins are worth protecting. It was the furthest-north cottonmill ever  
ever built. It had an original heating system, and is the only remaining  
example of it in Britain.

Flax was considered - was actually grown successfully in Caithness, and the Baltic.

Lot of the Skibo - Spinningdale papers are in Toronto