

THE NORTH SEA SCHEME.

A CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF THE HERRING FISHERIES OF SCOTLAND.

“The Herring loves the merry moonlight,
The Mackerel loves the wind ;
But the Oyster loves the dredging sang,
For she comes of a gentle kind.”—*Scott.*

IN the very year 1720, when the bubble of the South Sea Scheme was dazzling and delighting England, a joint-stock company in canny Scotland proposed a North Sea Scheme which, while it promised less visionary and immediate wealth to its supporters, gave good assurance of what was called in the language of the time a “prospect of plenty” to its promoters and of prosperity to the nation at large. The aim of the North Sea Scheme was to revive and develop the herring fishery of the Scottish coasts. A principal part of the object was to extend the fishing industry more fully along the western coasts, which were, and long continued to be, credited with a prolific variety of fish, especially herring, of phenomenally fine quality. Shares of £100 each were put upon the market, and, although the venture was despised as mean and paltry by the infatuated supporters of the

South Sea craze, two thousand names of the wealthier and more enterprising people of the country speedily appeared on the list of shareholders. According to a contemporary authority, as large a sum as two millions sterling seems to have been subscribed—a pretty conclusive proof that the nation was by no means bankrupt by the failure of the Darian project in the preceding generation. Several ships were at once commissioned for the instant prosecution of the industry: experienced skippers and fishermen were engaged; and a shipment of salt and barrels, and other necessaries for the purpose of preserving the expected spoils of ocean, was already actually on board.

It was never denied that, as the Scottish rivers and lochs abounded, these in pike and those in trout and salmon, so the Scottish seas swarmed at recurring seasons with herring, cod, the sea cat, tusk, and ling. Salmon, as a food for the peasantry, was so plentiful as to be at a discount, and ploughmen in some parts of the country bargained with their employers against being fed on continual salmon.* From Lochleven alone, and in regard to only one species of its fishy produce, an annual supply of eight casks of salted eels used to be—some three centuries ago—part of the feu mail of the Bishopshire to the Archbishop of St Andrews. There can hardly be a doubt that the taking of fish

* "Plenty of salmon in Herefordshire" (writes quaint old Thomas Fuller in his *Natural Commodities*); "though not in such abundance as in Scotland, where servants, they say, indent with their masters not to be fed therewith above thrice a week." Scotland was known as *Scotia Piscinata*.

to the towns in the south and east of the country. Lochs Broom and Fin were already famous as fishing waters ; and a keg of Lochfyne herrings was in 1720 no unacceptable compliment to an Edinburgh tradesman. Such a compliment was paid to Allan Ramsay, the Poet-Laureate of the Lowlands, by his brother rhymers, Lieutenant Hamilton of Gilbertfield, and duly, heartily, and appropriately acknowledged—

“ Your herrings, Sir, cam hale an’ fier
 In halesome brine a’ soomin’ ;
 Fu’ fat they are, and gusty gear
 As e’er I laid a thoom on ;
 Braw sappy fish as ane could wish
 To clap on fadge or scon ;
 They relish fine gude claret wine,
 That gars oor cares stand yon’.”

But while the nation was content to own those productive seas, and take an occasional taste of their tribute, it seemed also to be content that the fish harvest should go to the patient and plodding industry of the Dutch. The Firth of Forth especially was a favourite resort of Mynheer. He kept on good terms with the numerous villages of the Fife and Lothian coasts by sharing with them the gains of a little judicious smuggling ; but his main advantage, though the Scots were long in realising it, lay in the great takes of fish of which, every season and almost the whole year round, he despoiled the Scottish waters. It was no business of his—it was certainly no loss to him—if the Scots remained comparatively inactive while he had the run of the Scottish fisheries ; he was hardly the man to boast of the profits he secured through their laziness, or to enlighten them at his own expense.

They could only gauge his success by the number of his boats and the frequency of his visits. It is a wonder they were so long "supine," as Ramsay puts it, in a business which was well calculated to employ their energies, but at last they began to open both their eyes, and to see with them in a way they had never before realised—the immense productivity in fish of their firths and narrow seas, and the gainful rapacity of the enterprising Dutch. The political history of the country at the time of the Revolution casts an incidental light upon Dutch enterprise in the Firth of Forth. In 1689 an officer of Mackay's, a Lieutenant Ramsay, was in Edinburgh with an auxiliary force, which he was under orders to convey with all possible expedition northwards against Dundee. He was about to cross the Firth at the Ferry when the appearance of a fleet of vessels arrested his attention and his progress. He took them for a French squadron come in aid of the Stuarts, and was rather relieved than delighted when he by-and-by learned that the vessels were Dutch busses engaged in the peaceful peculation of Scottish herring. They were no unfamiliar sight from the shores of Fife or the Lothians, but they had come on this occasion at an unexpected time, and besides, the lieutenant doubtless thought he did right to be wary. It was, however, before the year of the Revolution that the Scots recognised, from Dutch example, the vast unappropriated wealth that lay in fish at their own doors; and the herring fisheries had already been made a subject of legislation when, in 1696, the famous Darien Company—which chiefly erred by being too

ambitious all at once—considered the matter as possibly furnishing a rich source of supplies for their projected emporium of miscellaneous goods. It was even proposed by the Company to establish markets, for the sale of herrings caught in Scottish waters, at places so far remote as Archangel and the Gold Coast; but that proposal, it needs no telling, shared in the collapse of the Darien enterprise, and came to naught, and the Scottish herring and other fisheries remained, more even than they had been before,

“A toom dominion on the plenteous main,
Whence others ran away with all the gain.”

This state of things seemed on the eve of a change for the better on the formation of the North Sea Scheme in 1720. To “ding the Dutch,” and secure their own fish for their own maws, was now the great aim and end of Scottish maritime enterprise. There were not wanting objectors to the scheme, men whose independency was not strong enough to do without the countenance of Court favour, and whose suspicions of Southron jealousy read failure in every purely Scottish enterprise. Others were afraid of what the Dutch might do if their monopoly of the Scottish fisheries should be threatened. These willingly confessed—how could they deny?—the enormous gains which Holland secured from the monopoly; it was even allowed that that country fished more riches out of the “Pictland seas” than it ever made by trafficking with both the Indies. But the very fact of such vast profits, they argued, would incite the Dutch to thwart the Scottish scheme, and their enormous wealth would

be used to the last stiver before they surrendered their hopes of a perpetual harvest which they had come by long usage to regard as rightfully their own. The question, besides, had a political aspect, and it would not do to fall out with such powerful political allies, even though the price of their friendship should be a monopoly of the Scottish fisheries. To these objections it was opposed that English rivalry need not be mistaken for English jealousy; that, as there were no longer separate interests, the ancient kingdoms, joined in 1707 like man and wife, should study each other's peace and prosperity; and that the surest means of making the Union an actual fact was to institute a community of gain, and

“Weave and fish to ane anither's hands,
And never think wha serves and wha commands.”

As for the Dutch, they would think twice before they broke the political alliance into which they had entered with Britain—a nation so powerful that it could with ease updraw every sluice in the Netherlands, and drown the inhabitants behind the security of their own dykes. There was reason, law, and nature on the side of the scheme. The future of Scotland, in the happy event of the scheme being carried, was painted in glowing prospectuses. In the first place, a much-desiderated impetus would be given to the boat-building trade; thousands, half the nation even—“with spirits only tint for want of work”—would find a new outlet for their energies in manning the fishing fleets, and in curing for home and foreign markets the food that was lost in the seas. Then

wealth would pour into impoverished Scotland; the population would increase with the establishment of comfortable homes; braw towns would rise with steeples and stone houses of ashlar work

“ Alang wild shores where tumbling billows break,
Plenish'd wi' nocht but shells and tangle wreck.”

Landlords would participate indirectly in the national gain, and would utilise their wealth by recovering waste lands, and improving what was already productive—nerved to the work by the faith of a tenfold return for their toil and outlay. The scheme, in short, was to set Britain on her feet. Scottish herrings were to maintain the nations—Goths and Vandals, Moors and Frenchmen,

“ The ranting Germans, Russians, and the Poles
Shall feast with pleasure on our gusty shoals;
For which, deep in their treasures we shall dive:
Thus by fair trading North Sea Stock shall thrive.”

There would be absolutely no need for us to toil or traffic on foreign shores, with both the Indies lying just beside us:

“ Yet, *for diversion*, laden vessels may
To far-off nations cut their liquid way,
An' fetch fra' ilka port what's nice or braw,
While, for these trifles, we maintain them a'.”

It is sad to think that all those beautiful hopes were blasted, while they were yet fresh, by a frost the origin and nature of which belongs to the social and political history of those times; and that the North Sea Scheme shortly proved as veritable a bubble as that of the South Sea, both bursting before the national gaze about the same time.