

[Northern Ensign and Weekly Gazette, Thursday 15 December 1864](#)

ATROCIOUS MURDER AT DORNOCH. THE county of Sutherland, the most remarkable in Great Britain for the lightness of its criminal calendar, has this week, for the first time for many years, been disgraced by the perpetration of a murder rivalling in atrocity most of those that have of late been committed. The foul deed, perpetrated on the person of a respectable and aged female, was done at Dornoch on the night between Friday and Saturday last, without the slightest provocation or justification, and is almost without a parallel in the history of crimes of blood. The full details, pending official investigation, are not ripe for public disclosure; but we believe the following are the leading facts of the case:— Between 2 and 3 o'clock on Saturday morning a young married man, named Alex. Ross, a native of Dornoch, while in a state of intoxication, went to the house in the burgh occupied by Mrs Sutherland and others, and alarmed the inmates by drawing up the lower sash of a window in the house. In the room occupied by Mrs Sutherland there were two persons sleeping, Mrs Sutherland and a young girl, the latter of whom escaped by a back window in her night dress on hearing the noise, and running to the next house, alarmed the inmates, who had only recently gone to bed. While raising the alarm, the girl observed a light in another house, and running there, she obtained entrance, and apprised the inmates that a man had entered the house of Mrs Sutherland, and was then in it. For some unexplained reason no one went to Mrs Sutherland's assistance, nor was the girl allowed to go to the house till nearly 6 o'clock in the morning, the hour of the north mail's arrival, when the master of the house to which the girl ran went and informed a relative of Mrs Sutherland's of the girl's statement. Both then went to the house, and forcing open the door they entered thereon, and found Mrs Sutherland lying on the floor in her night dress, dead, and Ross lying and sleeping by her side. The police-constable's house being next door, Ross was immediately taken in charge, and he has since been committed to prison. He gives no intelligible account of himself; but it is believed that while under the influence of drink, and ignorant of the hour, he had gone to the house to visit the girl, with whom he had some previous acquaintance. The body underwent a post mortem examination by Drs Ellison of Tain and Souter of Golspie, who have reported that Mrs Sutherland, who is 75 years of age, died from violence, and there is no reason to doubt that a foul murder was committed. Mrs Sutherland was mother of Mrs Gunn of the Dornoch Inn, and was a native of Caithness. Ross is a slater to trade, and has hitherto borne a good character. As may be imagined, this dreadful affair has excited an intense feeling in the district, and beyond the locality there are absurd rumours as to the condition of the body on being found. These will, however, be set at rest when the precognition into the whole case is brought to a close.

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[Banffshire Journal and General Advertiser, Tuesday 25 April 1865](#)

THE DORNOCH MURDER.

Alexander Ross, a young man, was charged with the crime of murder, in so far as, on the 9th or 10th day of December 1864, he lifted the sash window in the house premises in or near the town of Dornoch, in the parish of Dornoch, and county of Sutherland, then occupied by the now deceased Elizabeth Geddes or Sutherland, widow, person of upwards of seventy years of age, and enter thereat, and seek and invade the said Elizabeth Geddes or Sutherland in her own house, and did wickedly and feloniously attack and assault the said Elizabeth Geddes or Sutherland, and with his fist strike her one or more blows to the face, and with a walking-stick, or other weapon, to the prosecutor unknown, strike and wound her on the head, or knock or throw her against a table or upon the floor, and injure her head, and lacerate and abuse her, and put her in great fear and alarm of her person and her life, and keep her lying the said floor while in her night-dress, exposed to the cold, wholly regardless of the consequences; and in consequence of the said invasion of the house or premises she occupied, and the terror occasioned to the said Elizabeth Geddes or Sutherland by his said conduct, and the injuries or injury inflicted on her by him as aforesaid, and the shock to her system resulting therefrom, and from the said exposure to cold, or from one or more of these

causes, the said Elizabeth Geddes or Sutherland immediately or soon thereafter died, and was thus murdered by the said Alexander Ross.

Mr Asher, for the prisoner, gave in a plea of culpable homicide.

The Advocate-Depute intimated his acceptance of the plea.

Mr Asher, in extenuation, briefly recapitulated the facts, and stated that the prisoner was in a helpless state of intoxication so as to be ignorant of where he was. He had no motive, and no malice towards Mrs Sutherland. The death of the woman had resulted solely from the unfortunate intoxication of the panel. It was not one of those serious cases of culpable homicide which the Court had often to deal with. The panel was in a state of entire unconsciousness, and did not know where he was, nor yet did he know what he was doing. In a charge such as this he asked his Lordship to take the plea of drunkenness into account. The learned counsel then read a certificate from about fifty individuals in the district, in favour of the prisoner's character.

Lord Cowan said that the crime to which the prisoner had pled guilty was one of a very aggravated character. The law could not regard drunkenness as an excuse, but the Court was willing to take into consideration the hitherto good character borne by the prisoner. This was a crime for which the longest term of imprisonment could be awarded, but in this case the Court would merely award a sentence of fifteen years' penal servitude.

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