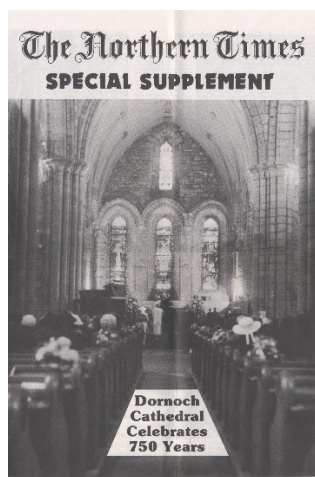




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*‘Jimmy Henderson Speaks Out’
talk by
Jimmy Henderson
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Many thanks ladies and gentlemen for turning out on a lovely summer's evening, and especially with the opposition of the pipe band. So hopefully, I don't think they've stolen any of my audience. Well, I'm not going to bore you, but just simply to talk about newspapers generally, it's been my life over 55 years, with three newspapers.

The first was the John O'Groats Journal in Wick, where I started, then I was with the Daily Express for 22 and a half years, and then finally with the Northern Times for 21. Since my retirement, I've been very busy as a freelance journalist, working for television and radio, and I'm still quite active, happily. It's the sort of job you can do until you drop pretty well, and that's what I intend to do.

So it's been a very satisfactory life from that point of view. You'll note I'm not of large stature; I sit here like a gnome at the end of the table, and I'll tell you my best story now, though I was going to keep it to the last. I was once invited to talk at a meeting of the Clan Gunn Society in Wick, and these Gunns came worldwide, from Canada, New Zealand, Australia, all over. I'd been invited to toast the guests at the very end. Well, the point was, anyway, that when I

got up, since nobody could see me, I stood up on my chair to address this gathering of Gunns worldwide, and said I was hugely qualified to be there, because my mother's father was a Gunn, my father's mother was a Gunn, so I was really a double-barrelled gun. And because I was the last speaker of the evening, I was the tail gunner. But Lord Thurso, the late Lord Thurso, John Thurso's father, who was a former Spitfire pilot and was chairing this particular gathering, looked up at me and in his drawl said, *"No, no, you're more of a sawn-off gun"*. So that went down rather well.

Ever since I was a very tiny guy, and that's a long time ago, I was always interested in newspapers. So when I was at high school in Wick, I used to contribute football match reports and bits of poetry and the occasional short story to the John O'Groats Journal. And I took great delight in a little stanza from Robert Burns' epistle to James Smith, in which he said;

*'The star that rules my luckless lot Has fated me the russet coat
An' damn'd my fortune to the groat
But, in riquit, has blessed me with a random shot
O'countra, wit.'*

So I hope that's true, and of course it was the very apposite, because I was going to join the Groat (John O' Groats Journal). I was heading for St. Andrews University to do classics and probably fulfil my grandmother's ambition of becoming a minister. But the editor of the John O'Groats Journal approached me at the end of school holidays, when I was due to have a break before going off to university, and asked me if I'd like to come on board as a trainee reporter when I was 17. So this is how I started in journalism. I had a couple of years there with The Groat before I went away on national service. I did two years in the Army and went to Brecon in Wales to join the Welsh Regiment. I ultimately transferred to the Army Education Corps. When I wanted to go to the Far East at government expense, and a colleague wanted a compassionate posting back to Elgin in Morayshire, where he was the sole support of his widowed mother, the Army, in its wisdom, sent me to Inverness and him to Singapore. That's the way it goes.

So I spent 18 months of my national service in Cameron Barracks in Inverness teaching illiterate soldiers how to read and write. At that particular time, the drafts of national servicemen were coming in with their father away at the war, their mother had probably been in a munitions factory or working in war work in the cities, Liverpool, Glasgow, Edinburgh. And then they were being drafted into Fort George for the infantry and they couldn't write home. They were unable to put pen to paper. They could play darts, they could count, they could bet on horses and do all the very adult things. But what they couldn't do was actually convey any expression on paper.

Now the Army was the only organisation in those days that took on board the business of adult basic education. As a result, they formed this full core of Army Education instructors. We were all given the honorary rank of sergeant to give us a bit of authority and our job was to teach these boys how to read and write. And you know we were able to achieve incredible results within three months because they were so keen to learn to be able to write home. And what satisfaction you get. I mean, no teacher even today can enjoy the same satisfaction, I'm sure, of seeing an illiterate boy coming in at one end and coming out the

other end of the sausage machine able to write home to his mum and dad. So that was a particularly satisfying period in my life away from newspapers.

Then I came back to the John O'Groats Journal, to finish off my five years apprenticeship. There. Then I was fortunate to get a post at Inverness with the Scottish Daily Express, which was then the premier Scottish daily paper. When it was absolutely at its apogee it was selling 600,000 copies in Scotland alone. That worked out, in a population of 5 million, as going into almost every household. The Daily Express in those days was so powerful and strong.

It was in the days when the Express, many of you will remember, was a broadsheet. None of this tabloid nonsense that it deteriorated into eventually and now it is a very minor player in a very big game against the Sun and the Daily Mirror. So during all those 22 years with the Express mainly, I went from Inverness to Glasgow, Glasgow to Edinburgh, Edinburgh to Aberdeen, Aberdeen to Edinburgh again, but my main source of activity was really in Glasgow.

Appallingly, in 1974, the entire empire crumbled and the Beaverbrook Press decided to withdraw entirely from their Scottish operation and print the paper in Manchester. This was because of dreadful union pressures. By then, the print unions had become very, very strong. They were able to wag the dog in a big way. They told the managers when they wanted the paper to appear and when they didn't. We had 50 stoppages in one year, which meant that almost every week the paper failed on one day to come out. And this is how you lose your readership. People have no time for it. Remember, the Times disappeared for a year due to industrial action, and it took a long time for it to build up its circulation again, and it hasn't achieved its figure even now, selling at a very cheap price.

So the unions were tremendously strong and they were able to force the management into a situation where they finally said, well, we're going to cut and run. So out of a nominal role of employees in Scotland of 2,000, the Daily Express downsized its staff to 70, of which I was fortunately one. So I was retained in Glasgow doing the jobs of seven others on the previous regime, and that was quite impossible. We ended up also doing linkages with Manchester, so I landed up in Manchester for a period between 1974 and 75. Then out of the blue came this offer of a job in Golspie. It was like manna from heaven from my point of view because I was getting fed up with the big national daily newspapers, the way that they worked and the way that the pressures were on you. Someone told me that a very well-known and revered journalist called Bruce Weir was planning to retire. He had edited the Northern Times newspaper in Golspie since 1949. He had come from the Glasgow Herald, especially to try and save it because the paper was on its knees, and he did this wonderfully well indeed. He was planning to retire as he was 67 at this stage, long past retirement really, but he decided he was weakening a bit and he wanted new blood, I suppose. So he put the word around that he was looking for someone to succeed him.

Very fortunately, one day on the Glasgow news desk, I was deputy news editor and features at that time, someone said to me, do you fancy a job in Golspie? I said, of course I do. So I shot off with my youngest. I was a widower at this stage with two young children, two daughters. One was twelve and the other was eight when their mother died. But at this particular stage, Susan would be about fifteen and Judy would be about eleven. So I came up anyway, and when I went in to be interviewed by the board of the Northern Times. In those days, this local newspaper, a tiny little paper in a population of 13,000, printed 6,000 copies.

So its circulation is far greater in proportion pro rata than the Daily Express ever was. I often said if the Express sold as many copies as the Northern Times sells in its own captive area, the Daily Express circulation should have been 25 million compared to the two and a half million that it was in fact.

While I was being interviewed I sent my daughter out simply to have a wander around the village to see what she thought of it and would it be the sort of place she would like to live in. The interview board consisted of the Countess of Sutherland as owner, her husband who was a co-owner, Charles Jansen, the Factor of Sutherland Estates who was the managing director, and the editor Bruce Weir himself. So it was very much a newspaper owned by the House of Sutherland. Fortunately they offered me the job. So when I went out and met Judy and I said, would you like to stay in this place? Oh, she said, I think it's wonderful, everybody has been speaking to me, asking me who I am, what's my name, what does my daddy do, what's he doing up here anyway? The normal curiosity, you know. Well, she was sold on the place. So this really made up my mind. I said, okay, my younger child is happy here. She's going to have to go to school here. This is where I want to be. So in 1975, I moved back. I belong to Caithness as you will have gathered but Sutherland was a county I'd always loved and admired because when I was in the Boys Brigade, in Wick, we used to come down to the Dairy Park just outside Dunrobin Castle to camp regularly every year. We used to run up around the monument in Ben Bhraggie while the cook got the breakfast ready. Then we used to wander into the village at odd times to do errands and so on. So I liked Golspie and I liked the Sutherland people and I resolved that one day I'd like to come back here. I married here a few years later and my new wife always alleges that I had made up my mind that I liked Sutherland girls as well and I had obviously decided to come back.

My time with the Northern Times was a particularly happy period because it meant a new marriage, a new beginning, a new family because I adopted three boys and we also had a boy in our second marriage. So all in all, we had six children and most of them are away from the county now, but there's still a couple that stay within very reasonable distance here.

When you're running a local paper, it's really a man and a boy, a tradesman and an apprentice job. A little paper like the Northern Times can't afford a big editorial staff. So it meant that being editor was just a prestigious title. You were the reporter and you had to do all the donkey work. My predecessor, Bruce Weir, also ran the commercial side of the company as well. Thankfully, I'm hopeless with figures and by the time I came they already had Heinz Voigt, a German prisoner of war who decided to resettle in Sutherland, as financial director. So I was relieved that he ran the entire commercial side of the business for 40 years.

I had to attend all the meetings of the old Sutherland County Council and then the new Sutherland District Council, then the offshoot of Highland Council, and I used to be here regularly, maybe three times a month covering various committees and meetings and so on. You'll see the records here. I got to know the county very, very rapidly that way and people. You have to learn a lot about politics and particularly local politics and who the local bigwigs are and how to get on with them. When you quarrel with them or they quarrel with you, you've got to learn how to compromise and get on with them that way.

My very first assignment job here was in Dornoch. And it was Jimmy Bell, who was a founder member of the Heritage Society, who was leading a protest march in Dornoch. Would you believe that? The former president of the Heritage Society, a much-respected citizen, leading 500 people in a protest. Well, the story was that a farmer at Drumdivan Farm, which is about a mile out of town on the South Road, had decided to cut a right of way to Loch-an-treel, which is a lovely little beauty spot in woodland where, for generations past, Dornoch people have played curling during icy conditions. It was also a favourite walk. And this farmer had decided he was going to put up a fence and bar the gate and not allow anybody through. Well, Jimmy Bell and the rest mobilised a great protest gang and on this particular Monday night in August 1975, he led out the troops and I was there to report it. It was great because it was more like a picnic than a protest march. They were all telling me of the days when they used to be curling there, the school children played there and so on. So it was a very nice cover story and it was a great start to my career on the Northern Times.

I've just been talking to Peter Stoop, who lives at Heatherwood Park, and telling him about a conversation I had today with another Dutchman in Brora, about a conversation involving a Dutchman in Orkney yesterday where all these pipers visited a winery. The Orkney wine is made from fruit and vegetables and so on, but it's a Dutchman who's behind that as well. And the most amazing conversation was going on in this winery, where the Dutch owner was trying to explain to a German piper what a gooseberry was. They were going through the berries, it's a sort of blueberry, and the Dutchman says, but in Holland we say so-and-so. And it went on about five minutes before the German suddenly picked up what a gooseberry was. But these were much more pleasant Dutchmen than the one at Drumdivan, I assure you. Well, in any case, that was quite an interesting situation as my first assignment.

Golspie Gala Week had begun the previous year, in 1974 last week was its 30th Gala Week! Amazing how time flies and I've covered every one of these occasions. They are great community efforts and you enjoy the atmosphere of these things. They have castle ceilidhs and so on giving a local paper a lot more to do than just reporting the mundane things of life in general, like births, marriages and deaths, although these continue to feature quite largely.

Rena is looking through a book of pictures I've brought in here and it will be passed around to you. The point I'm making is that not only words, but photographs that are hugely important in newspapers. When I was younger, pictures weren't all that regular. But nowadays, everybody seems to have pictures, particularly in colour. The very first picture in that folder is one I took myself. Now, I'm not a photographer. I'm just a reporter. But I landed up in an interesting situation a couple of years back on the beach at Brora where some dolphins were stranded. There was a huge effort by a RAF helicopter and rescue people to try and save these dolphins. Unfortunately, they weren't successful. The dolphins died. But all the way through the book, there are other pictures of press occasions and so on. So you'll see how we use the camera as well as the written word.

I was telling you about the unions and how inflexible they are. In journalism until very recently, photographers were photographers and reporters were reporters. Never the twain... When you went on a job, there had to be a reporter accompanied by a photographer. There was never a question of a reporter taking a photograph. This was strictly against union rules. That has all been changed nowadays and gradually, you're going

to see television cameramen doing the interviewing as well. So that's going to put me out of a job. This is the way that things progress and you can't stand in the way of progress.

A feature I introduced in the Northern Times, maybe in 1980, was a little column at the bottom of the page called 'Seen and Heard'. Now, this was ostensibly a ragbag of gossip. It was the sort of thing that you wouldn't get away with in a national paper. I probably wouldn't get away with it in many other papers anywhere else because the gossip referred specifically to particular areas of the county. And you'd use a byname, a nickname, which would be immediately recognisable in Durness, but would mean nothing in Dornoch. And vice versa. Mention somebody like *'The Barrel'* in Dornoch, and nobody up in Durness would have a clue who you're talking about. So it had specific local interest. The inspiration for this 'Seen and Heard', wasn't an original idea of mine by any means, it came from a tiny paper in Wick before the last war called 'Sports Favourite'. This paper was produced in the days before football results were flashed out on the radio, and there was no television, of course. But there was a massive following of Strang's Pools and Littlewood's Pools pre-war. I hadn't appreciated this until I read about it some years later. Apparently betting on football match results was a huge industry in the 1930s. So everyone wanted to know on a Saturday night what the scores were, and whether they were in the money or not. Now the 'Sports Favourite' used to carry this news, but it kept a column on the right-hand side for the late results. 'Now often because of snowstorms or bad weather or a breakdown in the telegraph or something like that, the results didn't come through. So the editor was forced to try and fill that column with something or other. So he filled it with gossip, who was seen out courting with so-and-so last night? All this sort of stuff. . So it suddenly occurred to me that we live off gossip in small communities. And this 'Seen and Heard' column, if provided and I wasn't libellous or slanderous in some respect, and provided I was very careful that I didn't hurt people unnecessarily, I could get away with that type of salacious gossip to an extent.

There are some suggestions made to me that I couldn't possibly have used in the paper. It would have caused tremendous mayhem. I think we were a bit near with a phone call from Kinlochbervie from a lady who said 'so and so' had been seen bent over a herring barrel at the back of the Tarbet Hotel and will be regretting it in nine months' time. And I said, I couldn't possibly use that in the newspaper. Oh, she says, Nellie enjoys a good laugh!

On another occasion I had a paragraph in the paper and I won't tell you the occasion. *"Why is it that so-and-so's belongings have turned up in the garden of a neighbour's house?"* And this was about to go into the paper, mentioning the location, when Alison Cameron, my deputy, came racing through and said, *"Oh, you can't possibly put that in the paper because this guy's run away with a neighbour"*. This caused a big stookie in Brora, so I'm not going to elaborate.

In any case, 'Seen and Heard' ran very successfully right up until my final year as editor, when I did a piece about one of our printers. He came from Glasgow, from a fairly rough area called Drumchapel. And that particular weekend in Golspie, there had been a gala, weekend dance or something, and there had been a fair amount of mayhem and rumpus, and quite a few assaults and so on. And he was heard to say, you know, Golspie's getting so bad, I think I'll just go off back and live in the quiet of Drumchapel. Now, I put this in the paper, you know, thinking this is perfectly okay. When he came raging up the stairs to the new editor

who was taking over from me, and said, you put that in the paper and there'll be no paper this week. And my successor relented, killed off 'Seen and Heard' that very day. It's never appeared since. That's how it happened. Now, but it's irrepressible, you see. So I now do it on the internet. It's now running on the Golspie website. I've been running the same type of stuff for about three or four years now with no comebacks at all. In fact, people phone me up or email me with contributions to it. So it seems to be quite good.

I've collected a few headings that I've come across over the piece. Like:

- Staggering attendances at church. From the British Weekly, which was a Church of Scotland magazine that ran for quite a few years, at the same time as 'Life and Work'.
- ... a beautiful eulogy, and the service of commission was a simple warm occasion.
-three battered in fish shop.
- This was the classic a favourite con that has been going on now for almost a hundred years is the one, and you'll see it again probably popping up this year when things are quiet in newspapers. A simple letter to the editor, which runs along the lines of :-
"Dear sir, while walking along the beach at Dornoch last spring, I came across an ancient vessel, apparently made of a tin-like substance. It was rounded, had a handle, and appeared to be a drinking vessel of some sort. And I wondered whether it was of ancient origin. It had an intriguing inscription around the bottom in what I assume is low Latin which reads, "Iti sapis spotanda tino ne".
When you run all these letters into the correct sequence of what they are as words, you've guessed "It is a piss pot and a tin one".
- Then you get things called spoofs. Spoofs are highly improbable stories. Things that you couldn't possibly invent. Way back in the Sixties, when women affected a style of hair called the beehive hairstyle, a story went out in West Lothian that a girl had died because a hornet had become trapped in her beehive and couldn't get out. The only way was to burrow its way through her skull.
- That was a Sunday Post story. We have a theory about the Sunday Post, that it is the Scottish Bible. Or used to be. Everybody swore by the Sunday Post. But they invent half their stories. The column by the doctor is written by a guy who's got a medical encyclopaedia alongside him. And then on the Monday morning, all the waiting rooms of doctors throughout the country are crowded with people suffering from the illness highlighted the day before in the paper.
- They used to say that about Dr. Finlay as well. If somebody died or had an aneurysm, sometimes the crowds in the next morning say, I think I've got an aneurysm.
- I have a classic story to tell you about Dr. Finlay. Absolutely true because it happened to me. One day in Edinburgh, I was phoned by my Glasgow news desk to go to the station and meet Bill Simpson who played Dr. Finlay coming off the train to tell him that Andrew Cruickshank, Dr. Cameron, had been admitted to hospital in Leeds and

was to undergo a prostate gland operation. And as a result, the series was going to be postponed. The filming had to be fixed up. So I spotted Bill Simpson, Dr. Finlay, striding down the platform, handsome fellow he was, with his suitcase. "Mr. Simpson?" "Yes." "My name's Henderson from the Express", I said. "Yes", he said. "I'm sorry to tell you, but Andrew Cruickshank's in hospital and he's going to have a prostate gland operation" And Dr. Finlay said to me, "is that serious?"

Without name dropping, one of the wonderful things about being in newspapers is that you have the opportunity of meeting the rich and the famous and all the rest. You've got easy access to them because publicity being publicity, you have the opportunity, they want it. So in the course of a short life, I have met Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher before she became Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan after he was Prime Minister. Oh, a lovely story about Alec Douglas-Home, who was a very short time Prime Minister, something like 18 months. But he was the only ever serving Prime Minister to visit Wick. All the rest were either has-beens or would-be. But Douglas-Home, while he was Prime Minister, came to Wick to a party-political meeting. And it was in the days when the local conservative association would appear in strength. All the principal officials would be up on the platform backing the principal speaker. And since it was the Prime Minister, of course, you had everybody from the Vice-Chairman down to the Treasurer all arranged alongside Alec Douglas-Home.

At that time, the Treasurer of the Caithness and Sutherland Constituent and Conservative Association, was Bertie Macbeth, who was the municipal painter in Wick. His job was maintaining the windows of council houses. But he was a strong Tory and a great believer in Alec Douglas-Home. So, after Home had made a speech, and you remember he's a very nice man but a bumbling type character, he asked for questions. From the back of the hall, a fishing boat skipper, you'll probably be able to give me his name, I can't remember off hand who he was, it wasn't Billy Cobb. Up this guy comes anyway and says, it was just at the start of the North Sea oil exploration boom. And this fishing skipper said, *"Will your government ensure that the interests of the fishing industry are protected when all this exploration is going on in our fishing grounds? And will you ensure that no debris falls off these oil rigs that will destroy our nets? And will you ensure you don't have oil wells on the top of our best fishing marks?"* And Douglas-Hulme was looking very puzzled at this because he didn't quite know what the answer was. But eventually, he sort of lumbered to his feet. When suddenly, in the far corner, the treasurer, Bertie Macbeth, leapt up and said, *"Sit down, Prime Minister. I'll answer that question"*.

There's another occasion in the same hall. Sir David Robertson was the Tory MP for Caithness and Sutherland. And he was a real doughty character. Nobody could mess around with David Robertson, I tell you. But on this particular occasion, a chap called Sheds Matheson, who was a marvellous Labour supporter, originally, I think, from Bonar Bridge, but he lived up at John O'Groats. He used to cycle into political meetings the seventeen miles to Wick to have a say. And on this occasion, David Robertson was going on about, I think, trying to save the Brora mine or something along those lines when Sheds shouted at the back, *"you're a liar."* Now, we've heard this already in recent times, you know, this challenge to senior politicians - that you're a liar. But not with quite such dramatic effect, except in the case, of course, of John Prescott who threw a punch. *"You're a liar"*. Robertson said to him, *"Don't you dare call me a liar."* *"You're a liar"*, Sheds persisted. *"If you call me a liar once more,"* said Sir David

Robertson, “ *I'll bodily throw you out of this hall*”. “You're a bloody liar! “ Off came Robertson's jacket, jumped down off the stage, straight down through the audience, picked up Sheds Matheson and threw him down the stage. And he said, “*You shouldn't say that sort of thing.*”

Margaret Thatcher impressed me hugely. I met her in Lairg when she was the recently elected Tory leader. It was, I think, still a couple of years before she became Prime Minister. But she struck me as being a woman who could assimilate your points very quickly. I was in company with my editor and mentor on the John O'Groats Journal who was now General Manager of the Newspaper Group or something. But he was a great Tory and he came down especially to meet the new Mrs. Thatcher. And we got on to her on the subject of oil rigs and the feeling that we ought to benefit from the spin-off of the Beatrice Oil Field, which is, after all, only 12 miles out from Helmsdale. But we get none of the servicing facilities or anything at all like that. Well, she promised then and there that she would take it on board and find out what the score was. But she was never able to get over the desire by the oil companies to concentrate all their activities in Aberdeen and Peterhead, not only the Moray Firth Basin but the entire North Sea area of the British state. And there was no way that Caithness or Sutherland could get any spinner from there, which was a great, great pity. I think we should have been able to put in certain sanctions, you know, that they would be required to have a helicopter base at either Wick or Brora. In fact, there was talk at one stage of a pipeline relaying linking system out at Loth. But it didn't come at all.

Jim Callaghan, I met him at Helmsdale not long after he'd been deposed and he was a charming fellow. I liked him very much. But then he went out to visit the amazing experiment, you won't believe it, of trying to grow grass on peat. This was with huge government subsidy. A potato farmer from the Lothians had come up and had persuaded the local enterprise company that it would be a good idea to put in masses of fertilizer into this peat bank at Forsinard out of which would grow lush grasses and so on. And sure enough it happened. You could see grass waving and so on, but there's still the peat underneath and the water table way down below. James Baird, who was the principal of this company, which was trying to regenerate the moorland, took out a great iron pole and stuck it down into the ground to show Jim Callaghan how close he was to the water underneath. He was really walking on maybe three feet of peat and it was then floating on a huge water table and Callaghan couldn't miss the opportunity, turned around to the assembled pressman and he said, “*There you are, positive proof that prime ministers can walk on water.*”

We used to get Dennis Healey over through Inverness. They came up here to hide of course. All of you will be well aware that John Profumo came here to hide after the Christine Keeler affair and, despite our best efforts, we couldn't find him. We didn't know that he was tucked away in the House of Tongue. Another famous hunt we were involved in was the Jimmy Goldsmith - Isabel Patino runaway marriage where Goldsmith then a young entrepreneur eloped with Isabel Patino who was the daughter of an Argentinian mining millionaire if I recall rightly. The father sent all sorts of forces out to try and stop any possible wedding. They came to Scotland to have a green style wedding with the press on the trail, masses of us. I was deployed to search from Cape Wrath all the way down to Ullapool checking every hotel, bed and breakfast and so on. I remember phoning in from Gairloch at one o'clock in the

morning and saying to my news editor. *"I've searched the whole place sir and I just can't find any sign". "No wonder!"* he said, *"they got married in Kelso this morning"*.

We got involved in quite a lot of that stuff. Another famous spoof story was another Sunday Post tale of how this man suffered from a dreadful affliction. They named the man and gave his address and explained that this was a very strange nervous reaction he had in his right hand which went up into the Nazi salute. So I was going over to South Uist to fish on a holiday and I resolved on my way back to Oban to go to this address and meet this man and authenticate the story. I was always very dubious about the Sunday Post story. So not only did I not find his address, but I also had great difficulty in finding the street because almost every house on the street had been demolished some ten years before. So here was positive evidence that they invented the story and had given an address that was quite non-existent. So it's not part of my plan not to tell you that newspaper men are upright and absolutely honest and straightforward. A lot of interesting sharp practice goes on as well.

The lady who charmed me the most, or set me back on my heels, as they say, was Barbara Cartland. Barbara Cartland, as locals all know, had a house with the McCorquodale's at in the Strath of Kildonan where she came up every year to spend up to three months holiday. And then she decided to donate to the Helmsdale Time Span Museum an entire shocking pink room full of her curtains, dresses, some of her clothing, and the entire collection of her books numbering almost 300, I think. So of course there's massive opposition to this locally and nationally. Because the Helmsdale Heritage Society were getting a fair amount of money from Barbara, for the upkeep of this little corner, they felt they had to keep it going. She called a press conference anyway to explain her motives and because I was the local reporter I had the privilege of asking the first question. So I was able to say,

"Dame Barbara, how can you possibly consider that any memorabilia belonging to you can be associated with a museum which is devoted to the history of this area going back to prehistoric times, going back to the ice age and through all the Jurassic period and so on and then finishing off with an oil rig sitting out only a few miles off the shore. these are all ancient"

She said,

"I can justify it perfectly. I myself am ancient."

No answer to that. I was quite taken with her anyway.

I must tell you about the Madonna business because, in all my years here, the Madonna wedding was something else. I mean, there was no way you could prepare for it, no way you would even imagine it could happen. I had no idea I'd make so much money out of it. I'll let you know very shortly how it was done. I was in Madeira on holiday and came back with Christine about the 20th of December and my telephone recording machine was absolutely clogged with calls, phone this news desk, phone that news desk. My God, there's been an earthquake or at least an air crash or something dreadful. All these newspapermen trying to get a hold of me and I was no longer really terribly active. It turned out, having got the papers the next day, what all the fuss was about, was Madonna planning to get married at Skibo and she was going to have the baby christened in the Cathedral and so on. So then the phone

calls came to me to come and be interviewed. Now, things were so tight security wise at Skibo and with an entire crowd around her that nobody was getting an interview first-hand with anybody about anything apart from Susan Brown, the local minister, who was very open and frank about the whole thing. But then there was a limit to how much she could say about it all. So they ended up interviewing the old, retired editor of the weekly newspaper. I was interviewed by BBC Radio One, Two and Three, by BBC Highland, by Grampian Television, by American Television, CNN, all on the same tack. We ended up interviewing each other because there was so little news going. And the culmination of it all was at 6 o'clock on the morning of the wedding, at the gate of the West Lodge, where I was interviewed by this wraith-like, glamorous character who was Rosie Millard the BBC's arts correspondent, who appeared like an apparition from behind a mass of caravans with big satellite dishes and all the rest.

"Eh, hello" she said "are you Henderson?"

"Eh?"

"So you're going to talk to me!"

So there we were. I was on Breakfast Time TV and yattering away about this, you know, the biggest story I'd ever seen in Sutherland. Well, out of it all, I made about £300 in fees, which I thought was pretty reasonable, considering I was doing no work. But it was probably the culmination of my career in the local paper. It was all relatively jovial and full of hilarity, but we had major stories in this area as well over the years.

We had a dreadful snowstorm in 1978, which cut a swathe right across the east of Sutherland, bringing down power cables and so on. Three people perished buried under 20 feet of snow at the Ord of Caithness, and one man had a miraculous survival after three and a half days when, as we all know the famous story, he wrapped himself up in ladies' nylons because he was a traveller in hosiery. Billy Sloane he was called, known as Billy Sutherland, and he managed to survive, having been entombed for that period.

If any of you are ever travelling north from here through into Caithness, you'll notice that from Navidale all the way through to Berriedale, there is a continuous belt of mature trees on the west side of the road, which have been up for well over 30 years. These were put up on the instructions of the Sheriff who held the fatal accident inquiry into the death of the three unfortunate motorists who perished in the snow. The sheriff was hugely critical of modern-day road engineers who tend to go straight, by making cuttings. Unlike the old engineers who followed the Roman principle of a track which follows round the contour of a hill. When snow comes down it's at the same level all the way, so that the road doesn't act as a trap. It just has the same dusting of snow as the rest of the countryside. This was true of the old road which the new cuttings had supplanted. Now these cuttings filled up to a level of 20 feet would you believe. The rescue vehicles were able to run up onto the old road and operate from there because there's no snow, and they used long probes to look for the cars underneath. This is how the people were found. Equally that road, the A9, although it has been improved is still very dangerous, especially at the Ord. A lorry went over in 1978 in the same year as the blizzard, and three men were killed having plunged 600 feet down there.

But the most intriguing of all were three mysterious deaths over a period of years in which nobody was ever brought to justice, and it didn't involve any local people at all, they were all visitors. The first of those was a sad case of a fish farm worker near Durness who drowned his

wife by holding her head underwater because he had gone bananas. She was in Durness working, and he had a very lonely life looking after the fish cages and he became depressed. He was brought to the sheriff court here and charged with her murder, but eventually it wasn't proceeded with as he was found to be insane, unfit to plead. Although sent away to a mental institution, he was subsequently released after a few years and is now back in society.

Another intriguing case was a waterfall murder at Eas a' Chual Aluinn at Loch Nairn. We have the highest waterfall in Europe, it runs for 200 metres straight down, it's a very slender waterfall, it's not hugely spectacular like the Niagara or the Victoria Falls, but it certainly is a very long scheme of water. Well this ex-RAF technician and his ex-WRAF wife were on honeymoon and were visiting waterfalls in Wales and the north of England around Shap and so on, and then eventually came to Scotland, and she fell to her death at Eas a' Chual Aluinn, all 600 feet. There was a fatal accident inquiry in Dornoch, and it appeared that, the husband said that he felt that there was a danger of the little dog going over, so he'd gone to grab the dog, and he may have nudged his wife in doing so, and dislodged her, and she fell to her death. But why the fatal accident inquiry was called was because a major insurance company had noted that he had doubled her life insurance to £150,000 only the week before. Although the major insurance company didn't press the case, it was a smaller Scottish company typically, which was only liable for a £10,000 payment on her death, who decided to go for an inquiry into it because they felt it was suspicious. However, the chap got away with it, except that the dead girl had a very revengeful father who came from Preston in Lancashire. This chap was the most menacing man I've ever met in all my long life of meeting menacing people and the criminal fraternity particularly. This man was no criminal, but he was so full of real rage at the fact that his girl, his daughter had died, and her husband had benefited from her death, that he more or less stalked him all around the country. And at one stage he invited me to meet him in the Ben Bhraggie Hotel in Golspie. He turned on me most savagely and said that I had made lots of money out of his daughter with headlines and so on. I said it was just my normal way of reporting. *"Oh!"*, he said, *"you'll get your comeuppance someday, my lad"*. I was absolutely petrified of this man. Well, it was no surprise to me to learn that on the second anniversary of this girl Hussie's death at the waterfall, her husband was found gassed in his car, in his garage, a locked garage in Dumfriesshire. Draw your own conclusions from that.

And finally, the third mysterious death, or it wasn't mysterious, but again, nobody was brought to justice. It was an absolute outright murder, where a Glasgow widow called Margaret McOnie had come up to the north of Scotland on a holiday and had met up with a man purporting to be a New Zealand mineralogist, who was in fact a mechanic from Wakefield or somewhere in Yorkshire, who'd already murdered an old man for his money and left his body, a battered body in a garage. The Yorkshire police were on his trail, but all they knew was that he'd gone north somewhere.

Well, this man who turned out to be Brian Newcombe, despite all his protestations of being a New Zealander and so on, took Mrs Maconie visiting and strangely, she took a photograph of him at the altar of the famous Italian chapel on Lamb Holm, Orkney, and he took a picture of her as well. Two days later, back in Tongue, they went for a walk along the Kyle and he lifted a huge boulder which was in front of him and he smashed her skull, killed her, for no obvious reason. There was no question of that. He didn't steal her purse or anything like

that. He just must have been a madman. But he went away off south again. The Northern Constabulary now proceeded on their murder case and it was the Yorkshire police who got him. So he was charged with both murdering the old man and murdering Mrs McOnie. But here you land up in an interesting situation. There aren't many cases like this where you have two different jurisdictions. If you go ahead on a trial by jury for murder in England, this is going to influence any subsequent jury who sits in Scotland to hear the second case. So you might be faced with a situation of having an entire murder trial in England in camera. Nobody knows anything about it. It's not reported or anything until the Scottish case is dealt with. Once he had he been found guilty of murdering the Glasgow widow, then it would be revealed that he already had been convicted and given a life sentence for killing the old man. But it never happened. The Procurator Fiscal in Dornoch was phoned one morning and told that Brian Newcombe had hanged himself in Armley jail in Leeds. End of story. So here are three sudden deaths and all strange circumstances.

This is what makes life on a newspaper interesting because you end up with all sorts of facets. You get times when you're able to go to a person and say, you've just won a million dollars or something like that. I did have the experience once of telling a barman called John Abernethy in the Caledonian Hotel in Inverness that he'd won the magnificent sum of £157,000 on Littlewood's pools. Not a vast amount today, but this was in 1953. So he said, *"You'll have a drink."* And I said, *"Yes, thank you."* He poured me a glass of water! It's strange how people react in circumstances like that. The most unexpected thing happen to you.

Do you have any questions? Do you want to ask me anything?

"Jimmy, have you ever been involved in any April Fools?"

I've originated many April Fools. One of the very best was we decided sometime about 1979 or so, when the Russian Sputniks were coming back into the earth and were breaking up and with the fragments being seen in the sky. So we decided to announce for the First of April edition that a Russian Sputnik was coming into the earth's orbit that night and it could be seen at Altnaharra at 7.30, Bettyhill at 7.45, Lochinver at 7. We gave the times when you could look out for this particular sputnik. But then one of my compositors came through having read the story and suggested a jape. So we then went on to say that because it was very dangerous to your eyesight these exploding bits of metal should not be observed through a telescope. What you had to do was go on to page four and cut out this little black coupon with the dot in the middle and pierce this dot with a pin. And then you could hold it up and this will protect your eye. Well, I kid you not, Simon Macleod, the late Simon Macleod tells me that along the esplanade to Lochinver at 6.25 that night, there were 17 people holding a wee bit of the ruse.

On another occasion, I met Colin Campbell, the late Colin Campbell from Balblair at some function in Lairg. And I was telling him I was on the lookout for a decent April Fool joke. And he said. *"I'll do an interview with you for the BBC. But I'll leave it until the time."* So at the appointed time, which would be the 29th of March or something, I went off out to Balblair to Susan Campbell's home. And Colin said, *"OK, we're all ready to go"*. And I said, *"Well, how do I start off, Colin? I mean, give me a clue."* He said, *"Well, I've got a fish farm in the Dornoch Firth where I'm breeding sardines."* So I said straight into the microphone, *"Mr. Campbell, what set you out on this particular interesting course?"* And Colin went into full wonderful

flow about the influences of the Gulf Stream and how he discovered that this was the ideal sort of location to breed sardines. They were in great big cages. They were protected with great security because obviously they were a delicacy. There were searchlights at night, guards walking with Kalashnikov rifles and anti-submarine nets. And he went on and on. And I was convulsed with laughter. I just couldn't ask. And then he finally said, *"but there is one important drawback."* And I fell for it. *"What's that, Mr. Campbell?"* "Size", he said *"We've got a real problem over size. Getting them to fit the tins."*

We had a particular glitch at one time when the Countess was elected president of the local committee which was sponsoring the National Mod in 1977 and Brian Wilson, who was not then an MP. Incidentally he's got a new job tonight, Tony Blair's given him the job of overseeing the reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan and seeing that British firms get a lot of the contracts. But back to before he was an MP, when he was publishing the West Highland Free Press he was hugely radical, he hated the House of Sutherland. It was an absolute paranoia over the clearances and all the rest. So it ended up that at one stage I ran a front page about the Countess and her critic Brian Wilson slamming the Countess and her family. Eventually she was forced into a situation where her husband asked her to resign, to come off the committee because it was causing too much trouble. I took the view that she shouldn't do it, that she should stick to her guns and to hell with Brian Wilson and all the rest, because we all knew that she herself was a very benign sort of person and was hugely supportive of the mod and gave them all sorts of facilities and donations and so on. But this was the one contretemps we had because Charles Jansen and I just didn't see eye-to-eye over that particular setup. Eventually she resigned but at no stage ever after or before did they exert any influence.

That brings me on to another interesting point about Skibo Castle and Dunrobin Castle. Locals will remember Hapimag, a top-class Swiss-based timeshare company, who wanted to convert Dunrobin into a similar situation as was later achieved by Peter de Savary at Skibo. It was all set to go and there was a press launch in the Ritz Hotel in London, would you believe, to which I was invited. It was the highest profile press conference I had ever attended and it was the morning after the Clive Ponting debate in the House of Commons. Now Clive Ponting, some of you will remember, was the civil servant who spilled the beans about the Belgrano. Much to the annoyance of Michael Heseltine and all the defence staff because he claimed the Belgrano was sailing away from the Falklands zone when the warship was torpedoed. The following morning in the Ritz, the Countess, Hamish Gray, who was the Secretary of State for Scotland, Robert Cowan, who was chairman of the Highlands and Islands Development Board, and Hans Schalk, who was chairman of Hapimag, the Swiss company, were all set to tell us about their plans to convert Dunrobin into studios. The plan was to build a fifty-cottage village down by the seashore in a Scottish medieval pattern, and to attract the cream of Europe's tourists to Golspie, employing a staff of about 120 people and selling all the various services to franchises, books, shops, and so on.

Everything was going swimmingly well until it came to questions. Brian Wilson had infiltrated himself with a sticker on his lapel saying Glasgow Herald or Grampian Television or something. He was a bona fide journalist. It wasn't a question of him being improper, but he didn't have a special assignment to be there, he just wanted to be there. So he asked Dr. Schalk, how much public money would you expect to get to set up the situation at Dunrobin? And the Swiss, being very straight, and had no side said, about half. Well, the Countess went

absolutely white. Robert Cowan almost fell off his chair. Hamish Gray turned a sort of sickly green because nobody expected the Swiss to say they would want fifty percent public backing. Now, I take you 11 years on to a similar press conference in Skibo. Peter de Savary, big spiel on his plans and all the rest. So I decided to do the Brian Wilson. *"How much public money, Mr. de Savary, would you expect for your Skibo enterprise?"* *"A substantial amount"* he said. Difference of approach, no controversy there, a substantial amount. He's had more than half.

No more questions. Jimmy, thank you very much for a very interesting, amusing, and entertaining evening.