

The Dunkeld Bridge Toll Riots of 1868

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

JUST before Christmas I was reading a book called 'Wade in Scotland' by J. B. Salmond, published in 1938. It isn't a well-written or well-structured book but it's crammed with stuff about roads and inns and bridges. To my surprise, I came across a fascinating account of a furious public row about bridge tolls that led to violence in 1868. It has nothing whatever to do with General Wade, except perhaps that he could have saved posterity a lot of bother if he had built a bridge at King George's expense at Dunkeld in the 1730s instead of leaving his troops to use the ferry.

I had never heard of the Dunkeld Bridge Toll Riots before. No doubt better writers than Salmond have described them, but if so, I will leave it to readers to enlighten me. I have done my best to scrape up a little more, mainly from a little guidebook called 'Dunkeld: Its Straths and Glens' of 1879, but I have a strong feeling that the real source is the files of the 'Perthshire Advertiser' of the day. Anyway, here is what I know so far; perhaps we can learn something useful.

In 1803 John Murray, 4th Duke of Atholl, obtained an Act of Parliament authorising him to build a bridge over the Tay at the City of Dunkeld, and to impose a toll or 'pontage' to defray the cost. This was not to exceed £18,000. Building began in 1805, and the bridge was opened to the public in November 1808, but not completed until 1809. Everyone had to pay a halfpenny to cross it.

The bridge had seven arches. It was 685 feet long and 26 feet 6 inches wide. The cost, including the approaches, was £33,978 17s 1d. Under the terms of the Act, £7,027 9s 9d was paid by the Commissioners of Highland Roads and Bridges, and £18,000 was to be borrowed by the Duke on the security of the tolls, in other words to be paid as pontages by the travelling public. The rest, namely £8,951 7s 4d, was to be paid by the Duke himself.

The Act forbade any ferry within three miles of the bridge, and awarded all rights of pontage to it. In other words, the Duke undertook to give up the right of his two public ferries and his own free carriages.

For fifty years everyone, including (one hopes) the Duke and his servants, dutifully paid their halfpenny. The first serious dent in the arrangements occurred in 1863, when the Highland Railway Company opened its line from Dunkeld to Inverness via Forres. This resulted in a substantial loss of through traffic, but the Highland Railway paid the Dunkeld Bridge Company a large sum of money in compensation. This was of course part of the overall deal by which the line was constructed from Dunkeld to Drumochter — almost every inch of which belonged to the Duke.

It was at this point that the idea first occurred to someone that by now the cost of the bridge must surely have been paid off. Things were stirring in the Highlands, and at the beginning of 1867 the Session of the local Free Church intimated to the Duke that it wished to appeal for its members to pass and repass over the bridge on the Sabbath for nothing. The Duke refused to receive the deputation.

Enter Alexander Robertson, stage left. Robertson is a man who should be better known to historians of the Highland Land Question. Again, I had never heard of him, so I went to the National Library and promptly found five of his works. He was born in Dunkeld in 1825. He became a coal, lime and wood merchant in Birnam, his best customer being the Duke of Atholl. He made a lot of money, built a villa in Strathbran called Dundonochie, and claimed for himself the chiefship of the Robertsons. Salmond introduces him like this: 'Some sixty years ago, if you had been walking in the main streets in Perth, you might have seen a burly figure in a kilt wearing a well-cocked "Balmoral" and a heavy beard; and if you'd asked anybody who the figure was, they would have looked at you in surprise, and said: "You maun be a stranger to thae pairts. That's the great Dundonochie!"'

In 1853, under the pseudonym 'R. Alister', Dundonochie published 'Barriers to the National Prosperity of Scotland'. For a 28-year-old coal merchant it is a remarkable production. In 300 eloquent pages he lays down the themes which he stuck to all his life: the principles of social science; the vital importance of maintaining what he called the 'peasantry' on the land rather than decanting them into the towns; the evils of the Bothy System, and of the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few — 'instead of nobles being defenders of their country,' he writes, 'they have ever been its greatest pests'.

Being a businessman, he is no socialist, and distinguishes between property rights which are and are not conducive to the general good. So his remedies are simple. Revoke, he says, the three types of land law which are not conducive to the general good: the game laws, the laws of entail, and the laws of hypothec (that is, security over goods in respect of debt due by the owner of the goods). The result: the opening up of the land for the people.

The book scored one important hit. A review of it in the 'Perthshire Advertiser' was read by a notorious clearing landlord, the Marquess of Breadalbane, provoking him to write (from 21 Park Lane, London) to the paper. 'R. Alister' rushed out the letter as a pamphlet along with his own (much longer) reply, entitled 'Extermination of the Scottish Peasantry'. Now that Dundonochie has a live target, it is full of swingeing stuff. 'I have laboured to show how the peasant at home loves his country and his God, but when huddled into the pestiferous alleys of a large town, he loses his physical strength and his religious principle . . . In Acharn, near Killin, there were nineteen families; how many now? If there be one tenant, mention his name . . . Out with it, my Lord!'

This is nineteenth-century political writing at its best; in a footnote, he tells a weird story. A stranger passing through Glenqueich near Amulree, now cleared, asks what has become of the people whose houses lie

in ruins, and a man, apparently weak in intellect, replies: 'They are out of my sight, and I know not where they have gone!'

No surprise, then, that about 1855 Dundonochie produced a pamphlet called 'Where are the Highlanders?' In this one, among other things, he argues for the restoration and regulation of the shieling system. Subtitled it 'Highland Regiments and Highland Clearances', he shows with brilliant use of irony how sheepfarming was affecting recruitment, telling for example how a recruiting officer 'was sarcastically recommended to try how the present residents in the Black Mount would look with red coats on'. While so doing, however, he puts the army in its place as the least important of the arguments against clearance. 'There are some who condemn the Highland clearances solely on account of the deficiency felt in recruiting; but this is not the highest ground to be taken — it is, in fact, the lowest.'

It is ironic that Dundonochie reserves praise in that pamphlet for the Duke of Atholl, with whose heir he was to lock horns. In 1867 when a public meeting was held to express indignation about the pontages, he it was who chaired the meeting, and he it was who was appointed convener of a committee to inquire into the state of the bridge accounts. Somehow or other this verse got around:

*The Chieftain deals in coals and lime,
And the Duke was a customer for a time,
But the Chieftain's prices ranged so high
That the Duke went somewhere else to buy,
So he would not pay the toll.*

The committee issued its report early in 1868. They calculated that the whole debt had been paid off 18 years before, in 1850. The report ended with a call for funds to try the case in the courts, and collection boxes were fixed up all around Dunkeld.

One day a local landlord, Sir Robert Menzies of Weem, came along and saw one of the boxes. He played football with it along the road, and no-one said boo to him. This represented a challenge, to which Dundonochie responded by marching back and forth across the bridge without paying. No-one said boo to him either.

Then, a few mornings later, things started to escalate. A dozen men appeared on the Birnam side of the bridge. Two of them jumped the wooden toll-gates and held the lodge door closed so that the keeper could not get out. Meanwhile the other ten lifted the gates clean out of their hinges and threw them into the Tay. They were fished out again at Caputh. Next day iron gates went up.

A public meeting was then held under the old oak-tree at the Birnam end of the bridge, famously supposed to be the relic of 'Great Birnam wood' which 'to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him'. Dundonochie made a rousing speech, the crowd armed themselves with hammers, saws and axes, and Dundonochie led them to the gates. It was a threatening gesture but nothing more. Eventually the crowd dispersed by themselves as the police stood by, but after that the authorities were worried enough to swear in some special constables.

A few days later Dundonochie appeared with an axe in one hand and a copy of the Bridge Act of 1803 in the other. He delivered a dramatic speech, then attacked the gates with the axe. After a dozen strokes the axe-head flew off. A local shoemaker promptly climbed on top of the gates and auctioned the broken spars as souvenirs. If I understand this part of the story correctly, someone paid 5s 6d for one.

Next night the real attack took place. Large crowds assembled and totally smashed up everything. But the Duke was not beaten. A new gate went up next day. It didn't last long. In the next battle everything was smashed to pieces again, and the policemen and special constables were badly knocked about.

That was the last straw for the authorities, and a detachment of the 42nd Royal Highlanders, the Black Watch, was summoned from Perth. The people were warned. The troops arrived to find the population of Dunkeld and Birnam marching back and forth across the bridge behind their pipers and their brass band.

The Black Watch did nothing. It was a sweet irony that this, the local regiment, had been eulogised at length by Dundonochie in 'Where are the Highlanders?'. They were kept stationed in the City for quite some time.

By 1869 it was time for the courts, both civil and criminal, to take up the issue. An action was brought against the Duke of Atholl on behalf of the public regarding the pontage. The Duke's lawyers argued in his defence that, under section 8 of the Bridge Act, he was entitled to charge against the bridge the whole of its construction and maintenance. They claimed that from the very beginning the pontage had been insufficient to pay the full interest on the expenditure; that the Highland Railway had further reduced receipts from pontage; and that, on investigation of the accounts, the debt was found to have accumulated to £58,000.

In July 1869 the Lord Ordinary found that the Duke was entitled to this whole amount. However, on appeal to the Inner House the decision was reversed, it being found that, by the express statement of section 12 of the Act, the Duke was only entitled to charge £18,000 against the bridge. 'This,' wrote the Duke himself in volume 4 of his monumental "Chronicles of the Families of Atholl and Tullibardine" (1908), 'was not very satisfactory, but as it was sufficient to prove the Duke's right to levy pontage, he was advised not to appeal. The Court remitted to an accountant to make out a statement on this footing, upon which, two years later, the Inner House found the sum due to his Grace to be £18,116, with interest at 5 per cent . . . This matter was a costly one to his Grace, as his legal expenses amounted to £1,800, and it was likewise a source of great annoyance and worry, as in other respects during the short time he had held the estates his dealings with his neighbours had been on a perfectly happy footing.'

Dundonochie was in his element. He slandered all sorts of people, from judges to sheriffs, and in between short prison terms he addressed meetings all over the country, reciting 'Scots Wha Hae' on every

possible occasion. Then, on the night of 5 September 1869, a symbolic act of violence against the Duke's property took place.

"Ossian's Hall" on the River Bran had been described by Thomas Pennant in 1769 as 'a neat building, impending over a most horrible chasm, into which the river precipitates itself with great noise and fury from a considerable height. The windows of the pavillion are formed of painted glass; some of the panes are red, which makes the water resemble a fiery cataract.' A well known tourist attraction, it was blown up with gunpowder, according to the Duke in his Chronicles, 'by some miscreants, who, though their identity was more than suspected, were never convicted of the dastardly act'.

The Dunkeld guide of 1879 connected the outrage to the 'pontage riots', and perhaps a clue is to be found in an inaugural lecture on 'Our Deer Forests' delivered by Dundonochie in Glasgow to the Highland Economic Society (of which he was President) on 5 March 1867, in which he stated irritably: 'Had there been a tithe of the enthusiasm and talent expended upon the SOCIAL ASPECTS of the Highlands that has been, in a measure, thrown away upon the Ossianic controversy, our country would be in a very different position from what it is at this moment.'

By the time the trouble was over Dundonochie was ruined. Thanks to him, however, in 1878 a Roads and Bridges Act was passed which vindicated everyone. It stated that interest had been steadily accruing on the debt of £18,000 since 1803, which the pontages were insufficient to defray, and that if it had not been for the lump sum paid by the Highland Railway Company, the outstanding balance in 1878 would have been much higher. As a result, only £7,000 had been paid off. The Bridge Company's creditors were therefore now paid £12,000, the capitalised value of the pontage at that time; the Duke of Atholl was paid £18,000; and, on 15 May 1879, the bridge was taken over for the people by the new Perthshire County Council.

The only other thing I know about Dundonochie is that, ruined though he was, he never gave up. I have before me a copy of his pamphlet 'Hanged for the Game Laws', dated Edinburgh, 31 March 1884, the day two coalminers were executed in Calton Jail for fatally wounding two men who had demanded to know why they were carrying guns in a field at Rosebery one morning before Christmas — 'offered up,' says Dundonochie, 'as a holocaust, or whole burnt offering on the smoking altar of the Game Law, which has been too often incarnadined with the people's blood.'

WHFP 3.1.97