

Bringing the past to life,

over a peat fire and a dram

THERE CAN BE few things more pleasurable than having the past brought back to life by worthies over a peat fire and a dram.

Johnny MacKay and two Donald MacDonalds, all three crofters in Strath Halladale, carried on that oral storytelling tradition, always with kindly humour and convincing recall. It was a gift. Sadly they are gone, and with them the tradition of the ceilidh house in many areas in the Highlands. Fortunately the landscape of the strath in which the stories were told is largely unchanged, and we still have our memories of these characters.

Recently, a bygone age in the Highlands on a bigger and wider canvas has come my way from the pen of Joseph Mitchell. This 19th century chiel first crossed my path when I was preparing an article for the Northern Times about the proposed but never realised branch line from Forsinard to Melvich. In work-related travels he would sometimes be in the North, and from there provides us with some humorous sketches. More importantly, we have to thank him for improving transport to the North.

Joseph Mitchell was a road and railway engineer who learned his trade as a mason working on the Caledonian Canal. Soon he was to be chosen by Thomas Telford, the biggest name in civil engineering at the time, to be one of his apprentices in London. Incredibly, at the age of 21 he was appointed engineer in charge of all Highland roads, bridges, and harbours. Later, Mitchell turned his attention to railways and was responsible for taking the line over the Grampians from Dunkeld to Forres. He was also involved, controversially, with Dunrobin some years later in surveying the line to Wick and Thurso, for which he claims he may not have been fully paid.

In the 1880s he published his "Reminiscences of My Life in the Highlands," a personal social history containing portraits of the people and the stories encountered in his travels. It is a rich tapestry.

Mitchell speaks of smuggling, the fearful smell from fields of blighted

potatoes in Skye, the consequences of the Clearances, absentee landlords, and sailing up the Caledonian Canal in the first steamer. He tells a story of that renowned Keisser, James Bremner, whose great claim to fame was refloating the s.s. Great Britain after it ran aground in Ireland. It seems that when he and Mitchell were working together in Lewis, Bremner successfully persuaded a Lewis boatman that the best way to catch salmon was to put salt on their tails!

by Raymond Train

Another story was the Fraser of Lovat funeral party which, after the customary funeral dinner, forgot the hearse! Of course he also writes of his work, and his difficulty in persuading heritors to pay their share of road maintenance.

Mitchell had his memoirs published privately. His account includes the histories of the important families throughout the Highlands and Islands. While he can be generous in his praise of the good qualities of some, he is equally frank in revealing facts and attributes of others which they would not wish to be made public.

Those who had received copies of the memoirs tended to pass them around (as one would in the circumstances!), and eventually they fell into the hands of those members of the gentry who had had a less than flattering mention. This was of course a more closed society than today, and many things were not shared with the public. The result was that litigation was threatened. Mitchell had an elegant get-out: he passed away when Volume Two was being printed!

Thereafter the memoirs had to be suppressed. The Clan Munro family, for instance, gets the treatment from Mitchell. Sir Hugh Munro of Foulis Castle is described as living "a gay life and was very much in London." No objection would have been taken to the meaning, at that time, of the word "gay", but the absenteeism in London is pointed.

Mitchell describes a coach journey to the North

made in 1837 at a steady pace of "ten or twelve miles an hour". This visit was to improve the drainage of the area above the road over the Fleet which his former boss, Telford, had made. "There is no finer drive in Great Britain than from Inverness to Tain, and northwards along the shore of the Cromarty and Dornoch Firths," he says. Yes, we would assuredly agree, but at speeds greatly in excess of ten miles an hour today drivers see less of the passing scene.

While in the North he was invited to dinner at Dunrobin. Her Ladyship was particularly agreeable. With his pawky sense of humour he goes on to say: "... when the revolution comes, and we, the people, get uppermost, I owe her Ladyship a day in the harvest for her kindness and affability."

Mitchell's father had been a witness to the well-remembered tragedy at Meikle Ferry in August 1809, when the overcrowded boat capsized with great loss of life. He had a narrow escape, for he had been riding down to the shore hoping to cross, when the ferry disappeared before his eyes. Our Mitchell says it was customary to give the ferrymen a dram on arrival on the other side "more in gratitude for our safe landing than for their seamanship!"

He goes on to paint a heart-warming word picture to explain the "charm" of a dram to a Highlander. It was a sort of "thank you" currency.

Mitchell deplores how English sportsmen have "corrupted" men with money tips. In his early days, messengers bearing a letter, for instance, would reject with contempt any pecuniary reward but would always accept the "civility of a dram".

There is an amusing description of the ceremony attended upon by a man Fraser whenever he was offered a dram. First he would make a pretence that it was "too much trouble," but when the bottle and glass were produced his eyes would glisten. Then, proposing a toast, and with great pleasure looking at the full glass, he would toss it back and "Immediately there glowed an expression of warmth, genial satisfaction and benevolence, as he

bowed and took his leave."

The toff who offers his ghillie today a miserably small dram while proclaiming its provenance and great antiquity is unlikely to witness the "charm" of the ceremony. A more likely response will be the muttered and time-honoured one: "She's small for her age!"

There is an amusing story of the clergy told by Mitchell. Apparently the Rogart manse needed some attention and the work was done by a tradesman from Golspie, name of James Douglas. The Rev John MacKenzie refused to pay for the job, saying the property belonged to Dunrobin and that was where the responsibility lay for the upkeep of the building. Some time later, at the

castle, James put his case to the countess, who turned round to refer the matter to the minister who was also present. He was reluctant and embarrassed to say that the estate was by law bound to pay for the repair, and instead gave a false account of the affair. "What have you to say now, James?" said the countess. The reply was: "Weel, my lady, all I say is one of us is telling a lie, and I know it's no' me!"

Mitchell has a go at Loch, the estate factor, and draws attention to his lack of popularity. He remembers an election in Wick in 1852 when Loch and friends were canvassing on the doorstep. A number of people followed, bearing a model of a half-burned croft house, and imitating the

bleating of sheep. A few years later when Mitchell was passing through Sutherland he would be asked in a triumphant whisper, "Did you hear the news? Loch is dead!" There appeared to be little public mourning by the people.

Our hero's travels in the course of work took him once to Shetland, having embarked at Scrabster as a guest of the Revenue Collector. When the vessel reached Lerwick a day late, the excise officers from the outlying islands, who had been summoned to foregather in town to meet with their boss, were found to have made use of their time. They were in a state of "helpless inebriety" and Mitchell relates that the much dismayed collector sent them to bed with a

sobering dosage of strong tea!

Finally, Mitchell tells a story at the expense of the Gollachs. He quotes the story of a Dunbar herring merchant who was impressed by the drinking bouts of the Caithness heritors. He dined with them one Friday evening in Wick but had to leave early to sail with the tide for Dunbar. He unloaded quickly and returned to Wick on Monday morning. "At the hotel he found his friends, the heritors of Caithness — keeping up their orgies all the time!"

It's an entertaining thought, but vain wish, that the three worthies from the Strath now exchange stories with Joseph Mitchell over a spiritual dram, in a now restored celestial ceilidh house!