

V.

JOTTINGS FROM THE RECORDS OF A FARMING SOCIETY IN THE COUNTY OF FORFAR, 1803-1814, UNDER THE PERPETUAL PRESIDENTSHIP OF ITS ORIGINATOR THE CELEBRATED GEORGE DEMPSTER OF DUNNICHEN. BY THE REV. CHARLES ROGERS, D.D., LL.D., F.S.A. Scor.

Nearly eighty years ago, namely on the 4th July 1803, was held, under the auspices of Mr. George Dempster of Dunnichen, the initiatory meeting of "The Lunan and Vinney Water Farmer Society." Invitations had been issued to twenty-six persons, but such was Mr. Dempster's popularity, that thirty-four attended, of whom eleven were landowners. Among those who met was the Rev. James Rogers, author of the Agricultural Survey of the County, father of the present writer. On Mr. Dempster's proposal, he was chosen secretary, and the records were afterwards kept by him. It is from the Minutes which he prepared, under Mr. Dempster's approval, that these present jottings are drawn.

In the minute which records Mr. Dempster's appointment as "Perpetual Preses," that gentleman is described as possessing "the same ardour of patriotism, as when he filled a public station."¹ In opening the Society's business, he expatiated on the importance of maintaining superior breeds of cattle and horses, on the duty of extirpating weeds, on the necessity of a stern resistance to smuggling, and on the desirableness of upholding the constitution. With his cordial approval, it was arranged that the Society

¹ Mr. Dempster was in early friendship with David Hume, John Home, author of "Douglas," Principal William Robertson, and Dr. Adam Ferguson. He latterly associated at London with Dr. Samuel Johnson and other literary notables. He represented in Parliament the Fife and Forfar burghs from 1762 till 1790, and latterly devoted himself to agricultural pursuits. His sterling independence as a politician procured him the designation of "Honest George;" he is as such celebrated by Burns, who deemed him worthy of a title. He was an ardent and successful promoter of the Scottish Fisheries. His long career of ardent patriotism and active usefulness was terminated by death on the 13th February 1818, when he had reached his eighty-fourth year.

should assemble at least once a year, that its proceedings should be accompanied by a modest feast at 1s. 6d., afterwards 2s. 6d. a head, and that on each occasion liquor of native manufacture should be used exclusively. The only practical business of the first meeting consisted in adopting the recommendation of a committee, that no member should hire a servant without obtaining a recommendation of him from his former employer.

At the second meeting, held in July 1804, Mr Dempster invited attention to the rotation of crops; suggesting various methods, and maintaining that by a proper alternation of green and grain crops, fallowing might be dispensed with. To each member he handed a slip of rules, which he termed *golden*; they consisted of injunctions to *keep the land rich and clean and dry*, to use efficient manure, and to avoid two grain crops in succession. Poultry and hogs, he maintained, should be largely reared. The Secretary read an essay on the rearing of horses and cattle. Prior to the reign of James I., he said Alexander, Earl of Mar, imported horses from Hungary; while James I. was himself a promoter of farm stock, by introducing on his lands at Falkland a superior species of milch cows. In reference to grazing, he remarked that one of the members had recently sold farm cattle of three years old at £18 each, while another member had reaped from about an acre a quantity of red clover which produced 154 lbs. of seed. At the meetings held in August 1805, and in July 1806, Mr. Dempster recommended the cultivation of Swedish turnips, and suggested that the tops of the carrot should be used in feeding milch cows. His former proposal as to the disuse of fallow ground was disapproved, it being strongly held that the land required rest at least every tenth year. It was agreed, on his recommendation, that wheat should be more extensively cultivated, and that it should be sown late in August or early in September. At the close of the meeting an indigent person, formerly a farmer, and then said to be in his 106th year, was awarded a little money.

The fifth meeting, held in August 1807, was attended with an exhibition of live stock. Various subjects were discussed. Gypsum as a manure,

recommended by the Board of Agriculture, was, on the motion of the Rev. James Headrick,¹ disapproved. Flax-raising was commended by several members, and by others styled unprofitable. The question as to whether carcasses of meat might be transmitted to distances packed in ice, was mooted and generally affirmed.

In his address to the meeting in July 1808, Mr. Dempster recommended the cultivation of vetches, to be sown in drills. The Chinese method of economising manure was explained and urged by Mr. Headrick; while the importance of draining marshes, described as "magazines of mischief," was duly maintained. At the meeting in 1809, the President remarked that he had lately been making trial of kale, with a view to its more extensive use. He regarded the sowing of spring wheat as worthy of consideration, and exhibited a sample of *naked* barley, resembling wheat, imported from Egypt, and commended by Sir John Sinclair. By individual members different agricultural topics were submitted for discussion. Mr. Guthrie of Craigie, an important landowner, held that the Swedish was much inferior to the yellow turnip, especially as the latter might be reared on a greater variety of soils. Mr Scott of Reswallie recommended a more general cultivation of barley, and suggested the erection in the district of woollen mills. He condemned the disuse of "the Scottish" or woollen bonnet, and hoped that at next meeting all the members would discard hats and appear bonneted. To this proposal Mr. Dempster expressed an objection. The hat, he held, was not cumbersome, as the bonnet was; it protected the face, and did not retain moisture. As to woollen manufactories, these had been established in East Lothian and elsewhere, and had failed. Manufactories of sail-cloth and coarse linen, long common to the district, were, he maintained, worthy of encouragement, and no others. It was suggested that a

¹ This reverend gentleman was then assistant in the parish; he was ordained to the cure 11th August 1807. He had recommended himself to Mr. Dempster by his agricultural papers in the *Farmer's Magazine*. His best known work, "*View of the Mineralogy, &c. of the Isle of Arran*," entitles him to special notice. He died on the 31st March 1841, in his eighty-third year.

donation should be presented to Mr. Meikle, inventor of the threshing-machine, who was represented as aged and indigent.

The Society's roll in September 1810 was seventy-four; it increased to eighty. At the anniversary then held, Mr. Dempster remarked, that sixty years ago, the district was covered with furze and broom; while bogs were to be found at every turn; now the fields were clean and well drained, roads were abundant, and wheat was largely cultivated. The establishment of local farming societies he believed was most beneficial, as they brought pleasantly together landlord and tenant, and enabled them to be mutually helpful. Respecting the destruction of weeds, a member remarked that in Strathmore, a riding committee inspected farms every summer, and, as authorised in the leases, imposed fines on those who permitted weeds to grow unchecked. Of spring wheat Mr. Guthrie expressed his disapproval; the grain was inferior, and the straw discoloured and feeble.

There was a competition among exhibitors of live stock in 1811, Mr. Dempster presenting several gold and silver medals to be used as premiums. In his presidential address, he recommended wheat-sowing in drill rather than in broadcast; suggested the use of single-horse carts, and remarked that cattle might be trained for use in the thrashing mill. These proposals were generally approved, especially the drill-sowing of wheat. But *naked* barley was unfavourably reported upon—a third only of the seed being found to germinate, while the grain could not be thrashed without difficulty. Some members discussed the respective merits of "Angus" and "Potato" oats, but the subject was left open.

In July 1812, the Society held its tenth anniversary. At this meeting wheat-sowing in drill was warmly commended, a member remarking that the produce of wheat sown in this manner was one-third more than under the broadcast system. At the following meeting Mr. Dempster, who had formerly congratulated the members on the general disappearance of field weeds, recommended drainage as "the most necessary of agricultural operations." He pleaded on behalf of crows, that they destroyed grub, and ought to be encouraged, a view strongly supported by Mr.

Guthrie, but objected to by Mr Headrick. Fiorin grass had at a former meeting been brought under discussion; the subject was revived, and among those who took part in the discussion was Mr. John Pinkerton, the antiquary, who, being Mr. Dempster's guest, was present as an honorary member. Mr. Pinkerton remarked that Camden had referred to a field of fiorin grass which was so fertile as to be cut four times a year.

At the Society's twelfth anniversary, held in July 1814, Mr. Dempster complimented the clergy as early promoters of agriculture. "Around the monasteries," he said, "the best soil was a garden and the worst a grave." It was remarked by a member that while the Roman Catholic clergy largely cultivated and made use of wheaten-flour, it had since the Reformation been generally disused. This sentiment was confirmed by Mr. Headrick, who stated that his father, who was a farmer in Ayrshire, had endeavoured to introduce wheaten-flour, but without success. A return to the use of oxen in tillage was suggested; the blight in barley, some held, might be prevented by pickling the seed; and the yellow turnip was unanimously ruled to be preferable to the Swedish.

The Society did not re-assemble. Having attained his eightieth year, Mr. Dempster was probably unable longer to discharge the presidential duties, and as his election was for life it may have been deemed ungracious to choose a substitute. It is even probable that Mr. Dempster believed that the object he had in view by the Society's establishment had been attained, and that little if anything remained worthy of special discussion. Perhaps these familiar notes of agricultural proceedings and speculations seventy or eighty years ago, may not be deemed, even in point of antiquarian interest, unworthy of our Society's notice.