

Bonnie Spinningdale

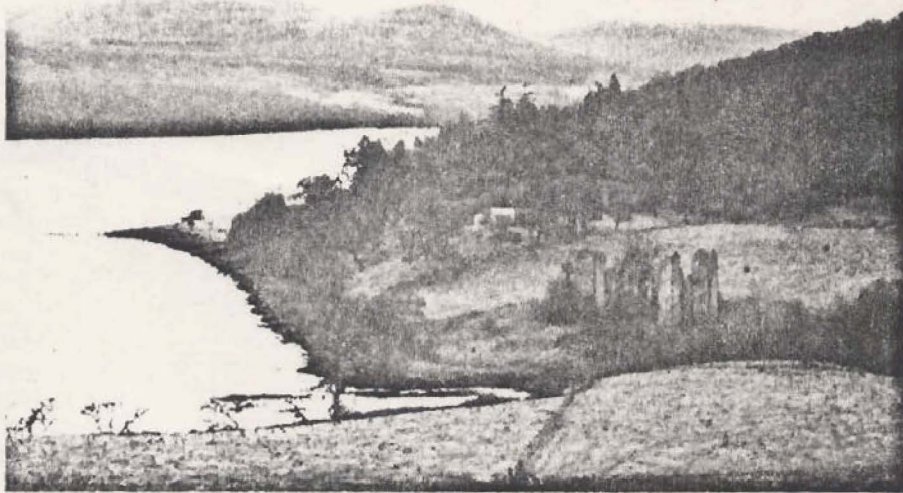
A Highland Cotton Mill 1792-1806

By Clair B. Calder

Towards the end of the eighteenth century the booming new cotton mills of Lanarkshire and of Stanley in Perthshire attracted many poor Highland people southwards. Others, desperate for a better life, set out on the hazardous journey across the Atlantic. Writing in the Old Statistical Account, the ministers of the Sutherland parishes of Golspie, Farr, and Tongue reasoned that prosperity could come to their people on their native soil if only manufacturing could be introduced. In the nearby parish of Creich another man was of a similar mind, a man possessed of great optimism, and with a remarkable affection for the people of his recently adopted county of Sutherland. Unlike the ministers this man had sufficient power, money and tenacity of purpose to do something about it.

Having bought in 1786 the estate of Skibo, later to become the Scottish home of Andrew Carnegie, George Dempster immediately set out to give what he called a "constitution" to the people on his land. While his mighty neighbour on the vast Sutherland estates was starting the infamous policy which became known as the "Clearances," Dempster set out to give long leases to his tenants, assuring people for their lifetime of their houses gardens and arable land. He was quick to realise that despite his "constitution" his tenants continued to rely upon a subsistence economy, and he looked around for means to improve their lot. The obvious answer was a cotton manufactory, the main ingredients for which, in addition to capital, were a head of water, cheap labour and ease of access by water transport. Through his rose-tinted spectacles Dempster saw in his estate on the Dornoch Firth the ideal site for such a venture.

Thus it is that today tourists arriving in the picturesque hamlet of Spinningdale are delighted to find what most of them take to be a ruined castle, but they are wrong. What they see is the shell of the old cotton spinning mill, bearing witness to the hopes and the disappointments of these far away years. With a beauty rare to industrial structures, it stands among green meadows near the sea shore. Its charming setting and the lofty dignity of the



The ruins of the Spinningdale Mill on the Dornoch Firth.

old building suggest nothing of the ugliness and the squalor associated with the Industrial Revolution. Its basic shape is a rectangle of 73 feet in length and 37 feet in width, and in one or two places the walls still stand four storeys high. At the south-east corner a large, three sided bay juts out from the rest of the structure. Here was the formal entrance to the mill, adorned by three graceful arched windows, each contained within two smaller windows. These threw light on the spiral staircase, and surmounting the topmost window was a large circular clock, the weathered face of which is still a feature of the ruin.

What of the people who planned and built and laboured in this long silent and lonely place? George Dempster we have already met. One of his first steps was to get George Mackintosh, the Glasgow manufacturer, to visit Skibo. This he did in 1791, and there "the plan was concerted." Mackintosh must have persuaded the famous David Dale to participate in the venture, for although the latter never visited Skibo, he and Mackintosh became the leading and most faithful partners. Dale, Mackintosh and Dempster were figures of national importance, and among those who joined them were other men of note. Robert Dunmore sprang from a

family most active in Glasgow-Virginia trade and "esteemed the very chief of the old tobacco lords." James and William Robertson were brothers of John Robertson of Glasgow, the owner of extensive West Indian possessions and the manager of the Glasgow Arms Bank. Robert Bogle was son of George Bogle, a Virginia merchant and a partner in the Glasgow Tanwork and the Eastern Sugarhouse. Robert Mackie was a West India merchant.

These along with another ten partners, including several from the county of Sutherland, subscribed a total of £3000, and so the Balnoe Company was launched to construct a cotton spinning mill at Spinningdale, near Skibo in the county of Sutherland.

Perhaps we might here digress a little to look more closely at these names, Balnoe and Spinningdale. Balnoe is derived from the Gaelic "baile nuadh" meaning new town, and in devising this name there is little doubt that Dempster envisaged a town in the real sense of the word, and with boundless optimism considered it almost a reality, writing in 1792, "We have lotted out a seaport town that will adorn the coast of Sutherland and enrich its fields. The town is nearly finished, wanting now nothing but houses and inhabitants." The name Spinningdale would appear

to owe its origins to the spinning mill, but this was not so. Centuries before the mill was built the village was variously recorded as Spengoodall, Spainzidell, Spinziedale and Spinningdale. Even the eminent writer Robert Southey was hoodwinked by the name when he passed that way in 1819, writing: "We pass across Spinning Dale, so named with double reference to the site and to himself by David Dale of New Lanark. . . He thought that a manufactory of the wool of the country might be established here. . . but after sinking about £20,000 he found the Yorkshire clothiers could afford to undersell him." So many ill-founded suppositions in so few lines written within a generation of the mill's heyday cast very serious doubts on Southey's reliability as an investigator and reporter!

Dated Dornoch, May 17th 1792, the following item appeared in the Glasgow Advertiser and Evening Intelligence of June 18-22 1792: "This day the foundation stone of a cotton manufactory was laid at Spinningdale in the County of Sutherland, by John Barclay Esq. This business is established by George Dempster Esq. of Skibo, and a number of patriotic gentlemen in Glasgow and the neighbourhood with the laudable intention of preventing emigration by employing the people of this long neglected country at home. It is hoped that the example of these philanthropic gentlemen will be followed by others establishing woollen and other manufactures in the neighbourhood." All building seems to have been completed by the end of 1794, when we find George Dempster writing: "Our Glasgow friends have also adorned its banks (the Dornoch Firth) with a palace cotton mill, round which a little town is rising tolerably fast, for there are already ten houses in it." Including the large water wheel, water trink (mill race) and ark (wheel housing), the four storey mill, a slated stove and washing house, two slated weaving houses, a barrack for workers, a smithy, a timber bridge over the burn (creek); and the repair of an old house for the manager and servants, the total construction costs came to £2,112.4.8½.

In addition to the buildings, machin-



The clock tower of the Spinningdale Mill. The circle above the arched window is the clock which didn't show the time of day but the hours the mill machinery ran during any given day.

ery had to be bought and installed. This included two large carding engines, one picking engine, one billie engine, one drawing frame, one roving frame, ten common jennies of 96 spindles, two slabbing jennies, three large mules for fine twist and one stretching frame. Thus before any work had been done, expenditure was considerably in excess of subscribed capital, and it required an advance of £728.1.7 from the Bank of Scotland in Tain to make ends meet. Thus before it really started the Balnoe Company was in debt, a state in which it continued throughout the years of its short existence.

Mr. John Ramsay had been appointed manager by the spring of 1792. Macintosh thought most highly of him: "Ramsay is a young man on whose principles of honour, integrity, attention and sobriety we may all place unlimited confidence. . . he is an excellent cotton spinner. . . he has a very useful mechanical genius. . . he is good at manufacturing and keeping books and accounts." Along with Ramsay from the Glasgow area came others of number unknown to instruct in the crafts of spinning and weaving. Twenty

eight apprentices were recruited locally, but as the novelty wore off and young men became aware of the restriction and monotony of factory life, they began to show their preference for the excitement and the glamour of the regiment. Indeed problems of labour and capital quickly began to threaten the enterprise. The Glasgow partners, debating in 1795 on the advisability of carrying on, blamed the local people for being unappreciative of the business "started by benevolent and friendly motives, but which the country people through indolence and want of experience do not seem ready to encourage by coming cheerfully forward to learn the weaving and spinning trades, and thereby earn money by labour and industry." The reluctance of the Spinningdale people to imprison themselves in a mill should have caused little surprise. A sympathiser with their feelings wrote: "Why should an active man be doomed to finger among paltry cotton threads, in the midst of noisy, evil smelling machinery, when the partridge and the muir hen are on the wing, the trout and salmon leaping in loch and river, and the broom bushes are gleaming like beaten gold." To people accustomed to regard time as an elastic commodity the clock on the mill must have meant unnatural adjustments!

Despite these difficulties, the enterprise struggled on. By 1795 the jennies were at work spinning yarn, and about thirty looms turned out "pulicates" in the shape of cotton handkerchiefs, "being the article at present reckoned most advisable to make and most calculated for a new manufactory." Regular monthly supplies of these manufactures were exported via the ports of Leith and Grangemouth. Maximum wages for labourers were 8 pence per day in summer and 6 pence per day in winter. Supplies of raw cotton were brought in by sea, and presumably these were transhipped from Glasgow or Leith. It would be nice to think that occasionally a tall ship direct from the Carolinas dropped anchor in the Dornoch Firth with a cargo of cotton for Spinningdale, but of this there is no evidence. Certainly, however it arrived there, the cotton spun and woven in Spinningdale

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originated in the very young United States of America.

The mill continued to lose money, and in 1803 Mackintosh and Dale appealed to the government for help to continue the work. This they did through Thomas Telford, asking for a sum equal to half the outlay and the losses sustained. This was not an unreasonable request to a government anxious to find means of preventing emigration from the Highlands. In his letter to Telford, Mackintosh made a forecast which has proved most accurate: "If this attempt were abandoned, it would put a final stop to all such undertakings in the Highlands for a length of time to come, perhaps for centuries." The reply sounded the death knell for Spinningdale: "The government cannot interfere, and the money voted for the Scotch improvements is to be applied for specific purposes of a general nature." Such gobbledy-gook language rivals that of more recent generations of civil servants!

In 1804 Dale prevailed upon the reluctant Mackintosh to sell the mill. George Dempster was heavy with disappointment. To Mackintosh he wrote: "Alas! Bonnie Spinningdale. Alas! Poor Sutherland." No record of the purchaser or of the price paid for the mill has come to light. Indeed it may not have been sold at all. Local tradition and what literary evidence there is suggest that it was sold very cheaply, and that the purchaser may have been more interested in insurance than in manufacturing. In any case in 1806 a great fire gutted the four storey mill, and all was at an end.

Today the interior of the mill shell is piled with fallen masonry, from which emerges the part of one cast iron wheel about four feet in diameter and geared on the circumference. Nothing else of the former contents may be seen, although doubtless the rubble hides other bits of machinery. Within living memory local people have found and broken off pieces of metal to use as anvils. Neighbourhood tradition has it that the mill had a system of central heating, and this is more or less verified by a letter which George Dempster wrote at Skibo in 1794: "I turn the leaf to tell you of a curious experiment I am trying at Dunnichen (his other home in Angus). . . to heat the saloon, dining room, drawing room, and principal bed

chambers, by means of an oven that bakes the air and diffuses it in tubes thro' all the house. Our cotton mill here is warmed in that way. One oven bakes more air than is sufficient in half an hour to make a storey of the mill too hot for human habitation. The contrivance is perfectly simple and the expense nothing. I venture to foretell that in the houses of the next generation there will be but two fires. . . one in the kitchen and one in the air oven. The following generation may well be satisfied with one, and our friends Harry Patullo and John Cochrane would have added, 'And by God the third generation will have no fires at all. . . but I am a rational projector and don't go quite so far'."

Some other interesting local beliefs and anecdotes about the Spinningdale mill have come to light. It is said that a "gravity feed" system was used, the raw cotton being hauled to the top floor, and then being processed downwards through the four storeys. The clock is said to have been linked to the mill machinery and worked only when the wheels were turning. Thus it showed not the time of day but the number of hours which had been worked.

Some people claim to have seen special "mill money," found when ploughing the fields near the mill. One of the most intriguing pieces of folklore is a poem, only two verses of which are hazily remembered:

*"I will not praise George Stephenson
Nor will I Watt nor Brown,
For all their steam inventions
Have spoiled our bonnie town.
Our bleaching greens extending
From the new bridge to the oak,
And upwards through (Dalrymple?)
Street
To Morgans in Kyleoag.*

How did the steam engine spoil the "bonnie town"? The likely answer is that the new source of power banished any slight hope that the mill might be rebuilt. Or did the steam engine really come to Spinningdale and cause the fire which brought all to an end? Whatever was in the mind of the unknown rhymers, he knew something of the disappointment that came to George Mackintosh and George Dempster, who had the welfare of the Highland people in their hearts. A few years after the mill went up in flames, Dempster himself turned

poet, and in verse delivered a veiled broadside at the Sutherland Estate and its immensely wealthy owner, the Marquis of Stafford, (later to become the first Duke of Sutherland) who could have saved the whole venture with a minute fraction of his vast resources:

*"I who erst saved the Highlanders
from want,
And taught them to plough, to build
and plant,
Attack'd the feudal dragon in his
den,
And of his slaves made valiant
Highland men;
Illum'd by night their seas, and coast,
and bays,
With all the splendour of a noontide
blaze;
Of seaport towns the first foundations
laid,
Towns, the resort of freedom, arts
and trade;
Plann'd a canal with many a costly
lock,
Surpassing far the coast of
Languedock;
Tho' old still active in the Highland
cause,
I drew my pen to give it English laws;
In vain I tried the Highlanders to
keep
From being devour'd by flocks of
Lowland sheep;
But rage for rent extinguished every
thought
For men who bravely had our battles
fought."*

Pennsylvania Scottish Fair

The First Highland Watch of Pennsylvania will sponsor the 15th annual Bucks County Scottish Country Fair in Pipersville on September 17. The fair will feature massed bands solo piping fiddling demonstrations, Highland and country dancing and a special performance by the Tannahill Weavers.

For more information contact Richard B. Childs, 6476 Lawnto Street, Philadelphia, PA 19128.