

MONTROSE – A REVIEW OF ITS BALTIC AND SCANDINAVIAN CONNECTIONS

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Montrose has one of the few natural harbours on the east coast of Scotland. It is formed by the estuary of the river South Esk which is scoured twice daily by the surge of water from four square miles of tidal basin behind the town, so that even in modern times regular dredging is not required. At Spring tides the flow of water reaches the speed of 7 knots. This excellent natural harbour with a ford connecting the main north-south coastal road may have attracted settlement before the foundation of the burgh around 1140. Scandinavian seafarers obviously knew the harbour and sheltered in it on their way up and down the long featureless east coast to and from York, London and other markets in England, since from the 12th century to the 1490s the tidal mouth of the South Esk was known as the *Aquam* or *Portus de Stromnay*, which is Norse *straum a***. 'Tiderace river' is a perfect description of the surge from the Basin at ebb tide.

Perhaps there was some occasional or seasonal trading by the Scandinavians by the 12th century. About 1136-46 a royal burgh was founded on the peninsula north of the estuary which separates the North Sea from the Basin, a remarkable site. The original burgh was laid out on higher level ground away from the harbour. The burgesses were granted the same rights as those of Perth, and were given a monopoly over a wide trading precinct stretching from the Findon Burn near Aberdeen to the Dighty Water near Dundee. Montrose was therefore the first burgh in Angus and Mearns.

The Scottish burghs seem to have flourished from their founding in the mid-12th century to the mid-13th century, a period which saw a rising curve of demand, production and urbanisation all over Europe. As a foreign implant by the Crown in a Celtic community, burghs were an unqualified success, providing an outlet for native primary products such as hides and woolfells, and an inlet for exotic foreign produce and

* I am indebted to Ian Fraser for this interpretation.

manufactures; in this Montrose can have been no exception, being particularly well sited for such trade across the North Sea and along the coast to England.

Although Scandinavians were perhaps the earliest traders in the area, Flanders with its development of an urbanised woollen industry became the most important market and source of manufactures, and Flemish and English merchant seafarers dominated the seaborne trade of North-West Europe until the early 14th Century when Hanseatic shippers began to take over.

There is little or no evidence for Montrose's trade until the later middle ages, but it obviously had an aggressive merchant community, as in 1289 the magistrates of Banff complained that the Montrosians were invading the fair at Aberdeen, intended to serve burghs north of the Mounth. Montrose had its own fair from the 13th century; unlike weekly markets which served for an exchange of local produce, fairs could last several weeks and were centres of international trade.

The Scots had Baltic contacts by the 13th century and by the 14th century Aberdeen, Dundee, St. Andrews and Leith are known to have established regular commercial links with Copenhagen, Hamburg, Lübeck, Bremen, Rostock, Wismar, Greifswald and Stockholm, while Ny-Lödöse (Gothenburg), Danzig, Elbing and Königsberg had Scots communities before 1500. It would be surprising if Montrose had not contacts similar to those of the more prominent east coast ports

Hides and wool were Scotland's main exports in the earlier middle ages but the decline of the Flemish woollen industry by the 15th century meant they were becoming less important. In the case of Montrose, however, there were alternative exports available, namely salmon and grain. By the early 15th century, when customs began to be levied on these items, Montrose was one of the three main salmon exporting ports next to Aberdeen and Banff; the town had its own fishings in the North and South Esks and monopolised the packing of salmon within its trading precinct. The salmon went mainly to Flanders and France in the middle ages; probably very little went to the Baltic, though in later times this changed, when Southern Europe was the main market.

By 1600, when a weekly grain market was established, grain became one of the town's most important exports. The immediate area around Montrose, the coastal plain of Angus and Mearns, was one of several areas similar to the laigh of Moray which most years produced a surplus of grain. Much of it went to the Forth, but probably before 1600 some was being exchanged in south Norway for timber. Thomas Tucker, in his report on the Scottish customs of 1655, described Montrose as "a pretty town with a safe harbour ... here likewise is a wayter, because there hath usually been salt brought in; and salmon, plaiding and corns sent forth". Tucker does not mention where these products went, but Dundee's and Aberdeen's trade was with Norway, Eastland (the Baltic), Holland and France. Montrose is likely to have had a similar pattern of trade, but is the only port mentioned as an exporter of grain; there is little doubt it was the main foreign outlet to Norway. In 1655, Montrose was sixth in the shipping league behind Leith, Glasgow, Kirkcaldy, Aberdeen and Dundee. With twelve vessels totalling 370 tons, she came close behind the latter two – with nine vessels totally 440 tons and ten at 377 tons.

A report to the Convention of Royal Burghs in 1691 on the state of burgh trade is unusually detailed for Montrose, giving a list of voyages made by Montrose ships between 1686 and 1690, with cargoes and destinations. A total of thirty-seven voyages is recorded for the four years; only one was not a Montrose vessel – a ship from Stockholm with deals; and only ten voyages were outside Scandinavia and the Baltic. Plaiding and salmon were taken to Campveere and miscellaneous goods brought back in three voyages, salmon and malt were taken in three voyages to Dunkirk, and linen to London with coal from the Forth in three voyages. Ten voyages were made to and from Norway (apart from Campveere, the only area where there was a direct exchange of goods), taking out "victual", probably mainly barley and malt as in the 18th century. The only specific ports mentioned were Dramtoun (Trondheim) and Christiansand (Kristiansand, Agder), and timber was brought home. In 1689, two Montrose ships sailed in ballast to Norway for timber, so plainly there was not always a sufficient surplus of grain to exchange. From the Baltic came iron and deals from Stockholm in nine voyages, flax in three from Konigsberg, flax and hemp in two from Riga, lint and knappel (oak staves) from Danzig once. Goods carried from other

places, or cash, must have been exchanged in the Baltic as there is no record of any of Montrose's products being taken there. Grain was also carried to the Forth by small coasting or fishing vessels and shiploads of fish came from Shetland in 1686. Out of the thirty-seven voyages, nineteen were to and from Scandinavia and six to the East Baltic.

So contacts with Scandinavia and the Baltic lands were predominant in the 17th century and probably somewhat earlier. Several prominent merchant families had branches in the Baltic. The Rennys were wealthy flax importers and had members of the family in Riga sending undressed flax to Montrose, which was already noted for flax spinning by hand and as a yarn market for north-eastern Scotland. In 1662 Thomas and Andrew Renny joined the business and were successful; in 1709 it was Andrew who was chosen, as one of the more prominent citizens of Riga, to hand over the keys of the city to Peter the Great when the Russians conquered Livonia from Swedes. Andrew was succeeded in business by a grandson, Patrick, who exported flax to Dundee and Montrose in the 1720s. His grandson, Robert Renny, became a Russian general and aide-de-camp to Czar Alexander at the time of Napoleon's invasion. He retired to Scotland.

The Ouchterlonies were also established in Riga. John Ouchterlony, a merchant there, retired to Montrose in 1736 and continued his interest in the flax trade. A grandson of his likewise became a Major-General in the Russian Army in the 19th century.

Richard Clerk, a native of Montrose, was in the Swedish navy from 1606 to 1625 and commanded five ships which besieged and captured Riga for the Swedes in 1619. He and a brother, John or Hans, c1617-44 and a nephew, Richard, c1628-88, all became admirals and became ennobled as the Klerks or Clercks. There were other Clercks in Stockholm in the early 17th century, both shipbuilders and silversmiths, but it isn't clear if they were related to Admiral Richard Clerk. Richard sent a brass chandelier or hearse to Montrose where it still hangs in the parish church.

In the early 17th century, sons of prominent Montrose merchants and Town Councillors by the name of Petrie and Christie settled in Norway where there are numerous families of these names. It is not

known where the predecessors of Emmanuel Kant, the eminent philosopher of Königsberg, came from except that they were Scots, but the name Cant was common in the Montrose and Dundee area from the 15th to the 18th century.

Montrose had a considerable trade with Gothenburg in the 18th and early 19th centuries. The prominent merchant and manufacturing family of Carnegie had estates at Pitarrow and Charleston near Montrose and one member, David Carnegie, born in Montrose in 1772, was sent out to Gothenburg in 1786 where he was first clerk to the British Consul and later an accountant. Another Montrosian, David Mitchell, was a merchant in Gothenburg in the 1790s. Another important merchant house in Gothenburg was James Dickson & Co. The firm started with two brothers who left Montrose in the mid-18th century, and they rivalled the Carnegies with their wide-ranging business interests.

In the 18th century, traditional trading patterns held firm; the growth of the linen industry from the 1790s meant increasing flax imports mainly from Riga but also from St. Petersburg and Archangel. This in turn stimulated the shipbuilding industry, and from there being one permanent yard from the 1690s, there were three or four by the 1750s, with keels occasionally being laid on the open beach. The timber almost all came from Norway and Gothenburg. In 1764 a local merchant in company with a shipmaster, two local shipcarpenters and Robert Crosswell, cooper in Gothenburg, built a wind-operated saw mill near the shipyards at the shore of Montrose. It was doubtless of the type in use in Scandinavia from the 16th century. The town was also expanding and timber was needed for building. Vast amounts of malted barley with some bear and oats were exported to Norway, mainly to Bergen, Christiansand, Mandal, Flekkifjord, Arendal and Easter Risor. Tar and timber came back from Bergen; prefabricated barrel staves of several sizes to pack salmon, herring and liquors came from the Sorlandet ports; and oak cartwheel spokes by the thousand came from Flekkifjord in particular. In the early 18th century Montrose had a direct tobacco trade with Maryland and Virginia, which also supplied some timber, so some unprocessed tobacco was also exported to Norway. In the later 18th century a wide variety of linen textiles, sailcloth and finer clothing textiles (most of it of local

manufacture), oak staves and spruce beer were brought from Memel and Königsberg, while skippers of vessels bringing flax from Riga nearly always carried a mast or two and some small timber home. Almost the whole of this Norwegian and Baltic trade was carried out in Montrose vessels, mainly two-masted brigs and schooners, but the French and Napoleonic wars 1794-1815 saw the arrival in Montrose of a number of Norwegian vessels laden with timber; they took away cargoes of textiles, some grain and other manufactures – a trend which continued in the 19th century.

The timber trade maintained connections with Norway and Sweden in particular throughout the 19th century, though occasionally oak timber masts and some fir came from Danzig, Hamburg and Memel. Some timber was imported from the St. Lawrence from the 1790s, but the greatest import trade and a major industry from about 1850 to 1890 was carried out by the single company, Robert Millar and Co. Deals from Gothenburgh, Christiansand and Flekkifjord were imported to be cut into planed timber planks for export to Australia. The timber was kept in bonded warehouses near the harbour until cut, planed and grooved by steam-driven machinery. Along with another firm, Birnie's, not many fewer than 1,000 hands were reckoned to be employed in connection with the timber trade in the 1860s. The trade fell off from the 1890s, and the last shipment came in 1900. The importance of the timber trade is reflected in the fact that Prussia and the Scandinavian nations had vice-consuls in Montrose in the 19th century, and there seems to have been a Norwegian seamen's mission at one time. Ships of Flekkifjord and Christiansand in the very south of Norway were regular callers before 1900.

International trade was very quiet between the wars. Up to the 1950s grain and fertilizers being brought in, some from Russia and the Baltic, but from the mid-1960s trade picked up as a strike-free labour force offered a quick turn-round, and goods from a wide area of east central Scotland are now landed and shipped from Montrose. Since the closure of the Fort William pulp mill, forest thinnings are a regular major export via Montrose to Christianham and other Swedish pulp centres, and the pulp, packed in sheets, is a major import.

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