

JOHN LAURIE;  
AN ECCENTRIC SUTHERLAND DOMINIE.

BY

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## PREFACE.

THE threads for this short biographical sketch of John Laurie, a gifted though very eccentric man, were gathered during many a pleasant holiday in Sutherland, where his memory is still green, and where a pupil of his is still occasionally found, who speaks of the old schoolmaster with affection and gratitude.

In weaving the threads together for this paper I made free use of a curious little book written by Laurie, entitled "A Tourist's Companion through Sutherland," and have also quoted from the unpublished reports of the Educational Committee of the Church of Scotland. For the latter I am indebted to Professor Laurie, LL.D., and have much pleasure in acknowledging his courtesy and assistance. I would also thank my several Sutherland friends for furnishing me with items of interest.

Recently I read the paper before the Edinburgh and Glasgow Sutherland Associations. Afterwards it appeared in the *Northern Ensign*, Wick (April-May), from the columns of which it is now reprinted.

D. WILLIAM KEMP.

TRINITY,  
EDINBURGH, June 1892.

"Delightful task, to rear the tender thought,  
To teach the young idea how to shoot,  
To pour the fresh instruction o'er the mind,  
To breathe th' enlivening spirit, and to fix  
The generous purpose in the glowing breast."

THOMSON'S "SEASONS."

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# JOHN LAURIE,

## THE ECCENTRIC SCHOOLMASTER OF INVERSHIN.

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### INTRODUCTION.

THE life-story of a country schoolmaster has more than a personal interest. It incidentally discloses much of the social and educational conditions of his time, and thus enables us to appreciate the extraordinary progress which has been made in recent years, educationally, by contrasting the present state of matters with that which existed only a quarter of century ago in the more remote districts of Scotland.

The district or non-parochial school at Invershin, about that period, may be regarded as typical of very many throughout the Highlands. The teacher in such a side-school was very frequently an elderly man, fairly well educated, but, not having been specially trained for teaching, full of strange whims and peculiar theories about education. He lacked system or method, and would devote much attention to one or two promising scholars, to the neglect of the others during the greater part of the session; and then would come a period of sudden work, oppressively exacting on the weaker and less favoured

children. He had no security for continuous employment, and was not unfrequently ill paid, ill accommodated in school buildings, and ill housed. The marvel to-day is that excellent results should ever have been obtained under such conditions, yet who cannot recall many men who have occupied or are still occupying and adorning important positions at home and abroad, whose elementary education was obtained under such circumstances?

So very rapidly are we moving in educational reforms, that what has been accomplished in the short period of two decades seems almost incredible. There is now, not only in every parish but in every district of Scotland, a well equipped school presided over by a highly educated and specially trained teacher, a school building quite palatial in appearance, fitted up with every modern convenience, a comfortable residence, and to crown all, education absolutely free. In the face of these facts, it is surprising to hear persons still loudly asserting that "the former days were better than these."

## CHAPTER I.

JOHN LAURIE, the old schoolmaster of Invershin, was by birth an Englishman, but from his long residence in the north Highlands has strong claims to be regarded as a Sutherlander—at least he was one by adoption. He formed a strong attachment to the county, and made a study of its scenery, history, and traditions; and in matters affecting the social well-being of its people, he was greatly in advance of his times. He said, "Sutherlandshire is, indeed, a strange land. It is associated with so many scenes and events that the traveller can scarcely proceed a mile without some object arising either to excite his admiration or harass his feelings."

The materials for a biographical sketch of Laurie are very fragmentary, but, passing over his early years, about which there hung a life-long mystery, we meet him for the first time, so far as his northern history is concerned, at Wick, when he would be about 17 or 18 years of age. For a short time he worked as a mason's labourer in Caithness, but the mountains of Sutherland appear to have had irresistible attractions for him; and he wandered thither. He found occasional employment with the crofters herding their sheep and cattle. This must have been about 1818, two years before the second great Sutherland evictions. He writes—"When I first resided in this locality, the Strath of Kildonan was inhabited by a



great number of small tenants, who procured a comfortable subsistence by their toil and industry. Two years after, they were all evicted to make room for six large sheep farms." Referring to the old Church of Kildonan, he says—"This venerable edifice, when passing it, always excites in my bosom a solemn sadness. I have seen assembled on a Sunday, at the administration of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, from three to four hundred people—a melancholy contrast between the past and the present." From these references we can fix with some precision the commencement of his residence in Sutherland. For two years he resided near Castle Cole, in the solitary and sequestered Strath Brora. Here he was employed as a shepherd, and being an Englishman would probably get employment more easily than if he had been a native. He appears next to have resided in Strathnaver, for he writes about Loch Monar—"It is much resorted to by great numbers of people, on account of the supposed healing virtues of its waters. I often remonstrated with the people during my residence among them on the stupidity and absurdity in the belief of its supposed supernatural powers. But all my efforts were in vain. The old people were so bigoted to the superstitious legends of their sires, that any attempt to efface or eradicate them would have been utterly impossible."

It seems probable that he journeyed westward either from curiosity or following his employment, and resided in the western parts of the Reay Country. Writing of Balnakiel, he says—"In the churchyard lie the remains of the celebrated Gaelic bard, Robert Donn or Mackay. A neat, small monument has been erected to his memory by his enthusiastic

admirers. His songs and poems were collected and published some years ago. They are highly appreciated by the Gaelic population. I have often heard many of his songs sung with great glee at the convivial assemblies of the inhabitants during my residence among them. The knowledge which I have acquired of the Gaelic language enables me to make a few remarks on his exalted endowments. Had he been born to wealth, and blest with a liberal education, his gifted genius would have raised him to eminence, and immortalised his name in every clime. But, alas! such was not his destined career. His humble birth compelled him to earn a subsistence, not by his brilliant productions, but by the sweat of his brow. Unknown and unheeded, he spent his days in obscurity, and was consigned to his lonely grave without a single tribute of public admiration being paid to his superior intellect. But why should we be astonished at his blighted career? All poor authors and poets have always been, and always will be, doomed to struggle with poverty and misery. It is not during their lives, but after their deaths, that their brilliant productions are appreciated and their memories revered. But what is the use of such preposterous inconsistency? Monuments erected over the graves of neglected and departed geniuses are empty, impious mockeries on their silent tombs. Yet, such has ever been the strange infatuation of mankind to the gifted sons of lowly poverty. But this shameful neglect has often blasted the blooming hopes of many a promising and aspiring youth."

## CHAPTER II.

LAURIE'S residence in various parts of central and north Sutherland extended from 1818 to 1825. The events of this period made a deep impression on his mind; the striking scenery, the intense solitudes, the flocks of sheep, the absence of human life, in those vast stretches of mountain and glen greatly exercised him. He gradually and insensibly got to look on sheep with as great feelings of detestation as Lord Ashburton is said to have done. Such was Lord Ashburton's intense hatred of sheep-farming, that he would not allow a single sheep to be grazed on any part of the estate of Rosehall. Whenever he saw a sheep he would immediately point at it with his silver-headed cane, and exclaim at the top of his voice, "There, there goes the enemy of man! These are the vile creatures that have been the cause of so much misery in the county."

Writing of this period, Laurie says—"During the first seven years of my residence in the county, every day when I traversed the hilly ridges, I always saw flocks of deer, from fifty to sixty in number, frisking and bounding through the mountains in all their pride and beauty. The sight was lovely to contemplate. I gazed on it with rapture and delight. So numerous were the deer at this period, that many shepherds supplied their large families with venison through the whole year. Every day during the

season they were out with their guns, and generally shot two fat bucks. These were taken to their houses on horseback, where they were salted and packed in barrels, which afforded to the inmates many rich and savoury repasts. Sutherland, at this happy period, was to sportsmen and anglers an unknown land. Steamboats and railways had not, as yet, brought to its shore and lovely glens those highly favoured mortals. Nature reigned supreme in all her great and glorious works. The rivers teemed with fish, the mountain moors with grouse and deer. At the eternal command of the Almighty, they increased and multiplied, and brought forth abundantly, by which they became nutritious food to many honest and industrious families. These scenes, alas, soon passed away never to return. A new policy was adopted for the future management of the estate of Sutherland, in order to augment its rental. The rivers were let to tacksmen and anglers. All the sheep-farms were divided into grouse shootings, and let to sportsmen. Water-bailiffs and game-keepers were appointed to guard and protect the rivers and moors from invasion. Strict orders were given to apprehend all poachers, and send them to Dornoch jail. The sovereign mandate was implicitly obeyed, and rigorously enforced. A tall, robust, young shepherd was one morning apprehended, and sent to Dornoch jail, a brace of moorfowl having been found in his possession. He was ordered to be imprisoned for three months. The manager of the sheep-farm, fearing that the long imprisonment would impair his health, and render him useless in future life, generously paid the fine, by which the young man was immediately liberated from his gloomy confinement. The shepherds were so in-

furiated at his incarceration that they determined to satiate their revenge. All the shepherds on the estate of Sutherland entered into a solemn league and covenant to break all the eggs of the moorfowl wherever they should be found. The work of destruction immediately commenced, and continued with unabated fury. In traversing the hills one day in company with two shepherds and their sons, we had hardly proceeded a mile when one of the boys exclaimed, at the top of his voice—‘Father! father! here is a moorfowl’s nest with twelve eggs.’ ‘Smash, smash them, Bill,’ was the command, which was instantly obeyed. During our short route through the hills, six moorfowls’ nests were wantonly destroyed, which contained about sixty eggs. The merciless destruction continued during the season by the shepherds on the estate of Sutherland, by which thousands of eggs were destroyed. When the shooting season commenced, the sportsmen were utterly astonished at the paucity of the moorfowl, for which they could not comprehend the cause. Some imputed it to the shepherds burning too much heather, others that they had burnt it out of season; some asserted that it was the ring-worm, and proposed that a jubilee should be granted for two years. The shepherds, in the meantime, were all laughing among themselves, and exclaiming to one another, ‘What great gowks our gentry are making of themselves by their stupid nonsense.’ An old shrewd shepherd at one of their meetings made a speech, which he concluded with the following remarks:—‘Our gentry and sportsmen are the greatest idiots on the face of the earth. I used to respect the gentry at one time, but now I despise them, for I really believe that they are all nothing but a parcel of fools, and I think that a

nutshell is quite sufficient to retain all their common sense. Some are saying one thing, some another, but I tell them they are all wrong. It is not to the burning of too much heather, nor to the ring-worm, but to our good strong sticks, with which we smashed the eggs, and we will smash them again and again, until every moorfowl is destroyed in Sutherland, if they ever dare to send to jail any of our sons for merely killing a moorcock!' On concluding the speech, he was vociferously cheered. The meeting then broke up, every member pledging himself to break all the eggs of every moorfowl's nest, should any shepherd be incarcerated for poaching."

## CHAPTER III.

SOON after this, the period referred to in the last chapter, Laurie removed from the Sutherland estates and found employment with the tenant of Ochto, Inveroykel, on the Ross-hire side opposite Rosehall. This might be about the year 1828. The farmer had two sons who were scholars at the famous Tain Academy, and during their holidays they used to attempt to teach him. By a strong effort of will he appeared to be very obtuse, but oftentimes a struggle was raging within him. Would he unmask himself? Would he let them know that he was a scholar? Yes, he would. He could not submit to be taught any longer, and to the no small astonishment of the youths and their parents he volunteered to assist them with their Latin lessons.

This was another important turning-point in Laurie's history. Previous to this, during his wanderings in Sutherland, it would appear that he had given little or no thought to mental culture, but now he recalled his college days with all their educational pleasures and advantages, and he resolved henceforth to devote himself to teaching. For a time he taught from house to house among the crofters and shepherds, and it was from this period those eccentricities began to exhibit themselves which, in after life, became such marked features in his character.

In personal appearance he was short and stout, had

a most peculiar expression, and was always clean shaven. He was healthy and strong, able to undergo considerable fatigue and hardship, and was never known to complain of illness. The crofters used to offer him a bedcover instead of a plaid to keep him warm in cold weather, but instead of clothing himself in this garment as a Highlander would do, he simply threw the coverlet over one shoulder and trailed the rest of it on the ground. He always considered it very bad etiquette to leave anything on his plate after meals. Knowing this, the crofters used to serve him with very large plates of porridge which he did his very best to finish.

About the year 1830 he became teacher at Invershin School. His remuneration in those days was certainly not oppressive. He received as school fees some 1s 6d per quarter, and a week's board in the different crofters' houses for every child attending school. For nearly 20 years he thus laboured, teaching to the best of his ability "the young idea how to shoot." For a time the great Free Church movement in the Highlands paralysed his efforts, a F.C. School being planted in his locality, and the children of Free Church parents being sent to it in preference.



## CHAPTER IV.

IN 1849 or 1850, the early excitement of the Church movement had somewhat abated, and Laurie's school again attracted pupils. A new school and school-house had been built by the proprietor, the Duke of Sutherland, and it was placed on the Assembly School Scheme of the Church of Scotland. The architect of the school thought flooring quite superfluous, and very soon the earthen floor was worn very uneven. One day the Duke called to see the new building, and, on entering, the schoolmaster said, "Come away, my Lord Duke; there is nothing here but mountains and valleys." His Grace took the hint and ordered it to be floored with wood immediately. Laurie continued teacher of the Invershin Assembly School for twelve or thirteen years, from 1849 to 1862, and as an evidence of the catholicity of the school, it may be mentioned that during the whole of that time the scholars for the most part were the children of F.C. parents. As for Laurie, he never darkened the door of any church, and there was little or no religious instruction given in the school. The reason for this eccentricity may be inferred as we touch on his later years.

The scholars under the charge of the Church of Scotland were examined generally once in three years, and full reports were transmitted to Edinburgh.

Through the kindness of Professor Laurie, I have

had access to the old educational reports\* of the Church of Scotland, in which I found some curious references to the old dominie.

The first report is dated 14th August, 1851 ; and I think it better to give it in the inspector's own words :—" Invershin, Assembly School—Teacher 48 years of age ; has been here 20 years teaching, but school taken on the Assembly Scheme only two or three years ago. An Englishman ; says he was educated in a Roman Catholic seminary at Durham, and is much mistaken if the teacher of it was not the now celebrated Cardinal Wiseman. If he was sure of this, he would let the world know his opinion of the Cardinal. Very wordy and inefficient in his teaching. Being what is called the schoolmaster's English in more than the usual degree, he is not understood by the children, and they stand terrified by the sudden bursts of anger that ensue when he finds them dumb to his obscure pompous questions. Present, 22 ; enrolled, 33. To teach reading he says is by far the hardest thing in education, and accordingly, as the most difficult things are those which so great a spirit naturally feels disposed to grapple with, he offers the reading powers of his pupils as his masterpiece. The oldest is called up to recite Horace Smith's 'Address to a Mummy.' He is alone, for classification is not approved ; but another boy is called up to personate the mummy, the advantage of which is, he says, to give greater spirit and a more natural gesticulation to the one who recites. The recitation is certainly *secundum artem*, and has abundance of the usual beauties of

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\* "Reports of School Inspection," thick folio MS. vol. in Church of Scotland Office, 22 Queen Street, Edinburgh (property of Education Committee).

rhetorical reading. It has the merit of some animation, and is, on the whole, far the best thing he has to show, except, indeed, the specimens done by one or two of his pupils of architectural and drawing perspective, which are neat and elegant, contrasting it with the common penmanship, which is the worst I ever beheld, and would seem to have been done in a frolic, if that humour were supposable under the stern rule of this 'plagosus Orbilius.' Teacher having little or no Gaelic, teaches none. No grammar, no geography, no arithmetic beyond simple subtraction. A Free Church school, three miles off, takes up a good many of the pupils who would have come to this ; but it is about to be given up. All the children attending this school are of the Free Church except four. Very little of what can be called religious instruction."—(*Report by Dr John Gordon.*)

The inspector's second report is dated 26th November, 1853:—"On roll, 35 ; presented, 15. Accommodation, both school and dwelling-house, very good and new, built by the Duke. Blackboard, and map mounted. Mr Laurie is a singular and eccentric man, about 60, I should think, possessed of considerable knowledge, which he keeps in a very confused state, and full of desire to carry into effect any of his temporary whims. Drawing, geography, grammar, Latin, surveying, and dramatic recitations by turns engage his attention, and are pushed to the verge of cracking, and then thrown overboard for an indefinite period. I pressed on him the necessity of keeping subjects more abreast.

"The reading of the two highest was very good, and the spelling fair. The recitation, 'Address to a Mummy'—a poor starved-like boy acting the mummy and the reciters poking their fingers into his face—

was ludicrous. Mr Laurie seemed to enjoy it, however, and considered it a masterpiece. The drawing, too (one pupil at present), was of questionable character. The Latin (one pupil, a grown boy) pretty fair as far as Nepos, but loose in grammar, as usual in country schools. Arithmetic good, grammar bad, but composition taught in a higglety-pigglety fashion. Master said that they knew parsing so well a year ago that he and they gave it up in disgust. Geography attended to in the case of three who had atlases, and know the outlines of the world pretty well; the rest neglected from want of maps—these I shall send. The writing is very fair. The juniors evidently neglected in the school, except when it suddenly occurs to the teacher to give them temporary prominence. A good deal of work done by this peculiar man, but much fails of effect through a total want of method. This school seems to confuse him, and he has no power of organising.”—(*Report by (now) Professor Laurie.*)

The third and last report is dated 23rd July, 1861 : —“On roll, 36; present, 20. Accommodation, excellent. Reading very fair. Intelligence not very high. Dictation occasionally practised, but the class could not attempt it. A most comical absurd school, but yet the juniors read fairly. There is a useful sewing school taught by a respectable dame, and supported by a lady resident in the vicinity.”

In 1862 Mr Laurie's services were discontinued, and he was succeeded by a Mr Mackenzie. He removed to a small cottage some distance to the east of the school where he lived in great retirement.

## CHAPTER V.

WHILE on the Assembly Scheme, Laurie's salary would be about £35 in all, in addition to house and small croft. The croft received little of his attention. Many a time the late Duke of Sutherland remonstrated with him for allowing the nettles to flourish so luxuriantly right up to the very door of the school. He doubtless thought he had enough to nettle him inside the school without doing battle also with the stinging herb outside.

The late Duke was rather fond of a talk with Laurie; and a Lady Gilbert who annually visited the district frequently called on him. The windows of the school commanded a good view of the approaches, and when the scholars noticed any of his distinguished visitors coming, they would warn their teacher, who rushed off into the house to change his coat, and to make himself presentable. His usual tattered appearance sometimes bordered on the grotesque, for he wore his clothes until they were past repairing, and patches were generally stitched on the outside of the garment. His trousers were always short, displaying white stockings. Hence his anxiety to tidy himself before receiving his callers. But during his temporary absence the school would be a perfect bedlam, the children yielding themselves to the wildest excitement. On his return the distracted man could only restore order by a liberal

application of the cane to all and sundry, and something like silence would hardly be obtained before the visitor's arrival.

Laurie always lived alone while at Invershin. He did his own cooking, excepting when a neighbour made him a present of a piece of roast pork or cooked meat. The school girls were very attentive, however, and frequently cleaned out his room; and he, for want of sweeties, would recompense them with a handful of raisins. The big boys were occasionally very trying, and gave him a great deal of trouble. In his absence they studded the cushion of his chair with pins, and when he made the painful discovery, the storm was awful. He would threaten to *do* for them all if he did not find out the culprit. At other times he was of a kindly, genial nature, and took an interest in the children's amusements. One hot sultry summer's day in 1857, three of his scholars went to bathe in the Shin. They soon returned to him in great glee, informing him that they had got their pocket-handkerchiefs full of bright gold, which would make them independent gentlemen for life. He took a number of specimens out of each handkerchief, mixed them together, and got them sent to an eminent chemist in Edinburgh. In a few days the chemist reported that the particles of gold were so small and scanty that they would never defray the expense of working the metal. In consequence of that information the gold-search was abandoned; and the three scholars, instead of becoming independent gentlemen, became, in after life, three "stout, rough navvies."

The discovery of gold in the Shin, and the fact that there was gold in paying quantity in Kildonan, silver at the Mound, coal at Brora, granite in Rogart,

marble in Assynt, and lime at Shinness, made Laurie quite eloquent on the possibility of Sutherland becoming one of the most flourishing counties in the kingdom. What constant employment would the working of those minerals give to hundreds of honest, industrious families! He would exclaim—"How happy and comfortable they would be!" They would then never be compelled to leave their happy cottage homes, and roam the land in quest of employment.

## CHAPTER VI.

AMONG Laurie's many pleasant reminiscences of his long residence at Invershin, none afforded him more real happiness than his acquaintanceship with Andrew Young, the tacksman of the Shin salmon fishings, and his estimable family. For the long period of 35 years he appears to have known Mr Young, and to have taken quite an angler's pride in his friend's expert knowledge of all relating to salmon fishing.

In 1857 Mr Young brought out a neat little volume, small 8vo., entitled,

THE  
ANGLER AND TOURIST'S GUIDE  
TO THE  
RIVERS, LAKES, AND REMARKABLE PLACES  
IN THE  
NORTHERN COUNTIES OF SCOTLAND ;  
TO WHICH IS ADDED  
INSTRUCTIONS TO YOUNG ANGLERS.

BY ANDREW YOUNG,  
INVERSHIN, SUTHERLANDSHIRE.

EDINBURGH : ADAM AND CHARLES BLACK,  
NORTH BRIDGE.  
MDCCLVII.

Laurie gave much assistance to Mr Young in the



preparation of the "Guide," and, indeed, it is probable that the idea of getting Mr Young to give the world the results of his extensive experience originated with him.

This brings me to Laurie's own attempts at authorship. I had heard frequently that he had written a little book on Sutherlandshire, but after consulting numerous library catalogues and antiquarian booksellers, and finding that it was quite unknown, I thought the book spoken of must really be Young's. Still I found persons in the parish of Creich quite positive that they had seen the book, and many a weary tramp I had to cottages where a copy, it was said, might be seen ; but it always turned out to be a Will-o'-the-Wisp. I was fast becoming sceptical about it, when at last an esteemed Sutherland friend, to my great delight, sent to me the actual book. It bears the following title :—

THE  
TOURIST'S COMPANION  
THROUGH  
SUTHERLANDSHIRE.

—  
BY JOHN LAURIE.  
—

GLASGOW : PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR BY  
ARCH. K. MURRAY & Co.,  
243, PARLIAMENTARY ROAD.

In the preface he says—"A valuable and interesting mass of local, historical, and antiquarian details in relation to the county of Sutherland were published within the last sixteen years [*i.e.*, between 1853 and 1869] by several eminent writers. Many changes have taken place in the county since these works were issued from the press, in consequence of

which a part of their local and statistical information will be quite useless to future tourists. The Sutherland Railway has opened to the traveller many novel scenes, and will open many more when extended to Wick and Thurso. It was these changes and the construction of the railway that induced the author to publish the present work, which he has endeavoured to make interesting and instructive to the reader. How far success may crown his humble efforts, he leaves the public to determine."

The book bears no date, but from internal evidence it appears to have been published in 1869. It consists of 108 closely-printed pages, small 8vo., and was bound in red stiff paper boards. It contains, first, a general description of the county, then a minute account of the mountain and lake scenery, followed by that of the sixteen principal rivers. A short reference is made to the railway route from Ardgay to Golspie; and three tours through the county are sketched:—(1) Route from Helmsdale to Melvich; (2) route from Melvich to Lochinver; (3) route from Lochinver to Dornoch.

The description of the rivers is taken almost verbatim from Young's "Angler's Guide," 1857. He says, "As none of the [Young] family intend to favour the public with a second edition of the work, . . . I will . . . rescue the useful little work from oblivion, extract from its pages all the valuable and interesting remarks . . . on the . . . salmon rivers." He does not appear to have been aware that a second edition had been published by Messrs A. & C. Black in 1865, four years before his own book.

Referring to the rivers of Sutherland, he denounces in almost virulent language the salmon legislation of

the past half-century, to which he attributes the scarcity of the salmon. He asks, in the greatest indignation, "What it was that induced British senators to pass such a preposterous fishery bill, is to me paradoxical and incomprehensible. I cannot solve the piscatory problem, unless it be on the supposition that they wanted to immortalise their names by transmitting to posterity an everlasting monument of their insane and blundering salmon legislations. Who but a set of thrice-double asses would have allowed rod-fishing to continue during the whole spawning season? The idea is so repulsive and preposterous that language is not adequate to expose and denounce the gross 'irrationality.'" Laurie then goes on to suggest remedies, and says that the direful results in Sutherland and in Scotland generally should surely "teach British senators to be more cautious and consistent in future when passing their Fishery Acts for the protection and preservation of the salmon race. If not, they will compel us, whether we will or no, to denounce and brand them as a set of consummate blockheads and slubberdegullions, whose stupid and insane salmon legislations are a foul libel on our national character and vaunted civilisation." He certainly does not spare our M.P.'s.

## CHAPTER VII.

LAURIE'S cottage commanded a fine view of the Kyle of Sutherland, and just opposite was Craigcaoin-eadhan, or Rock of Lamentations, on the Ross-shire side. The hill is memorable as the place where the Marquis of Montrose fought his last battle, and on his defeat, fled to Assynt to the not very tender mercies of Macleod of Ardvreck Castle. The events of Montrose's life gave Laurie a favourable excuse to wander away from his subject in a digression of considerable length on the pretensions of prelacy. In the most amusing way he drags in Mr Disraeli and thrashes him most unmercifully with his pen, as I feel sure he would have done with his tongue if he had got the chance. He says—"How are we to reconcile the bloody, persecuting career of Montrose with the speeches which were lately delivered by Mr Disraeli in the House of Commons in defence of the Irish Church? He has, in these speeches, the frontless impudence to tell us that the clergy of the Church of England have ever been the most liberal, merciful, and the most tolerant of all the clergy in Europe. What does this rabid Tory statesman mean in presuming to palm upon the British nation his mercenary impositions? Why does he not visit Sutherland, and stay a few days at Inveran and there muse on "Craigchoynechan" and the fate of Montrose. But perhaps the right honourable gentleman thinks

that he is privileged to lie." Laurie proceeds to give a black catalogue of atrocities committed during Covenanters' times, then exclaims—"Will Mr Disraeli, I wonder, with these melancholy truths ringing in his ears, ever attempt again to foist upon us his fictions for realities? If he do, I will give him a castigation that will make him writhe, and, like the viper, expire in his own poison? He may, however, if he pleases, continue to idolise and eulogise his bastard Romish parsonism; but I tell him to his face that it has been the bane of England, the scourge of Scotland, and the curse of Ireland.

"I hope that Mr Disraeli will be more cautious in what he asserts in his future parliamentary speeches in defence of the boasted toleration of the Anglican State clergy. If not, he will miserably disgrace himself. I have just finished a political work, which I hope he will purchase when published. Perhaps my remarks will teach him a little common sense, of which he stands so much in need, and abate somewhat of his rabid Toryism and rampant parsonism."

How unfortunate for Lord Beaconsfield and the nation that our bold philosopher's work was not published. It would doubtless have also proved invaluable to the late Lord Derby, and made him a wiser and better man, for "in giving Mr Disraeli a mild castigation," he goes on to say, "I should have lashed his lordly master, the Earl of Derby. But I will leave the noble lord for the present, in all his glory and madness, as I intend to arraign him at the bar of his country in the next publication. There the British nation will behold, to their amaze and astonishment, what fools they made of themselves, and what pusillanimous mortals they were in entrusting the destinies of their country to such a fierce,

fiery, political bigot, who was far fitter for some lunatic asylum than for the British Senate. But I hope the auspicious day is fast approaching when his frantic Toryism and canting parsonism will be repudiated, and consigned to execration and abhorrence. When I look back and contemplate the reckless and mischievous political career of this bigoted Tory statesman, I am compelled to exclaim, Happy, thrice happy, is the land on which the baneful star of aristocratic arrogance sheds not its blasting influence !”

After describing the pleasant little estate of Creich, and narrating the circumstances which led the proprietor, Mr Houston, to sell it, Laurie breaks out in a terrible tirade against the law, thus—“Talk of the beauty and purity of British law!—what rhapsodical nonsense! What is the worth of its purity and excellence when a man is compelled to ruin himself before he can obtain justice? The late Mr Houston’s ill-fated litigation gives us a very beautiful picture of the majesty, purity, and excellence of British law. British law may be very beautiful in theory, but in practice it is a hideous mass of senseless jargon, which neither men nor angels can comprehend. Law is like physic, the less people take of it the better, if they want to save themselves from ruin, poverty, and misery.”

## CHAPTER VIII.

LAURIE'S honest and uncompromising Radicalism comes out in many of his stories. Describing the road at Rhiconich, he says—"One of the rocks is denominated Lawson's Rock, called so from the 'engineer' who superintended the construction of the road. This misapplied epithet, which has been adopted by several writers in their 'Tours through the Highlands' almost compels me to to burst into a loud laugh. Mr Lawson was never an 'engineer,' but was for several years a bungling mason. He owed his situation of road inspector entirely to the gross favouritism of the Sutherland officials, which at that time was their grand character."

We have already seen that Laurie was in the county at the time of the evictions of 1819. During the whole of his life he puzzled over the principles involved in those evictions, and endeavoured to discover some justification for them, but apparently without satisfying himself, for he writes—"Such ruthless and barbarous depopulation is a social problem which I have long endeavoured to solve; but all my efforts have been in vain. I cannot, for my very life, reconcile the vile solecism on any known, humane, or religious principle whatsoever, unless it be on the supposition that landlords are empowered by the fundamental principles of our glorious constitution to do what they like with their

own, no matter what miseries, what calamities they inflict upon thousands of their fellow-mortals. If such be the blessings and results of the British constitution, it is high time to reform it, for it is certainly one of the greatest and most gigantic impostures that ever was palmed upon mankind." Those sanguinary events appear to have made an indelible impression on him, so that when Macleod's book on "The Sutherland Clearances"\* was published it found his mind very receptive, and perhaps too ready to accept all its painful narratives. He says—"I perused the work, and candidly confess that, in the whole course of my reading, I never met with such a series of barbarous inhumanities." "Mr Sellar, if we are to credit Mr M'Leod's statements, actually personified Shakespeare's Aaron"—

"Tut ! I have done a hundred dreadful things  
As willingly as one would kill a fly ;  
And nothing grieves me heartily, indeed,  
But that I cannot do ten thousand more."

Laurie refers his readers to Macleod's book, fearful that he might harass their feelings too much were he to quote from it, as the details were so "appalling and horrific." He then proceeds—"But to enable the reader to form some faint idea of the barbarity and ruthless antipathy of Mr Sellar to the natives of Sutherland, I shall relate a few facts as narrated by several aged and venerable Highlanders, who had been evicted from their once happy and peaceful homes. . . . I merely mention them as told to me by the natives. I shall therefore leave all tourists

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\* Since the above was written, "Donald Macleod's Gloomy Memories in the Highlands of Scotland" has been again reprinted, with a preface by "Fionn" (Henry White), dated Glasgow, 1892.



to form their own ideas regarding Mr Sellar's conduct to the tenants of Strath Brora, Kildonan, and Strath Naver."

"In the latter end of April, Mr William Young, who was then the head factor on the estate of Sutherland, sent a messenger from Rhives office to inform the Strath Naver tenants that as Mr Sellar had taken a lease of nineteen years of both sides of the strath, and intended to convert them into a sheep farm, he hoped that they would leave the strath peaceably and quietly at the ensuing term, and not compel him to adopt harsh measures to enforce the evictions. The poor tenants, on hearing the doleful news, held a meeting, when it was unanimously agreed that six of them should wait on Mr Sellar, and request him not to expel them from the strath, as their pastoral lives and habits had rendered them entirely unqualified and unable to obtain a subsistence in any other future avocation of life. The deputation, on their arriving at Culmally, were ushered into Mr Sellar's presence. They informed him that they had been sent by their fellow-tenants to implore him not to evict them, as they did not know what would become of them, or whither could they go, should he expel them from their tenements. The unfeeling monster told them in a fierce, stern tone of voice that he would soon answer their question. 'You want to know where you are to go after the term? I will tell you. Go to the Little Ferry and drown yourselves; and if there is not room enough there, go to hell, where there is plenty of room for you and the whole of your tribe. Get out of my presence this moment, ye vile, lazy, indolent, thievish scoundrels, and be ready to leave the strath on the 26th of May. If not, I will send a company of soldiers from Fort George to

evict you at the point of their bayonets, as the whole of you would be greatly the better of losing a little of your hot, fiery, Highland blood.”

Following this is an account of the circumstances which culminated in Mr Sellar being arrested and put on his famous trial. The statements are curious, inasmuch as they differ in many important particulars from the usually accepted version of the events; it would, however, be exceeding the object of this sketch to attempt to reconcile details of incidents which have been the subject of so much controversy, but it must be remarked that Laurie wrote after the lapse of nearly half a century.

Travellers reading this curious “Tourist’s Companion” would be very apt to feel they were journeying through a blighted land, and be better able to understand “how a country could be ruined,” as Hugh Miller strikingly phrases it in his article on “Sutherland as it was and is.” No wonder poor Laurie’s guide-book never became a popular one, and now-a-days is hardly known.

Amidst all this gloom, Laurie admits there was at least one place in Sutherland that had progressed considerably, and Dornochians will be pleased to hear it was the county town—their independent and quaint little royal burgh. Of Dornoch he writes—“When I first visited it forty years ago [about 1829], it was the most miserable and wretched town in the whole kingdom. To the traveller, it presented nothing but a sad scene of wretched poverty, inactive indigence and gloomy solitude. The only public accommodation for visitors was a miserable little inn thatched with heather. But time, in its revolving years, renovates and improves all things. Old Dornoch has passed away, and New Dornoch

has risen, which may now vie in modern improvements with any town in the land. Old buildings have been removed, elegant houses built, a superior inn, a new Court House erected, a branch of the Caledonian Bank established, and the old Cathedral beautified and restored." It is gratifying that the progress so well described is still going on. The arms of the burgh—a horse-shoe, the symbol for good luck—appears again to be bringing fortune and prosperity to the ancient town. Long may it continue!

## CHAPTER IX.

THE "Conclusion" of this somewhat extraordinary booklet is as interesting in its matter as it is remarkable as a bit of writing. If the language is a little spiced, and the facts and figures are a trifle exaggerated, we must excuse the writer. He meant well, and his conclusions would have been equally righteous even if based on lower estimates.

Laurie concludes thus—"Before closing the pages of this work, I am very anxious to make a few brief remarks on the depopulation of Sutherland, which first commenced in 1811. It is not my intention to recall to our minds all those sad scenes of misery and desolation which characterised this untoward event. Their painful reminiscences would but only harass and exasperate our feelings. The dark drama has passed away, and let us hope that it shall never be again enacted in any part of our land, if we have any regard for our boasted civilisation and humanity. But although the dreadful scourge has passed away, yet it suggests many sad and painful reflections, which never can be contemplated without shuddering. No wonder. What must be our indignant feelings when we are told that the whole estate of Sutherland was divided among ten alien sheep-farmers, for whose sole interests and accommodations ten thousand human beings were evicted and cast upon the wide world without pity or regret? Their miserable

future destinies in after life never cost their stern oppressors one single pang of remorse. And what aggravates the sad picture is that everything was done to promote the comfort and interests of these ten sheep-farmers. Large commodious houses were built for their residences, adorned and surrounded with neat gardens and delightful shrubberies, at the sole expense of the noble proprietor. Leases of nineteen years were given at merely trivial rents, by which they amassed enormous wealth. Every one of these sheep-farmers died worth from £80,000 to £90,000 and £100,000. Out of all this wealth they never expended a single penny either in improving their farms or employing the native population. The only few shillings they gave were spent in shearing and smearing their sheep, and other trivial expenses which they could not avoid.

“I will now reverse this side of the picture and give the other, in order to illustrate the two sad contrasts. To those miserable tenants who had been evicted from their once happy homes, no favour nor pity was shown. They were huddled together in miserable groups on the sea-coast, where they were compelled to improve their bleak, barren allotments, and build their cottages, barns, and stables, at their own expense. Their rents were 50 per cent. higher in proportion than those of the sheep farmers. Many of them paid from £5, £8, and £10 of rent, which their lands could not produce, in consequence of which they were compelled to drag out their miserable existences in misery and poverty, depriving themselves of the common necessaries of life, that they might be enabled to pay their high rents. Here we behold one of the most appalling and revolting social anomalies

that was ever exhibited to the human gaze. Ten alien sheep farmers, pampered, bloated and gorged with wealth and luxury, while hundreds of the native population, ruined and impoverished, were unable to procure the common necessaries of life to support themselves, their wives and families. The two contrasts are painful to contemplate ; they rouse my indignant feelings, and compel me to exclaim, God made Sutherland ; but man, proud, haughty, man ! blighted and defaced it by his cruel inhumanity to his fellow-man.'

“The next remark which I intend to make is a very important one, and deserves the most serious consideration of all Christian philanthropists. On 26th May, 1871, the leases of sixteen sheep farmers expire. Should his Grace feel inclined to enlarge them, he can, in virtue of his landlordism, enact over again the same sad drama enacted sixty years ago. But let us hope that his Grace will learn wisdom from past errors and mistakes, and that he will, on the expiration of the leases of these sheep farms, endeavour to promote, by every means in his power, the happiness and welfare of his tenantry. Their aged and venerable sires, in being evicted from their happy homes, drank deep, deep of the cup of affliction. But, oh ! may their descendants never be fated to taste again the nauseous draught which yielded such bitterness of woes, and converted Sutherland into a wild howling wilderness. Oh ! that his Grace would sympathise in future with his numerous tenantry, and promote their social welfare, in permitting them to cultivate again the soil of their fatherland ! What an inestimable blessing would he confer upon them—how happy would be their destiny ! With what pleasure and delight would they cultivate their fertile

fields ! They would rise cheerfully to their labour—their days would pass away on the halcyon wings of peace. Should his Grace feel inclined to this blessed consummation on the expiration of these leases, I would recommend him to imitate the example of Alexander Matheson, Esq., and imbibe his spirit of kindness and generosity. This benevolent and philanthropic gentleman purchased, some years ago, the estate of Ardross from the late Duke of Sutherland. The estate at this time was one of the most wretched, neglected, and uncultivated properties in the whole land. The small tenants were poor, miserable and torpid ; their little farms execrably cultivated, and exhausted by the continual succession of oats, bere, and potatoes. Fortunately, the dawn of rational improvement soon arose, which speedily dispelled all the gloomy horrors of agricultural slothfulness, absurdity, and wretchedness. Mr Matheson took under his own management the improvement of his estate. By his strenuous and successful exertions, thousands of acres were brought into culture which at one time exhibited nothing but a gloomy scene of sterility and desolation. In a few years this barren cheerless track was converted into fine, flourishing, arable corn farms, which now burst upon the sight in all their superior improvement, excellent cultivation, and amazing fertility. Here the eye roams over a wide expanse of landscape scenery, whose diversified aspects exhibit all that is beauteous in form and pleasant to the sight. And what enhances this delightful scenery and superior improvement is, that they were all accomplished without a single tenant being evicted from the estate and compelled to seek a miserable and wretched subsistence in some foreign clime. . . . Mr

Matheson might have converted the whole of his estate into one high sheep-walk, which would have been grasped and monopolized by many sheep farmers, who would have given a very high rent for rearing their four-footed darlings. . . . Such a great and illustrious man is certainly entitled to our esteem and veneration, and whom we are solemnly bound to recognise as one of the greatest benefactors of the human race. It is to him that we ought to erect our public monuments to commemorate his virtuous deeds and Christian philanthropy, that future ages may sing his praises, and transmit them to the latest posterity. May his Grace the Duke of Sutherland imitate and follow Mr Matheson's kind and benevolent career. It will endear him to his numerous tenantry, and his name will be had in everlasting remembrance."



## CHAPTER X.

WE must now leave Laurie, the schoolmaster, author, would-be social reformer and philosopher; and look at him in his old age, on the closing days of his chequered life—his work being done. There in his little cottage he lies, oftentimes all alone, but receiving from his old friends and neighbours, the Youngs especially, unremitting attention and kindness. In his quietude, he lives over again the half century he had spent in the North Highlands, but he resolutely keeps a mental veil between his Sutherland memories and the memories of his early years in England, to conceal the latter even from himself. For a time he was successful in the effort, but, as the silver cord was loosening, the veil disappeared, and he yielded to the contemplation of those

“Sweet scenes of youth, to faithful memory dear,  
Still fondly cherished with the sacred tear.”

How true is it, as Professor Masson touchingly expressed it at a Sutherland gathering in Edinburgh a year ago, that we forget last “the bonnie brier bush in our kail-yard.” He now talked freely of his early home at Scarborough; of his parents; of his days at Ushaw College, Durham; and of some of his fellow-scholars, one of whom was N. P. S. Wiseman, then two years his junior, who rose to fame and died a Cardinal; whilst there he was, dying in obscurity, far from his relatives and unknown. But he had still a secret oppressing him, and he dared not go hence into the pure light, where secrets are im-

possible, until he had unburthened himself. So he told his friends, the Youngs, that "John Laurie" was an assumed name, his baptismal one being George Crathorne; and that his stepmother's unkindness had driven him to go to sea; but, not liking a sailor's life, he landed at Wiek, from which point our narrative began.

The Youngs lost no time in communicating this information to the Crathornes still resident at Scarborough, who were greatly surprised by the romantic story, which revived the memory of a tradition in their family that a relative had disappeared when a youth, and had never since been heard of.

Meantime, however, poor old Laurie (for so let us still call him) had died, and his mortal remains were reverently laid to rest in the little God's acre at Invershin.

His old pupil Mr George Young, with characteristic affection, reared a headstone to his memory bearing the following inscription:—

TO  
COMMEMORATE  
THE MEMORY OF  
GEORGE CRATHORNE,  
WHO WAS BORN AT SCARBOROUGH, YORKSHIRE,  
12TH NOV., 1800,  
DIED AT INVERSHIN, 15TH MAY, 1872.  
FOR FORTY YEARS HE WAS A  
TEACHER IN THE COUNTY OF SUTHERLAND,  
UNDER AN ASSUMED NAME,  
AND LABOURED WITH ZEAL TO BRING  
HIS SCHOLARS TO PERFECTION  
IN ALL BRANCHES TAUGHT  
BY HIM.  
THIS STONE IS ERECTED  
BY ONE OF HIS PUPILS,  
GEORGE YOUNG,  
INVERSHIN.

The Crathornes came of an old Roman Catholic family in the north of England—sturdy yeomen, deeply religious but tolerant. Hence George would naturally be sent to Ushaw College, which is situated about four miles out of Durham. Dr John Gillow became president of the college in 1811, and would be at its head all the time George and young Wiseman were there. It is not unlikely that Wiseman, who had come from Spain, manifested quite early those strong unrelenting Roman Catholic feelings towards Protestantism which characterised his after life, and fitted him all the better for the Cardinalate. This may explain Laurie's remarks to Dr John Gordon when inspecting his school in 1851.

The epitaph on the headstone in the quiet burying-ground at Invershin was, I believe, the only and brief biography of this eccentric schoolmaster, but withal worthy man. For many years I have cherished the idea of gathering a few facts of his life together, and now having accomplished it, although very imperfectly, I hope it may afford some little pleasure to some of his old pupils, and to his parishioners generally.



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NOTES  
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VICE-PRESIDENT ROYAL SCOTTISH SOCIETY OF ARTS; LIFE MEMBER EDINBURGH  
SUTHERLAND ASSOCIATION; LIFE MEMBER GLASGOW SUTHERLANDSHIRE  
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EDINBURGH:  
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1887.

## EXTRACTS FROM REVIEWS.

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### "Celtic Magazine."

"'NOTES ON EARLY IRON-SMELTING IN SUTHERLAND,' which lies on our table, is a booklet of considerable antiquarian interest. Our author's notes, in their present form, have special points of interest of their own. The chapter on Sutherland which he set before himself being, as he says, short, he makes a rather lengthy introduction, in which will be found interesting notes on the subject of ironworks elsewhere. The 'Notes' were written very much with the view of eliciting further information regarding iron-slag remains in Sutherland. The author is most scrupulous in giving the authorities and sources of his information, and earnestly invites further information as to slag heaps in any part of Sutherland, and as to any bits of malleable iron or implements found in slag heaps."

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SUTHERLAND  
AND  
CAITHNESS  
IN  
1760,

WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY DANIEL WILLIAM KEMP,

*Editor of*

'BISHOP POCOCKE'S TOURS IN SCOTLAND' (First publication of Scottish History Society);

*Author of*

"NOTES ON EARLY IRON-SMELTING IN SUTHERLAND," &c.

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