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EDITORIAL

I am getting nervous that I am in danger of becoming a Mouse Potato, the computer equivalent to those who get fat watching television football and game shows constantly from the comfort of a sofa. I really must force myself to go for walks (up Knockbain and Knockfarrel is very pleasant and just behind my house) and do the house decorating my Small Wife has been begging for since 1986. This months bookshelf includes two reviews of Web sites which could possibly be considered a waste of time for those of you without a computer and modem connected to the Internet, but not necessarily. If you have read a book lately involving Highland Family History, share your approval or horror with the rest of the HFHS by sending in a review. That definitely goes for magazines and software and Web sites too, even if I still prefer to read genuine books with pages to turn over.

One thing that gives me hope that I have not mortgaged my soul off was a question from our Florida member as to whether we had a special-interest group within the Society with responsibility for Computers. I answered that (a) we are too small to need SIGs much anyway, but also (b) I consider a computer SIG to be something to avoid (unless needed for management purposes in a large organisation) so I use the journal for comments and feedback, sliding in email addresses of correspondents, reviewing web sites and software mixed in with those of books and magazines in our Bookshelf section. The point is to treat computery-things as infrastructure to be used and not put them on a special pedestal from which they look down fondly on both disciples who worship and Gentiles who are frightened of touching The Mystic Keyboard. We do not have a Telephone SIG either for the same reason. Feel free to argue, I may be just a stick-in-the-mud who needs his eyes opened.

On the first Saturday in May Dingwall held its Hobbies Fair showing off the private talents of the Burgh and district. There were brilliant models of steam engines, aeroplanes, boats, cars, trains and ploughs, all driven by steam. Cyclists and photographers. Cactus experts and cigarette card collectors. Potters and rock-climbers and collectors of flatirons. I was there with my family history stall including the small computer (my PC was ill) and a large painting of a 19th-century warship done by a gt grandfather. I had printed out the McColl drop chart from REUNION onto 20 A4 pages which were loads of fun to stick together but are fairly impressive when suddenly unrolled. Several HFHS members strolled by and were nice to me, but that just shows how polite our members are.

Ethics Department. We have a hundred-odd files of family trees (usually drop-charts and pedigrees) in our library, on open access to any member who cares to ask for them. I have listed all the surnames mentioned in them to give about 2500 entries so far. I have assumed that people have sent them to us for just this reason, plus perhaps that if a second copy exists somewhere their work will not have been wasted if they die and their papers are destroyed or dispersed. But what if someone should wish to look up everybody in our records with a particular name-type with a view to catching all Hawaiians for purposes of advertising junk mail, or recruiting as spies, or blackmailing if Hawaiian ancestry were to become embarrassing under some future government? Please send me your views.

We now have our own website on <http://sentinel.mcc.ac.uk/genuki/big/scot/Highland.FHS.home.html>, very kindly set up by Hugh Reekie. My Internet Explorer 3 finds it when I ask for highland+genealogy and I would like to know how easily your searchers find

DID HE FALL OR WAS HE PUSHED?
The Mystery Behind the Death of a Master Mariner
 by John Durham

For a number of reasons, some of which have become more obvious since I started to research in detail the more colourful individuals on my family tree, hardly any documents relating to members of my branch of the family have survived the passage of time. In the case of my great-uncle, Captain John Durham, I have been more fortunate. The following items are in my possession: his Certificate of Competency, the 'sailing card' for his final voyage to the West Indies and his silver watch, which he presumably had on his person the day he drowned. The main body of the watch is dated 1887, the year in which he passed the examination to gain his Master's Certificate. The back of the watch, which has the entwined letters JD inscribed upon it, is dated 1893, some three years after he died, and must have been replaced.

This watch was a silent witness to the events of 2nd May 1890, which resulted in the following item appearing in the *Northern Chronicle*: "*The Late Captain Durham - On Saturday news of the death by drowning of Captain Durham, of the steamship Morven, was received by his parents in Thurso. He was a young man of much promise, and became captain of this ship when ordinary men in his profession could scarcely expect to secure the title of being able seaman. His father, who is Boot & Shoemaker in Thurso, is much sympathised with in his bereavement.*"¹⁾

As well as sharing the same name, yet another factor in stimulating my interest in this man, the eldest of my grandfather's six brothers, was that he was born, like me, in the Shetland Islands. My aunt recalls that a friend of the family, who was the editor of a national newspaper at the time, said to her "Of course, you realise that his crew did away with him." Comments like that are an added stimulus to family research, even if subsequent research very often fails to find evidence to support such statements. However, the suggestion that there was a query concerning his death was an added inducement to try and find out more about his career in the Merchant Navy.

My first port of call was to the Guildhall Library in London. In the upstairs reading room I looked up the appropriate volume of the "Registers of Certificates of Competency and Service - Masters and Mates". These volumes are in alphabetical order and each covers approximately ten years. In order to request the correct volume, you need to know the period during which your ancestor was an officer in the merchant service. For Captain John Durham, I found the following details of his relatively short career as a master mariner:-

1888 - MORVEN /S/ 82283	January 24	Foreign
	May 5	West Indies
	July 7	Mediterranean
	July 9	Foreign
	November 23	South Pacific

1889 - MORVEN /S/ 82283	February 26	West Indies
	May 5	Baltic, Norway, White Sea or Cattegat
	June 7-17	[Ashore and off]
	July 7	Baltic, Norway,

		White Sea or Cattegat
September 24		West Indies
December 6		West Indies

1890 - MORVEN /S/ 82283	March 14	West Indies
	May 3-19	Ashore
	June 16	Captain reported drowned ²

I already knew three of the four pieces of information which are essential when researching the career of someone in the merchant service. These were my great-uncle's name, the number of his Certificate of Competency (obtained from the copy I had in my possession) and the name of the vessel he commanded (from both the newspaper item and the 'sailing card'). The missing piece of information was the reference number of the ship, in this case 82283. In addition to distinguishing between two vessels bearing the same name, this reference number would be required later on in my research.

The next step was to obtain details of the events leading up to the sinking of the *Morven*. These were to be found in the pages of the "*Shipping Gazette & Lloyds List*", microfilm copies of which were to be found in self-service cabinets on the ground floor of the Guildhall Library. This publication, which appears daily from Monday to Saturday each week, contains information relating to the movements of shipping all over the world. It was at this point that I made one of the mistakes that enthusiastic researchers tend to make from time to time. I was informed that there was a separate index to the newspapers and it was recommended that I should consult it first. Thank you very much, but there is no need to. I knew the date the event took place so why look at an index? How wrong I was.

I extracted the film that covered the period either side of 2nd May 1890 and started to look for entries which mentioned the *Morven*. The fate of the ship began to unfold.

Friday, May 2nd - Sombrero, *Morven* sailed (1st) for Stettin.

Friday, May 2nd - Sombrero, *Morven* sailed (1st) for St. Kitts.

Saturday, May 3rd - St Kitts (by cable) British steamer *Morven*, struck on a rock, compelled to run ashore near Sandy Point to prevent sinking; is full of water. **Captain drowned.** Cargo is Sombrero Phosphates. Is she insured and where? Send instructions. (Lloyd's Agent).

Monday, May 5th - London May 3 - Following telegraph has been received from Captain Fox, dated Barbados, May 2: - "*Morven* ashore, full of water, north end St Kitts. Captain missing". [see Saturday's edition]

Monday, May 5th - St Kitts (by cable) - *Morven* lying in an upright position; she lies well supported along her whole length; she is lying on a hard bottom, four fathoms aft, three forward, West Island 13 miles, Basserterre, must become a total wreck; cargo can be salvaged.³

Over the next four months, a further eleven items were found, all of them referring to the attempts to salvage the cargo, but there were no further comments concerning the fate of Captain John. This is not surprising as the under-writers at Lloyds would be more interested in being kept up to date with the extent of their possible financial liability, rather than in the fate

Tuesday, June 25th - Boulogne: *Morven* sailed (22nd) for Tyne.⁵

Fortunately not too serious an incident, but it must have resulted in at least a question mark about his navigational skills being entered in Captain John's personal file. At this point I decided to contact the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. With Captain John's Certificate of Competency in front of me, I spoke on the phone to a very helpful member of the staff there. I was very surprised when she informed me that they had my great-uncle's Certificate of Competency. In the best traditions of the pantomime, I then said "Oh no, you haven't!" to which she replied "Oh yes, we have".

The reason for this apparent anomaly is that two certificates are issued, one is given to the successful candidate and the other is retained by the authorities. This second copy would be needed to prepare a replacement copy if the original was lost for some reason. A more interesting piece of information was that, when a candidate applies to sit the examinations for his master's certificate, he has to fill in a form detailing his maritime experience covering the previous four years. That application form was also held at the National Maritime Museum and could be viewed on request. On enquiring if the Log Book had survived, I was asked for the reference number of the *Morven* which I had obtained on my first visit to the Guildhall Library (I mentioned previously that it would be needed). A quick check on a computer database gave me the bad news that the ship's log had not survived.

It was then suggested that I look for the "Agreement and Account of Crew" for the final voyage of the *Morven*. Crew members have to sign on prior to every voyage and then get paid off, usually on return to the original port of embarkation. I assumed copies of these would be held at the National Maritime Museum, but this is not the case today. When they were all stored there, they took up several miles of shelf space, and it was decided to retain only those for the years that end with a '5' i.e. 1875, 1885, 1895 etc. The remainder were then offered to a number of repositories, the main one being the Maritime History Archive at Memorial University in Newfoundland, as a letter from one of their archivists advised me:-

"The Maritime History Archive holds approximately 75% of the surviving crew agreements and official log books of British registered vessels for the periods 1863-1938 and 1951-1976. The Public Record Office at Kew has retained all surviving documents prior to 1861, and for 1939-1950, as well as a 10% sample in the 1861-1938 and 1951-1976 periods. All surviving documents for 1861-1862 and years ending in '5' (e.g. 1885) are held at the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich."

You have to write to the Maritime History Archive enclosing the reference number of the vessel you are interested in (I told you it was important) and the relevant date(s). Their index will confirm if they have crew agreements for a particular year, but a full scan of the microfilm will be required to check if they have the copy for a specific voyage that year. If you wish to proceed further, you will have to pay a search fee of \$35 for one hour, which will also cover the cost of approximately 10-15 photocopies. Fortunately they were able to find the one for the last voyage of the *Morven* from London to Barbados via Dartmouth. Most of the crew were signed off in St Kitts with "shipwreck" in the column headed "cause of leaving ship".⁶

There were no references to problems with the crew (although these would most probably have appeared in the log) and once again another avenue of research appeared to be closed to me. While scrutinising the list of crew members, I noticed that Alexander Wallace, aged 20,

of the master. The last entry I found was dated 18th September 1890. It referred to the successful transportation to Eldorado of approximately 700 tons of phosphate rock salvaged from the *Morven*. This was all I was able to look at on this visit as, having failed to look at the index first, I wasted a lot of time having to search each page carefully for references to the *Morven*.

The following week I wrote to the archivist on St Kitts, enclosing details of what I had found so far. My first letter did not arrive (or was mislaid) and, on following it up, I was informed that there was nothing in the archives relating to the *Morven* or to the death of Captain John. I thought this was surprising and wrote again, querying the lack of comment in local newspapers of the time. I did not receive a reply. Subsequently I discovered that the Public Library in Basseterre, the principal town of St Kitts, had been destroyed by fire in 1982 with the loss of all archival material stored there. A pity I had not been told that in the first place.

The next move was to follow up the reference to the *Morven* having been ashore and then off between the 7th and 17th June 1889, a year before the final voyage. This required a further visit to the Guildhall Library. This time, before starting to check the "Lloyd's List" for June 1889, I looked at the index to the newspaper. It is also on microfilm, is in alphabetical order by name of vessel, and takes the following form:-

1889: Jun 3/26 4/22 4/7 5/176 6/19 7/17 8/6 13/6 18/11 21/21 25/9
Jul 9/6 10/5 17/8 20/8 23/10 31/7 31/8 etc.⁴

It is a very simple code. The first number is the date in the month and the second is the column number (not page number) on which you will find a reference to the vessel. If I had made use of it on my previous visit to the library, I would not have had to read through every page of every edition printed between 2nd May and 16th September, looking for the name *Morven*. Using the index entries for June shown above, I found the following items:-

Monday, June 3rd - The following telegram has been received from the Neptun Salvage Co. dated June 3rd 9.30am - "*Morven* (S), wood cargo, stranded Wester Finngrundet, Poseidon despatched."

Tuesday, June 4th - Gefle, June 4 11am - British steamer *Morven*, cargo wood, is ashore at Wester Finngrundet, but will probably be got off with little damage. Some cargo has been put into lighters.

Wednesday, June 5th - London June 5 - The following telegram has been received from the Neptun Salvage Co. dated June 5 - *Morven* floated.

Thursday, June 6th - The following has been received from the Neptun Salvage Co. dated June 6, 10.20am - *Morven* arrived Stockholm; *Fairfield* floated, brought Holmsund.

Friday, June 7th - Stockholm June 6, 2.05pm - *Morven* (S), Durham Master, has put in here leaky [sic], having been ashore at Finngrundet, made jettison of 180 standard, and got off with assistance from Neptun.

Thursday, June 13th - Stockholm: *Morven* sailed for Boulogne.

Tuesday, June 18th - Boulogne: *Morven* arrived from Hernosand.

Friday, June 21st - Gefle, June 16 - The *Heppet* passed, on her way to Ljusne, a great quantity of planks and boards, probably from the *Morven* (S) which stranded in the neighbourhood.

came from Caithness. I checked the IGI and noted a possible birth in Dunnet parish and, on checking the census return for 1871, found Alexander aged 10 with his family. Referring to our "Register of Members' Interests", I noted that another member of our Society was researching that surname in Dunnet. I contacted him to find out if he knew of this particular family. He did, but then told me that Alexander was himself lost at sea some five years later as First Officer on board the *Livonia*.⁷ Yet another dead-end!

He was able to put me in touch with a grandson of Alexander's elder brother Sinclair, who had also been a master mariner. At long last am I going to find out what really happened that day over a hundred years ago? No such luck. When I spoke to him on the telephone, he told me that his grandfather died before, or soon after he was born, and his grandmother never talked about her husband's life at sea as she found it of no interest! There were other members of the crew from Scotland, but tracing descendants of each of them will be very time-consuming.

While waiting for further inspiration, I decided it was time that I visited the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich. I wanted to look at the application form that Captain John had filled in when he applied to sit the examinations for his Master's Certificate. I telephoned in advance giving them my great-uncle's name and certificate number. This meant that, when I arrived there, the documents had already been extracted from the repository and were waiting for me at the reception desk. When I opened up the folder I was delighted to discover that inside it were not one, but three certificates, and their associated application forms. These were for second mate, first mate and finally master, the latter being identical to the one I already had in my possession.

The application forms were a fund of information. From the first I learned that my great-uncle initially went to sea as a cook, four days before his 14th birthday, on the 75 ton schooner *Janer Fraser* out of Wick. In fact, from the information in that one folder, I have been able to reconstruct his entire career. At the age of 18, when he first applied to sit the examinations for second mate, his application was turned down as he did not have a certificate to confirm the three month's he claimed he spent on the *Cariduna* of Wick as an ordinary seaman. I also discovered that he had to sit the section on navigation twice before he passed his examination for first mate, six weeks before his 21st birthday. He served on fourteen other vessels before joining the *Morven* as first mate on 3rd December 1885, having served on her as second mate for a period of three months the previous year. He gained his master's certificate on 10th May 1887 and took over command on 24th January 1888. On his application form my great-uncle is described as being 5'10" tall, of fair complexion, with fair hair and brown eyes.⁸

The next area of research had to be the records held at the Public Record Office at Kew. Having never been there myself and not knowing which documents would be relevant, I decided that this time I would use the services of an experienced researcher. It was money well spent and, although there are no reports of what happened that day, the researcher did find a reference which may be relevant. There was some correspondence in September 1890 between the Board of Trade and the Colonial Office respecting the Sandy Island light and its importance vis a vis St Johns harbour. "In the absence of any dangers to the north-west or south-west, it is **only careless navigators** that would approach the light during hazy weather so close as to risk striking on the outlying reefs. With the land in sight, **ordinary care would enable mariners to keep their vessels clear of dangers**."⁹

If these comments were a reference to the *Morven*, it looks as if my great-uncle's problem with navigation, first highlighted when he had to re-sit that section of his examination for first mate, then re-emerging when he ran the vessel aground off Sweden the previous year, had finally caught up with him. Albert Cole, an assistant steward, the last member of crew to sign on, did so on the 1st May in St Kitts. This information indicates that, before setting off for Stettin, the *Morven* returned to St Kitts after loading it's main cargo of phosphate rock at Sombrero. Having had to double-back before setting off for England, Sombrero being 100 miles north of St Kitts, Captain John may have tried to recover some of this time by taking a short-cut. This decision then resulted in the *Morven* striking the rock on which the Sandy Island light was located at a time when the visibility was poor.

In the only family letter I have come across in my researches, the youngest daughter of Captain John's eldest sister wrote "My mother's other brothers - John (her favourite) - ship's captain who went down with his ship in the traditional way and is buried in St Kitts".¹⁰ This seems a more fitting epitaph for him than believing that his crew "did away with him". As the incident must have taken place not long after the *Morven* left St Kitts, the captain must have been on the bridge at the time, and would have to accept full responsibility for the wrecking of the vessel. It is possible that one or more members of the crew were unhappy with the stranding of the *Morven*. This dissension with the captain may, through word of mouth combined with the passage of time, have ended up as the suggestion that "his crew did away with him". I find it difficult to believe that they could have done such a thing without someone noticing. In addition to the crew of twenty, there were seven passengers on board at the time, making it very difficult to hide such a crime from all of them.

Captain John could have believed that this disaster would certainly lead to his temporary demotion and, quite possibly, to the loss of his master's certificate. If that was the case, the comment by his niece that he "went down with his ship in the traditional way" was probably a correct reflection of what actually happened. Once again it looks as though what at first appeared to be an exciting piece of family folk-lore, and worthy of further research, has turned out to be no more than a rumour. On the other hand, the information I have obtained while researching my great-uncle's career in the Merchant Navy has been well worth the effort.

PS: While extracting all references to the *Morven* from the index at the Guildhall Library, I noticed the following entry in May 1890 - MI May 28 with cc 10641 below it. I wonder if the MI referred to a Maritime Inquiry into the loss of the *Morven* and, if so, perhaps there is a report somewhere which would tell me **what really happened that day?**

Sources and references:

- ¹ *Northern Chronicle*, 7th May 1890.
- ² *Registers of Certificates and Competency - Master and Mates* - Guildhall Library, London.
- ³ *Shipping Gazette & Lloyds List*, 2nd May 1890 - 18th September 1890.
- ⁴ Index to above - Guildhall Library, London.
- ⁵ *Shipping Gazette & Lloyds List*, 3rd June 1889 - 25th June 1889.
- ⁶ *Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John's, Newfoundland, Canada A1C-5S7*.
- ⁷ *Register of Members' Interests*, Highland Family History Society, August 1995.
- ⁸ Maritime Information Centre, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.
- ⁹ St Kitts despatches Nov-Dec 1890 - Public Record Office (CO 152/179).
- ¹⁰ Letter from Elizabeth Mary Oag (1906-1989) dated 23rd April 1979.

BOOKSHELF

(I can't read everything, so if you have read a book or magazine or used a piece of software or a Web site, please share your opinions of them with us in Bookshelf. These reviews are by Jonathan unless credited to someone else)

In the last issue we reviewed Marjorie Bleidner's 1990 publication of her 1841 Ross and Cromarty census index but missed out where and how much. This is still available from her at 2000 Coco Plum Drive, Apartment 706, Marathon, Florida 33050, U.S.A. at a cost of \$45 post paid.

Web site <http://islandnet.com/ocfu/>

This stands for the Ontario Cemetery Finding Aid and it contains an index to as many burial registers as it is encouraged to touch, currently (it says) over 1.1 million interments from about 2000 cemeteries, cairns, memorials and cenotaphs in Ontario. The site is well laid out, with clear links to other pages from the opening one, and importantly, links back to the main one too from wherever you get to. I searched for some Ontario ancestor names. You need a surname (spelt in any way you like including Soundex) and can add first names, counties and townships, but if you leave the fields blank you get all possibilities. I tried McColl, Middlesex County and got nothing, which suggests that bit is not yet entered, but then I went for McColl, Guelph Township and got ten entries, one being (I am sure, I think, I hope!) my several-greats-uncle Neil McColl in Block E, Woodlawn Cemetery Guelph, and the others are there or Marymount so maybe a lot of cousins I'd never heard of are there waiting for me.

The ref. WW-4322 will enable the 'contributing organisation' listed on another page to give me more info when I apply to it for the details or to borrow the microfilm on an Inter-Library Loan. Main problem (this is not a criticism!) is that name, burial place and reference number are all you get, no ages or dates or relatives so you do not get everything served up to you on a plate. Whether or not that is why the Ontario Genealogy Society itself is not a supporter of this set-up, several of its sub-societies are.

I just printed off the pages I wanted for later study and writing to Canadians about, but I could have set up a database and dumped chunks into it. Then you sign their Guestbook with your name and address and a short comment that appears almost at once. If you want to wait as it all downloads you can read earlier such comments, similar in excitement to reading the register of any hotel or museum, but with the odd flash of pleasure when someone says what they had been seeking so you can write directly to them if you see something hopeful. Islandnet has done one for British Columbia which I may search tonight in the wee small hours when I rack up my telephone bill. Now all I need is someone in Canada to go and look for all these references I've built up.

Web site <http://leisterpro.com>

This one is the home page for Leister Productions Inc., the makers of the family history program REUNION. Again a nicely-designed site which showed me what I wanted and didn't spend too much of my phone bill downloading beautiful pictures. They are designing REUNION v5 at the moment so are calling for ideas while they list what it will probably contain. I'm glad of that because I'd like a Print Preview and a field for my own ID numbers

and plenty of space for notes, and these will be coming with lots of other bells and whistles like Hebrew date converters and Soundex names and more ways of typing charts. I would like to be able to do a single chart with all ancestors and all descendants on it, but that is not mentioned. It will not be ready for a few months but when it is Mac and PC versions will be issued close together.

Then I downloaded a maintenance update to improve mine from v4.07 to v4.08, this is designed to fix minor bugs so it added little that I could see so far, but if you have earlier versions (like my co-editor) this is your chance to keep up with the McColls for free. Most people who use any program hit snags, so there is a problem forum that you may join. I sent in a couple of comments and their technical people E-mailed me the answers at once. Such questions and responses all appear on their daily digest which is E-mailed to all forum members every day.

The site also has a series of articles by Jan McClintock on things you can do or answers to frequently-asked questions (FAQs is the jargon) so I found out how to make a 'Heritage Chart' with the source couple in the middle, their ancestors above and their descendants below, good help?

Sources for Scottish Genealogy in the Library of the Society of Genealogists. Compiled by Marjorie Moore. £4.85 +£1.00 p&p

This tells us that the Society of Genealogists library in London is the best place in the British Isles outside Scotland in which to research Scottish ancestry, and this latest in their Library Sources series certainly suggests the claim is reasonable, but perhaps there are not all that many parts of these islands outside Scotland where people are actually likely to want to do it. Pages 13 and 40 in my review copy were blank sadly, but they have lots of items on their shelves. Everything is listed by county where appropriate, or Scotland-General for non-county pieces like dictionaries and shipping and banks, and we are told where in the building they are to be found. My only grouse is that published books are not identified as such, nor are their authors given, e.g., under Ross and Cromarty the entry Cromarty highland life 1650-1914 is given and I recognise Monica Cloughs book from that title. They have built up a good collection of censuses and so on, and recently added the LDS OPR fiches to the shelves too. A large selection of monumental inscription books, OPR microfilms, maps and directories etc. are here, so are the Scottish History Society books, peerages, Scottish FHS publications (including ours) and sasine indices, services lists and many more. It would be necessary for anyone researching within reach of London, and I think would be a useful quickie guidebook to what records can be available in the Scottish records depositories too.

Population Lists of Assynt 1638-1811. Edited by Malcolm Bangor-Jones. £2 UK, £3 overseas

Who thought that the official censuses before 1841 no longer existed? Dr Bangor-Jones has found and put together in this one booklet six such for the Sutherland parish of Assynt. All are as complete as the editor could make them, and all will be useful to family and local historians. The combined lists with place-names and three-generation patronymic names might allow an ancestor hunter to trace back to the early 1500s through the various kinds of census for 1811 (national), 1774 (Sutherland Estate), 1746 (loyalists), 1691 (hearth tax), 1667 (tenants) and 1637 (tenants). Each has been given a short explanatory introduction. The booklet is available from the editor at 1 North Somerville Place, Dundee DD3 6TU.

OLD-TIME TINKERS

[*Hugh Oag was born in Wick in 1847. He was a successful master plasterer. He kept a diary of his observations and they appeared in the John O'Groat Journal on the theme "Old Caithness Stories" under the pseudonym "Crofter". He also wrote letters to the editor on a range of subjects including these on tinkers*]

Sir:- In recent issues of your valuable paper "Norseman" and his critic have had something to say about the tinkers. It might interest some of your many readers to know a little more about the old Caithness tinkers. They made and supplied all the country districts with tin-ware. The men made the tins and the women went round the country and sold the goods. The two most prominent leaders in that day was Jamie Williamson ("The Money Man") and Willie Macphee, two decent, hard-working men, and respected all over the county. The tinker wife set out with her goods on a ring on her back. The goods consisted of four-pint pails (Scots measure), two-pint pails, three-chopin pails with lids, milk dishes, siers or sives, chopin jugs, and wee jugs for the bairns. She had quite a load to start with, but she knew her customers and soon got rid of it. Every house had its tins. No better drink of water could be got than out of a tinker's tin jug.

Willie Macphee and his wife, Peggy Campbell, specialised in another department. They made horn spoons. As a boy I have watched Willie over a big fire, in a quarry near our croft, making horn spoons. There were no other horn spoons in country houses then. They were well made, with sometimes a bit of ornament on the handle. It is from old Willie's business that a Caithness proverb has come. When it is not sure if one will succeed with some undertaking, it is said - "He will make a spoon or spoil a horn." Both men and women were well clad in rough material. I never heard of them begging. They were far removed from the dirty, ragged tinkers of the present day, who are a problem to the State and a pest to every householder. Every effort to reform them, as yet, has been a failure.

I am etc.

A Crofter.

The Tinker Clan, can they be reformed?

"Norseman," in one of his interesting notes, recently brought before us the problem of the "Clan Macfee." The tinkers I knew as a boy were not like the lazy beggars of our day. The head of the clan was old Willie Macfee, ably assisted by his wife Peggy Campbell (who claimed to be descended from the Ducal house of Argyll). They were a quiet, decent couple, and kept the clan in order. Willie wore a suit of rough homespun cloth, and Peggy had a long cloak of thick blue cloth down to her heels. (It was before the days of high-heeled shoes and white stockings!)

Although they went round the country with the clan, they were no idlers. They and their sons had a good trade in making tin pails and milk dishes, and Willie was an expert maker of horn spoons. The spoons were well finished and sometimes ornamented. In that day Willie's spoons were in nearly every crofter's house.

After Willie's and Peggy's death the clan went rapidly down hill. Then a revival came and an effort was made to convert the tinkers. A man was appointed as a missionary to preach to

them. This turned out a failure, and was eventually given up. When the Wick Breakwater was going on, R.L. Stevenson, in a letter to his mother from Wick, says:- "In one of the caves lives a tribe of gipsies. The men are always drunk, simply and truthfully always, from morning to evening. The great villainous-looking fellows are either sleeping off the last night's debauch or hulking about the cove in the horrors."

Wandering: in the Blood

There are some who think that if the young children could be got they could be saved. In my herding days I found a wild duck's nest. I put the eggs in my breast, ran home, and put them under a "clockan-hen." In due time I had a nice little flock of wild ducks. They got every attention, but when they came to a certain stage they disappeared. It was in the blood. A Caithness lady, one well known for good works, took a likely young tinker girl, paid her board and had her schooled, intending to fit her for domestic service. When she grew up she followed the example of my ducks and bolted. It was "in the blood."

At the time of the revival referred to, two boys of the clan Macfee were taken, clothed, and put to school. It did for a time, but by and by the lure of the road seized them; they decamped from their lodgings and returned to the clan. One of these boys perished in a storm many years ago, the other died when he was of age for the old age pension, and at the wake and funeral there were four bottles of whisky at 12s 6d - £2 10s. Lately a tinker bought a bottle of brandy at about £1. He laid down his cash and said:- "Well, it's a dear morsel."

Hugh Miller's Experiences

Hugh Miller, when recovering from a serious illness, made the acquaintance of a band of tinkers in a cave at Cromarty. At first they were suspicious of him of a spy, but latterly they talked freely with him, and he had the freedom to come and go to their cave where they made their tin ware and horn spoons. One lady of the clan posed as doctor. She said he was a quiet, sickly lad and that his trouble was consumption. Her cure was parsley minced small and made up in balls with butter. He heard there was to be a wedding and one night turned up to see it. But the two men who had been sent for the whisky drank it on the way and returned drunk. Then a row started, and one of the women whispered to him - "Honest lad, ye had just better be stepping your ways, for it will be a roch time with us here the night." He was of the same opinion himself, and had not the pleasure to see the tinkers' wedding. He says - "I could only trust what I saw, what was told, on no occasion could I believe, for never were there more gross and monstrous lies than those of the gipsies." I have found it the same. As one instance, since the war (W.W.1) one of them told me of one battle that we had gained where there were heaps of dead Germans "as high as Dunnet Head!"

Tinkers are a thankless race, the more you give the more they ask, and only in one instance do I know of a spark of gratitude of a kind. A friend of mine was building his corn beside the road. A tinker was passing with his cart, and my friend threw a sheaf to him. The tinker looked up and said - "Weel, maister, this sheaf may save ye twa or three."

Whoever will satisfactorily solve the tinker problem will deserve the V.C.

A Crofter.

