

## Three Letters of George Dempster.

The following three letters were written in his old age by George Dempster of Dunnichen, M.P. for the Forfar and Fife burghs from 1761 to 1790, whom Burns, in his "Earnest Cry and Prayer," eulogised as "a true-blue Scot." They should properly have been printed in the last chapter of the *Letters of George Dempster to Sir Adam Fergusson*, which I published in 1934, since they were written to Sir Adam's nephew and heir, James Fergusson, who succeeded as 4th baronet of Kilkerran. I did not, however, discover them among the unarranged papers at Kilkerran till several years later. Even at this date it seems worth while to print them as a supplement or closure to the Dempster-Fergusson correspondence and as characteristic specimens of Dempster's epistolary style.

The letters were written when Dempster was over 80, and are all overshadowed by death, actual or imminent. Dempster's contemporaries are dropping off and he recognises that he must soon follow them. His simile of his old age as a battlefield with fallen comrades all round him was a favourite with him.<sup>1</sup> During the year preceding the first letter he had lost his wife and his niece, Harriet Soper-Dempster, and this letter's immediate occasion was the death on 10th November, 1810, of Sir Adam's sister, Helen, the widow of Sir David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes. She was also the mother-in-law of James Fergusson, whose first wife had been his first cousin, Jean Dalrymple, after whose death he married Henrietta Duncan. See Note (2) below.

The Jean or Jane Dalrymple here mentioned, however, is a slip of the pen for Christian Dalrymple, Lady Hailes's step-daughter (daughter of Lord Hailes by his first wife), who inherited Newhailes and lived till 1838—dying a genial old lady who was wont to observe (being both a wealthy heiress and a hunchback) that "for the honour of mankind, she had never had a proposal of marriage." "Charlotte" is Dempster's niece, Mrs. Charles Boddam.

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### George Dempster to James Fergusson.

Dunnichen by Forfar,  
19th November, 1810.

MY DEAR SIR,

On my return to this place yesterday I found your favour of the 10th instant conveying the melancholy tidings of Lady Hailes. I regret this loss, and condole with you most sincerely

(1) See *Letters*, pp. 321, 327.



on the occasion, and with Miss Jean (*sic* for Christian) Dalrymple, Sir Adam, and Lord Hermand, to all of whom I request you to signify my condolences when an opportunity offers. We are strange inconsistent beings. We are as certain her innocent soul is gone to heaven, where there is no sorrow, as that it has left this world, where there is nothing else; and yet we mourn the change. I regret dissolution of the parental and filial connection between the deceased mother and surviving child, Lady Hailes and Miss Jane (*sic*) Dalrymple. They set a bright example, and afforded a rare instance, of what good hearts improved by a virtuous education can do, by converting the novercal relation, the cause of so much domestic misery, into the tenderest tie of nature—mother and child. I regret it never was my good fortune to see the parties during Lady Hailes's widowhood. But old as I am, it may still be my lot to witness as bright an example, of the same kind, and in the same family.<sup>2</sup> The branch ingrafted into it, is from our best Angus stock; and not degenerated, or the world is much mistaken. It is seldom given to telling lies of the good-natured kind. I thank you for your condolence with me in the late wreck of my family. For these last ten years, such a letter could at no time have come amiss. During that period Death has robbed me almost of every thing that would have render'd my life happy, and my old age supportable. Your sister my child, her husband, their son,<sup>3</sup> and now the last of my brother's progeny, Harriet. My own dear wife, after a union of thirty-six years. I have buried my sweetheart and my nurse just when entering on my second toothless childhood. But time must deaden our feelings, and a repetition of such losses render us as callous as grave diggers, I am ashamed to say. I enjoy at this present moment good health and good spirits. If you come to Lundie House perhaps you'll push on another stage. I'll try to wait for you, but don't delay too long for fear—

Your affectionate friend,

GEORGE DEMPSTER.

Charlotte is with me and begs to be remember'd to you.

Dempster's next surviving letter to James was written on receiving the news of the death of Sir Adam, his friend for nearly his whole lifetime. Sir Adam had died, after a long illness, early in the morning of 25th September, 1813.

- (2) Dempster alludes to James's three children by his first wife and to their stepmother, his second—Henrietta, whom he had married in 1804, second daughter of Admiral Viscount Duncan.
- (3) Jean Fergusson married Dempster's half-brother, Captain John Hamilton Dempster, and had one child, George, whom Dempster had wished to make his heir. They all died between 1798 and 1801.

Dunnichen,  
28th September, 1813.

MY DEAR SIR JAMES,

Your favour of 25th instant has just reached me. It would fill a volume to give vent to my feelings for the departure of a friend with whom I studied law sixty-two years ago<sup>4</sup>; accompanied to London; travelled twice with, over the continent of Europe; sate together many years with, in Parliament; we visited Staffa, and the Hebrides, together, and I cannot recollect that any circumstance ever interrupted our friendship, during the long period of its duration. I shall therefore be silent on the subject, and proceed to congratulate you on succeeding to the ancient honours of your family and its fortune, and to wish you an augmentation of the one, and much happiness and contentment to you, and Lady Fergusson, in the enjoyment of the other. Had not my sand glass been nearly as low as your uncle's, I should think it a duty, and a pleasure, to pay my respects to you both on this melancholy occasion—one of you the heir to my friend, the other the daughter of the best and greatest man our country has produced and the companion of my still earlier studies. We were both flogged by the same school master.<sup>5</sup> May God bless you both. Farewell, my dear Sir James. I have the honour to remain with affection

Most respectfully yours,

GEORGE DEMPSTER.

P.S.—I pray my affectionate respects and condolence to Lord and Lady Hermand, and Miss Fergusson<sup>6</sup> and Miss Dalrymple, whom I co(n)jecture to be at Kilkerran.

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By the time of Dempster's next letter, Sir James had already embarked on the course of uncalculating expenditure in which his uncle Lord Hermand was to pull him up less than two years later. He was enlarging Kilkerran House, projecting ambitious improvements to the estate, and, as this letter shows, treating his wife to a gay season in Edinburgh.

The nephew to whose death Dempster alludes at the beginning of the letter was Lieut. Col. Thomas William Gordon, 3rd Foot Guards, who had died a prisoner of war in France. He was the son of Thomas Gordon of Balmaghie, who married Dempster's sister Agnes Augusta.

- (4) At the University of Edinburgh. See *Letters*, pp. 3, 5.
- (5) Admiral Duncan and Dempster were born within eighteen months of each other, and both received their first education in Dundee.
- (6) Catherine, only surviving daughter of Sir Adam's brother, Charles. She later married the Rev. Leslie Moodie, minister of Inveresk.



Dunnichen, Forfar,

28th December, 1813.

My address St. Andrews.

MY DEAR SIR JAMES,

I thank you for your favour of the 23rd instant inclosing Captain Blair's letter. It gives a fuller and more accurate account of the premature fate of my favourite nephew, than I have reason to believe his brother and heir, Captain James M(urray) Gordon of the Navy, has as yet received. I have therefore sent it to him. I consider human life as a battle of 70 or 80 years' duration, in the course of which all the combatants are, to use Mr. Windom's expression, are kill'd off. Bonaparte is a corporal, compared to General Death. I write this on a drum head, with wife, brothers, sisters and nieces all lying dead in heaps around me, and expecting to be order'd every minute on the forelorn hope my self.

I wish you, Lady Fergusson and family many happy returns of the season; and a full enjoyment of the fashionable round of amusements of the capital, for the short while within which they are bounded. I assume some authority over Lady Fergusson, and must restrict her ladyship to *one* dinner, *three* routs, and *two* balls, and *one* supper in the 24 hours. It would be a proof of insanity if a K.B. and his lady did not run stark, staring mad, for six weeks every winter. Besides how could the industrious tradesmen, and women, born to no inheritance, but their heads and hands, share in your ample hereditary possessions, and *vindicate their grain*? In proportion as your purse lightens, you return to the solid Kilkerran senses. Then plant, drain, farm, build. *Cultiver une terre—planter une arbre, faire un enfoncé.*—The Gentoo commandments.

I heard of your being in Angus last summer, when I was there. But you'r(e) not obliged to visit church yards, and charnel houses, eve(r)y visit you pay your living friends. Believe that with sincere respect I have the honour to be

My dear Sir James,

Yours and Lady Fergusson's

most respectfull, &amp;c., &amp;c., &amp;c.,

GEORGE DEMPSTER.

JAMES FERGUSSON.