

CATHEDRAL MINISTER IN FIGHT FOR ACADEMY

"Infringement of a Precious Heritage"

In a sermon in Dornoch Cathedral recently the minister, the Rev. F. H. Fulton, talked about Sutherland Education Committee's proposal to downgrade Dornoch Academy.

Mr Fulton began, "There is a text in the prophecy of the Old Testament which, whatever its exact interpretation, does seem strangely apposite to the serious situation which is threatening our beloved town and its environs just now. You will find it in the Book of Jeremiah, the twelfth chapter and the ninth verse:—'Mine heritage is unto me as a speckled bird: the birds round about are against her'.

"In the manse garden, for some years, there has been a family of blackbirds nesting who are not just the sober-garbed examples of their species you would expect. They have a special inheritance of gleaming white feathers amongst the black, of which, no doubt, they are quite proud; but it brings them little joy because the other blackbirds are always pecking at them until by the end of the season they are quite bedraggled, having lost much of their finery."

Mr Fulton then referred to the fact that up and down the country newly elected councils had gone to church to be "kirked", "a gracious and commendable custom." Dornoch Town Council had attended worship in the Free Church. "We have remembered them in our prayers just now," said Mr Fulton.

"More than ever will this council need our support, as not only have they been entrusted by us with a notable part of our heritage but they will have to try their utmost in the next weeks to preserve one of the most important aspects of it against all-comers — namely, the provision of senior secondary education in the county town.

PROUD HERITAGE

'Just as the prophet Jeremiah complained to God of the desolation of his wonderful heritage centred on Jerusalem by the inroads of his greedy compatriots who have sown wheat but will reap thorns, so do we in Dornoch complain of the many infringements of our precious heritage by those whose heritage it ought also to be.

"For indeed our heritage is one to be proud of and one not lightly to be given up. No one would question the civilising influence of the Christian Church in the Dark and Middle Ages. By the year 550, if not before, Christianity was well established here and a Christian settlement lived and worshipped slightly east of where we are just now.

"Where throughout Sutherland and Caithness all was wassailing and war, here in Dornoch, called Dornoch even then, the gentle arts of peace were taught and the service due to the Prince of Peace declared. In this little oasis were to be found scholarship and music and the art and illumination, and from this centre the fuldee monks fared forth as far as Caithness and Orkney on Christ's work bent.

"Centuries later the character of Dornoch and its traditions must have still been here, and this, no doubt, led St Gilbert to choose to build this cathedral church in which it is our great privilege to worship Sunday by Sunday, from which to organise and administer in parishes the whole of Sutherland and Caithness. It is in a very real sense the mother church of the North and round its precincts the burgh of Dornoch, as we know it, has grown up.

"Beyond its suburbs, in medieval times, clan feuds, vendettas, cattle

rieving and burnings of the thatch were everyday occurrences; within its purlieu law and order was maintained by bishop, dean and chapter, courts and counsellors of the bishop's burgh, and children were educated at the school. From this shore boats sailed to places such as Aberdeen and St Andrews and Edinburgh, over the seas to European seats of learning and to Rome itself; while from the monastery of the Red Friars on schoolhill, the means were found to ransom prisoners of war from Saracen and Moorish hands.

NEW ERA

"Our heritage was even then 'as a speckled bird', and in 1570 the 'birds' of Strathnaver and Caithness swooped down in envy leaving the cathedral and burgh in ruins.

"When one of the distinguished former pupils of Dornoch School, Sir Robert Gordon, obtained from King Charles I a royal charter for the burgh in 1628, a new era of comparative prosperity began not only for Dornoch but for the county of Sutherland, whose chief market it became. It was complete with provost and bailies, sheriff and commissioner to Parliament. From being in pre-Reformation times the city of the north it had become the county town of Sutherland.

"Later, with the discovery of the benefit to health of sea-air and seawater and the enterprising reconstruction and enlargement of the ancient golf course on the links (as we know), it became a 'favourite' holiday resort for the discerning, bringing in their train money, and hotels, and now caravans.

EDUCATION NOT NEGLECTED

"But all the time education was not neglected, and bigger and better schools succeeded each other, culminating five years ago in the magnificent new academy, considered sufficiently important for a Queen to open. Under its first-class rector and staff the education offered is second to none in the North. Alas! Our educational heritage, as once our ecclesiastical, has become a 'speckled bird' and we find 'the birds round about are against her'.

"Here is our heritage—1400 years of religious ordinances continuously administered in this place and possibly as many years of schooling, with a history of law and order and local government centuries older than anywhere else in the county.

FOR COUNTY'S SAKE

"And yet the county town would seem to be of so little importance in the county and its heritage so little shared or known that the powers that be can actually contemplate the needless downgrading of its excellent and widely-known Academy and thus leave it probably the only county town in the British Isles without a senior secondary or full comprehensive school; to say nothing of depriving the young people of the county of the benefits of the long traditions of our school, and the inspiration of belonging within these venerable walls where so many of them over the years have contributed greatly to the praise of the sanctuary and other work of the church.

"Indeed, our heritage is as 'a speckled bird' and we must pray that this time the other birds may see the dangers of what they are contemplating before it is too late. Not only for the sake of Dornoch must we strive, but for the sake of Sutherland as well.

"A county that does not support, and use, and increase its county town reflects no credit on itself and loses much."