GEORGE DEMPSTER AND THE SKIBO ESTATE

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I Introduction

Although best known for having been the Scottish home of Andrew Carnegie, the Scottish-American steel magnate, Skibo Castle and its estate has had a second noteworthy owner, albeit one whose name has fallen from public view - George Dempster of Dunnichen, MP, the eighteenth century politician and agriculturist. In this talk I intend to say something about Dempster himself, a little about the history of Skibo prior to Dempster's purchase, and then go on to describe the purchase itself and the programme of improvements that followed. I shall then follow Dempster's involvement with Skibo until it ended, and conclude by assessing the success or otherwise of Dempster' improvement programme.

II George Dempster

George Dempster of Dunnichen (1732-1818) was one of the best-known and public-spirited Scotsmen of his generation. Although remembered now mainly as an agricultural improver he spent half his adult life as a popular, very energetic and conscientious independent Whig MP, and gained great public esteem through his unfailing efforts to promote Scottish trade and industry. His attractive and very outgoing personality was marked by candour, great enthusiasm for the causes he espoused, and an immense willingness to help other people. He placed personal merit above wealth and rank, and commanded much affection from his charm and for the altruism and integrity he displayed in public life.

Dempster was the grandson of a wealthy Dundee grain merchant who had used his fortune to purchase a number of Forfarshire estates, centred on the estate of Dunnichen, which he made his home. Dempster attended St Andrews University and then he went on to study in Edinburgh for the Bar, and became an advocate on 4 March 1755. Shortly before this, in November 1754, he had inherited the family estate at the relatively early age of 22. Dempster may have practised at the Bar for a few years, although this is uncertain, but he soon decided to enter parliament. He successfully contested the Perth district of burghs at the 1761 general election and then represented them continuously until 1790 - a relatively long period of some 29 years. In parallel with his parliamentary career Dempster commenced a substantial programme of improvements to the Dunnichen estates, incorporating as many as possible of the contemporary ideas concerning enlightened agricultural and estate management practice. He also spent much

time and energy in promoting Scottish industry - especially fishing and textiles - and in addition involved himself enthusiastically in a remarkably wide range of related activities.

He was an active participant and frequent speaker in the house of commons, but by his own admission was not a natural politician. He was unable to subsume his personal political views within the developing party system, and accordingly his eloquence and passionate expression of his views resulted in little by way of solid achievement. By the late 1780's Dempster was becoming wearied by this, and concentrated more and more on his extraparliamentary activities, where tangible results were more easily obtained. It is against this background that his decision to purchase Skibo must be viewed. Changes in the domestic circumstances of Dempster's half brother, John Hamilton Dempster (c.1753-1800) gave added impetus to this change of focus.

Dempster came from a large family: his father had married twice and had a total of 12 children, but of all his brothers and sisters Dempster appears to have been closest to John. John Hamilton Dempster entered the East India Company's marine service in 1768, his first voyage being as fourth mate of the *Devonshire* to Madras and China. He rose to become a captain, and after commanding several smaller vessels he commanded the East Indiaman *Ganges* in 1781 and later commanded two other East Indiamen, the *Rose* and the *Earl Talbot*. By the mid-1780's he had amassed a comfortable fortune from his Indian voyages.

On 25 October 1785 Captain Dempster married Jean Fergusson, niece of Dempster's oldest and closest friend, Sir Adam Fergusson of Kilkerran (not to be confused with another of Dempster's long-standing friends, Dr Adam Ferguson, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University). marriage pleased both families very much but it was particularly pleasurable to Dempster since it further consolidated his already long friendship with Sir Adam while drawing him yet closer to his half brother. A year after the marriage the couple's only child, a son - named George after his uncle - was born and Dempster, with no children of his own, appears to have placed all his hopes for the future in the boy and regarded him as his heir. For example, Dempster's correspondence contains descriptions of elaborate schemes that he was devising for his nephew's upbringing and education. This excessively close interest in Captain Dempster's family would, one would think, have been somewhat irritating to the Captain and his wife, but there is no evidence to suggest that this was so. The main driving force behind the Skibo purchase was Dempster's belief that for the sake of his family Captain Dempster should give up the dangers of his seafaring life for the safer and more settled life of country gentleman and farmer - a prospect that John himself appears to have found quite agreeable.

Dempster, in common with most of his contemporaries, was a prolific letter writer and fortunately a considerable quantity of this correspondence has survived to provide the source material for this talk, as well as for my PhD. Dempster himself wrote in a conversational style, both candid and spontaneous, which makes his letters a delight to read and brings vividly to life both the events of the time and Dempster's own thoughts and reactions to them. They are an invaluable historical source.

III Skibo - a brief history

Skibo is an ancient foundation, first recorded in 1211 when it was included in a grant of lands made by Hugo Freskyn to his kinsman Gilbert, Archdeacon of Moray, who probably made it his home after being appointed Bishop of Caithness in 1223. It appears to have continued to be a residence of the bishops until the abolition of the Episcopacy in 1688. Thomas Pennant included it in his tour of 1769, referring to it as "the bishop's summer residence". Owned by the Gray family from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, Skibo passed briefly into the hands of Sir Patrick Dowall of Edinburgh, whose nephew, George Mackay, son of Lord Reay, became laird of Skibo in 1751. He effected a considerable number of improvements to the property, which had become somewhat run-down, but then ran into financial difficulties which forced him to sell it. It was bought by William Gray, a member of the old Skibo family, who had made a fortune in Jamaica. He renovated the castle in 1769, just before Pennant's visit, but seems in his turn to have over-reached himself financially, resulting in the forced sale of the property. In July 1786 it was one of a number of Sutherland estates which had been sequestrated (that is, taken into judicial possession on behalf of the owner's creditors) that were put up for auction by the Court of Session and which attracted the attention of George Dempster.

IV The Skibo purchase

Captain Dempster had done well in the East India Company's service, but George Dempster, as a proprietor (that is, shareholder) himself, and also sometime director of the Company, was well aware of the hazards and perils involved in seafaring, and he was, as I have said, after the birth of young George anxious for John to abandon maritime life for the less uncertain and more steady life of a country farmer. From surviving correspondence it would appear that the Captain himself was in favour of this idea. In July 1786 (shortly after the birth of young George), the sequestrated Sutherland estates came up for auction, and Dempster decided to buy one of them. He employed William Ramsay, an Edinburgh lawyer, to bid on his behalf and was successful in acquiring the 18,000 acre Skibo estate for the sum of £11,500. Dempster was later, in 1789, to purchase the adjoining but much smaller 500 acre estate of Pulrossie, which, in 1791, he transferred to his brother. Captain Dempster himself later acquired another adjoining estate, Over-Skibo. Dempster financed the purchase of Skibo (and possibly Pulrossie also) using borrowed money, but there seems to have been an understanding that John would repay the debt in due course, once he had acquired the funds to do so from further voyages. In the meantime, while John was at sea, Dempster would manage all the estates on his behalf.

Dempster's friends were horrified by the purchase of Skibo. James Guthrie of Craigie, a neighbour of Dempster's in Forfarshire, for example, pointed out the dangers involved in buying an estate whose lands had already been exhausted by bad management, tenants whose houses were ruinous, and whose remoteness would make it impossible for Dempster to manage except

through agents in whom he would have to have complete trust. In Guthrie's view the whole enterprise was likely to become a millstone around Sir Adam Fergusson also complained of Skibo's Dempster's neck. remoteness and remarked on the further difficulties likely to be presented by the harsh climate. In his view to use borrowed money both for the purchase and for Dempster's planned improvements would be ruinously expensive and most unlikely to be recouped through increased rents, as Dempster was arguing. Another factor, although not mentioned by these friends, was the pressure of other commitments on Dempster's time and finances. In 1786 he was still a member of the House of Commons, and a very active one at that, being heavily engaged in legislative proposals concerning the Scottish fisheries industry and with the establishment of lighthouses around the Scottish coasts. One outcome of this activity was the founding of the British Fisheries Society, with Dempster as a director and leading light, which had as its main object the establishing of fishing settlements along the western Scottish seaboard. This society held its inaugural meeting in London in August 1786, only a month after Dempster's purchase of Skibo. Dempster was also involved with the setting-up of several cotton spinning mills, one at New Lanark with Richard Arkwright and David Dale, where spinning had commenced in March 1786, and the other at Stanley in Perthshire, with a group of Perth businessmen and where spinning had commenced at the beginning of 1786. Also, of course, Dempster continued to be involved in the management of his estates at Dunnichen, and in carrying forward his programme of improvements there which would include establishing the new planned village of Letham, where building commenced in July 1788.

Given these existing commitments, involving attending meetings in various parts of the country and a heavy investment of both time and money, it is hardly surprising that those who wished Dempster well were appalled that he should be contemplating yet a further major project in a remote part of the country with which Dempster had no previous connection. The Skibo estate would be difficult to manage from such a distance and its purchase and development with borrowed money presented great danger. If things went seriously wrong Dempster's finances, habitually precarious and particularly stretched at this time because of the existing commitments outlined above, would be plunged into ruin.

But Dempster remained unflustered and unmoved by these entreaties. As regards the use of borrowed money, he argued that this would be but a temporary expedient since his brother's East Indian voyages would quickly produce sufficient profits to clear the debt. In the meantime, although he accepted that his rental income from the estate would not cover his interest on the loan, his own savings could make up the difference. Nor did he see remoteness as a serious problem since in his view the roads leading to it were comparatively good.

While it is understandable that Dempster should wish his brother to retire from the sea and become a farmer, and would be willing to arrange and finance the purchase of an estate for him, it is not so obvious why he should choose a remote Highland estate rather than one closer to home in Forfarshire. The main reason, probably, lay in the price which at about 13 shillings per acre was extraordinarily cheap by lowland standards. Improved agricultural land in Forfarshire, for example, could fetch almost £40 per acre at this time.

Of course, the quality of the Skibo land could be expected to be much inferior to that in Forfarshire, but Dempster was confident that the application of enlightened methods of management of both the land and its tenants would soon raise both the rental and the value of the Skibo land. To this was linked another hobby-horse of Dempster's, that given the right encouragement and pump-priming investment the Highlands and Islands could from their own resources become as prosperous as the lands further south. It was this belief that lay behind his enthusiastic support of the British Fisheries Society and was undoubtedly a factor in his thinking behind the purchase of Skibo.

Dempster appears to have bought Skibo in 1786 without first having viewed it, because his first recorded visit was not until the summer of 1787. He visited it then on his return from a tour of possible sites for fishing stations with some of the other directors of the British Fisheries Society. Nevertheless he seems to have been familiar with the character of the estate before this and to have fallen in love with it. He was neither the first nor the last to have been so affected by Skibo's mesmerising charms - owners as far apart in time as the Bishops of Caithness, Andrew Carnegie and the present owner, Peter de Frequently in his Savary, seem to have been similarly captivated. correspondence Dempster referred to Skibo in glowing terms, complimenting it both on the beauty of its scenery and the mildness of its climate. It is true that the climate around Skibo was, and still is, remarkably mild and Dempster, who had been warned before purchasing the estate that the rigours of the north Highland climate would be the undoing of his ambitious plans, took delight in proving these predictions wrong. Sir Adam Fergusson, for instance, had commented on his "clear conviction that the Southernmost County in Scotland would not be the worse for a Degree or Two more of Southern

latitude." In 1794 Dempster was able to report to Fergusson that walnuts had that year ripened in the garden at Skibo, an unusual event since walnuts had not previously been known to ripen north of Durham². When Captain Dempster decided to take himself and his family to Lisbon for a few month's holiday for the sake of his wife's health, Dempster persuaded him to assist in carrying out an experiment to compare the daily temperatures in Lisbon and Skibo to demonstrate how similar they in fact were.

² Fergusson, Letters, p.253.

¹ Fergusson to Dempster, 31/10/1786: Dempster Papers 1/8.

V The improvement programme

Va The tenants

At the time when Dempster took over Skibo the conditions of the tenants there, in common with those elsewhere in the Highlands, were wretched. Sinclair's Statistical Account contains numerous references to such conditions, and the entry for Creich parish (in which the greater part of Skibo lay) differs little from dozens of similar accounts. At Sinclair's invitation Dempster himself wrote a supplementary account of the economic conditions of the parish with particular reference to Skibo. In this account Dempster demonstrated the under-population of Skibo - there were no more than 200 families living on a land area of more than 18,000 acres. The whole rent of his property amounted to no more than about £700 - £800 per annum, of which more than a quarter in fact came from two large farms. The people were living at the lowest possible level of mere subsistence with their only occupation, apart from growing their own food, being a little spinning carried out by women. The young men of the parish were forced to travel south each spring in search of farm labouring work, and towards harvest time they were joined by many of the young women to assist in the cutting down and getting in of the crop. They all then returned for the winter, which was spent in virtual idleness gathered round peat fires. As for their houses, they were mere hovels, virtually unfurnished, and built of turf walls and roofs, becoming so verminous that it was necessary to tear them down and start again every three years or so.

Dempster very quickly set in motion a programme of agricultural reform and improvements along the same lines as he had already begun at He granted his tenants long leases, commuted personal services into money rent, and made it clear to the tenants that they were no longer bound by the medieval code of unstinting loyalty and servitude to himself as landlord. The term "Personal Services" sounds innocuous, but in fact it involved potentially very heavy demands on the tenant, making it hard for him to run his own farm effectively. The services comprised: 1) Thirlage, whereby when the proprietor of an estate built a corn mill on it, all the tenants had to use it, and no other (usually resulting in the tenants having to pay an exorbitant charge to the miller for having their corn ground); 2) Bonnage, whereby the tenant was obliged to cut down the proprietor's corn (usually ahead of his own); and 3) Carriage, which involved transporting materials or produce on behalf of the proprietor, and generally carrying out his errands. In addition, on the estate one blacksmith had the monopoly right to do business on the estate, for which he paid the proprietor a rent and, again, typically charged excessive prices to the tenant; and other various services were usually required of the tenant, such as digging and fetching peat, carrying and spreading dung, and generally undertaking any necessary work for the proprietor. In addition to abolishing personal services, Dempster fixed the rents of all the present tenants at their current level for their lifetime, and gave them the right to nominate a tenant to succeed them (subject to a right of veto by himself). The rent could only be changed either at the death of a tenant, when the new level was to be fixed by two (presumably independent) arbitrators, or when the tenant chose to resign his tenancy on due notice to a member of his family, when the rule of a revaluation was to apply as if he had died.

While at present the tenants had to pay for wood for their houses, Dempster proposed that in future anyone who built a stone walled house thatched with heather or straw was to have the wood free of charge. Dempster also granted part of the value of trees on the estate to the tenants - again, as he had done with considerable success at Dunnichen. There, according to Dempster, the tenants took great pains to protect the trees from accidental damage by farm animals, even to the extent of planting replacement trees themselves where necessary. Finally, in order to encourage the cultivation of waste ground Dempster let it be known that anyone could settle on such ground on payment of the fairly nominal rent of one shilling a year for their lifetime. On their death the revaluation rule would apply, except that the rent for the first generation after the new settler would be halved. To give further encouragement to new settlers, for the first two years of their tenancy Dempster provided them free of charge with iron for tools and seed corn and potatoes. Dempster enshrined these new rights in a constitution, which he termed the Constitution of Creich after the parish in which the greater part of the Skibo estate lay.

Vb The management of the estate

As regards the management of the estate, Dempster was fortunate to find that the previous factor, a Mr John Fraser, was willing to act as factor for him and to be an exceptionally reliable man. He proved, in fact, to be an excellent factor - a capable and conscientious man who was able to work well without close supervision but who had no tendency to exceed his authority. The correspondence which passed between them in 1786 and 1787 provides considerable insight both into Dempster's method of management of the estate from such a distance and into his ideas and plans regarding its development. Matters of concern to him included:

- the depth of water at the mouth of the Dornoch Firth, which proved adequate to allow reasonable-sized ships to enter;
- the presence of a substantial bank of shell marl on the estate useful as a source of lime for applying to fields to reduce the acidity of the soil;
- arrangements for collecting rents;
- the problem of illegal cutting of timber on the estate;
- the removal of the existing tenant from Skibo Castle presumably to permit Dempster himself to use the building; and
- the appointment of a gardener.

Fraser was particularly displeased about the illegal cutting of timber, which he was sure was being carried out by Dempster's own tenants. He advocated taking a very strong line, and urged Dempster to prosecute the most likely suspects in the expectation that the guilty ones might thereby

be identified and a clear warning provided to the others. This, apparently, was the approach being taken by other estate owners in the parish. Dempster, however, as has been seen, characteristically chose to have greater faith in is tenants' good nature and chose instead to grant part of their value to the tenants themselves, writing to Fraser that he was "unwilling to begin my acquaintance with my new tenants by suing them at law for injuring the planting on my estate. When we are better acquainted I hope to find every one of them guardians of it. I have no doubt I shall." Fraser remained unconvinced and thoroughly disapproving, and wrote back to Dempster expressing the hope that he would not have cause to regret his benevolence.

In his supplementary account for Creich Parish in the *Statistical Account*, published in 1793, Dempster was able to report that some twenty to thirty new settlers had taken advantage of his offer regarding the waste land and had, in Dempster's own words, "already exhibited strong proofs of what Highlanders can do, in the improvement of their country, when secured in the enjoyment of the fruits of their labour". In typical fashion Dempster used the opportunity of the *Statistical Account* entry not merely to describe Skibo estate and his actual and proposed improvements, but went on to write what was in effect a manifesto. After describing the financial advantages he hoped to accrue from his improvements he emphasised that financial advantage was not the immediate aim of himself and his brother. Of greater importance was the benefit to be gained from seeing a thriving and industrious population become established, rather than a wasteland populated only by sheep, which was becoming the fate of much of the land

OSA vol. 8 (1793), p.378.

Dempster to Fraser, 1/2/1787: Sutherland Papers (quoted by Calder, p.161).

in his neighbouring estates. The advantage of men over sheep were as thousands to one for, again in his own words, "As the understanding, industry and ingenuity of man, in a state of freedom, are superior to those of the brute creation, so is the value of an estate inhabited by mankind, to one occupied by sheep." 5

⁵ OSA vol. 8 (1793), p.381.

Vc The establishment of planned villages for manufacturing industry

For Dempster purely agricultural reforms, although essential, were not enough. For Skibo to become truly prosperous some form of manufacture had to be introduced to provide employment for farm workers made surplus by the new and less labour intensive farming methods. This required the founding of a settlement or settlements to house the workforce. Dempster was at this time heavily engaged in the early stages of the British Fisheries Society's village building programme on the west coast and had already established a village of his own at Letham on the Dunnichen estate. In 1790 he was ready to do the same at Skibo, and selected two sites: one on the Skibo estate itself at Spinningdale (then known as Spanziedale), and the other some two miles further east at Balnoe (formerly Newton; now Newton Point) on the Pulrossie estate, nominally under the control of Captain Dempster. The construction of planned villages was very much in vogue at the time, with many landowners eager to attract industry to enrich their estates, and so Dempster was by no means alone in this, but nevertheless he was more ambitious than most in proposing at Spinningdale to construct a cotton spinning mill - the building which, as I said earlier, stimulated my own interest in Dempster. Both villages were sited on the banks of the Dornoch Firth in order that they might be served by boat, and as I mentioned, enquiries about the feasibility of this formed part of Dempster's earliest correspondence Dempster viewed the whole project through with his factor, Fraser. somewhat rose-tinted spectacles, seeing his Skibo estate as the ideal location and anticipating his new villages quickly growing into major seaport towns.

Balnoe, for example, he described as "so fine a natural harbour that I have no doubt of it becoming the seaport of the county."

In 1786 Dempster had spent a few days at Matlock in Derbyshire and had been very much impressed with Richard Arkwright's cotton mill at nearby Cromford. As a result Dempster was instrumental in attracting Arkwright to Scotland to build a similar mill at New Lanark. By the time he was ready to commence similar operations in Sutherland Dempster therefore had experience of that venture and was also a partner in a company building a cotton mill at Stanley, in Perthshire. For Spinningdale he approached George Macintosh, a Glasgow manufacturer and associate of David Dale who was one of the New Lanark partners, and persuaded him to visit Skibo in the autumn of 1791. Macintosh had introduced Turkey red dyeing into Scotland in partnership with Dale and was the father of Charles Macintosh, inventor of the raincoat. Although now based in Glasgow he had in fact been born at Newmore in Ross-shire and was very much a Highland patriot. He wrote that his interest in the project was "more from patriotic motives than that of profit."⁷ No time was lost in getting the venture under way and the company was formed quickly enough for Dempster to be able to report the same in his entry in the old Statistical Account, the relevant volume of which was published in 1793. It had a total capital of £3,000 made up of thirty shares of £100 each all but seven of which had already been taken up. At the end of his entry Dempster listed the eighteen shareholders: Dale and Macintosh took two shares each (later increased to three), Dempster and his brother also took two each, while the other subscribers, among whom was Dempster's factor John Fraser, took one share each. Some of the subscribers were based in

⁶ Dempster to Fergusson, 27/11/1794: Fergusson, Letters, p.251.

Macintosh to Gilchrist, 2/4/1792: Lyon Papers.

Sutherland or Ross-shire, but many were Glasgow merchants. Arkwright was not one of the shareholders, but it is possible that he provided advice and assistance with training of the workforce - as he is known to have done at Stanley. There is, however, no surviving evidence that this was so. Written into the contract of partnership (dated 1792) was a clause stating that the object of the partners was to introduce a manufacture into Sutherland that would give employment to the poorest inhabitants, rather than immediate profit to themselves. Dempster himself confirmed this in his supplementary statement to the old *Statistical Account*, writing that public spirit rather than the desire to maximise profit was the prime motive behind the project.

Meanwhile the second village, Balnoe, was to become a centre for the linen trade. One of Dempster's Dundee friends, one Alexander Morison, had undertaken "to establish the weaving of linen, and to encourage the extension of the spinning of yarn all around the country." Originally the name 'Balnoe' (Gaelic for 'new town') was applied to the site at Spinningdale and the company which operated the cotton mill was accordingly called The Balnoe Company. However, over time the name Spinningdale reasserted itself and by 1794 Dempster himself was using this name. The name Balnoe was then used for the 'linen town' at Newton but to avoid confusion it was agreed that the company's name should remain unchanged.

The Spinningdale mill was completed in 1794 at a cost of almost £1,000. Dempster was highly delighted: in 1792 he had written to Fergusson: "Our cotton mill goes on charmingly. The banks of the Kyle [Firth] appear to me a paradise already highly improved and ornamented", and in 1794 he wrote of

⁸ OSA vol. 8 (1793), pp.377, 383.

⁹ Dempster to Fergusson, 9/9/1792: Fergusson, Letters, p.223.

the finished building: "Our Glasgow friends have also adorned the Dornoch Firth's banks with a palace cotton mill." The mill was a fairly large one, of four storeys and probably an attic. On plan it comprised a rectangle of 58 feet x 38 feet, together with what appears to be a later 20 feet wide extension at one end. Each floor was provided with two fireplaces, but Dempster experimented with a form of central heating, which he also tried at Dunnichen House. In January 1794 he wrote to Sir Adam Fergusson that "one oven bakes more air than is sufficient in half an hour to make a story of the mill too hot for human habitation." The architect and builder of the mill are unknown, but could have been James Boog, a Dornoch baillie and carpenter, who had turned himself into a contractor and architect and built up a thriving practice in churches and manse in Sutherland. He was a local man and certainly had the necessary experience to build the mill.

The Spinningdale mill was intended for the manufacture of, and I quote, "coarse calico and shawl cloths, checks, skirting and other goods of a plain, coarse and simple fabric". ¹² Management was to be through a standing committee of the partners living in the Glasgow area. Clerks were to be employed in Glasgow and expert weavers and cotton spinners sent to Sutherland to instruct apprentices in these arts. Both spinning and weaving were to be carried out, but it is uncertain if the weaving sheds were erected before the spinning mill. It was first intended to concentrate on weaving, but this was soon revised in favour of spinning, which was believed to be "the most advantageous part of the trade".

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Dempster to Fergusson, 27/11/1794: Ferguson, Letters, p.251.

Dempster to Fergusson, 9/1/1794: Ferguson, Letters, pp.248-249.

¹² Contract of Co-Partnership of Balnoe Co., 1792: Lyon Papers (quoted by Caldwell, p.168).

Meanwhile, in May 1791 the Dempsters received an offer to purchase Skibo and Pulrossie for a total sum of £18,000. The intending purchaser (whose name is unknown) was a friend of Sir John Sinclair and it was through Sinclair that the offer was made. Dempster might have been expected to reject the offer out of hand but, interestingly, he did not do this, but first discussed it with his brother, leaving the final decision to him. It would appear that the Captain's latest East India voyages were proving less profitable than had been hoped, temporarily dampening even Dempster's optimism. However, the eventual decision was to reject the offer. Dempster was clearly pleased with this, for when he reported the decision to Fergusson it was combined with another eulogy of the beauties of Skibo: "All idea of a sale of our property here is vanished. You would be charmed to see how the value of both estates is encreased by their union. Like husband and wife they lie in one another's arms, both indeed at present fast asleep. They form an extent of 14 or 15 miles along the north bank of the Firth of Dornoch which is on the point of becoming one of the most beautiful of our firths."¹³

Dempster to Fergusson, 14/10/1791: Fergusson, Letters, p.206.

VI The end of Dempster's involvement with Skibo

For 10-15 years after its purchase Dempster used Skibo as his second (and to judge from his correspondence, his preferred) home. As the century drew to a close, however, other circumstances were to lead to this coming to an end. From about 1790 the health of Captain Dempster's wife Jean began to cause concern. She developed a persistent and recurring cough which it gradually became clear was caused by tuberculosis. In the hope that a milder climate might effect a cure Captain Dempster took her and their son George to spend the winter of 1790-1791 in Lisbon, but this did not result in the hoped-for cure, and Jean's symptoms returned in October 1991. For the next few years, a fairly stable pattern was established of relapse alternating with remission, until in 1797 her health suddenly declined rapidly and in April 1798 broke down completely. She died on 5 May 1798, and on 14 May was buried in the Dempster family burial plot at Restenneth Priory, near Dunnichen. Soon afterwards John Dempster sailed on another voyage to India and China, leaving his son (then aged 12) in the care of Dempster and his wife. Before he returned young George contracted the same disease that had killed his mother. The symptoms first appeared in November 1800 (i.e. some 21/2 years after the Captain's departure) and the boy's condition deteriorated rapidly. Again, it was hoped that a milder climate might effect an improvement, and in March 1801, somewhat desperately, George Dempster took him south by sea to Exmouth. This proved to be in vain, and young George died in Exmouth on 17 March 1801, about three years after his mother. To add to Dempster's distress it was soon afterwards learned that Captain Dempster's ship was missing after having been caught in a typhoon in the South China Sea in

October 1800 while on its way from India to China. In due course it became obvious that Captain Dempster must have perished in this event.

Dempster's brother's family, which he regarded as his own, was thus extinguished in the space of only 3 years. This was a shattering blow to him. although it was the loss of young George, in whom he had vested all his hopes for the future, that seems to have been the greatest tragedy of all. Although Dempster continued to visit Skibo he henceforth confined his agricultural improvement activities to Dunnichen and its environs. Skibo and Pulrossie were inherited by Captain Dempster's natural daughter, Harriet Milton Dempster, who returned to Scotland with her husband to claim it. Her origins are unknown, there being no previous mention of her in Dempster's correspondence, not even in the considerable body of surviving letters between him and his brother. Harriet was named after the ship Harriet in which her father, as second mate, made two voyages to Jamaica in the early 1770's. Captain Dempster carried her with him on his last voyage delivering her safely in Bombay in August 1800. Once there she seems to have lost little time in falling in love with and marrying an up-and-coming East India Company writer, William Soper (b.1763). He came originally from Ashburton in Devon and had amassed a considerable fortune in India. On taking possession of the Skibo estates he and Harriet added the name of Dempster to their own, in accordance with the terms of Captain Dempster's will, made in 1799.

Dempster thought highly of both the Soper-Dempsters and formed a close relationship with them. They seemed in his eyes to provide a replacement family for the one he had just lost, and he continued to be on very affectionate terms with them for the rest of his life. Dempster and his wife continued to make regular, and lengthy, visits to Skibo and the Soper-Dempsters for their part made reciprocal trips to Dunnichen and took an active interest in Dempster's activities there. William Soper-Dempster had taken over the management of Skibo but seems to have departed somewhat from Dempster's benevolent approach; although he never evicted a tenant he found it necessary to prohibit squatters (Dempster had welcomed them) and, on the death of a crofter he consolidated holdings and prevented the automatic succession of a relative. The population necessarily declined, thus dissolving Dempster's dreams, and Soper-Dempster's popularity declined also, not helped by his manner and bearing which, in contrast to Dempster's, reportedly were haughty and arrogant.

Early in July 1809 the Dempsters travelled north to pay an extended visit to Skibo, remaining there over the winter. Dempster enjoyed being at Skibo as much as ever; but this was to be his last visit to Skibo. In the spring of 1810, while the Dempsters were still at Skibo, a double tragedy struck: both Rose Dempster and Harriet Soper-Dempster fell seriously ill. In Rose Dempster's case, the illness proved so serious that from the start there was very little hope of recovery and she died on 10 July 1810. Her body was brought south to Dunnichen to be laid to rest at Restenneth Priory, the funeral taking place on 21 July. Once again, as with the death of young George, such troubles did not arrive singly. During Mrs Dempster's illness the health of Harriet Soper-Dempster was giving equal cause for concern; she had contracted the same tuberculosis which had already cut such a swathe through Dempster's immediate family. In the hope that the milder climate of southern England would provide a cure the

Soper-Dempsters headed south to Devonshire at the end of July 1810 while Dempster himself returned to Dunnichen. On 17 October 1810 Harriet died in her husband's native town, Ashburton in Devon. Dempster himself lived on at Dunnichen until his death on 13 February 1818.

VII Success or otherwise of Dempster's improvements

The cotton spinning mill at Spinningdale was to prove unsuccessful. One reason was high initial expenditure. Although the cost of the mill building itself seems reasonable, it was only the largest of a number of buildings built at the same time. Also constructed were a large weaving house with a store overhead, a smaller weaving house, a store and washing house, a large barrack for workpeople and a smithy. The machinery proved unexpectedly expensive also, and altogether over £3,000 was laid out on the mill, the machinery and the auxiliary buildings. While this matched the intended capital of the company of £3,000, seven of the £100 shares were not taken up. leaving a shortfall of some £700 which had to be met by an advance from the Bank of Scotland in Tain. The company was therefore significantly in debt before production started, and it suffered the further misfortune of commencing operations in the teeth of a slump following the outbreak of war with France in 1793. It was soon realised that the scheme had been overambitious and that demand was nowhere near meeting the production capacity of the mill - for example, in 1795 fewer than half the spindles were employed in spinning yarn. This was the result of a change in the balance of profitability from spinning to weaving, but it left the company with a mill that was much larger and more costly than necessary. Shortage of capital was being mentioned by the partners as a serious problem as early as 1794, soon after the mill was completed, and in 1795 further borrowing of up to £2,500 was agreed. Nor do the Highland workers appear to have been the paragons that Dempster would have his correspondents believe. The Glasgow partners, while debating in 1795 on the advisability of continuing the business, complained of the local peoples' lack of appreciation for what was being done

for them from benevolent motives and their unwillingness to be involved in the enterprise. Macintosh considered them to be lazy, but it is more likely that they merely found it difficult to adjust to long hours of regular work in the mill that was entirely foreign to the old Highland way of life. Macintosh also mentioned difficulties with the manager, and the venture without doubt was hampered by the same disadvantages that have discouraged other attempts to bring industry to the Highlands:

- distance from markets:
- limited local demand;
- high transport costs; and
- unskilled labour.

Nevertheless, for a number of years the company struggled on. Robert Owen, David Dale's son-in-law, visited the works on behalf of Dale and Macintosh in 1802 and made one or two suggestions for improvements in the organisation of the mill. However, he reported that the works were not extensive and that the locality was unfavourable for extension or for a permanent establishment. In 1803 Dale and Macintosh appealed through Thomas Telford to the government for financial help to continue operations. They sought a sum equal to half the outlay and the losses already sustained, arguing prophetically that if the venture was allowed to fail it would put a stop to all such undertakings in the Highlands, possibly for centuries to come. The government, however, was unmoved and no grant was forthcoming. Both Dale and Macintosh appear finally to have withdrawn their support and in 1805 the mill was sold for £2,000, payable with interest in 10 years, to a Mr McFarlane, a cotton spinner from Glasgow. The surviving partners signed a

deed of renunciation assigning all their rights in the enterprise to Mr McFarlane. In 1806 the mill was destroyed by fire and never rebuilt. It seems that McFarlane was either unable or unwilling to repay the purchase price and the property reverted to one of the original partners, Dugald Gilchrist. In 1815 a Robert McKidd offered to buy the ruin and its associated buildings from Gilchrist. McKidd offered £2,000 with the intention of using the buildings for a tannery. There is no evidence that the offer was accepted. When Robert Southey saw the remains of the mill in 1819 it was "no more than a picturesque ruin attracting the eyes of curious travellers" - a description which fits it just as well today.

Although Macintosh placed the blame for the failure firmly on the poor attendance and application to work of the workforce who "never ... produced not more than ½ or ¾ as per Spindle [than] other ordinary works in this country" together with poor and over-indulgent management, typically Dempster would have none of this, and placed the cause of the failure firmly on the slump resulting from the Napoleonic war. He was deeply disappointed by the sale of the mill; although no longer a partner he had evidently continued to follow its fortunes with keen interest. On hearing of the sale of the mill he protested to Macintosh "Alas! Bonnie Spinningdale. Alas! Poor Sutherland. Oh, were you or I, either of us, or both together, Marquis of Stafford, this patriotic beginning of industry, riches and comfort, should not die of consumption or for want of sustenance". 15

Macintosh to Dempster, 11/12/1805: Dempster Papers 8/10.

Dempster to Macintosh, 1804: George Macintosh Biographical Memoir p.125 (quoted by Calder, p.177).

The failure of the cotton mill soon led to the decay of the village of Spinningdale, although its post office and role as a minor commercial centre have ensured its survival in some form to the present day. The houses built by Dempster in connection with the mill were far superior to those formerly in existence in the area and were afterwards taken over by farm workers. The projected village at Balnoe never seems to have amounted to much and apart from a warehouse completed by 1793, only one or two houses seem to have been built. In 1796 it was proposed to move the weaving manufacture from Balnoe to Spinningdale because of insufficient water power, much to Captain Dempster's disappointment. Captain Dempster's suggested use of horse or steam power was to no avail. In April 1800 a newspaper advertisement announced the imminent dissolution of the Balnoe Linen Company and the consequent sale of its bleachfield and weaving houses. By 1834 there was no village at all there, although the site was still being used as a shipping point for locally produced wool, corn, timber and so forth.

Even if the venture had been more successful to start with, and had been able to take advantage of the new roads and the Caledonian Canal built in the ensuing decades by Telford and giving readier access to Glasgow, centre of the cotton trade, it is most unlikely that it could have endured against the rapidly improving techniques and ever-changing machinery in the large-scale mills owned by the wealthy cotton businesses further south. The Stanley mill was in a considerably more favourable location and yet could not survive; it was even more difficult for the Spinningdale concern, located in the most remote part of the country, to do so.

Dempster enjoyed rather greater success with his programme of agricultural reforms at Skibo. The estate increased in prosperity quite dramatically during his ownership, as is evidenced by the contrasting accounts in the old and new *Statistical Accounts*. In the parish of Creich, where the bulk of the estate lay, rents were £1,195 in 1834, between a third and a half of the total for the entire parish. A half-century earlier the total rent for the Creich and Dornoch sections combined had been only £700. In 1834 it was stated that four large farms each paid rent of £150 per year and there were besides a great number of smallholdings also paying rent. The value of the estate had been further greatly enhanced by the large amount of tree planting that had taken place. Dempster in addition gained enormous popularity by resigning so many of his feudal rights and by granting security of tenure to as many of his tenants who wished to take advantage of it. Dempster himself remained utterly convinced of the rightness of his approach, both as regards his agricultural reforms and his attempt to introduce industry. He wrote to Macintosh:

"The late and great Lord Bolingbroke said that there was only himself and a Monsieur di Pauli fit to govern the world. Among ourselves I may say there are only myself and George Macintosh fit to improve the Highlands and protect their inhabitants. I have planted the waste lands with people; you have fed those people and given them profitable employment. I may say, without arrogance, had there been more George Macintoshes and George Dempsters in every parish in the Highlands, the wisdom of the legislature would not now have the painful task of contriving inefficacious means of preventing

the emigration of our bravest people, and the depopulation of a large tract of our kingdom." ¹⁶

The *New Statistical Account*, as do so many others, pays great tribute to Dempster for his patriotic example. The account for Dornoch, for example, concludes its description of the Dempsters:

"[George Dempster] was most active and assiduous in devising measures himself, and in encouraging measures planned by others, which had for their object the improvement of his native country. He took an active and leading part in promoting its manufactures, its fisheries, and its agriculture. He was a gentleman of great benevolence and suavity of manners. While he and his brother remained in Skibo, they were much respected by all ranks; and as landlords, they were kind and indulgent to their tenants." ¹⁷

This, I feel, provides a fitting epitaph for George Dempster's involvement with the Skibo estate.

¹⁷ NSA vol. 15 (1845), p.21.

Dempster to Macintosh, 1803: ibid, p.125 (quoted by Calder, p.184).

George Dempster and the Skibo Estate: Talk given at Carnegie Hall, Clashmore 15 April 2000

George Dempster: biographical details

- 1732 George Dempster was born into a wealthy Dundee merchant's family.
- 1748 Dempster commenced studies at St Andrews, later moving to Edinburgh to study for the Bar.
- 1754 On his father's death in a riding accident Dempster inherited a 6,000 acre estate at Dunnichen (near Forfar and about 12 miles north of Dundee).
- 1755 Dempster admitted to the Faculty of Advocates.
- 1760 Dempster commenced his political career.
- 1761-1790 Dempster was MP for the Perth district of burghs. He combined this with innumerable other activities, becoming a proprietor (shareholder) and on two occasions also a director of the East India Company; playing a major part in the introduction of the cotton industry into Scotland; and founding the Dundee Bank. He also promoted the establishment of lighthouses around the Scottish coasts and gave great encouragement to the Scottish fishing industry both by opposing the crippling salt laws and by playing a leading role in the establishment of the British Fisheries Society. In addition he supported and promoted schemes for the development of roads in the Highlands and in the vicinity of Dunnichen. He was responsible also for the introduction of cold-storage into the British fishing industry.
- 1790-1818 After leaving Parliament Dempster devoted his life to <u>agricultural innovation</u> and <u>improvement</u>, both at Dunnichen and at Skibo, an estate in Sutherland which he and his half-brother acquired in 1786.
- 1818 Dempster died at Dunnichen.

Skibo - key dates leading up to Dempster's purchase

- 1211 First recorded, in a grant of lands made by Hugo Freskyn to his kinsman Gilbert, Archdeacon of Moray.
- 1223-1688 Residence of the Bishops of Caithness for all or most of this time.
- Late 16th-late 18th centuries Owned by the Gray family.
- July 1786 Purchased by George Dempster.

The Skibo purchase - key dates

25 October 1785 - Dempster's half-brother, Captain John Hamilton Dempster, marries Jean Fergusson, niece of Dempster's oldest friend, Sir Adam Fergusson of Kilkerran.

July 1786 - Skibo purchased by George Dempster.

October 1786 - Birth of Captain and Jean Dempster's son, George.

1789 - Dempster purchases Pulrossie estate, adjoining Skibo.

1791 - Ownership of Pulrossie transferred from Dempster to Captain Dempster.

1796 - Captain Dempster purchases Over-Skibo, another adjoining estate.

Note on relative monetary values: very roughly, eighteenth-century monetary values should be multiplied by 100 to give their present day equivalent. Thus, the £11,500 paid for Skibo would be worth about £1.15 million today.

The Skibo improvements

- i. The Statistical Account of Scotland (generally referred to as the First Statistical Account, or Old Statistical Account) was edited by Sir John Sinclair and published in 21 volumes between 1791 and 1799. Initiated and masterminded by Sinclair himself, it comprised a description of the salient facts about every Scottish parish written usually by the minister to the parish. It comprises an invaluable historical source and its success led to the publication of a second series of 15 volumes (referred to as the Second, or New, Statistical account), in 1845. In the present century a Third Statistical Account has been in preparation.
- ii. Personal Services The principal personal services comprised:

Thirlage, whereby when the proprietor of an estate built a corn mill on it, all the tenants had to use it, and no other (usually resulting in the tenants having to pay an exorbitant charge to the miller for having their corn ground);

Bonnage, whereby the tenant was obliged to cut down the proprietor's corn (usually ahead of his own); and

Carriage, which involved transporting materials or produce on behalf of the proprietor, and generally carrying out his errands.

In addition, on the estate one blacksmith had the monopoly right to do business on the estate, for which he paid the proprietor a rent and, again, typically charged excessive prices to the tenant; and other various services were usually required of the tenant, such as digging and fetching peat, carrying and spreading dung, and generally undertaking any necessary work for the proprietor.

- iii Key dates for Skibo improvements:
 - 1787 Abolition of Personal Services; granting of the Constitution of Criech.
 - 1791 Commencement of the plan to build manufacturing villages.
 - 1792 Signing of the contract of partnership for The Balnoe Company.
 - 1794 Spinningdale Mill completed.

The end of Dempster's involvement with Skibo

1790 - First signs of Jean Hamilton Dempster's illness.

5 May 1798 - Death of Jean.

October 1800 - Death of Captain Dempster at sea. Skibo inherited by his daughter Harriet and her husband, William Soper-Dempster.

17 March 1801 - Death of George Hamilton Dempster.

1805 - Sale of Spinningdale Mill.

1806 - Destruction of the Mill by fire.

July 1809 - July 1810 - Dempster's last visit to Skibo.

17 October 1810 - Death of Harriet Soper-Dempster.