

A Scotsman's Log

By Wilfred Taylor

DORNOCH, Friday

Cathedral

It was windless and peaceful at eight o'clock this morning in the neat bijou metropolis of Sutherland. The sky was a translucent grey and little waves rolled up the Dornoch Firth and into the Kyle of Sutherland. From the smooth green fairways of the Royal Dornoch Golf Course to the little gardens everything in sight was trim and tidy. We thought that the doors of the cathedral, facing a row of pollarded trees and a stretch of green turf, were closed, but when we pushed them they opened easily. We stepped inside and slowly walked around. It is a tiny cathedral as cathedrals go, but deeply impressive. It has a long pre-Reformation history and has been restored many times. The walls are covered with plaques and memorials—one of them to Dr Bentinck, a famous minister.

We paused by the font, where the baby daughter of Mr Pearce, the manager of the Dornoch Hotel, where we had spent our first night, had been christened just 11 weeks ago by the Rev. Mr Fulton—a man, we were told, who writes in a beautiful script. On the wall behind the font is a simple tablet. This carries a moving tribute from the Royal Norwegian Brigade who had their training schools in Dornoch during the war. These soldiers were made happy in their exile and they found Christian fellowship in the little "House of God."

Beauty

This has been a wonderful season for the gorse in this part of Sutherland. As we drove from Arday through Spinningdale to Dornoch the quiet landscape everywhere was splashed with gold. If the gorse is there in profusion the summer visitors are not. Last year was a bumper year for holidaymakers but up to now things have been rather slack on the tourist front.

We came out of the cathedral gently meditating on the past. Over the shining sands and calm waters we could see the houses of Tain and the

long, low peninsula stretching out to the lofty lighthouse at Tarbat Ness, the light of which we used to pick out some summers ago from Findochty, far away on the dimly-seen Moray coast.

The little town was waking up. People came to their doorsteps with brooms. One of them was sweeping the entrance to the City Chambers, or whatever they are called—a small hall housing the Carnegie Library erected in 1906. Andrew Carnegie then had 13 years to live and he must have been a familiar figure in Dornoch when he drove in from nearby Skibo Castle.

History

The gentleman with the broom was Mr Ross, who, quite recently, was appointed with his wife joint caretaker of the hall and library. We fell into conversation with him by the side of the little burn which flows slowly through the cathedral city. Until recently he had been gardener in the estate belonging to the late Lord Rothermere. Dornoch has its golf and newspaper links (the valley of the River Fleet is not far away). Fewer than 1000 people dwell in pretty Dornoch.

According to Mr Ross, who informed us that the place is steeped in history, there is no staple industry here. The industrial capital of Sutherland appears to be Brora. Part of the county's administration is centred in Dornoch, with its sheriff court. A fine modern senior secondary school is being built—one of three new schools in the county. There are two hostels for children from outlying parts; the girls' hostel next door to the Dornoch Hotel commands a superb vista of water, sky and hills.

Dornoch claims several "lasts" to its credit. The last witch to be burned in Scotland suffered for her sorcery here. Apparently she was burned in what is now the garden of the golf professional. A stone marks the spot. A last man was also hanged near what is now the boys' hostel. (Whether he was the last to be hanged

in Scotland or Sutherland or Dornoch we are not clear). And one of the last wolves was despatched in these terminal parts.

Name

Mr Ross proved to be a mine of information and gave us his interpretation of the derivation of the name Dornoch. As we took it from him the Danes and the Sutherlands fought a ferocious battle long ago. The top Dane knocked the sword out of the hand of the top Sutherland and was about to exterminate him when the top Sutherland picked up the leg-bone of a horse which happened to be lying around and knocked the Dane cold with it. A horse's leg bone or hoof is a "dornoch" in Gaelic, but we may have got the story muddled. After all it was just half-past-eight in the morning.

Sutherland is a huge square lump of a county which straddles the country from East coast to West coast. It is the county of the clearances and, alas, the population is down to about 13,500. It is a beautiful and a haunting county filled with ancestral memories and with memorials to the fighting Seaforths. It abounds in majestic mountains, lonely lochs and delectable kyles. Over large parts of it the Dukes of Sutherland and Westminster held sway.

To us there is something uncommonly attractive about the little coastal towns in the east of the county—Dornoch and Brora and Golspie. By comparison with the villages in the wild and woolly west they have a gently sophisticated appeal. It is surprising that they are not more popular with holidaymakers.

Adieu

And so we say farewell to sweet little Dornoch where the people are great readers of books in Mr Ross's library. At the end of our brief visit it struck us as a happy place with its well-kept gardens, its wide clean streets and its air of repose and contentment. It reminds us just a little of Haddington.