

SAMUEL LAING OF PAPDALE, ORKNEY A KELP-LAIRD'S POLITICAL AMBITIONS, 1824-1834

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Samuel Laing (1780-1868) had a long and varied life. His talents, energy and self-confidence enabled him to distinguish himself in several roles. He was generally admired, even by his opponents, though they might accuse him at different times of being mulishly obstinate or recklessly ambitious. His brilliance was not in doubt. Perhaps his most remarkable characteristic was his resilience: disaster might strike, but he always bounced back — albeit in some new direction (Fereday 2000: 1).

An influential figure in Orkney: 1824

In 1824, Laing, having established himself as an influential figure in Orkney, was chosen to represent island interests in London, where he made representations against the government's proposed reduction of the import duty on barilla:

I was sent to London as a delegate from the County of Orkney to represent to the government the ruinous tendency of the measure to Kelp proprietors, and to the numerous population depending upon the manufacture of Kelp. I prevailed so far that, after an examination at the Treasury Board of the Deputation, the full operation of the Reduction of Duty on Barilla was postponed, and only a partial reduction took place at that time [1824]. I did not charge the County any part of my expenses . . . Our County in course presented me with a piece of plate of 100 guineas value . . . (OA D1/466, 81)

Laing gained further prestige in Orkney when he secured the dismissal and replacement of Alexander Peterkin, the sheriff-substitute, on 24 July 1823 (OA SC11/1). Since 1814 Peterkin had been active and efficient in performing his legal duties and had devoted his leisure hours to historical research and the preservation of the public archives. However, he was a warm-hearted, outspoken Whig who commented on Orkney affairs, ancient and modern, without deference to the lairds or anyone else, causing great offence. He even dared to support the claims of the Shetlanders to share in the election of the MP for the Northern Isles (Fereday 1986: 250).

Peterkin and Laing were opinionated men who disagreed not only on the Shetlanders' claim but on local issues in Kirkwall. They found co-operation and compromise difficult in the absence of Captain Balfour's calming influence. Therefore Laing was eager to be rid of the troublesome sheriff-substitute and achieved this quickly. He persuaded the sheriff-depute, James Allan Maconochie, to take charge of official legal duties in Orkney, on the grounds that Peterkin was in a state of hostility with so many heritors that 'the business

of the county could not go on, nor justice be administered . . . ’ (NAS GD 263/40, Petition of A. Peterkin, 6 Oct 1825, Appendix II: 12).

Indignant at being dismissed, Peterkin charged Samuel Laing and James Baikie with conspiracy and libel, but achieved little except the chance to state his case publicly. However, as editor of the short-lived *Orkney and Zetland Chronicle*, which he produced in Edinburgh from December 1824 to September 1826, he persisted in making critical comments about Orkney gentry and Kirkwall magistrates. Thus on one page he deplored the failure of the county and burgh authorities to check the depredations of sturdy beggars, described the state of Kirkwall Jail as a ‘disgrace to the county’, and reported that after a woman prisoner, mocked by the mob outside, had committed suicide ‘some individuals among the county gentlemen . . . exult openly . . . because it will save expence to the county’ (O and Z Chronicle, Dec 1825 - March 1826: 106). Such abuse annoyed Laing but did little to harm his popularity with Orcadians.

Laing’s political ambitions

Samuel Laing was working closely with James Baikie, 8th laird of Tankerness, whose wife, Eleanor Wemyss, was a younger sister of Gilbert Laing Meason’s wife, Mary Wemyss. In 1824 this close connection enabled Samuel Laing to buy Baikie’s lands in Eday for £14,000, the purchase money being advanced by Meason in return for a bond secured on the property (OA D1/466: 80; Orkney Sasines, 6 May 1824). By selling out in Eday, Baikie was able to clear his debts, save his Tankerness estate and finance religious and educational projects — he was a liberal friend of the Reverend Robert Paterson and the Seceders. From Samuel Laing’s point of view the purchase was a magnificently confident gesture and a huge gamble.

He later claimed, very optimistically, that by owning the whole of Eday and managing it more efficiently he raised the total rental of his Orkney property to £950 a year and ‘increased the quantity of Kelp on the estate from 150 to 300 tons . . . ’ (OA D1/466: 80, 81). By settling Captain Shaw (his brother-in-law), May Laing (his sister) and their numerous children at Carrick House, Eday, in 1825, he obliged his relations and gained a resident family representative in the North Isles (OA D1/466: 16). Laing’s acquisition of land also improved his social standing and increased his political influence in Orkney.

He was developing political ambitions since, as his performance as provost of Kirkwall and as delegate representing kelp-manufacturers had shown, he was fit to represent Orkney interests in parliament. There was, however, a problem to be overcome before he could become a candidate for election. In 1820, after old John Balfour had been made MP for Orkney and Zetland, Samuel Laing had agreed, along with the Balfours and other lairds, to continue the electoral pact of 1818, by which the lairds and Lord Dundas allied to share the nomination in alternate parliaments. Clearly it was Lord Dundas’s turn to choose

the next MP, and he would put his brother, Captain George Heneage Lawrence Dundas RN, into parliament. Samuel Laing, grown conscious of his own superior abilities, felt impatient of his obligation to support a Dundas who, when previously MP from 1818 to 1820, had not been active on Orkney's behalf and who knew little of the islands.

Fortunately for Laing he discovered an excellent reason for regarding his promise as no longer binding. Lord Dundas, owning the Lordship of Zetland as well as the Earldom estate in Orkney, made no objection to the Shetlanders' claim that they ought to participate in parliamentary elections; a proposal which, if carried into law, would reduce the value of Orkney votes. Samuel Laing argued that this failure of Lord Dundas to oppose the Shetlanders' pretensions absolved the Orkney lairds from standing by their electoral pledge (OA D2/24/1, Capt Wm Balfour to J. Balfour, 22 August 1825).

In Edinburgh Captain Balfour, while recognising the abilities of Samuel Laing, regretted seeing him 'throw away his character' by breaking the political pact with Lord Dundas (OA D2/24/1, 10 May 1825). Striving to restrain Laing, the Captain offered financial support towards presenting Orcadian objections to the Shetlanders' case in the Court of Session, though he was doubtful of success. At the same time he refused 'being any party to the threat . . . of withholding support in all time coming from those who do not assist us on this occasion' (OA D2/24/13, WB to SL 21 May 1825).

There was no holding Laing, who argued that if Lord Dundas, John Balfour MP and the Honyman family did not bear the major part of the cost of opposing the Shetland claim then the Orcadian voters must look for other leadership. By exploiting the fear that Orcadian votes would be devalued and stirring up discontent against absentee lairds Samuel Laing might break down the existing political arrangements and create an opportunity for himself. In August 1825 he announced that he would be a candidate at the next election and, not confining himself to the Shetland question, he launched a hearty attack on the Dundas family's past record:

I consider the County of Orkney has been so entirely neglected and so ill-used by Lord Dundas's family that they were not entitled to ask the support of any freeholder of the county who has a real interest in it . . . since the last general election not one of their family has taken the trouble to visit the county, or have the slightest knowledge at this moment of its concern (OA D11/18, 22 August 1825).

Since the Balfours and their friends would not break with Lord Dundas, Samuel Laing's only hope of electoral success lay in an alliance with Robert Heddle of Melsetter and Sir Richard Honyman of Armadale (Sutherland) and Graemsay (Orkney) — 'Heddle with his seven votes and three supporters, and Honyman with his eight family votes' (OA D2/24/1, WB to JB 1 October 1825). Heddle, though keen to oppose the Shetlanders' claim, eventually decided that Laing's attempt was hopeless (OA D3/273, Robt Watt to W G Watt, 8 August 1826).

The fact that 'Mr Samuel Laing has written some very insulting letters to Sir Richard Honyman within these few months on a private transaction' precluded any political co-operation between them (OA D2/24/1, WB to JB 11 Oct 1825).

Gilbert Laing Meason, though he could hardly forbid Samuel to stand for election in Orkney, begged him to behave with dignity and to avoid provoking ill-feeling:

Let me seriously recommend to you to have no irritating speeches or personal altercation but Gentlemanly conduct, a hearty shake of the hand with Capt Dundas and mutual civility and forbearance. Do this well and you shall carry the County next time . . . (NAS GD 31/504/3, 31 May 1826).

Despite his popularity in the islands Samuel Laing had no chance of gaining the twenty or twenty-five votes needed for victory in the tiny electorate of about forty qualified freeholders, and on 30 June 1826 he withdrew from the contest, leaving Captain G H L Dundas to be elected unopposed on the 12 July. In a printed letter circulated to the voters Laing thanked his supporters, promised to stand again and loosed a Parthian shot at the Dundases:

. . . the County of Orkney has been placed in the degraded situation of returning to Parliament representatives personally unknown to the freeholders, having no real stake of their own in the County, equally ignorant and careless of its concerns and interests; and in political principles, entirely opposed to those of the body of Constituents by whom they are elected (OA D14/1/29, 30 June 1826).

Samuel Laing, in so far as he had any party sympathies, had stood as a ministerial supporter or Tory, as it seemed that, with the barilla duties due to be reviewed in 1827, a Tory MP might have more influence than a Whig (OA D14/1, Rev Wm Logie, 12 July 1826). Despite his failure to win the seat, his spirited intervention and his later lobbying helped to persuade the Tory government to continue the duties unchanged for another three years.

Meanwhile the political balance in Orkney shifted. In 1826 Captain Balfour returned from Edinburgh, and in the following year he persuaded his uncle to purchase the Graemsay estate for £34,500 from the Trustees of the late Sir William Honyman (OA D2/23/6, 6 Sept, 20 Oct 1826). Thus the Honymans ceased to be a political force and the Balfour influence was strengthened. Nevertheless, with the prospect of a Whig government and a Reform Bill, the Balfours did not put forward a Tory candidate in 1830. Instead they backed their friend, George Traill younger of Hobbister and Ratter, a talented man, with property in Sanday and a good knowledge of the islands (Coghill 1980: 5, 6). It was possible that George Traill, as a moderate Whig, might, when the Reform Bill was drawn up, persuade the government to grant Shetland its own MP: a concession which would preserve the vested interests of Orcadians and satisfy the just claims of the Shetlanders (Coghill 1980: 6, 10).

Samuel Laing was jealous of George Traill, thinking with some justification that his own talents were as great and his experience, achievements and

popularity were greater than those of the Caithness Traill. However, he accepted that Traill was a much better choice than Dundas had been, and he refrained from challenging Traill in the elections of 1830 and 1831, allowing him to be chosen unopposed.

Concentration on financial affairs in Orkney

While the barilla duty survived and kelp lairds were solvent, Samuel Laing continued as a leading figure in Orkney affairs. Thus in August 1826 he headed the jury of magistrates that examined witnesses and determined the exact equivalents of the traditional Orkney weights and measures expressed in the Imperial weights that were increasingly used even in local transactions (OA D2/10/9, NYRO ZNK/V/4/2/8). As provost of Kirkwall he chaired the committee that recommended building a bridge over the mouth of the Oyce or Peerie Sea, specifying a drawbridge so that masted vessels could still enter (OA K1/1/11, 11 April 1829).

His own kelp shores and farms required close supervision if they were to support his family and service his debts. One worrying problem was that, even while the £5 a ton import duty on barilla was maintained, kelp prices began to decline. In 1826 he was still able to sell kelp at £11:11/- a ton which, after production costs and freight charges, left him with a clear profit of £8. That year he made about 330 tons, half on Eday and half on his lands in Sanday, Stronsay and Shapinsay, and his net profit from all kelp sales totalled £2,659. In 1829 he made 280 tons, sold them at £7:7/- a ton gaining less than £5 a ton net profit; so his kelp income totalled £1,298 (NAS GD 31/502/5 and 101). Other kelp lairds sought to co-ordinate their selling, in the face of a combination of glassmakers trying to force prices down; but Laing preferred to sell early and independently (D14/1/32, J Baikie to J T Urquhart 27 January 1827).

As his kelp profits diminished, Laing had every incentive to make farming pay. In 1829 he claimed, somewhat imaginatively, that his income from land was £2,016 a year, after paying stipends, feu duties and taxes amounting to £170. About three-quarters of this land income of £2,016 came from farm rents, the other quarter was derived from town house rents, mills, fishermen's net ground, grazings, moss, rabbits, sheep and wool (NAS GD 31/502/101). This meant that he had so improved the value of his estate that his rentroll was worth more than his kelp-making. Such triumphant claims were discounted by Captain Balfour who, always doubtful of attempts to force improvement on farmers, suspected that Laing's vaunted results did not justify his efforts and investments:

In this place [Orkney] the greatest Improver is Mr Samuel Laing and . . . he has never been able to get tenants . . . who will give any rent equal to the interest of his outlays — four fifths of his estate is in his own hands, and the general opinion is that he loses money by every one of his farms (OA D2/23/6, WB to JB 2 Nov 1827).

Bitter experience had converted Samuel Laing to Balfour's way of thinking. When Laing was asked to give his advice on the management of the Graemeshall estate, he advocated the consolidation of farms out of run-rig and the use of statute labour to make better roads, but he cautioned against capital investment. Tight management was the policy that brought results:

The first object and leading principle in the management of an Estate ought to be — to lay out nothing — and draw in as much as can be fairly and judiciously done by increase in the Rental (OA D5/10/2, SL Nov 1827; Schrank 1995: 27, 28).

As late as 1829 Laing could still assert, and convince himself, that his financial position was tenable. He estimated, with characteristic exaggeration, that his estate was worth £81,261: a figure achieved by valuing the kelp shores at sixteen years purchase and the lands at thirty years purchase. He thought his furniture, books, plate and linen were worth at least £2,000. He valued his 49 farm horses at £678, his 268 cattle at £1,106, and his 1,068 sheep at £534. Farm implements were reckoned to be worth £250 and 45 kelp boats and tools were worth £280. His shares in three or four trading sloops might amount to over £700. Reliable debtors owed him £340 and he had wool on hand worth £40. He had insured his own life for £5,000. Dead or alive he was, on his own most generous calculations, worth over £91,000 (NAS GD 31/502/101).

A pessimist might reduce Laing's estimate by at least a third. The kelp shores that he valued at over £20,000 might soon become almost worthless. His imposing rental might be founded more on hope than reality, and other figures might be discounted or even challenged. Moreover, he owed £33,700 in heritable bonds and £8,190 in personal debts, a total of £41,890, with a growing burden of interest that swallowed much of his annual income (Ibid, May 1829). In 1830 he found it necessary to borrow £2,000 from the National Bank of Scotland (Orkney Sasines, 1830, No 488).

A shift of focus

After his son Sam went to Cambridge, Laing began to spend more time in the south, taking his daughter Elizabeth, now of marriageable age, and his sister-in-law Mary Kelly with him. They went not only to see relatives in Scotland and England but to holiday abroad. Apparently they were at Tours in France during the summer of 1829 (OA DI/466: 83, 95). In June 1830 they were in Paris, and later Samuel Laing wrote to his factor, Peter Copland, from Neuenrade, Westphalia, on 19 September, and from Stuttgart, Wurtemberg, on 5 October (NAS GD 31/502/56, 57, 65 and 58, PC to SL 22 Oct 1830). Thus Laing was in France immediately before the July insurrection that replaced Charles X by the bourgeois Louis Philippe, and also saw Liberal unrest in German states. Witnessing revolutionary turmoil in Europe made Laing favour political reform in Britain as an alternative to more violent change.

Returning to England, he stayed at Hythe, Kent, writing to Orkney frequently about the prospects for the kelp manufacturers and the glass industry (OA D2/4/14). Early in 1831 he went with Elizabeth and Sam to spend a week at Ore Place, near Hastings, with Sir Howard and Lady Elphinstone, who were related to the Elphinston family of Lopness, Sanday, and 'always kept up a kind of cousinship acquaintance' with the Laings (OA D1/466, 3, 85).

The end was nigh for kelp-lairds. The act fixing a £5 a ton import duty on barilla had expired in January 1830, but it was not until after Lord Grey's Whig ministry came into office, in November 1830, that the Board of Trade and the Treasury decided to take another step towards free trade. On 16 December 1830 a Treasury order provisionally reduced the duty and on 7 February the Commons, in committee, resolved that the rate should be lowered to £2 a ton; the Chancellor of the Exchequer assuring alarmed critics that 'It was a great mistake to suppose that the measure . . . would destroy the kelp manufactures' (*The Times*, Tuesday 8 Feb 1831, p. 2, col. 4,5). George Traill MP, snowed up in Edinburgh, missed the crucial debate, but hoped for some compensatory measure: lower taxes on glass and windows 'would help the kelp industry and the glass industry alike' (OA D2/8/9, GT to WB 8 Feb. 1831).

Samuel Laing foresaw that his income from kelp would be only a quarter of what it had been. Cheap barilla did, indeed, cause kelp prices to fall: by 1833 kelp was selling at only £4:10/- a ton and scarcely 500 tons were made in Orkney (Thomson 1983: 46, 48, 111-4). Meanwhile all Laing could do was to urge George Traill to seek scientific advice: the discovery of new chemical uses for kelp might revive prices a little (NLS Ms 19336, ff32-34, SL to GT Nov. 1831).

Renewed political ambition

The political news from Westminster was more encouraging, since quite soon there would be a Reform Act and an extension of the franchise that would allow Laing to turn his popularity in Orkney to advantage. He told George Traill that he was confident of succeeding him as MP:

Mr Laing has announced to me his intention to be a candidate for the representation of Orkney, in case of Reform, of which he is a most enthusiastic advocate. He says he has no chance under the present system but thinks he has a strong interest among the small heritors who, he conceives, will have a decided superiority of votes. He adds that his motive for standing is not personal ambition, but in order to keep the situation open for his son (OA D2/8/9, GT to WB 28 March 1831).

There was one more election under the unreformed system in 1831, which repeated the result of the previous year, then a final crisis in the House of Lords, after which the Reform struggle was won. Samuel Laing was busy in the south during 1831, delighting in his son's graduation as second wrangler at Cambridge (DNB, Sup. Vol. III, 1901), warning Kirkwall Burgh Council to take precautions against the coming cholera (OA K1/1/11, 8 Nov 1831), trying to sell

kelp (NAS GD 31/502/96), and watching the Scottish Reform Bill take shape. The new county franchise would give the vote to men who possessed property worth £10 a year and tenants paying £50 a year, and Laing thought that such an electorate in Orkney would favour him against any Dundas candidate.

When George Traill's negotiations to obtain a separate MP for Shetland ended in failure Orcadians were displeased, especially since Traill's native Caithness obtained a member of its own. However, Laing made the best of the situation and, after praising Traill's endeavours, now urged that there be no further opposition to the Shetlanders (OA D2/8/9, GT to WB, 23 April 1832). Laing wished to avoid further offending new voters whose support he would soon be soliciting.

As early as 5 June 1832 preparations were begun in Orkney for the election that would be held after the Reform Acts became law: tenants on the Earldom estate were asked not to pledge support for any candidate 'till the wishes of Lord Dundas' family shall be known' (OA D13/2/8, 8 June 1832). Yet Samuel Laing, standing as a very independent and Orcadian Liberal, was confident of success in Orkney. Shetland was his main problem and, after being chosen as provost of Kirkwall yet again on 29 September, he visited Lerwick to seek support by attacking the Dundas family as absentee and neglectful.

Unfortunately for Laing, George Traill decided to stand a third time for Orkney and Shetland as a moderate Whig, backed jointly by the Tory Balfours and the Whig Lord Dundas. Thus Laing faced a contest not with some little-known relation of the Dundases but with a talented and experienced opponent, not easily dismissed as an agent of aristocratic influence (NAS GD 236/22, 19 Oct 1832). There was also a third candidate, Robert Hunter of Lunna, whose intervention might take a few votes from Traill and so indirectly help Laing.

In Shetland, William Mouat, of Garth urged voters to support George Traill, who had been more sympathetic to Shetland's claims than Laing and who might yet gain Shetland a separate MP:

The number of claims for registration in Orkney is 164 and the Freeholders upon the old roll 44 - in all 208. Of these 126 are stated to be engaged to Mr Laing and about 55 to Mr Traill, leaving 30 neutral . . . The Shetland claims amount to above 80 . . . (OA D13/2/8, M Mouat, 24 Sept 1832).

In most of the United Kingdom the general election was held during December 1832, but Orkney, traditionally the last to go to the polls, voted on 7 and 8 January 1833. The poll-books arrived on 23 December, brought north by the small paddle steamer *Helensburgh*. On her passage from the Clyde she was so battered by the wintry seas that she was unable to proceed immediately to Lerwick, therefore a sailing vessel was chartered to take the Shetland books to their destination (Cormack 1971: 12, 13, quoting *Scotsman*).

Before during and after the open voting at the hustings in front of the Town Hall, Kirkwall, Samuel Laing enjoyed clamorous support from crowds of

local people, most of whom were without votes. He won a majority of the votes cast in Orkney, was proud of his achievement and deeply moved by the effusive display of popular regard:

At the Election in 1833, the enthusiasm in my favour, the professions, the demonstrations of favour, from all the middle and lower classes were unexampled. It was then that I was rewarded for all my labours. It was then demonstrated that even in Orkney a man who really acts for the public good will meet his reward (OA D1/466, 88).

For three days Kirkwall folk relished the triumph of their local hero, although their jubilation was premature as the sheriff-substitute, Mr Charles Shirreff, was awaiting the arrival of the poll-books from Shetland. Gradually, as the days passed and the suspense increased, Laing's supporters grew impatient for him to be declared the winner. The best account of this period of unjustified confidence was given by William Wood, surgeon in Kirkwall, writing to James Dennison, North Myre, Sanday, on Friday 11 and Saturday 12 of January 1833:

The Election business is over so far, but I fear it is the pleasantest part that is past. You will have heard already that Mr Laing had a majority of 32 in Orkney. The Steamer from Shetland should have been here before 2 o'clock yesterday [Thursday 10 January] which (according to act of parliament) was the time for declaring the member. But yesterday forenoon Mr Shirreff signified his intention of waiting longer, but how long I do not know. This was made known to the different bodies who were gathering for the procession, and also to Mr Laing. It made a little grumbling at first, however they were all determined to go through with what they had begun.

The different bodies met at the Ball green, and at one o'clock marched up to Papdale, and conducted Mr Laing down to the Hustings, which he mounted amidst the cheers of thousands. A few of Mr Traill's friends were on the Hustings, but not himself; many of Mr Laing's were there. Exactly at two o'clock three tremendous cheers were given, and all Mr Laing's friends on the Hustings shook hands with him. He read a protest against Mr Shirreff's proceedings, having previously demanded of him the declaration of the member, and having got a refusal. Mr Shirreff read an answer to the protest, but in such a low voice that many called out 'give it to Mr Laing to read':

Mr Shirreff has nothing to save himself but a letter from the Lord Advocate [Francis Jeffrey], in which he expresses it as his opinion that Mr Shirreff might wait; MacConnechie [James Maconochie, sheriff-depute] and the Solicitor General [Henry Cockburn] are of a different opinion, but the act of parliament is surely what he should go by — it is said by Mr Laing that Mr Shirreff has made himself liable for the fine (£500) and many more are of the same opinion.

There were several very excellent speeches made from the Hustings; none of Mr Traill's party spoke a word. Mr Graham [Alexander Sutherland Graeme] spoke for a long time, and in very high terms of the procession. He said that it was by far the finest political procession he had ever seen, even what he had witnessed in

London yielded to it. Everything was neat, regular and orderly. The Broad Street was completely filled, the procession all kept in their ranks and packed as close together as possible. There were five or six and twenty flags, most of them silk and gilt lettering — the effect was truly imposing. They had 1 fifer, 1 drummer, 1 trumpeter, 4 fiddlers and 7 pipers.

After the speechifying was finished, Mr Laing was put in the Chair, which was entirely of Orkney growth, with a seat of heather. They then paraded him to the head of the Town, and from thence to the end of the Ayre, and then took him to Papdale, where they gave him 3 cheers again and left him. Mr Spence the banker, before they left Papdale, presented him with the Merchants' flag, which Mr Laing rolled up and promised to keep while he lived.

Some of the devices on the flags were very good. The carters had on theirs an Orkney garron, and written over him 'A Native suits our soil' — under him 'He will be steady and sure'. I admired the Holm Fishermen as much as any, they came in the forenoon with two fiddles playing before them — on their flag they had two herring Boats, one under sail, the other lying to. Above the boats 'The Holm Fishermen', under 'Laing's truest Friends' . . .

2 January 1833 — No vessel from Shetland yet. Mr Shirreff means to declare the member today at 2 o'clock . . . (OA D14/1/37).

In fact, as Wood's next letter shows, the delay continued, tension mounted and when the news from Shetland proved to be unwelcome to Laing's followers they reacted angrily and eventually rioted:

I would have written you again before this time, but I was waiting for the end of our revolution. As you say you have had 'no right account of it', I will give you a sketch of what I have heard and seen of 'The Glorious 15th of January' a day never to be forgotten by the enlightened mob of Kirkwall. The Steamer arrived here on the Sunday [13 January 1833] after I last wrote to you; I happened to be at the shore when she arrived, and I went to the pier to hear the news. Mr and Mrs Patton were there with anxious looks — they were soon joined by Mr Traill of Woodwick, Mr Heddle, Mr Pat Fotheringham and Mr Wm Fotheringham.

Mr Traill and Mr Patton, with a Sheriff Officer, went off immediately to the steamer; they were not many minutes on board. They came on shore with the Captain and Thomas Foulis, who had been sent to Zetland to bring the Poll Books. I saw by their faces, before they landed, that all was not well with them. Mr Patton, when they got within the pierheads, called out 'Five for Mr Laing, Eight for Mr Hunter, and Forty-five for Mr Traill'.

Early on Monday [14 January 1833] groups of tradesmen, boatmen etc gathered all over the town, to plan what was to be done next day, as it was known that Mr Shirreff was then to declare Mr Traill [younger of Hobbister] Member for the County. Monday passed on quietly — only a threatening was now and then heard. On Tuesday morning about ten o'clock I had occasion to see a patient or two at the shore; when I came to the Poor Man's Corner, I heard the sound of the Drum, and immediately Peter Wick came round the corner swearing vengeance

against the Sheriff. He was followed by Thomas Wick beating the drum, and about a hundred and fifty boys and lads marching in regular order, all armed with sticks. I stepped into Hugh Wood's shop till they passed.

I saw no more of the proceedings, for I was afraid there would be mischief, and did not go up to the Cross. I hear the mob first opposed the Sheriff at or about the corner of Mr John Baikie's house; he never got farther, the wives were the most active, they tore some of his clothes and threw peats and stones etc at him; some, I believe, struck him with their fists. He was defended by Woodwick chiefly — and I believe if he had not been there, the poor Sheriff would have suffered. He returned to go up the street again, but stopt at Patton the Baker's [shop] and there attempted to take out the poll books, but the mob gathered on him again with such fury, that he had to run to his own house.

Mr James Spence then got to the Cross and read a letter from Mr Laing; and Thomas Mackenzie and Patton protested against the Sheriff, and the Mob dispersed. Mr Shirreff declared Mr Traill immediately after, within the threshold of his own door.

There was no person hurt. Captain Balfour fell, but no one attempted to hurt him. Mr John Baikie also fell, and Mr James Baikie [of Tankerness] was once or twice on his knees. Mr Urquhart got a blow on the ribs which made him *host* [ON *hósti*, a cough]. Precognitions have been going on ever since. I hear that some of the Rioters will be taken up to-morrow, and if that shall happen we will likely have a real Riot. None of the Sheriff's Officers will act, and none of the Constables. There is talk of soldiers, men of war and pressgangs. How it will end I know not.

There is a very exaggerated edition of the story in John Malcolm's paper, the Observer, which some of our Kirkwall Gents would do well to contradict. Mr Laing has had a letter from Lord Brougham this day, which holds out the best of hopes to him, and he goes off to London to-morrow.

The Mob, Riot or Row was altogether a very foolish story and was not worth taking note of, at least as far as I can learn. I am afraid to speak a word about it here (OA D14/1/38, 30 Jan 1833).

Wood, a supporter of Samuel Laing, tried to play down the damage inflicted by the mob on those gentlemen who had attempted to escort the sheriff-substitute. Yet one victim suffered more than cuts, bruises and torn clothes: John Traill Urquhart was doubled up by a blow under the ribs that caused internal injury. He was carried to the house of his brother-in-law, Dr John Bremner, lingered for a month and expired on 18 February 1833 (Hossack 1900: 353-4; OPR 21/7). Before his burial on the 26 February, a post mortem examination revealed that he had a diseased kidney, but the blow was the immediate cause of death. This tragedy shocked everyone in Kirkwall but, thanks to Captain Balfour and others, the assailant, Muir, was not tried for the death of Urquhart. Hanging the man would have permanently embittered divisions among Orcadians (OA D2/7/8, 3, 10, 24 June 1833).

Political disappointment tempered by family successes

Laing's legal challenge failed and George Traill was confirmed as the MP; the official record of votes cast being Traill 107, Laing 96 and Hunter 9, from an electorate that now numbered 275. The defeat of his political ambitions and the unhappy consequences of the riot forced Laing to reconsider his position in Orkney, where his financial problems were insoluble. The death of his brother Gilbert at Rome on the 13 August 1832 intestate removed all hope of further fraternal help and brought troublesome responsibilities (OA D1/466, 87; Forfarshire Inventories, SC47/40/9, 225-38). Samuel could do no more for his sister Mary and her family, and in the autumn of 1833 the Shaws emigrated, embarking at Stromness for Canada (OA D1/466, 16).

In contrast to Laing's dark prospects, the outlook for his children had never looked brighter. On 17 March 1834 Sam was elected a Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge, another step in a remarkable career: in the course of his later life he displayed ability as a lawyer, civil servant, businessman, politician and writer (DNB, Sup. Vol III, 1901). Elizabeth, an attractive and sensible young woman, heeded her father's advice and chose her husband with great care. In Kirkwall on the 20 March 1834, she married Henry Baxter of Idvies, Forfarshire, an able, wealthy man with useful Whig connections (OA D1/466, 88).

Son of John Baxter of Idvies, a banker and merchant in Dundee (1764-1833), Henry Baxter was a graduate of Edinburgh University (1817), an advocate and a Whig Church Commissioner. He had succeeded to the estate of Idvies, Forfarshire, in 1833, yet he retained links with commerce and industry, being a double cousin of the Baxter Brothers of Dundee, the leading linen manufacturers (Dundee Ref Lib, 377/3).

Laing felt enormous satisfaction that his children were now making their way in the world, but he was surprised and irritated when, after seeing Elizabeth married, Mary Kelly announced that she too was leaving Papdale. Two years later she married a retired jeweller, a very elderly, wealthy and amiable man (OA D1/466, 90-94). Clearly it was time for Samuel Laing to make a new life for himself. Left alone, he longed to be free of his responsibilities and to escape the humiliation of bankruptcy and the sale of his estate:

Finding it impossible to keep my estate together, the interest of the debts accumulating and a sale of the whole or of the greater part of it necessary, I went up to Edinburgh after my daughter's marriage, settled with my agents that they should have full powers to sell under the superindendance of Mr Cuninghame, Advocate, and of my son, without any interference, providing they pay me £240 a year until the estate is sold . . .

Orkney would not be agreeable to me if my property is so diminished that my station, influence in society and means of being useful are comparatively gone. It is not easy nor is it agreeable to descend — to be the second where one has been the

first — but it is not difficult, at least for me, to accommodate myself to a totally new scene and new circumstances (OA D1/466, 90).

So at the age of fifty-three Samuel Laing left Orkney. From Scotland he went to England and in July 1834 crossed from Hull to Gothenburg by steamship, saw something of Sweden, and then went to Norway, determined to live there and learn the language. He travelled from Christiania overland and reached Drontheim (Trondheim) on 25 August. Delighted by the area and fascinated by its history, he lodged for the winter at Brusved Gaard, near the small town of Levanger (Laing 1836 Ch III). Here he lived cheaply, devoted himself to the study of Norwegian life and Norse Sagas, and began the first of the books that gained him fame and fortune.

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