

**Young, Alex F and Close, Rob (Eds)**

***The Diary of Thomas McClelland: Ayr in the 1790s***

**Ayrshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, Ayr, 2022, pp.122, £10.00**

**Ayrshire Monographs No.51**

**ISBN 978 0 9935573 8 5**

Alex Young and Rob Close have prepared a well-edited edition of the diary of Thomas McClelland, a lawyer, merchant and ship-owner in Ayr. It covers the period January 1792-June 1798, with a gap in the middle between April 1793 and November 1795. Unlike many diaries it is articulate, well-written and well-informed. As well as serving as an interesting episode of the local history of Ayr and Ayrshire, it undoubtedly takes its place as a valid contribution to the social history of Scotland for the period covered.

It is strongest on subjects that relate to McClelland's diverse careers, namely shipping, trade and law. The principal trade of the period through the port of Ayr was in coal for the Irish market, but there were many other trading routes, especially as regards imports, for example: a frequent trade in timber from the Baltic port of 'Memnell' (Klaipėda, Lithuania); iron, hemp, tallow and deal (planks) from St Petersburg; and iron and deal from Gothenburg. There was also a trade in general goods with London, Liverpool and other cities, as well as a wide-ranging coastal service, for example a regular trade in slate from the island of Easdale, near Oban. Many of the vessels were based at Ayr, or other Ayrshire ports like Saltcoats and Irvine. Thomas McClelland had shares in six local vessels, notably the sloop *Fame*, on the London trade, and the brig *Minerva*, that traded overseas. With so much coastal and international activity there was a significant customs presence in Ayr, with watch maintained by Captain James Dowie and his revenue cutter *Prince Augustus Frederick*. Dowie seems to have been ruthless. In October 1796 McClelland notes that he had just killed the fourth man of his eight years service in Ayr 'more than all the Revenue Officers in Scotland, except himself, were ever known to either hurt or maim'. Smuggled cargoes confiscated by Dowie and his crew included salt from Ireland, also gin, brandy and tobacco from various places. Some of Dowie's time was taken up in limiting the activities of a local smuggling ring begun by William Brackenridge of Dowhill and continued after his death in 1791 by his heirs. The Brackenridge ring operated the Ayr-registered cutter *Peggy and Nancy*.

Closely related to coastal and international trading from the port of Ayr was the local shipbuilding industry, which often supplied local traders with vessels. Most frequently mentioned is the shipbuilding firm of Ralston Smith & Co, which had a yard at 'Newtown Green', although other Ayr shipbuilders are noted as well. The *Fingal*, launched by Ralston Smith & Co on 17 December 1796 (400 tons burden) was said at the time to be 'the largest Ship ever built at Ayr'; she was sold to McNeil Stewart & Co of Glasgow for the Jamaica trade. As the revolution in steam shipbuilding was not yet under way, the ships built in Ayr during the 1790s were all sailing vessels. However, other evidence of industrial revolution was already to be seen in Ayrshire. In his diary entry for 14 March 1792 McClelland mentions that the ironworks at Muirkirk had been erected 'about three years agoe' and further mention of this ironworks is later made – as for example on 17 May 1792, when it is reported that a cast metal wheel of 5½ tons from Coalbrookdale had been landed at Ayr and drawn through the town on its way to Muirkirk 'upon a carriage with four wheels made for the purpose and drawn by twelve Horses'.

Diary entries relating to local fairs (New Year Fair, Palm Fair, Midsummer Fair and Michaelmas Fair) relate mainly to the fluctuating price of horses, and of woollen cloth. Ayr

Races are frequently described by McClelland, as for example in his diary entry of 6 November 1792, where he reports that ‘Ayrshire Hunt and Ayr Races commenced today and a very genteel and numerous company came to Town in consequence’. Individual races are often described, as on 20 September 1796 when ‘A plate of £50 was afterwards run by Lord Cassillis’s Pony Colt Carrick and Alex Kincaid’s Bay Mare Trifle which was won by Carrick – an excellent Race ... which afforded great entertainment’. McClelland also describes proceedings at the Ayr Circuit Court (Spring and Autumn) in some detail, as on 10 April 1793 when ‘Abraham Sherman, an Irishman was tried capitally for Housebreaking and Theft at Craighouse Mill near Colmonell sometime agoe’. Two days later ‘The Judges on considering the verdict returned yesterday against Sherman [Theft *only* was proven, said to have saved the prisoner’s life], ordered him to be whipt thro’ the streets by the Hangman on 3<sup>rd</sup> May and afterwards banished beyond the seas for life’.

*The Diary of Thomas McClelland* is surely one of the most useful descriptions of local life in Scotland during the 1790s that historians will be able to find. It will be of greatest interest to historians of coastal communities, but all local historians will find much that they can relate to. In 2020 Ayrshire Archaeological and Natural History Society published *Oculus: the musings of a Liberal Victorian in Ayr* that described life in Ayr in 1898. As Thomas McClelland’s *Diary* deals with life in the town exactly a century earlier an interesting comparison between the two can be drawn. The published *Diary* is dedicated to the memory of the late Sheena Andrew, a former Reference Librarian at Ayr’s Carnegie Library who first drew the attention of one of the present editors to Thomas McClelland’s two-volume manuscript. She well deserves credit for facilitating its eventual publication, as do both of its assiduous editors. *Don Martin*.