

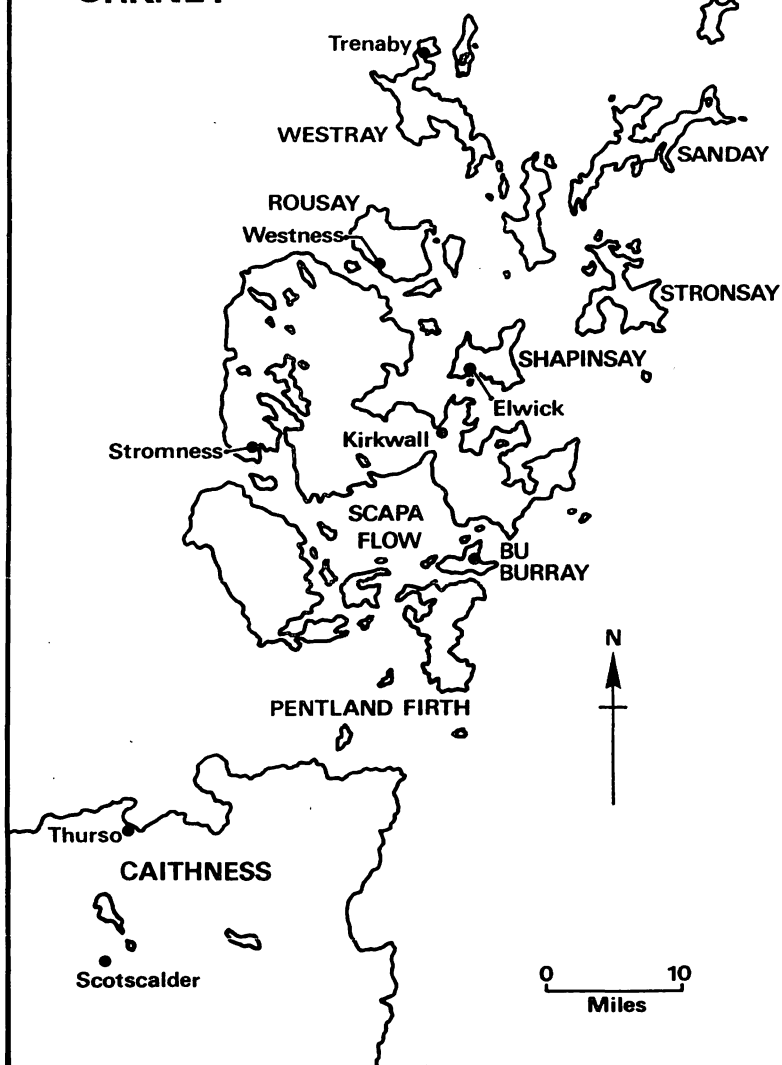
THOMAS BALFOUR OF ELWICK (1752-99), AN ORCADIAN IMPROVER A Sketch of his Origins and Career

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At the time Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster began publishing his monumental Statistical Account of Scotland his passion for improvement was shared by a noteworthy gentleman, two years his senior, on the other side of the Pentland Firth. Thomas Balfour of Elwick, Shapinsay, though he possessed but a small estate, was both the leading personality among the resident heritors in Orkney and the most active agricultural improver in the islands. Given the generally backward state of Orcadian farming, despite the efforts of Sir James Steuart of Burray (d1746) and others, Thomas Balfour's innovations on the estate of Sound and the little village that he planned and built at Elwick seemed exciting enough to contemporaries. Certainly the Rev George Barry, minister in Shapinsay, lauded the achievements of the laird as an inspiring example that ought to be followed by heritors in other parts of Shapinsay and Orkney, where ordinary farmers continued to adhere to ancient customs. Naturally, when Sir John Sinclair began producing and circulating county surveys for 'The Board of Agriculture and Internal Improvement', draft reports written in a few months by volunteer surveyors and printed with wide margins for invited comments, Thomas Balfour of Elwick provided the information and recommendations for Orkney (1795).

A national crisis, arising from the war against Revolutionary France, diverted Thomas Balfour's energies elsewhere. He raised, most profitably, two fencible regiments and took one of them to serve in Ireland. His abiding interest in the land continued as strong as ever and he invested his gains from military ventures in the purchase of Scotscladder in Caithness, fully intending to improve that estate as soon as he was free from regimental duties. Illness and death frustrated his ambitions. Had he lived he would have vied with Sir Benjamin Dunbar of Hempriggs (later Lord Duffus) and Sheriff James Traill of

ORKNEY



Hobbister (Orkney), Ratter and Castlehill (Caithness) as practical improvers in the county of 'Agricultural Sir John', the great theorist. James Traill (1758-1843) was the particular friend of Thomas Balfour and their early careers are surprisingly similar, though the cautious and prudent Traill usually followed in the footsteps of the zestful Balfour. Both men ably seized the opportunities of their time: each married an aristocrat, acted as Sheriff, experimented in agriculture, planned a village and raised a regiment. The correlation is so close that the later life and work of James Traill give a fair indication of how Thomas Balfour might have spent his old age had he lived to join his friend in Caithness.

Balfour's death at forty-seven with so many hopes unfulfilled does not affect his importance as an improver in his native Orkney during the last decades of the eighteenth century. His career is also of some general interest. It is remarkable that, born a younger son, he became not only a laird in his own right but the enterprising leader of local society, a prominent ship-owner and colonel of his own regiment. His success can be attributed to family help, personal charm, tireless energy and considerable talents.

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Thomas Balfour of Elwick's father was William Balfour (1719-1786), 2nd of Trenaby in Westray, a minor laird with a life-long interest in farming, a love of business for its own sake and an original turn of mind. William Balfour married Elizabeth Covingtrie, daughter of a well-to-do minister in Sanday and niece of a former provost of Kirkwall. Both William and his brother Thomas, after whom the future improver was to be named, exploited Orkney's kelp resources so vigorously that they helped provoke the Stronsay Anti-Kelp riots of 1742. Objecting to the heavy feu duties exacted by the Earl of Morton's Chamberlain in Orkney, William meddled with the Jacobites and this caused government troops to burn his house of Trenaby in 1746. Then he played a leading rôle in carrying on the Pundlar Process designed to abolish or reduce the obnoxious feu duties and, the lengthy suit ending unsuccessfully, this led to his bankruptcy (1759). He survived financially thanks to his own exertions and considerable assistance from his brother.

Within a few years William Balfour had the opportunity to re-establish his family's fortunes. The Earl of Morton, as an active president of the Royal Society, became more interested in Venus and Tahiti than in the troublesome Northern Isles, and in 1766 he sold the Earldom estate in Orkney and the Lordship of Shetland to the notorious war-profiteer, Sir Lawrence Dundas. The new owner strengthened his hold on the islands and the parliamentary seat by purchasing Lord Garlies' Burray estate (1768) and obtaining a grant of the Bishopric lands (1775). William Balfour, so long an opponent of the Earl of Morton, advised Sir Lawrence on his acquisition, helped his nominee with the election of 1768 and then became his factor in Shetland (1769). It was a poacher to gamekeeper transformation which ensured – for a decade at least – that there would be no organised opposition to Sir Lawrence's domination. For his part William Balfour gained a good income, a position of local power and the assurance that his three sons, about to be launched into their careers, would enjoy the patronage of Sir Lawrence Dundas.

When William Balfour sailed north to begin his duties in Shetland all three of his sons, John (b1750), Thomas (b1752) and David (b1753) were students at Aberdeen. In 1771 Sir Lawrence's candidate was again unanimously elected for Orkney: whereupon Sir Lawrence, who was a director of the East India Company, rewarded his factor by obtaining a writership at Madras for young John Balfour. After a commercial course in London, John sailed for India (1772) where, eventually, he made a large fortune. This wealth was to be a factor enhancing the importance of the Orkney Balfours for more than a century.

Until William Balfour had obliged the Dundases at a few more parliamentary elections, his younger sons could not expect the munificent patronage that had given John his golden opportunity. David, the youngest son, was articled to an Edinburgh lawyer and eventually became a writer to the signet. Setting up on his own account, at a time when Sir Lawrence Dundas's influence was at its height in both Orkney and Edinburgh, David prospered as the trusted agent, in legal and business matters, of his relations and other Orkney lairds and merchants.

Only Thomas Balfour, the second son, stayed to graduate at

Aberdeen (1772); after which, aided by Professor Traill, he took an Edinburgh medical degree. He qualified as a doctor of medicine in 1774 with a thesis entitled *De Cortice Peruviano* on the properties and uses of Peruvian bark or quinine. Clearly Thomas had thought of following his eldest brother to the tropics. However, there were other possibilities and meanwhile he was at leisure to enjoy himself in Edinburgh society: his father's connection with Sir Lawrence Dundas bringing Thomas invitations to gatherings at the houses of the great man's political allies.

While possessing all the family talent for business, Thomas Balfour had always been somewhat wayward, having more ambition and fewer scruples than his brothers. Delighted by his glimpses of high society he became reluctant to embark on a toilsome professional career that would bring him only the courtesy title of gentleman. He much preferred the notion of being a gentleman in the full social and economic meaning of the term: a man of breeding, honour and wealth with no occupation save the supervision of his own landed estate – a hobby that bore the stamp of royal approval. It readily occurred to him that a young man in need of a fortune might obtain one most speedily by an advantageous marriage. Luckily his prepossessing appearance, personal charm and fashionably romantic tastes made him attractive to ladies. Accordingly he looked about him for a suitable wife.

At General Scott's new house in Drummond Place, Thomas was introduced to a sister of Viscount Ligonier. Apparently this lady, Frances Ligonier was distantly related, on her mother's side, to General Scott and was on a visit to Edinburgh. The lady had a very lively mind, shared Thomas Balfour's literary and musical tastes and seemed to welcome his attentions. He fell determinedly in love with her and when, tantalisingly, she returned south, he was inspired to write romantic poetry well-calculated to express the intensity of his emotions.

Having gained the approval of his father, Thomas set off in pursuit of Miss Ligonier. His brother David, with characteristic self-sacrifice, gave up his own allowance to help Thomas in his quest. So the next eighty pounds forwarded from Orkney by the young men's mother and uncle went wholly to finance Thomas for a season in the fashionable world. He renewed his suit in London, proposed and was promptly

accepted. They were married on 19 September 1775.

Frances Ligonier's greatest asset was her Huguenot family name which was then an epitome of military distinction. She was the daughter of the late Colonel Ligonier (d1746) and the niece of the late Field Marshal Lord Ligonier (d1770), Commander in Chief of the British Army during the Seven Years War. Her brother, Edward Viscount Ligonier, had brought the dispatches announcing the victory of Minden (1759). In 1775 he was a Major General, the following year he was created Earl Ligonier and in 1777 he was made a Lieutenant General. Such were Thomas Balfour's new relations. Dead or alive they were all so distinguished as to be very valuable acquisitions.

As regards immediate financial gain, Thomas Balfour's marriage was advantageous by the modest standards of Orcadian lairds. Frances had inherited £400 from her father and £2,000 from her uncle, the Field Marshal. Probably she had about £1,000 of this in easily realised stock: another £1,000 had been invested with the Duke of Bolton in return for a bond of annuity paying fifty pounds a year. She had only limited expectations from her brother, whose estate was entailed and who had to provide for his wife. Even if he did predecease his sister, Frances would inherit, at most, one thousand pounds.

Frances Ligonier had no beauty to supplement her modest fortune and uncertain expectations. Her intelligence and strength of mind were doubtful assets in the marriage market. It is not surprising, therefore, that at the age of thirty-three (admitting to twenty-nine) she was ready to accept an enthusiastic, handsome and charming young suitor of twenty-three, who might give her an establishment of her own in the land of her maternal ancestors.

Lord Ligonier approved the match, offered the use of his house in town and promised to do what he could for his brother-in-law. As Colonel in Chief of the Ninth regiment of Foot, Ligonier was soon able to obtain a commission for Thomas Balfour and arrange the regimental duties so that the young man did no service at all excepting a little recruiting in Orkney.

In the latter part of 1775 Thomas Balfour took his new wife north to meet his brother David and also his father, who sailed down from

Shetland for a brief family reunion at Aberdeen. Thomas and his wife wintered there, made welcome by Professor Traill and other friends, then set off in the spring of 1776 on a two hundred and fifty mile ride to Caithness. After visiting the Traills at Dunnet, they crossed to Orkney where Frances found herself the principal object of attention in Orkney society.

At this time William Balfour was at the peak of his career, being Chamberlain for both Shetland and Orkney until he was replaced in Shetland by John Bruce of Sumburgh (1778) and in Orkney by Patrick Haggart (1780). Inevitably William Balfour had to spend some time in Shetland but the task of managing the Earldom and Bishopric property in Orkney, collecting rents and feu duties, enforcing his employer's 'Admiralty Rights' over wrecked ships and gaining a share of stranded whales, as well as looking after his own lands, gave him ample opportunity to instruct Thomas in every aspect of estate management. In the spring of 1777 William Balfour spent five weeks at the Bu of Burray examining that estate, which had been farmed well earlier in the century, and considering how he could persuade Sir Lawrence Dundas to lease the property to young Thomas. While this Burray scheme was formulating and relatives doted over the expectant Frances, Thomas Balfour helped his father in Kirkwall and his mother at Trenaby where the Balfours had built a new meal mill and ginal.

Early in 1777 he sent recruits to the Ninth regiment of Foot at Norwich, where the traditional garments of the Orcadians amused the rabble. Presumably the islanders were clad in sheepskin coats, worsted caps and rawhide or sealskin rivlins. They acquitted themselves so well in an affray that Lord Ligonier was delighted with their hardiness and spirit.

At the end of May 1777 Frances miscarried and when she had recovered Thomas Balfour took her and his sister Margaret south to stay with Lord Ligonier at Cobham Park, Surrey, where they spent the following winter. Meanwhile, Thomas's uncle, Thomas Balfour of Huip, who had long held the lease of the kelp shore of Burray, obtained an agreement from Sir Lawrence's Commissioners in Edinburgh that young Thomas should have a lease of "the Mains of Burray with the Mansion House" from Martinmas 1778. This was perhaps the best farm in Orkney and had been praised by the Rev

George Low on his tour of 1774.

The farm called the Bue (in Scotland Mains) is under the management of the Factor for the estate, and indeed here I saw the first improvements in the Orkney; the whole farm is inclosed and parted into subdivisions by stone and earth fences, and laid down with Dutch white clover and rye grass, which ... promises a fine crop of hay. In other inclosures of natural grass, and where the former is much worn out, he keeps about 50 or 60 Cows, and rears half that number of Calves.

Despite Thomas Balfour's enthusiasm for agriculture, all that he had learned from his father in the north and all that he had seen of southern methods, he had only limited scope for innovation at the Bu of Burray. Unfortunately, his tenancy coincided with a series of generally poor harvests that threatened the whole of Orkney with famine.

Times were so hard that he began the costly business of stocking and managing a large farm with a flourish of calculated generosity to the smaller tenants of Burray. He allowed them winter pasture for their beasts in the Bu's enclosures and authorised some farmers to shoot the rabbits that swarmed on the links. Help was needed desperately. Sangster, the assistant factor of the Earldom estate, responsible for the income from South Ronaldsay and Burray, calculated that Sir Lawrence's tenants would need 500 bolls of oatmeal, 500 bolls of bere and 100 bolls of potatoes to survive in 1779.

Even at a time of high corn prices, Thomas Balfour had no prospects of accumulating capital at the Bu of Burray. The profits of his farm were swallowed up by the expense of a large household and a very high standard of living. Frances bore him three children: a daughter Mary (b1778) and two sons, John Edward Ligonier (b1780) and William (b1781). Balfour and his wife spent money on renovating the interior of the house, repairing the colonnades joining the wings of the main building and adding a new kitchen for Frances's English cook. Nearby Balfour built a new stone and slate stable, added a wooden stable and rethatched the old stables. To the amazement of Sangster, Balfour maintained "about 30 to 40 horses partly for use and partly for luxury".

Relatives, friends and travellers of distinction were sure of a most hospitable welcome. One distinguished visitor, Principal Gordon of the Scots College in Paris, noted in passing that Thomas Balfour's determination to improve his house and farm was more evident than his interest in the ancient broch tower from which the island derived its name. Balfour, like his predecessors at the Bu, used the broch ruins as a quarry for building stone.

... Captain Balfour has carried on improvements with success, but has few imitators; it is hard to drive the Orkney people out of their old ways. There has been an old tower in this island... There now remains nothing of the old castle but part of the wall; the stones have been employed in building Captain Balfour's dwelling house, offices and inclosures.

Balfour could afford a high style of living in Burray and was able to try out modern ideas in farming because he had various sources of income quite apart from the Bu of Burray. He acted as his father's agent in Kirkwall and managed the family property in Westray during his father's long absences. He also acted as factor of lands in Deerness assigned to his mother by her aging brother, David Covington of Newark. Besides Frances' annuity of fifty pounds, Thomas had his pay as a military officer and this increased as his brother-in-law found opportunities to promote him. Eventually, as most of the Ninth of Foot languished in an American prison camp, Ligonier was able to appoint Thomas Balfour adjutant of the regiment. This completely unearned income would continue until peace allowed the survivors of the regiment to return or until Ligonier died.

Though spending freely, Thomas Balfour did not much exceed his income until he took up politics. In 1780 the Balfours and their friends finally broke with the Dundases of Kerse and looked to a new political patron, the rising Henry Dundas (1742-1811) younger brother of Robert Dundas of Arniston. Robert Baikie of Tankerness, a close friend of the Balfours, stood as parliamentary candidate against Sir Lawrence Dundas's nominee for Orkney. After initial success the attempt failed and Sir Lawrence retaliated against the rebellious Balfours. William Balfour was dismissed and his accounts challenged by law suits designed to embarrass him. Thomas Balfour, though still

tenant of the Bu of Burray, knew that the Dundases of Kerse wished to be rid of him and that he could expect no more favours from Sir Lawrence (d1781) or Sir Thomas Dundas.

Thwarted politically, Balfour had thoughts of making the army his career in reality, but this was strenuously opposed by Ligonier who insisted that Thomas must be content with a sinecure and domestic bliss as he lacked any experience of military duties. Any irritation that Balfour felt towards his patronising brother-in-law was speedily replaced by concern, sympathy and excited expectation. Earl Ligonier fell ill and then died, in June 1782, aged only forty-two.

As soon as Balfour could disentangle himself from a bad harvest he hastened to London where he stayed with his uncle, Thomas Balfour of Huip, who had political and commercial business in the capital. After paying his respects to Countess Ligonier, accepting a gold watch bequeathed him and putting in a bid of ninety pounds for the library of the late Earl, Thomas Balfour found that he would gain from a legacy of up to £1,000 due to his wife. Though he would have to sell his commission, its value was enhanced by the prospect of peace and he would receive over £500.

It only remained for Thomas Balfour to consolidate his gains by becoming the owner of small landed estate and his good fortune extended to a buyer's market. The dearth of 1782-3, the worst since the famine of 1740, hindered the collection of rents in kind and led to huge arrears. Soaring prices did not compensate those lairds who had lost most of their crops and incomes. A better harvest and the coming of peace in 1783 lowered corn and kelp prices, so the value of land in Orkney fell just when Thomas Balfour was looking for property.

At this time the Lindsay brothers, nephews of the late Andrew Ross and trustees for the valetudinarian George Ross, wished to sell the estate of Sound in Shapinsay in order to clear mounting arrears of feu duty. It is also possible that William Lindsay was willing to favour the Balfours in return for support in local politics: the Balfours and their friends enabled William Lindsay rather than Robert Laing to become Provost of Kirkwall in 1784 by a unanimous vote.

Whatever the secret clauses of the agreement may have been, it is

certain that the good offices of his father and uncle enabled Thomas Balfour to buy the lands of Sound for only £1,250 in 1784. Half the purchase price was lent by John Balfour, who had sent funds from India to David in Edinburgh to be applied on Thomas's behalf.

David also arranged the arbitration by which Thomas parted with the Bu of Burray at Martinmas 1785; a generous allowance for improvements and repairs being set against the outstanding rent. Urged on by his father, Thomas had the effrontery to claim compensation for potential profits from the unexpired twenty-four years of the lease, but this was not allowed. Sir Thomas Dundas of Kerse had hardly congratulated himself of being rid of a troublesome tenant in Burray, when he found that he had acquired a disputatious feuar in Shapinsay. When Thomas Balfour acquired Sound, he immediately challenged the amount of feu duties payable to the Chamberlain of the Bishopric estate.

Henceforth Thomas Balfour styled himself Balfour of Elwick after the excellent anchorage overlooked by his property. Weather and tides permitting, he could reach Kirkwall in less than an hour and Shapinsay was conveniently placed for reaching those lands and kelp shores in the outer North Isles and in Deerness which he managed for his parents. Shapinsay itself was mainly covered by heather: apart from patches of runrig and a few scattered enclosures, most of the land was unreclaimed common. A population of about seven hundred subsisted mainly by farming, with seasonal kelp work and in-shore fishing. All the farmers were tenants at will on one or more of three estates: the Bishopric property lands, Thomas Balfour's lands and a smaller estate belonging to Robert Laing of Strenzie (in Stronsay). Balfour was the only resident heritor. The minister, Alexander Pitcairn, was so elderly and infirm that he was no longer able to perform all his duties or keep proper registers.

In Burray Thomas Balfour had been able to renovate an existing mansion house: in Shapinsay he had to build one. The seventeenth century mansion of Sound had been burned by the Royal Navy in 1746 and later the ruin had been adapted to serve as a farm. Thomas and Frances wanted something more fashionable. During the next few years they built, on a site east of Sound, an elegant and commodious residence which they named Cliffdale.

After becoming the laird of Elwick, Thomas Balfour was soon a leading figure in Orkney's political, social and economic affairs. In 1784, he and his friends founded an Association for Preventing Smuggling, in order to embarrass their political opponents in Kirkwall, where many merchants were involved in illicit trade. When Pitt fixed new premiums for British registered fishing vessels and then abolished duties on British-caught fish, Balfour swiftly exploited the opportunity. He became the islands' leading shipowner with four small brigs, four sloops and a fleet of open herring boats based on Shapinsay. The Northern Lighthouse Trustees used him as a local agent when building towers on North Ronaldsay (1789) and the Pentland Skerries (1793).

At the end of 1786, his powerful political friends in Edinburgh appointed him Sheriff-Substitute of Orkney and Robert Nicolson, his man of business, became Sheriff Clerk. The death of his father in 1786 and his uncle in 1787 left Thomas as head of the Balfour connection in Orkney, local representative of his absent brother John, third laird of Trenaby. In 1790 John Balfour returned from Madras and was elected as member of parliament for Orkney and Shetland, with the backing of Henry Dundas, Pitt's political manager in Scotland.

The vital part that Thomas Balfour had played in his brother's victory over the nominee of Sir Thomas Dundas of Kerse, made Balfour hope for some favours from his brother and from the government as soon as the political dust had settled at Westminster. Frances was so upset by the possibility that Thomas might accept a post in India that this scheme had to be discarded. Eventually other benefits from Harry IX were bestowed on Thomas Balfour. John showed his gratitude more promptly: childless himself, he paid for Thomas's boys to be educated at Shern Lodge School, Walthamstow, and then at Harrow, making it clear that the elder would be his heir.

In 1792, the aged Rev Alexander Pitcairn died and in the following year the Rev George Barry, formerly second minister in Kirkwall, was transferred to Shapinsay. Thomas Balfour had no reason to complain of his talented new minister, who was to be the author of the first History of Orkney (1805). George Barry, asked to write a description of the parish for Sir John Sinclair's Statistical Account, included a panegyric on the changes wrought by Thomas Balfour since he

purchased the estate of Sound.

...the only residing heritor of this parish ... in the space of 7 or 8 years that he has possessed the estate, has totally changed the face of that part of the island. Previous to his purchase, nothing was to be seen over its whole extent, but a dreary waste, interspersed with arable lands ill cultivated, a few miserable hovels thinly scattered over its surface, under the name of farm houses or cottages, which were not fit to shelter from the rigours of the climate a few ragged inhabitants, dirty through indolence, lean with hunger, and torpid by despair.

Everything on this estate now happily wears a very different and more pleasant aspect. An elegant house has been built, and an extensive garden laid out; the lands are substantially inclosed and judiciously cultivated with the English plough; many barren fields are, by cultivation, made fertile; summer fallowing, with a change of seed and rotation of crops, is introduced with good effect; and the soil, which formerly bore with reluctance coarse grass, and scanty heather, and puny oats and bear, now chearfully produces oats, rye, barley, pease, wheat, potatoes, clover, and turnips, in considerable quantity and of good quality.

Together with these improvements, the same gentleman has erected a little village by the side of the harbour of Elwick, in which he has placed joiners, carpenters, weavers, tailors, shoemakers, coopers, and labourers of various sorts, furnished them with work sufficient to employ them; and thus enabled them from the fruits of their industry to marry early, and to produce numerous families. In short, Cliffdale, which is the name of this gentleman's seat, taken in conjunction with its appendages, exhibits to the eye of a stranger coming from the sea, or from Kirkwall, rather the appearance of a neat little villa in the vicinity of some opulent city, than of a gentleman's house recently raised in a remote sequestered part of the kingdom.

Balfour's ideas, fashionable among more progressive farmers throughout most of Britain, were certainly new in Shapinsay where the only previous attempt at better farming was Robert Laing's erection of kilns to exploit a band of limy local sandstone. In boasting of the laird's success with wheat the obsequious Barry strays beyond the bounds of credibility. Nevertheless, it is clear that Thomas Balfour was an agricultural improver and that his two-stilted iron ploughs, his new seeds and rotation, his clover and turnips, his house and village, set an excellent example.

Barry's fulsome praise of Balfour contrasted with his unreserved condemnation of the ignorance and stubborn traditionalism of the tenant farmers in most of Shapinsay. Making no allowances for the natural caution of men struggling for subsistence with little capital and no security of tenure, Barry thought them wilfully backward and unresponsive to the example set them by an enlightened resident laird and their minister. Thus in summer the people of Shapinsay let their sheep, young cattle and hordes of ferocious swine roam wild on the common, separated from the growing crops by only a crumbling turf dyke. Any suggestion of herding the animals or regulating their number was greeted with suspicion and non-cooperation.

So blindly attached ... are the ordinary class of people here to ancient customs, and such rooted aversion have they to discover what store they have to their landlords and to their ministers, that no force of example, no influence of authority, no arguments drawn from either humanity or from interest can prevail with them to adopt a measure (i.e. herding) which in every respect appears so reasonable.

Arable farming, with the lands still largely in runrig, was also conducted in traditional, inefficient fashion. Barry bemoaned the fact that late ploughing lost the benefit of frost breaking up the soil, the ploughs were one-stilted and the oxen yoked in a way that hindered the animals' exertions. Most tenants had a tolerant attitude to weeds, never bothered to marl or lime their land, relied on sea-weed rather than dung as manure and had no idea of improving the quality of the seed they sowed.

Progress, in Barry's view, depended on other heritors imitating

Balfour. Only energetic, resident landowners with money and new ideas could overcome the prevailing inertia of the cottars. There must be fewer but larger farms, longer leases to substantial tenants, the commutation of all rents and feu duties into cash payments and abolition of all labour services.

Thomas Balfour's intelligent application of capital derived from England and the Coast of Coromandel to improve a corner of Shapinsay, his enterprise as a Kirkwall shipowner, his political connection with Harry Dundas's patronage network, his close friendship with James Traill of Castlehill, and, when war came, the spirited way in which he raised and commanded two fencible regiments, all recommended him to the attention of Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster. In war or peace Balfour displayed initiative: it is not in the least surprising that Sir John asked him to contribute to the draft surveys being produced for The Board of Agriculture and Internal Improvement.

Thus Sir John Sinclair's *General View of the Agriculture of the Northern Counties and Islands of Scotland* (1795) was partly based on information provided by Colonel Thomas Balfour and included his "Observations respecting the obstacles to the improvement of Orkney and the means of removing them". Sinclair accepted Balfour's arguments that green crops including turnips were better suited than cereals to the cool, windy summers of Orkney. He sympathised with Balfour's hopes for some new manufactures: Balfour himself was experimenting with a distillery in Shapinsay. Similarly, Sinclair strongly approved of Balfour's enterprise in developing the fishing industry.

However, Balfour also took the heaven-sent opportunity to air the old criticism that Orkney lairds, especially those in the heavily skatted north isles of Orkney, had been making about the dominating rôle of the holder of the Earldom and Bishopric estates. He condemned the exaction of skat and feu-duties in kind, alleged that computing prices were always too high, regretted the irredeemable grant by which the Earldom had passed from the Crown and suggested that the lease of the Bishopric estate might be transferred to the feuars or vassals as compensation for the other burdens imposed on the islands.

They (the Orcadians) suffer greatly ... by that irredeemable grant (of the Earldom) ... which by interposing a subject betwixt them and the Crown, has made their situation much worse than that of other Crown vassals. They surely seem to have every claim of justice on their side, and public expediency appears to demand, that what still remains the property of the Crown (i.e. The Bishopric Estate), should be applied for their indemnification, and not made an instrument of their farther oppression in the hands of any individual. In order to put an end to the monopoly of corn in these islands, the duties still belonging to the Crown (i.e. the Bishopric feu-duties), in so far as they are payable in kind, should be leased or converted to the vassals themselves.

These ingenious arguments, deliberately dressed up in fashionable free-trade language, accompanied by a large number of practical suggestions for agricultural improvement, were accepted and published by Sir John, who does not seem to have realised that Balfour stood to gain personally in Shapinsay from any commutation of Bishopric feu duties on favourable terms.

The ideas of Colonel Thomas Balfour and Sir John Sinclair were scathingly dismissed by Captain James Sutherland, an able and unscrupulous man, who succeeded Balfour in the Bu of Burray and then became factor of the Earldom and Bishopric estates (1792-99). Sutherland was anxious to discredit Balfour's pretensions to be an authority on agriculture both because he resented the implied disparagement of his own estate management and because Balfour was such an inveterate political opponent of Sutherland's employer, Sir Thomas Dundas of Kerse (made Lord Dundas in 1794). Accordingly Sutherland expressed himself contemptuously and intemperately in a private memorandum that he entitled "Answers to the observations of Sir Whittle Sheepshanks and his worthy friend Dr Colonel Balfour".

The assertion that the situation and climate of the Orkney Islands are much better suited to the cultivation of Green Crops in general than of Corn, is a most absurd one ... and would be found upon Trial to be as chimerical and visionary as many other of the childish Don Quixote Schemes for

which both these Gentlemen are so particularly eminent and of which they are so fond of writing and talking. Green crops can never thrive or answer any good purpose in Orkney.

Dr. Balfour has, to be sure, made some awkward and feeble attempts to raise Grass upon his trifling property in Orkney in all [of] which he has uniformly failed, never having yet been able to raise such a crop as could pay the expenses of seed and labour. He has made some pitiful attempts, equally impotent, in the way of raising turnips upon small patches of ground and this year has made a humble attempt to raise cabbages, which has proved equally abortive...

The truth is, that the severity and fury of the constant gales of wind in this blessed climate is such, that it destroys and nips every vegetable on the face of the earth, so thoroughly and completely, that from the month of November till the month of May no vegetable but heather can exist upon the face of the earth...

But were it possible to raise Green Crops in Orkney to feed cattle and sheep during the winter and spring, which is certainly not the case, there is no market or demand for them.

This last point had some validity. In the days when sea transport was entirely by sailing ships, it was impossible to export large numbers of Orkney cattle easily and cheaply, so fodder crops such as hay, clover and turnips were less important than the traditional oats and bere. Captain Sutherland was also right when he went on to assert that, whatever marginal improvements Balfour might achieve in agriculture, the manufacture of kelp was the most profitable part of Orkney's economy in the 1790s, "the main source from which all its riches proceed".

From kelp alone a sum between 16 and £20,000 annually of ready money is brought into Orkney – Upwards of £4,000 of which is regularly paid to the Country people for their

labour.

In Sutherland's opinion, despite Balfour's improvements and new crops, the estate of Sound yielded (after the payment of feu duty) about £50 a year profit from the land and an average of £187:10s a year profit from the kelp shores. Given that Balfour had paid only £1,250 for the property, his investment was giving him a 4% return from agriculture and a 15% return from kelp manufacture. Even Sutherland had to admit that the feu duties on Balfour's lands in Shapinsay, amounting to over £55 sterling, were "pretty high". However, Balfour had known of this annual payment to the Bishopric when he bought Sound and Captain Sutherland thought that the profits of the estate's kelp shores gave Balfour a better return on capital outlay than could be won from the most fertile and improved farms in the south.

As might be expected, Captain Sutherland emphatically denied Balfour's assertion that high prices were charged if feu duties were not paid in kind. Sutherland claimed that he had always fixed the computing prices "at a very moderate rate". Indeed, because he charged only 6s8d for a boll of bere and one shilling a stone or 8s a boll for oatmeal "the avarice and duplicity of Orkney people" frequently made them sell their grain at the higher market price rather than deliver it as feu duty. He said that many vassals of the Earldom "were totally withholding payment of their grain and selling it from 12/- to 17/- per Boll whereas they only pay ... (for undelivered feu duties) ... at the rate of 6/8."

To the annoyance of Captain Sutherland, Balfour exported cargoes of bere to sell at 12, 15 and 16 shillings a boll. Yet Balfour disputed the amount of feu duties demanded from him for his Shapinsay estate and, while the matter was in contention, refused to make any payment at all in either kind or cash. Sutherland was also suspicious of Balfour's schemes for improved management of the Shapinsay hill ground, alleging that Balfour "has proceeded lately to appropriate to himself several miles of the Bishop's property in Shapinsay... to the grievous oppression and disturbance of the poor tenants of the Bishoprick in his neighbourhood who are not able to contend with him".

The hostile view of Thomas Balfour taken by Captain Sutherland and the praises heaped on Balfour by the Rev George Barry reflect the circumstances of the writers: one an embittered political opponent, the

other a grateful and deferential dependent. What they both agree on is that Balfour's innovations were not often imitated by ordinary farmers or other lairds. While kelp-making dominated the Orkney economy, old-style farming would continue. Enclosures, the sweeping away of runrig, the division of the commons and the introduction of new farming methods such as crop rotation, turnips and cattle production would only come when kelp-making was no longer so profitable and when steam transport allowed increased access to the expanding markets of the south.

Balfour's political schemes as well as his agricultural improvements also proved largely abortive. Skilfully as Balfour put the case for relieving Sir Thomas Dundas of the Bishopric lease, his efforts came to naught because of the dramatic realignment of British politics. By 1794 the threat posed by the ideas and armies of Revolutionary France had turned Sir Thomas and other Portland Whigs from critics to supporters of Pitt's government and the ministers showed their gratitude. That spring Sir Thomas was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Orkney and Zetland. In the summer he was raised to the peerage as Lord Dundas of Aske in Yorkshire and his adherents in Orkney rejoiced that their patron had at last regained his "proper influence with administration".

There was no likelihood that Pitt and Harry IX would needlessly provoke their new ally by depriving him of the Bishopric estate in Orkney. The whole mood of parliament was reacting against reform and towards the maintenance of existing property rights, so Lord Dundas continued to hold the lease at royal pleasure. Not until a generation later, in the days of the Liberal Tories when Old John Balfour was again M.P., did the Crown resume its rights and end the lease (1825). Meanwhile, in the 1790s, as Thomas Balfour's prospects of engineering a transfer of the Bishopric lands faded, he was already seizing other opportunities for advancement and profit. War gave him a wider scope for his talents, increased access to public funds, a last chance to play the rôle of soldier and every justification for breaking the bounds of domesticity.

In 1793 he raised his first regiment, The Orkney and Shetland Fencibles, a tiny corps of only three companies: two garrisoning in Kirkwall and one in Fort Charlotte, Lerwick. The officers were mostly relations or friends of Balfour: many recruits were the officers' tenants

or were sons of tenants. The pay and subsistence of the three companies was over £300 a month in 1793 and rose to £675 a month at the end of 1797. The O. and S.F. provided a degree of protection against the threat of enemy raids, overawed a few radical tradesmen and contributed significantly to the wartime prosperity of Kirkwall and Lerwick.

The company at Fort Charlotte was relatively well-disciplined and efficient: the two companies in Kirkwall began well but deteriorated. Kirkwall had no modern fort capable of accommodating the soldiers, and Balfour's request that barracks might be built was refused. Consequently Balfour allowed local men to lodge at home and billeted the others in the alehouses and hovels of the town, the fencibles becoming rather too well-integrated with the community. Since most of them were among friends and were frequently allowed to continue with their peacetime occupation when not needed for duty, the companies in Kirkwall were more like part-time local volunteers than regular soldiers, despite being paid as such. Balfour himself, proud as he was of his new regiment, still devoted much of his time to his estate, kelp shores and trading ships. He even continued to act as Sheriff-Substitute.

In 1794 he obtained permission to raise a full-sized regiment of ten companies, the North Lowland Fencibles. This was raised at Banff, recruited round the Moray Firth and from the cities of Britain, and incorporated hundreds of men who were either transferred from the O. and S.F. or newly enlisted in the islands. A third of the officers of the N.L.F. were from Orkney and Shetland. All this was highly profitable for Balfour, but there was the drawback that he, now a colonel, had to take the new regiment to serve in Ireland leaving his lands, kelp shores, trading ships, political interests, legal concerns, together with the Orkney and Shetland Fencibles, in the care of friends and subordinates. Inevitably his military career, grand and lucrative though it might be, distracted his attention from his responsibilities in Orkney.

Many lairds admired Balfour's patriotism and enterprise. In Caithness, Sir John Sinclair raised two battalions of fencibles and Sir Benjamin Dunbar raised another: later, James Traill formed the Caithness Volunteers. There were also some critics. In Orkney,

Captain James Sutherland held Balfour personally responsible for the islands' wartime labour shortage.

No man has ever contributed so much to the depopulation of Orkney or done it such real injury as he has by depriving them [the Orkney lairds] of the hands necessary to manufacture their kelp. In order to promote the private Interest of this gentlemen in completing a Corps of Fencibles for Ireland every nerve was strained and most extraordinary expedients devised to get the poor ignorant Orkneymen to enlist into it and was by far too successful for the good of his country.

Since his recruiting operations commenced it is certain that the annual income of Orkney has at least decreased between 6 and £7,000 in the single article of kelp solely from want of hands to manufacture it...

The Balfour family's prestige and influence in Orkney, reduced by the departure of Thomas Balfour to Ireland in 1795, declined further after 1796 when John Balfour ceased to be the member of parliament. John Balfour, though a conscientious representative of the lairds, had always grumbled about his irksome and thankless task. His complaints that Orkney's grievances received too little attention from the government and his call for guarantees of official support if he were to stand again made Harry IX quite ready to part with him. Moreover, a new and more pliant representative who was not a Balfour would be acceptable to Lord Dundas, whose wishes had now to be taken into consideration.

Colonel Thomas Balfour, who obtained leave from Ireland to attend the election, hoped till the last moment that his brother could be induced to stand. Indeed, the Colonel would have been glad to be a candidate himself, if only his brothers had agreed; but they preferred that the Balfour connection should stand aloof rather than risk a disagreeable and expensive contest. Disappointed rather than dismayed, Thomas Balfour showed himself as resilient as ever. He had long foreseen that, if he lost the official patronage that had aided his military ventures, his best policy might be to sell out of the army, invest his considerable gains in a landed estate and retire, like Cincinnatus, to

devote himself to agriculture. At the end of November 1795, he had written to ask his brother David to look out for property bargains, particularly estates with a big acreage capable of improvement.

I shall have in cash and government securities about £6,000 at Whitsunday next – by sales of detached subjects in Orkney and of some of my concern in ships I could make up £2,000 more if necessary. It is my opinion that a purchase of land to the full extent of these sums is likely to be a good speculation, particularly where there is a large surface capable of culture to be had for little money. Even great tracts of land not capable of cultivation must raise greatly in value unless some violent shock shall stop the present course of things. I would consider great extent as a primary consideration therefore, capability of more extended or improved cultivation a second and facility of access a third. From habit, rather than good reason, I would prefer the East coast to the West and the sea coast to inland situation.

All thought of affording land in the Central Lowlands of Scotland was soon abandoned and, given the Balfours' strong links with Caithness lairds, it is not surprising that the looked for bargain was discovered just across the Pentland Firth. In May, 1797, David reported the new acquisition of his widowed sister, Mrs Craigie, in Orkney.

Tom has concluded with Mr. Sinclair of Scotscladder for the purchase of his Estate in Caithness – What makes me hope that it may turn out well is that Mr Traill of Hobister was very desirous for it taking place – But it certainly would require Tom's personal attention, and it is uncertain when he may be at liberty to bestow it.

Despite the hardships of garrison duty in some of the most turbulent parts of Ireland, Thomas Balfour showed a slight reluctance to return to the bosom of his family. His motives were partly economic but mainly personal. With an old wife, ten years his senior, in Orkney and a young mistress, about twenty years his junior, in Dublin, Thomas Balfour preferred to carry on a little longer. More importantly, his wayward seventeen year old elder son, though illegally promoted to be a

captain in the N.L.F., still needed constant supervision. Balfour knew that he needed to keep the youth under his wing for a year or two before transferring him to a line regiment and letting him begin his military career in earnest. So Balfour soldiered on until fate disrupted his well-laid plans.

At Christmas 1797 he went to Dublin on "regimental business" intending to stay ten days. He was in low spirits because of a general's complaint about the clothing of the North Lowland Fencibles and because, at home, his long-neglected Orkney and Shetland Fencibles had been inspected in Kirkwall, found to be inefficient and undisciplined and, in consequence, ordered to disband at the end of the year. Military matters and his other affairs occupied him for an entire month; worse still, after some unfortunate personal contact he returned to his regiment with typhus and barely survived the resulting fever.

In May he obtained convalescent leave to visit Orkney and took Edward with him. They reached Caithness and stayed with James Traill at Castlehill, where Frances Balfour joined them. At last Balfour was able to inspect his new lands of Scotscladder, which were certainly very extensive and in great need of improvement. Wishing to add to his estate, he agreed to buy the lands of Oust, two or three miles north of Loch Calder, for £2,920. He gave directions for building a new house at Achavarn, with a view south-west across the head of Loch Calder towards Ben Freiceadain. In consultation with his old friend, he planned future campaigns of enclosure and reclamation that might, in decades, extent the bounds of cultivation in the existing heathery wastes.

The outbreak of the Irish Rebellion ended this brief idyll. Balfour, though far from well, returned to join his regiment, sending his wife and Edward to Orkney. In Ireland Balfour carried out his duties although it became increasingly apparent that he was suffering from an ulcer or cancer in the stomach, which caused him increasing nausea and loss of weight. By the end of 1798 he could do no more. He went first to London for the best medical advice available and then, joined by his wife and Edward, went to Bath to try the waters. Increasingly weak, he continued to ponder schemes for agricultural improvement in the far north and make notes from books on farming. He finally

died, terribly emaciated, on the 9th of August 1799.

* * * * *

Colonel Balfour's widow chose to return to Cliffdale in Shapinsay, a house that she associated with her late husband's happiest and most successful years. The headstrong young Edward, free at last to rush into battle, was killed in the Helder Campaign on 19th September 1799, aged nineteen. Consequently the late Colonel's property passed to his younger son, William, then a homesick midshipman in the Mediterranean. His trustees decided to sell Oust, for which the purchase money had not yet been paid, and dispose of the property to Major Sinclair of Forss for £3,500, making a quick capital gain of £580 thanks to wartime depreciation of paper money and a real rise in land values.

As soon as his uncles would let him do so, Captain William Balfour RN left the navy, married his cousin and settled at Cliffdale. Reacting against an eccentric English mother and years of enforced exile at Harrow and at sea, Captain Balfour was determinedly Orcadian and traditionalist. Though deeply interested in farming, he allowed his tenants to continue in the old-style. His sister, Mrs Brunton, the moralising novelist, drew heavily on the character of William Balfour when portraying a kindly, paternalistic, romantically feudal laird in her *Self-Discipline*, though she placed her hero in the Highlands rather than in the northern isles. Captain Balfour had little interest in Scotscladder and Achavarn from which he drew an income of "less than £450" a year in the period 1816-1820: he was glad to sell that estate, still largely unimproved, to Mr Henderson in 1821 for £17,000. thus Colonel Balfour's plans for Calder and Oust were not carried out by his successor. Almost the only reminder of Balfour's eighteenth century improvement scheme is the small house of Achavarn, and that has been enlarged by Victorian additions.

In Orkney things turned out differently. When old John Balfour died in London (1842) much of his huge fortune passed to the Orkney Balfours, and after the death of Captain Balfour (1846), David Balfour (1811-1887) had both the money and inclination to fulfil his grandfather's wildest dreams. Assisted by cheap government drainage loans and employing a dynamic Caithness factor, David Balfour

transformed Shapinsay. Ancient runrig and Colonel Thomas Balfour's eighteenth century enclosures round Sound were all swept away and the island divided into ten-acre square fields by a grid of five foot deep drains and stone dykes. The area of cultivated land was trebled and the most modern farming methods enforced, with very profitable results. Ironically, in contrast to the up-to-date landscape, the house of Clifdale was swallowed up inside a mock-feudal castle, symbol of Balfour pride and pretensions.

Thus, nearly fifty years after the death of Colonel Thomas Balfour of Elwick, in the very changed circumstances of the 1840s, the improvements that he had pioneered and advocated were adopted throughout Shapinsay. The effects were so dramatic as to provide a model for Orkney's long-delayed agricultural revolution.

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