

THE NORTHERN TIMES, FRIDAY

A Sabbath invasion of Ross-shire

On the morning of Sunday, 18th February, 1722, a party of gentlemen arrived at the Sutherland side of the Meikle Ferry. There were five of them: Adam Gordon of Dalpolly in Strath Brora; George Gray, Laird of Skibo; Robert Gordon of Coxton, in Morayshire; William Gordon of Helmsdale, and Alexander Ross, surgeon, of Dornoch, lately of Tain.

The Synod of Ross and Sutherland, concerned at the amount of Sunday travelling for pleasure, had passed an Act on 30th April, 1721, forbidding ferrymen to convey travellers on the Sabbath, save in case of necessity. So the ferryman refused to take them over. They told him their business was urgent; that failed to move him. Then they threatened to give him a beating, and reluctantly he ferried them across to Ross-shire, with their grooms, horses, and baggage.

TAIN WELCOME

They rode on to Tain, which they reached an hour before church service, and called on Bailie Robert Ross, who welcomed them in. There they were joined by John Gordon of Garty, who had come to Tain the previous day.

They rested, and consumed three bottles of the bailie's wine. Meantime, Adam Gordon's man took yarn of Mrs Gordon's to James Yeaman to be dyed. Mrs Yeaman "stood aghast at the audacity and savagery of the Sutherlandshire heathen," and refused to accept the yarn; but after some argument she took pity on "the uncivilised barbarian," and took it, in flagrant breach of the Fourth Commandment.

The Laird of Skibo's man went to Hugh Ross, gunsmith, "to get his master's pistols dressed." The gunsmith refused to touch the weapons. Skibo, himself, then called, and offered him "a substantial sum," but the gunsmith was not to be tempted.

PISTOL FIRING

Bidding farewell to the hospitable bailie, they rode a farther mile to the public-house at Knockbreck. There they resumed their potations, and stayed until the church came out. (Services lasted several hours in those days). They celebrated their departure from Knockbreck by firing their pistols in the air.

Thence they journeyed to Inverbreakie, the hamlet on the site where Invergordon was later to arise. At the ferry there they parted with their Moray friend, Robert Gordon of Coxton, and two of the party were going on with him. The rest returned by way of Tain to their northern homes, calling at various places of refreshment on the way.

kirk-session to appear in sackcloth before the congregation, for admonition: how much graver this case of the gentlemen of Sutherland and Moray?)

The Presbytery met on 14th November, 1722, and the Rev. Robert Kirk, minister of Dornoch, representing the Sutherland parishes, was with them. Appeared before them Robert Gordon of Coxton, Adam Gordon of Dalpolly, George Gray of Skibo, William Gordon of Helmsdale, Donald Mackay of Skibo and William MacDonell of Kildonan. The last two would be grooms.

The culprits "offered submission to discipline," pleaded guilty, professed remorse, and "promised in the Lord's strength not to give the like offence hereafter." They were then removed from the room.

REBUKED

"Then the Presbytery, taking the above submission and confession under consideration, together with the advice got in the case from the Commission of the last General Assembly, and judging it may not be for edification to go beyond a Presbyterial rebuke to the parties concerned," appointed the Moderator to deliver a sharp rebuke, "and in regard the said parties . . . have given scandal in the parishes of Tain, Logie Easter, Kilmuir Easter, and Rosskeen, the Presbytery appoint that the Presbytery's resolution anent them be intimated from the pulpits of the respective parish churches above mentioned, and that it be recommended to the Presbytery of Dornoch to cause intimate the same in the pulpits of the several parishes where the said parties do reside. Then Adam Gordon and the other delinquents were called in, and were long and seriously dealt with regarding the heinousness of their guilt . . . were rebuked sharply, and dismissed from censure."

WISE MOVE

The other two, Dr Ross (who had found it advisable the year before to move from Tain to Dornoch, he being at variance with the Tain kirk-session and the minister, Rev. Hugh Munro), and John Gordon of Garty, appeared before the Presbytery at a later meeting, and were similarly dealt with.

There is no doubt that influential representations must have been made to the Commission in Edinburgh and the Presbytery of Tain to bear in mind the social status of the Sabbath-breakers and handle the affair gently.

And it is worth remembering that in the same year, 1722, the last witch to suffer capital punishment in Scotland was burned at Dornoch.—F.M.

REFERRED TO ASSEMBLY

The matter was so grave, and affected so many gentlemen, that Tain Presbytery were reluctant to handle it, and referred it to Edinburgh, to the Commission of the General Assembly. The Commission took several months to consider the case, and then passed it back for the Presbytery to give judgment according to the rules, and urging that the Presbytery "should be careful to study what makes for edification."

We may ask why a mere straight case of Sabbath breaking should be referred to Edinburgh. In fact, Tain Presbytery were in a dilemma. Not only had the sin been committed in different parishes within its jurisdiction, the sinners were resident in various parishes outwith the area. Moreover—and this was the most serious snag—all the sinners (along with their grooms) were of the gentleman class, some of them lairds in their own right. (The catechist of Tarbat, a few miles from Tain, for venturing to start a different tune from that selected by the precentor, had been about that time summarily sentenced by the Tarbat