

The Overseas Trade of Ayrshire

1660-1707

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Ayrshire in the later 17th century was by no means one of the stagnant backwaters of pre-Union Scotland. It lay on the awakening face of the country. It looked first to Ireland, where the Scottish colonists of Ulster, many of them from Carrick, Cuninghame or Kintyre, maintained a lively trade with the homeland. It also looked already to America—Glasgow and Ayr were practically alone in trading outside Europe before 1707. It maintained a European trade as wide as the seas between Stockholm and Bordeaux. The primary products of the county were already famous well beyond its boundaries—the cattle of Carrick sold at Smithfield, the butter of Cuninghame was reputed the best in the north, and coal from Saltcoats burned in the hearths of Ulster. Kilmarnock hose and Galloway cloth were trade names recognised in the discriminating markets of Rotterdam and Leyden. If the economy was rural, it was not on that account backward. If living standards were low, merchants men of little capital, and inland transport largely a matter of packhorses on rough tracks, these conditions were common to almost the whole of Scotland, and to very large parts of England. Although the prosperity of the county had its ups and downs like anywhere else, it was in fact an area as progressive as any in Scotland.

These remarks may seem surprising, in view of the well-known descriptions of Ayr itself between 1656 and 1700, which are unanimous in their depressing portrayal of the county burgh. Tucker spoke in Cromwellian times of a decayed burgh, with its harbour "clogged and filled up with sand."¹ A burgh petition of 1670 mentions stagnant trade,² Morer in 1689 said "it had formerly a very great *Trade*, but it is much impaired of late years,"³ and in 1692 a gloomy account of the town's losses at sea, its lack of shipping, its ruinous quays and its 140 "waste houses,"⁴ appears to complete the catalogue of decay. It should, however, be noted that the descriptions of 1656, 1689 and 1692 all coincide with particularly severe depressions, and those of 1670 and 1692 were made with the intention of stressing the poverty of the town

¹ *Misc. Scottish Burgh Records Soc.*, 1881, p. 27.

² *The Royal Burgh of Ayr*, ed. A. I. Dunlop, 1953, p. 200.

³ T. Morer, *A Short Account of Scotland*, 1702, p. 115.

⁴ *Records of the Convention of Royal Burghs*, 1677-1711, p. 588.

—the first to avoid a charitable collection for wasted Dundee and the second to underline their penury for the benefit of a Royal Burgh investigation. Indeed, as will be seen, the returns made by the burgh in 1692 are demonstrably false in at least one respect. Generally, the customs books and the commercial letters of the period do not support this picture of a senile and collapsing burgh. Without denying a decline, both absolutely from earlier days when the harbour was deep and the French market more settled, and relatively, compared to the other burghs in Ayrshire now beginning to challenge her lead, they show Ayr as still the most important burgh in the county in the 1680's, and her merchants as lively, adventurous and bold in the face of adversity. Furthermore, Ayr is not Ayrshire. To generalise from the difficulties of that burgh would be to leave out of account Irvine, Kilmarnock, Saltcoats, Ballantrae, and a wide countryside full of diverse economic activity.

The picture of overseas commerce drawn here is based on three hitherto unused sources, all in Register House, Edinburgh—the fragmentary post-Restoration customs-books, the still more fragmentary bullion books, and the very full, though completely disarranged, papers of Andrew Russell, Scottish factor at Rotterdam between 1670 and 1696. This paper exhausts the possibilities of none of these sources for the history of Ayrshire—for example, from the Russell papers alone, a fascinating picture might be built up of the commercial activities of any one of a dozen Ayr merchants of the period. As for this present study, no justification is offered apart from the fact that the history of trade is, to the author, the most fascinating of all histories, and in Scotland the most neglected.

I—THE DIRECTION OF SHIPPING IN AYRSHIRE

A general picture of the directions of overseas trade in the county can be obtained from the customs books, incomplete and awkward to use though they are. Sometime between 1673 and 1677, the county was divided for the first time into two "precincts," with head offices at Ayr and Irvine respectively. Formerly the county had been administered as a unit from Ayr, and this very division suggests an expanding trade. The Ayr precinct included the port of Ayr, and nominally all the little harbours of the south of the county between there and Ballantrae, though in the 1680's the surviving books seemed to have omitted them completely. The Irvine precinct included Irvine, Saltcoats, Ardrossan and the other ports of northern Ayrshire, comprising a large group within which no discrimination is possible from the custom books.

Two tables below show the distribution of ships arriving and departing in these two precincts from and to various overseas areas between November 1st, 1681, and November 1st, 1686 :—

TABLE I.—ARRIVALS

	<i>From</i>	Ireland.	England.	Holland.	Norway.	Baltic.	France.	America.
To Ayr	17	2	8	7	—	32	2	
To North Ayrshire	169	—	—	3	2	11	—	

Note.—June, July and August, 1682, are missing from the Irvine books.

TABLE II.—DEPARTURES

	<i>To</i>	Ireland.	England.	Holland.	Norway.	Baltic.	France.	America.
From Ayr	42	2	14	—	—	39	4	
From North Ayrshire ...	402	1	—	—	1	8	—	

Note.—March, April and May, 1682, are missing from the Irvine books.

The impression given here of an overwhelming preponderance of Irish traffic and therefore of the relative unimportance of Ayr needs correction. Certain of the Ayr books are unique among the customs books of Scotland in giving estimates of the tonnage of the ships entered; in these, 35 ships trading to Ireland averaged 15 tons burden, and 37 ships trading with other areas averaged 52 tons burden. If these tonnage averages are applied to Tables I. and II. the position alters radically.

TABLE III.—ESTIMATED TONNAGE OF SHIPS IN TABLES I. AND II.

	<i>Arriving from</i>		<i>Departing to</i>	
	<i>Ireland.</i>	<i>Elsewhere.</i>	<i>Ireland.</i>	<i>Elsewhere.</i>
Ayr	255	2652	360	3068
Northern Ayrshire	2535	832	6030	520

Now Ayr emerges as handling almost half the tonnage of incoming ships and a third of the tonnage of outgoing ships, while concentrating very markedly on a non-Irish and widely flung trade, mainly with France, but also ranging from Virginia to Norway and later into the Baltic. This was fully in accord with the traditions of her great past. The days of cosmopolitan trade were not yet over, but they were inevitably numbered for this silting port, lacking the hinterland of a Glasgow, and relying so largely on commerce with England's traditional enemy. It is the period of the French wars, beginning in 1689 and ending in 1715, that saw the real decline of Ayr as a shipping centre.

The northern Ayrshire ports, on the other hand, traded on a large scale with Ireland, with a secondary and comparatively minor European trade, though between 1680 and 1700 boats from both Irvine and Saltcoats had sailed as far as Bordeaux and Stockholm.⁵

Finally, the small ports in the south of the county apparently traded exclusively with Ireland—between March and November, 1690, 11 small boats left Girvan, 11 left Ballantrae and 1 left Turnberry for Irish ports.

II—THE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF THE MERCANTILE COMMUNITIES IN AYRSHIRE

The distribution of shipping in the ports is one question. Who owned the ships and cargoes that left from those ports is another altogether. Nothing was commoner than for the merchants of one burgh to make use of the facilities of another. Witness the retort of Saltcoats in 1700 to the allegation that six times as many boats were leaving from there, Ardrossan and Kilwinning as sailed from Ayr :⁶

⁵ Scottish Record Office : Customs Books of Irvine ; *Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland*, Vol. X, App. p. 137.

⁶ A. P. S. loc. cit.

"It us weel known that the place is so inconsiderable that it hes no trade but such as arises from the convenience of the harbour which makes veshells belonging to Kilmarnock, Irvine and other places put in there so that the benefite arising from the trade there belongs to others not to them."

Perhaps something like this explains the discrepancy between the seven voyages which the merchants of Ayr admitted to before the Royal Burgh Commissioners in 1692 as having taken place "within the last five years,"⁷ and the 26 incoming vessels (besides Irish traffic) reported in the incomplete customs books for part of this period.

TABLE IV.—SHIPS ARRIVING AT AYR

	<i>According to Customs Books.</i>	<i>According to Report of 1692.</i>
	<i>Nov., 1687 - Nov., 1691.</i>	<i>" Within Last 5 Years."</i>
Virginia	—	1
West Indies	—	1
Baltic	2	3
Norway	5	1
France	16	11
Canary Isles	3	1

Note.—*Customs books are missing, 1/6/1689 - 1/3/1690, 1/11/1690 - 1/3/1691.*

Two explanations are possible. Either on at least 22 voyages to Ayr within this period local merchants played no part or the returns were deliberately falsified to make the burgh appear poorer than it really was. In any case it should serve as a salutary warning against taking the Burgh Commissioners returns of 1692 at their face value.

This, however, is a side issue. That the merchants of Ayr were the most important mercantile community in Ayrshire is suggested by the shipping figures and fully borne out by other evidence. For example, in 1680, sixteen men in the town were trading to Holland and corresponding with Andrew Russell, the principal Scottish factor in Rotterdam; he had more correspondents only in Glasgow and Edinburgh. Many of these Ayr merchants were not trading through their own port at all but shipping out

from the new and rapidly developing outport of the west on the Firth of Forth—Bo'ness, where two other factors, John Knox and David Murray, consigned their exports to the Low Countries. Many of the same names appear in the correspondence of the Scottish factor at Bordeaux at this period. Then it seems that after 1689 they tried to develop a trade with Spain and the Canary Islands to replace lost French traffic, and they took part in several trans-Atlantic ventures between the Restoration and the Union, as well as trading to Scandinavia.⁸ When the port declined it was not for lack of initiative on the part of the burgesses.

It is hard to say anything too definite about the other burghs in the county. The names of their merchants do not appear to any degree in the correspondence of the factors overseas, and the evidence of the customs books, as we have seen, suggests their horizons were largely limited to the Irish coast with occasional ventures further afield, probably by Irvine traders.

It appears, however, that there were enterprising spirits in Kilmarnock; in 1700 Ayr and Irvine complained about them:—

"It is offered to be proven that the trade of Kilmarnock in import and export to France, Holland, Norway, Virginia, England and Ireland and other forraigne parts hes been above half of the trade of both of the Burghs of Ayr and Irvine."⁹

To this the unfree burgh retorted:—

"Kilmarnock hes little or no forraigne trade and to redargue that objection they are willing to appeal to the Customs Books . . . seeing they lye ane considerable distance from the sea nor have they any sea-port and there is not above two or three persons in the wholle Town of Kilmarnock that aither had or understand forraigne trade."¹⁰

The appeal to the customs books was hypocritical, because there was no evidence to be found in them as to who really owned the cargoes or financed in voyages—and the men of Saltcoats themselves gave evidence that Kilmarnock citizens were using their port in these years. But since the whole dispute was over the proportion of taxes to be borne by unfree burghs for the privilege of trade, it would be astonishing if Ayr and Irvine were not also overstating their case. We may only guess where the truth lies between the two quotations.

⁸ *R. C. R. B. loc. cit.*, and below pp. 73-75.

⁹ *A. P. S.*, *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ *A. P. S.*, *loc. cit.*

⁷ *R. C. R. B.*, p. 588.

In addition to the activity of native mercantile communities there was also considerable—perhaps very considerable—intervention by exporters outside the county. One instance is given in the appendix, of Ayrshire cloth bought up by a partnership of a Glasgow trader and Russell of Rotterdam through the good offices of a Kilmarnock merchant, in 1683. There are also very many other examples in this correspondence of Russell receiving consignments of “Galloway cloth”—a typical west country product of a wider origin than the name suggests, much of it coming from or through Ayrshire—from merchants in Glasgow, Stirling and even Edinburgh. Common sense, at least, would suggest that the enterprising citizens of Glasgow did a large trade in the county, especially in the northern half, and that much of what they bought found its way overseas. Morer in 1689 mentioned how the merchants of Ayr “give way to the Success of Glasgow.”¹¹ Such intervention was more likely to mean progress than ruin for the county as a whole.

Finally, some indication both of the relative commercial importance of the towns in Ayrshire and of the small capital of their traders may be found in the subscription lists of the Darien Company in 1695. The totals of capital invested in this venture by the inhabitants of three local burghs are tabulated below. The figures are in £ sterling.¹²

TABLE V.

	<i>Invested by</i>		
	<i>Ayr.</i>	<i>Irvine.</i>	<i>Kilmarnock.</i>
Merchants	2100	400	900
The Toun Funds ...	200	100	—
Other Indwellers ...	300	300	700
GRAND TOTAL	2600	800	1600

The total sum invested by the county burghs was very small—the total capital stock subscribed was £400,000 sterling, and Glasgow merchants alone contributed over £26,000.

¹¹ Loc. cit.

¹² For lists, see *Darien Papers*, ed. Hill Burton, 1849, p. 415.

III—TRADE WITH IRELAND

Traffic with Ireland was the “raison d’être” of foreign commerce to every port in the county except Ayr, and over the county as a whole it occupied a far bigger tonnage of ships than any other branch of trade. Similarly, the northern ports of Ayrshire were peculiarly important in the total trade of Scotland and Ireland. Comparison with the precinct of Portpatrick, to the south, though exceedingly difficult owing to the confused nature of the latter’s customs books, suggests that north Ayrshire’s trade to Ireland far exceeded that of Galloway. Comparison with the precinct of Port-Glasgow, to the north, shows that north Ayrshire was far more important for exports to Ireland, though more incoming ships sailed up the Clyde.

TABLE VI.—IRISH TRAFFIC

	<i>Incoming Ships to</i>		<i>Departing Ships from</i>	
	<i>North Ayrshire.</i>	<i>Glasgow.</i>	<i>North Ayrshire.</i>	<i>Glasgow.</i>
1680-1 ...	?	31	64	41
1681-2 ...	39	44	62	36
1682-3 ...	35	44	87	46
1683-4 ...	39	45	87	41
1684-5 ...	29	48	65	48
1685-6 ...	27	49	101	31
1688-9 ...	18	48	61	45
1689-0 ...	33	70	187	168
1690-1 ...	24	61	146	76

From north Ayrshire, then, more goods were consigned to Ireland than from any other area in Scotland, and exports were of far greater volume than imports. Saltcoats was probably the most used port; it was described by John Spruell in 1705 as having forty or fifty “small Barks and Ships” trading to Ulster.¹³ On the Irish side almost all the boats came from or went to a semi-circle of ports from Derry to Strangford—Derry, Colrairie, Glenairn, Larne, Belfast and Carrickfergus were the principal names, though outside this area there was some trade to Dublin and occasionally with Cork.

¹³ J. Spreull, *An Account Current Betwixt Scotland and England*, 1705.

Of exports, coal was normally much the most important. Since the mid-sixteenth century mining for the overseas market had been carried on in Ayrshire, but it was not until after the Restoration that Saltcoats developed its pre-eminence in this trade and by doing so greatly expanded the volume of commerce. In 1679 Robert Cuninghame of Auchinharvie, son to the court physician of Charles II, sank a great deal of money in capital developments in the area. He built saltpans and a harbour at Saltcoats and created in the vicinity the first large-scale mines in Ayrshire. Nef estimates that by 1700 some 25,000 tons of coal were being dug annually in the county, most of it from Auchinharvie's concern.¹⁴ According to the export books of the northern precinct—not, admittedly, an ideal source for statistical enquiry—388½ chalders (c. 800 tons) were exported to Ireland in 1680-1, and 702 chalders (c. 1400 tons) in 1690-1. Not all this would have been from Saltcoats—there were mines elsewhere along this coast and at Irvine—but the bulk presumably was.

Salt, which had been Auchinharvie's associated venture, played a much less conspicuous part. The customs statistics for the same two years were nothing and five chalders respectively. Probably Ireland satisfied her needs cheaper and better from English producers in Cheshire.

It will be seen from Table VI that a great increase appears in the numbers of boats sailing loaded to Ireland between 1689 and 1691, when the western kingdom was in an uproar of civil war, and Derry was undergoing its famous siege. As might be expected, foodstuffs joined coal as the main export to beleaguered Ulster in these years. Barley, malt and meal, which would be more typical as imports from Northern Ireland, were leaving in large quantities from all the small ports of the county in 1690.

More unexpected are the exports of livestock at the same time, doubtless to replace breeding stock slaughtered by the rebels. Thus, in 1690, sheep and lambs were sent from Ballantrae to Portaferry, Carrickfergus and Killiderent, from Girvan to Portaferry, Carrickfergus and Glenairn, and from northern Ayrshire to Belfast, Larne and Glenairn. "Kine" were also sent to Portaferry from Ballantrae.

Other exports, in war and peace alike, were less bulky, less regular and less important. In the 1680's small quantities of wool for Ireland were regular enough. So was cloth, linen, linen thread and Kilmarnock stockings, usually as part of a mixed cargo in a larger boat for Belfast or Glenairn. A wide range of

¹⁴ J. U. Nef, *The Rise of the British Coal Industry*, 1932, Vol. I, p. 50-1.

very miscellaneous goods can sometimes be found with them—kegs of aquavite and beer, barrels of soap and alum, parcels of bonnets, gloves and shoes, pins, knives, locks, scythes, wooden combs and buttons; in 1684 even Bibles for the Elect. Not all these would be made in Ayrshire, but the native middlemen presumably had their cut.

Imports from Ireland occupied less shipping space and were probably less valuable than exports thence. One of the most important was tanned leather, which paid an extra import duty known as bullion dues, and by this chance has left easily accessible (but not necessarily reliable) statistics of its volume.

TABLE VII.—IMPORTS OF TANNED LEATHER (IN LBS.)

	1685-6.	1686-7.	1687-8.	1691-2.
To South Ayrshire	1,000	4,115	1,840	5,145
To North Ayrshire	12,591	19,012	10,350	5,440
	1692-3.	1693-4.	1694-5.	1695-6.
To South Ayrshire	1,370	565	—	1,047
To North Ayrshire	4,570	3,640	5,150	3,336

The very sharp drop between the mid 1680's and the early 1690's, if not explicable by the vagaries of customs administration, must reflect the damage inflicted on Ulster farmers by civil war.

By the 17th century Ireland's reputation for breeding horses was already well established. Ayrshire imported many, especially from County Antrim; they came over in open boats, up to six in a cargo; in 1681-2, 348 entered the northern ports in this way. It would be interesting to know whether they were primarily tough little packhorses designed for the rough and boggy tracks that passed for roads in Scotland and Northern England, or the prized mounts of the gentry and nobility. Probably they were the first, but a horse was simply a horse to the customs officers.

Cheese, and especially butter, were the other important products of a pastoral agriculture which found their way to Ayrshire ports. Butter, in particular, was a significant import, despite its presumed

competition with the native product. Indeed, Ayrshire merchants re-exported Ulster butter to Holland *via* Bo'ness, and Andrew Russell was quick to find appreciative customers for it in Rotterdam. Some of it doubtless went to France as well.

Grain was normally a forbidden import, though the constant reiteration of prohibitions by Privy Council suggest that the regulations were not well observed.¹⁵ When prices were high in the west of Scotland, it needed more than a proclamation to keep the Irish farmers out of the market. Even the most effective weapon Council could devise—to issue a commission to David Crawford, of Dumfries, in 1695, empowering him to seize and destroy all grain imported from Ireland and to confiscate the smugglers' boats—was misused; Crawford, it seems, illegally issued licences to importers and the whole point of his commission was thus lost.¹⁶

From 1696 to 1700, however, Scotland endured one of the worst famines of her history; all prohibitions of import were temporarily suspended, and corn flowed freely from Ireland to the ports of the west. For a few weeks in 1699 the Government even paid a bounty on the imports of foreign grain, when the crisis was at its worst. The figures for this bounty are extant, and show that the county imported 990 bolls from Ireland between June 9th and August 15th, of which 416 came to the Irvine precinct and 574 to the Ayr precinct. This was only about 10% of the total imports from Ireland, most of which went to Glasgow. Another 481 bolls came from the Baltic to Irvine, and the total represents only about 6% of the whole imports to Scotland from overseas.¹⁷ Fertile Ayrshire was perhaps better able to ride out the disaster than most areas, though the west as a whole was peculiarly hard hit.¹⁸

Ireland, traditionally a supplier of wood to disafforested Scotland, continued to send timber to Ayrshire despite the diminishing extent of her forests.¹⁹ It took a wide variety of forms—boards, baulks and “tree nails” for building and general construction work, oars for boats, rungs for ladders, and “jumps,” which presumably had nothing to do with horse-shows. Most numerous of all were barrel-staves—some 12,000 were entered in the Irvine precinct in 1668-9, all good Irish oak prized in the county for packing the famous Clyde herrings.

¹⁵ *Register of the Scottish Privy Council*, 3rd Series, Vol. VII, *passim*.

¹⁶ National Library of Scotland: *A Commission for examining witnesses anent the importation of Irish Victual*, 1696.

¹⁷ Scottish Record Office: Misc. Cust. Pap., “Accompts of Bounty . . . 1699.”

¹⁸ See for example in Scottish Record Office, Acta of the Privy Council, 1694-1696, esp. pp. 293, 345, 399, etc.

¹⁹ Spruell, *loc. cit.*

Other imports from Ireland were occasional—the odd barrel of soap or tar, a little glass, a cargo of bricks, a few hops and (fairly regularly) small numbers of fox-skins. In general, Scottish-Irish trade was characterised by the exchange of primary products; such manufactures as there were flowed from Scotland to Ireland, and not in the reverse direction.

IV—TRADE WITH FRANCE

Ayr's connection with France had been, in the 16th and early 17th century, the basis of the burgh's considerable prosperity. In the 1680's this trade was still the most characteristic activity of the port, though the rest of the county played little part in it.²⁰ Indeed, Ayr remained at this period the third most important harbour in the country for vessels trading to France, having about 10% of the total arrivals and departures from and to that area.

Nevertheless the best days for commerce with France were already past. The same imports that had attracted the Scots to the Bay of Biscay in previous centuries—wine and salt—were still available. But the exports to pay for them were becoming increasingly difficult to market. The Union of the Crowns had brought with it withdrawal of the Scots commercial privileges gained under Mary, and French mercantilism was bent on encouraging home industries. The Royal Burghs petitioned incessantly and in vain for a remedy; in 1698 they said it was well known:—

“What discouragement the trade and commerce of this kingdom is under through the heavy impositions and burdens that are upon the goods they import to France, as particularly all ther Scots woollens, butter, linnen cloath, coalls and all other goods imported to France, wherof the duty is so great that it is equal to ane prohibitione. As also the fishing of this natione which is undenyably the farr greatest manufactorie thereof, cannot be vended in France, being under an absolute prohibitione only since the beginning of the lait warr . . . in lyckmaner ther is ane imposition of fyfty souz per tunn exacted from Scots ships and vesshells trading to France besides manie other inconveniences . . . by which the trade of this nation will be brought to a very low conditione if remeid be not provided.”²¹

The terms of this petition, especially in the list of exports, are so applicable to Ayr that it is hard to believe that it was not the work of the representatives of that burgh, which, indeed, it would be natural to suspect, as no town would lose more than Ayr out of the decline of the French trade. On top of these

²⁰ See Tables I. and II. above.

²¹ *R. C. R. B.*, p. 260.

difficulties came the two long and bitter wars with Louis XIV, lasting from 1689 to 1696, and from 1703 to 1714. Trade with France virtually ceased, and nothing that Ayr could do in seeking other markets could restore her wealth. It was the darkest chapter in the economic history of the burgh.

Nevertheless, in the 1680's the troubles of war lay concealed in the future. In these years, on average, eight ships sailed annually from the county for France, almost all leaving from Ayr itself, and three-quarters returning to that burgh. They traded with the Biscay ports—principally Bordeaux, La Rochelle, St. Nazaire²² and Nantes; their cargoes, and especially the imports, were valuable out of all proportion to the shipping involved.

The cargo outward was invariably miscellaneous. Herrings were probably the main export, but as they were charged no duty after 1670, they were seldom mentioned in the customs books.²³ Coal was in demand, mainly at the mouth of the Loire, where the climate was cooler than further south. Wool was much in demand when it was available; French mercantilism welcomed it enthusiastically for the native woollen manufactories, and consequently it was not enumerated by the burghs as one of commodities on which the duty was "equal to ane prohibitiōne." One or more of these three bulk commodities was found on virtually every boat bound for France. Other goods were less bulky. Textiles were still sent regularly in the 1680's—plaiding, Galloway cloth, linen and Kilmarnock hose found their way through the French fiscal barrier, perhaps smuggled, but at least yielding profit enough to encourage another consignment. Equally regular were tallow and butter, again in the face of heavy duties. Hides occurred, but rarely. It is interesting that in 1681 a cargo of wheat was consigned from Ayr to France; it was presumably grown in the county, and if so must have been an unusual crop at this date in the west.²⁴

The two great imports for which the Biscay trade originated were salt and wine. The first was peculiarly important to Ayrshire. The county's extensive fishing industry depended upon French salt, the Scottish product being quite unsuitable for the curing of herring. Similarly, the hides of Ayrshire cattle could not be preserved without good salt. It is therefore not surprising that many ships arrived from France loaded entirely, or almost entirely, with salt of high quality, and that this trade

should win the approval of mercantilists while almost everything else that arrived from thence was castigated as luxury. In later years the trade died away even in peace time, as good salt was exported to Scotland from Cheshire, the local fisheries declined, and more cattle were driven over the Border on the hoof. But in the 1680's, though doubtless less important than it had been, it was still the biggest occupier of shipping space on the trade between Ayrshire and France.

Wine, by contrast, was a luxury and dispensable, but few Scots would willingly have dispensed with it, whatever the pamphleteers may have said. The meanest tavern in the Lowlands reckoned on being able to offer "a glass of brisk claret" to wayfarers. In peace time the traders of Ayr imported their "hogsheads of French wine" steadily—an average of 50 tuns a year was declared to the customs, 1685-1688, and as the duty was high and morality in respect of smuggling low, real imports may have been much greater. Fifty tuns may be said to represent one full ship-load, though in fact they were distributed over several ships as a rule; they also represent 200 hogsheads (or some 80,000 pints), and as in Edinburgh at this period the Earls of Melville were paying around £85 Scots a hogshead for their claret, the cargoes seem to have been valuable in relation to their bulk.²⁵ At any rate, when war broke out in 1689, there was a determined effort to find wine elsewhere, several boats going to the Canaries or Spain between 1692 and 1696. Smaller quantities of brandy also came from France; it was impossible to find an alternative supply for this in war-time.

France also exported other goods, mainly luxuries. Prunes and chestnuts, for example, came in the winter months with the wine, and an effort was evidently made to land them all in time for Hogmanay. 11,000 lbs. of prunes were entered at Ayr in 1687-8. Among manufactured goods, chests of good quality glass, reams of fine white writing paper, a few iron pots, and, frequently, iron "hoopes"—presumably for coopers—were more or less regularly shipped to Ayr. Finally, the homeland of fashion contributed fifty or so hats a year to adorn the richer heads of Ayrshire. They were described as "Coudabek" and were for gentlemen.

V—TRADE WITH HOLLAND

Since much of the commerce between Ayrshire and Holland did not normally run through the ports of the county, the records of a ship or two a year that did sail to Ayr from Veere or Rotterdam give little idea of the real importance of

²² I take "St. Martins" of the customs books, a wine and salt port, to be St. Nazaire.

²³ Some boats carrying herrings alone may have escaped registration altogether in the Ayrshire ports; it is unlikely there were many.

²⁴ Cf. J. E. Handley, *Scottish Farming in the 18th Century*, 1952, p. 53.

²⁵ Scottish Record Office, Leven and Melville Papers VI: 123/1-18.

Dutch trade in the area. The true outport of the west for Holland was Bo'ness; there, however, the local customs books can be no help, as the ownership of the cargoes was never stated, and many merchants of Glasgow, Stirling, Linlithgow and Edinburgh also used the facilities of the port. Nevertheless, the letters to Andrew Russell from merchants in Ayr and other towns provide evidence about the nature of this trade. Some of them, reproduced in the Appendix, give a most vivid impression of the habits of commerce in Restoration Scotland. After reading them all through, one is aware that the trade through Bo'ness was varied and important to the burgesses of Ayr; obviously it had grown up as the outport developed during the 17th century, and it must have done something to compensate for peace-time obstructions and war-time embargoes on the traditional trade with France. To say whether it was more important or less important than the commerce with Biscay or Ulster would, however, be mere guesswork. Thus a qualitative, but no kind of a quantitative, description can be given.

The nature of both the exports and the imports was limited by the difficulties of inland transport between Ayr and Bo'ness. Carriage by packhorse was expensive and only thinkable for small and relatively valuable goods; thus it would pay to send cloth, but not coal, and to bring linseed, but not iron. The rest must come and go all the way by sea if they were to be sent at all, and the route to Holland lay round a forbidding number of dangerous headlands.

Of all the Scottish goods which Russell handled for his Ayrshire customers, west country cloth was quite the most important. He was, indeed, a specialist in this commodity. His attempt to buy up all the Galloway cloth in the west with the help of a Glasgow partner has been mentioned already.²⁶ Furthermore, John and James Gordon, factors at Veere, forwarded the cloth they received from Bo'ness and other ports to Russell at Rotterdam. From the Ayrshire side, Robert Hunter, Provost of Ayr, was particularly prominent in consigning plaiding and Galloway cloth to Holland. But it was not a one-man trade, for more than a dozen of his burgess colleagues and a few men outside the county burghs also participated. In the 1670's and 1680's the volume and regularity of the shipments point to a thriving local industry of woollen textiles. Like the Aberdeenshire and Lothian industries, however, it fell on hard times before the Union. In 1706, David Black wrote that "formerly" 600 sea-packs of "Galloway whites" had been sent abroad in a year, but now none were exported.²⁷ It was another disaster for Ayr

and her merchants that this support should have given way simultaneously with the French trade.

Kilmarnock hose was a supplementary textile product sometimes sent to Holland. This trade, too, was alleged to be in decay by 1700.²⁸

The other exports were mainly agricultural. Hides and sheepskins were often sent with the cloth, sometimes serving as wrappings to keep the more valuable textiles dry on the horse and in the hold. Some English and Irish leather passed to Holland through the hands of Ayr merchants. Most was evidently from local cattle, however, and its supply varied according to the English demand for live beasts.²⁹ As generally more and more black cattle were sent to Smithfield, this trade fell off. Of shipments of wool there is no record, but the letters cease about 1690, and some trade may have grown up later as the cloth industry itself decayed. For small furs there was a slight demand in the Low Countrie, for "ffox, ffoumart and otter skins," as the letter has it. Finally, Ayrshire and Irish butter was shipped by the merchants out of Bo'ness regularly enough and welcomed at Rotterdam.

Russell sold the goods he received from the Ayrshire merchants to Dutch purchasers and credited the balance, minus a small fee for factorage, to their accounts. The "returns," as they were called, could be of several kinds. Occasionally they would be in coin, as when Ralph Holland requested dollars for his hides and cloth in order to buy timber in Scandinavia.³⁰ Sometimes they would be by bill of exchange, as when Adam Osborne requested a bill on a London Scot, though had it suited him he could as easily have had it remitted to a trader in Glasgow or Edinburgh.³¹ The most popular practice, however, was to use the money gained by sale of the outwards cargo to buy a cargo home, Russell again acting as factor in purchasing the Dutch goods and often sending them on the same boat. This pattern appears to hold true of most branches of Scottish commerce.

Judging from the diverse nature of the goods ordered by Ayr, Holland must have appeared to the Scots like one huge general stores. If you wanted garden seeds you wrote to Russell of Rotterdam.³² If you wanted drugs you wrote to Russell of Rotterdam.³³ If you wanted a barrel of soap, a dozen new

²⁸ A. P. S., X, App. p. 115.

²⁹ See letter I.

³⁰ See letter IV.

³¹ See letter II.

³² See letter VI.

³³ See letter III.

²⁶ See letter V.

²⁷ *Essay upon Industry and Trade*, 1706, p. 7.

cooking pots, or a bag of galls for making ink, you wrote to Russell of Rotterdam. The busy factor must at times have been hard pressed to know where to lay his hands on "8 unc small spinadge" or "12 lib cristeltartar"; yet, though his clients sometimes complained of delay, they never complained of failure.

Amid this welter of goods some stand out as more important, or at least more frequently ordered, than others. Linseed for the flax growers was much in demand, though perhaps more for Glasgow buyers than for those of Ayr; the former may nevertheless have retailed some of it in the county, and the latter were not backward in the trade. A group of products for dyeing woollen cloth were important—alum, madder, indigo and dye-woods, for which Holland served as an entrepôt. Then there was a class of luxury foodstuffs—prunes, figs, raisins, currants, sugar—grocery wares for those with a little money to spare. Sugar, however, was comparatively seldom imported, probably because the product of the new Glasgow Sugar Houses was available in Ayrshire, and there was also direct importation from the West Indies. Metal and metal goods were needed, small piece goods like iron cooking pots, small copper kettles and brass were coming into Bo'ness, but bar-iron and sheet-copper coming in small quantities by boat all the way to Ayr. The last two were re-exports originating in the Baltic, where Russell had private commercial interests; Ayr imported larger quantities directly from Stockholm in some years.

Finally, could anything convey the flavour of the times more charmingly than Letter VI—the three black hats put in the cask with the vegetable seeds?

VI.—TRADE WITH NORWAY AND THE BALTIC

The Norwegian trade was not a large one for Ayrshire, but it was regular. Almost every year between one and four ships arrived from the fjords, making for Ayr herself. They carried deals and "trees"—wooden baulks—suitable for general construction work and for use in the coal mines. Scandinavian fir, even after the long and risky voyage round Cape Wrath and through the Minch, was evidently cheaper and easier to obtain than Irish oak. The bullion books give some statistics of this import.

TABLE VIII.—DEALS IMPORTED INTO AYRSHIRE

	1685-6.	1686-7.	1687-8.	1691-2.
To South Ayrshire	—	15,405	4,424	427
To North Ayrshire	17,150	12,000	3,400	1,000
	1692-3.	1693-4.	1694-5.	1695-6.
To South Ayrshire	1,390	—	3,965	6,124
To North Ayrshire	—	—	178	154

These figures again reinforce what has been shown earlier—how much more prosperous the peaceful 1680's were for trade than the war-like 1690's.

A peculiarity of this trade was that it was for imports only. If ships sailed from Ayrshire for Norway, they usually went ballasted and thus escaped entry in the customs books. It is likely, however, that many followed the pattern of Ralph Holland's son,³⁴ sailing from Ayr or Bo'ness to Rotterdam, Rotterdam to Norway, and Norway to Ayrshire, then perhaps tramping home along the Scottish coast.

It was rarer for ships to penetrate into the Baltic proper. Some Polish grain was brought in during the famine, but this was altogether exceptional. There are records of half-a-dozen voyages to Stockholm to fetch iron and perhaps copper; these are mainly from the 1690's, when records are particularly scrappy, and there were almost certainly other ventures to Sweden in the missing years.

VII.—OTHER COMMERCE

The customs books show that the bulk of Ayrshire trade was concentrated into four channels—with Ireland, France, Holland and Scandinavia. Commerce elsewhere was irregular, though far flung. It is surprising that the trade with England should have been irregular. In the neighbouring precincts of Dumfries and Kirkcudbright it was the largest trade, Cumberland sending

³⁴ See letter IV.

her coal and salt into the Solway Firth in exchange for miscellaneous west country produce. Ayrshire, however, had coal of her own, and after Auchinharvie had created Saltcoats, she had enough cheap salt to do without English supplies. It is significant that the only year in which an appreciable English traffic was registered by the Ayrshire customs books was 1666-7, when nine boats, mainly salt-carriers, entered the whole county; it was a year of war, and Auchinharvie had not yet built his pans. In the other years one or two boats was the maximum entered, and several years went by without any traffic at all.

These odd boats were usually from Bristol and Whitehaven; their cargoes included colonial goods of various kinds, and tobacco in particular, mostly of American origin. Perhaps the reason why the west of Scotland failed to develop a larger trade with the entrepôts of the west of England was that, even before the Union, Glasgow and Ayr were supplying the region by their own illicit American trade. This combination of circumstances seems to have left the English with no commodities to sell in Ayrshire.

The eight or nine recorded ventures to Spain and the Canary Islands were almost all undertaken in war-time, to find wine when the Biscay shore was closed to the Scots, and exports were similar to those on the French trade.

Commerce with American was also small and irregular, but deserves more detailed consideration. The table below gives details of all the voyages that can be found in the customs books between 1666 and 1692; all are recorded as sailing from or to Ayr.

TABLE IX.—AMERICAN TRADE WITH AYR

	<i>Ships Arriving from</i>	<i>Tonnage</i>	<i>Ships Departing to</i>	<i>Tonnage</i>
1672-3 ...	Montserrat	28		
1677-8 ...	Montserrat	40		
1677-8 ...	Montserrat	100		
1680-1 ...			Virginia	?
1680-1 ...			West Indies	100
1682-3 ...	Montserrat	?	Montserrat	?
1683-4 ...			Carolina	?
1685-6 ...	Plantations	?		
1689-90...			Virginia	?

This is not, of course, an exhaustive list of trans-Atlantic ventures. Customs books survive for less than half the years 1666-1692, and there is evidence elsewhere of other pre-Union voyages on which merchants of Ayr or Kilmarnock were concerned.³⁵ The actual total does not perhaps matter very much. What is interesting is not only that these boats sailed but also that they sailed repeatedly. The reiteration of "Montserrat" in the customs books, for example, shows that Ayr merchants had found a source of profit in the Leeward Isles, perhaps originating in some personal contact with a Scottish emigrant, which they exploited for at least ten years.

The trade was carried on for the sake of the sugar and dyes of the West Indies, and the tobacco of the mainland. In exchange Ayr merchants sent woollen and linen cloth, shoes, hats, gloves, hose and generally more assorted goods than on most branches of trade. The ships themselves were sometimes disconcertingly small to face the Atlantic swell and the hurricanes of the Caribbean. One voyaging to Montserrat in 1673 was 28 tons, and the "Swan of Ayr" reported wrecked in the West Indies in 1693 was only 14 tons.³⁶ It must have required nerve as well as enterprise to have been a skipper in those days.

CONCLUSION

Looking back to the later 17th century from the standpoint of to-day, it seems remarkable that an agricultural community with a few basic industries and a handful of small coastal burghs should have sent its ships so far and so regularly in search of trade. It is impressive that the boats of Ayr should have been familiar in Montserrat, and remarkable that wine, iron, drugs and timber should have been brought directly from the corners of Europe to a country market town. Part of the explanation lies in the rudimentary state of inland transport, which made the sea by far the cheapest and most convenient route for trade. Part, too, lies in the comparatively self-centred economy of the county before Glasgow had stretched its tentacles far over the adjacent areas. It must also be borne in mind that the total volumes of commerce were tiny by modern standards, and that at the time there was nothing extraordinary about Ayrshire's kind of wide trade.

Nevertheless, the burghess of Ayr around 1680 lived much in contact with the great world outside; he must have been an

³⁵ A. P. S., X, App. p. 137; R. C. R. B., p. 587; *Royal Burgh of Ayr*, p. 200.
³⁶ R. C. R. B., loc. cit.

interesting man to meet, and his burgh an interesting town in which to dwell. Perhaps a historian may be allowed a little nostalgia ; there is little that is cosmopolitan about an equivalent community to-day, and something has been lost as well as something gained in the passage of time.

APPENDIX

LETTERS TO ANDREW RUSSELL AT ROTTERDAM

LETTER I.—FROM ALEXANDER CAMPBELL.

A List of Ayrshire Exports.

Sir,

Ayr 29 Nov. 1674.

. . . I desir yow to aqwant me uth two lynd upon . . . your advice concerning our cuntrie producke qt it will doe against the spring such as sheip skins hyds salt and dry kilmarnock hooses gallaway cloth and plaidin ffox ffoumart and otter skins and old brass and copper and ffor skins and hydes thie cuntrie cannot aford the half of them that we had thes yeere past our catall and sheip is becom feuer by reason of the great storm ye heard off and this year our cattall hath sold at grait rate in England och hath occasioned many to be driven ther, a barrall off good beiff is worth 14 or 16 lbs. heir, If occasion offer derect mey letter to my ffreind John Stirling marchnt in Glasgow I desir you to excuse my boldness and tediousness pr this is all at prt from yore ffriend and servant to power

ALEXR CAMPBELL.

o o o

LETTER II.—FROM ADAM OSBURNE.

An Ayr merchant sends cloth, and desires bill on London

Sir,

Ayr 30 August 1675.

My four pakes of Cloth befor this tyrne ar come to yor hands and so sone as you can make money off it I shall desyre yow send me ane Accot and wt all the frie presents I shall desyre yow to take bill In my name or order payable att the house off Mr William Golt Marchant Liveing neir Bishops Gait in London he is our

cuntrie man I hope you will obtemper my desyre becous I trust to it In ansuaring In pairt for my credit ther weh is all at prst from him who is willing to serve yow heir and to be

Your ffriend and servant

ADAM OSBURNE.

I shall desyre yow to give me ane Acet how sheip skins will do about mertines fir I have some and I think shall not get them sent till after harvest and how brodcloth yow think about that tyme the goods vendeth next door in Alexr Lymdsdail his vessell.

o o o

LETTER III.—FROM ROBERT RODGERS.

A Kilmarnock merchant trading to Holland through Bo'ness and Irvine.

Sir,

Kilmarnock, ye 3 of May, 1680.

I have sent above with mr John Boyd from irwine 11 packs of sheip skines, small packes containing in all 1181 skunes the qch skines I have desyred yow be a letter wt Mr Boyd to sell to my best profitt and if the pryce be reasonable to pass them of with the first occasion yow can and as for the produck of them, returne it in goods contained in a bill inclosed in my better to yow wt Mr Boyd only I desyer yow to ade to my goods (If money serve) two pound more of cushaneell and see it be sade coloured without mictur, and 12 lib of cristeltartar and 50 : or 60 lib of small lidline towes and 20 golid bookes, and Lett all my goods be marked thus $\frac{4+}{R}$ and as for these droges I have ordered to gett I desyr yow to caus packe them well and fill these potts contained in the said bill full of droges and becaus theu requare haist I desyer yow to send them to me be burroustouness with David cochrane (Whom yeell find in Mr : Jacobs) or som other sure hand to John Knox with ane acopt of them for the rest of my goods putt aboard of Mr Boyds vessell for he and I hes agreed, and pay Mr Boyd for fraught of my skins 40 : gilders. Bot if so be that Mr Boyds vessell com away as soon as any for the Ness, send the droges with him, but if nott send them by the Ness nott troubling yow farder at present desyryng by a line from Mr Boyd or yow to know qn he aryves and the raitts of skines and other goods I rest.

Sir your Humble Servant

ROB : ROGERS.

present my love to your wyffe and mr boyd.

LETTER IV.—FROM RALPH HOLLAND.

An Ayr merchant plans a venture to Holland and Norway.

Sir,

Ayr 6 March 1682.

This accompanies my Son with whom I have sent what goods could be got caried this season but shall hast over More as quickly as possible can bee, in the meane time I desire yow to procure him what dollors or goods he needs there till efects come over, which shall be directed to yow if he be gone, the goods he is to buy I have given him accompt it is only Iron about ten tuns, 500 lbs whalbone, 2 hheads Coperas, 500 lbs Madder, 200 lbs galls, 8 lbs nutmegs because the ship being comeing with deals I have the fraught free therefore I must intreat yow help him to dispatch, and clear of the last years accompt before yow enter on this and what ballance rests give him Creditt for it, this is all at present from

Sir, yors at Command,

RALPH HOLLAND.

Sir, My Son being unwell I have sent William Wallace and unlesse the Season proves so that effects come up before the Ship be ready, I must lett the other goods alone and intreat yow make him up as many dollors as loaden the ship with deals in Norway and I shall hast over goods to yow I am verie sorie to be troublesom I am

Sir, yours at Command

RALPH HOLLAND.

42 hides, 4 packs fine galloway cloth, I great ox hide, 11 score skins h; the halfe of 44 score 5 skins I have to come from dumfries 21 score hides the halfe being large English hides from 30 to 58 lbs.

o o o

LETTER V.—FROM GAVIN HAMILTON.

A Glasgow exporter buys up Ayrshire cloth in bulk.

Sir,

Glasgow, 18th Sept, 1683.

I wrot to yow pr last post shewing that I was then upon my Journey to obey your Comands this serves Nowe to Acquaint yow that I have bowght it from Marchtts in kilmarnock nier

Irveing and four packs of it from on in this towne, I Have it for sietin penies pr elne profit Galaway measure the particular account grof I shall send pr dito parcel qch I shal mak al Haist to send over as ye direk—the playdeing is at eight and ten penies per elne profit ther is ane mercht in kilmarnok gon to galaway to bay for us about 5 or six paks mor wch he told me went hom from the Chapel fair unsold wch is to be heir by against this day or that dayes so that I judge our parcel wil extend heir to seven thowsand pounds Scots so that ye may give me Ane bille for thrie thousand pounds Scots and upon the goods is shipped shall send Yow ane stated account . . . expecting to heir from yow als soon as ye possible I remaine.

Your own obleiged friend and servant to pour

GA : HAMILTOUNE.

If that were com from galaway yr is Not paks in the west of Scotland and ther is No fair to bay mor until mertines so that I judge there wil be non to trwble your mercat in Haist. If ye could give me bill payable in Glasgow it wold saife thrie pounds Scots upon the pound or therby.

o o o

LETTER VI.—FROM HUGH McJERROLL AND JOHN MACNILLIE.

Two Ayr merchants describe an accident in the port and ask for garden seeds.

Sir,

Air, Nov. 19th 1683.

My Love and service being presented to your self and family I thought to have seen yow er this time with Thomas Gourlie in Queensferrie who was Laying att Air and had taken in a Considerable Quantitie of goods being bound for Rotterdame, The ship laying in the river being Clear to sail with the first wind in october Last Such a great Speat Came down, at eight a clock at night that hir Cables broke and with the speat the ship presentlie over sea, the Company was all prieserved but narrowlie and the goods also but a little spoyld wt water. So not being intended to come over till Feberwary, John McNillie and I most presume to trouble yow to buy for us a small Quantitie of Ga-den seeds, and send them over with the first occasione to John Knox's in Borrowstouness, the Accompt of them is as followes, 70 lbs Cybow seed, 12 lbs Leikseed, 6 lbs parsneps seed, 6 lbs Carrett seed, 2 lbs Letuce seed, 1 lb and $\frac{1}{2}$ purpie seed, 8 unc turneip seed, 8 unc small Spinadge, 8 unc Radish seed. Pray Sie that they be good and well and cause put them all up in good baggs and then

put all together in ane Caske and ye shall have your money either by bill or when I come over my self. Let me have the accompt of the Seeds by post, also put into the Cask three Black Hats about 3 gilders pr pice. Qch is all but we are

your loving ffrinds and servants

HUGH MCJERROLL.

JON MACNILLIE.

Sir, Remember my Love to Denys Verburgh. Send also in the Caske 2 dutch ells velvet at 6 gilders pr ell.

o o o

LETTER VII.—FROM ROBERT HUNTER.

A List of imports from Holland.

The letter, dated October 27th, 1690, is endorsed in Andrew Russell's hand thus:—

To buy : 6 hog : linseed
 10 lbs lyck seid
 250 lbs sorted pans in 2 sorts
 1 baal mather best sort qt goes here
 6 bar : soape
 6 bothoms wt sydes conform for making 6 kettles
 wgt. 40 and 60 lbs
 1 hog : alum
 50 lbs onyon seed

o o o

LETTER VIII.—FROM DAVID MURRAY.

A covering note from a Bo'ness factor.

Sir,

Bo'ness 11 July 1691.

Thes serves to accompagnie ye bearer Marck Starck with eght packes of Sheap Skins marked RH belonging to Provest Hunter in Ayre for ye disposing of them yr are to wreat his order is all at present from

Sir, Your Humble Servant,

DAVID MURRAY.