

GEORGE DEMPSTER OF DUNNICHEN

(1732-1818)

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work and is based on my own research. Where I have drawn on the work of others, I have acknowledged my sources.

Andrew Munro Lang

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank firstly my wife, Margaret, without whose constant encouragement and support this thesis would have been neither started nor completed. Secondly, I wish to thank Professor G. W. S. Barrow for permitting me to undertake this thesis in the Department of Scottish History and my supervisors Mr John Simpson and Dr John Bannerman for their encouragement and advice.

Throughout the research I received unfailing courtesy and help from the staff in all of the libraries and other institutions named in the bibliography and would like to record my appreciation of this. I would like to thank also the private owners of manuscript collections for granting me access to them and either providing me with or allowing me to make photocopies. I wish to record a special thanks to Mrs Ishbell Kidd, Secretary to the Letham Feuars' Committee and Keeper of the Archive, for granting me access to the archive and for her general comments and advice.

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ABSTRACT

Although best remembered as an agricultural improver and reformer George Dempster of Dunnichen played a wide-ranging role in the public life of the country. He was in turn lawyer, member of parliament, proprietor and then director of the East India Company, partner in several cotton spinning enterprises, and director of the British Fisheries Society. He combined his interest in improving his own estates - and encouraging others to do likewise with theirs - with being one of an active group of businessmen who strove to develop trade and industry throughout Scotland. He established the Dundee Bank, actively supported road development in both Highlands and Lowlands, established many of the first lighthouses around the Scottish coasts, and introduced cold storage methods into the British fishing industry. He vigorously promoted the Scottish textile industries, both through parliamentary legislation and, more directly, by playing a major role in the introduction of cotton spinning into Scotland.

His patriotic zeal on behalf of Scotland both in the political and the commercial spheres caused Dempster deservedly to become one of the most popular Scotsmen of his generation, a fact that has become clouded by his later obscurity. Nor was his popularity based purely on his achievements; Dempster had an attractive and disarming personality, remarked on by almost all who came into contact with him.

This study attempts to provide as well-rounded a biography of George Dempster as is possible given the prescribed limitation of length. The diversity of his interests and the enthusiasm with which he pursued them are emphasised and every effort has been made through reference to primary sources to give a true portrait of Dempster the man while accurately recording his aims and achievements.

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INTRODUCTION

During his lifetime George Dempster was one of the best known and most popular Scotsmen of his generation, commanding much affection which sprang partly from his personal charm and partly from the integrity and altruism he displayed in his public life. He was born of a wealthy Dundee merchant and throughout his life played an active part in the public life of the country. As a young man he was a member of both the Select Society and the Poker Club, and went on to take up a parliamentary career lasting 28 years. He impressed his fellow MPs by his independence and incorruptibility, earning himself the sobriquet 'Honest George', and this reputation survived even well-publicised attempts on his part to use bribery in elections, albeit this was a common practice at the time. However, he failed to achieve any real success as a politician through his reluctance to speak or vote other than in accordance with the dictates of his conscience. He called himself a Whig and attached himself to the Rockingham party but was unable fully to adapt to the needs of the developing party system and to abide by the party line regardless of his personal views.

Nevertheless, he was respected by his fellow MPs and was held in high and increasing esteem by his constituents. His political record was one of which he could have been proud: he opposed the American War, deprecating its origin, its conduct and its protraction; he supported the freedom of the press, the younger Pitt's plans for strengthening the national economy and also Pitt's attempts to facilitate trade between Britain and Ireland. He supported also the encouragement of industry, fisheries and the building of roads and was ever ready to present petitions in parliament and make speeches there on behalf of individuals whom he considered to be the victims of injustice.

Dempster combined his parliamentary career with a range of other activities broad even by eighteenth-century standards. He became a proprietor (shareholder) and on two occasions also a

director of the East India Company and was active in debates at East India House as well as in debates on East India affairs in parliament. He opposed the company's political activities and its growing territorial control over India, but even more did he oppose the government's attempts to gain control over the company, and he was always a staunch supporter of the rights of the proprietors.

Dempster was also one of a very active group of Scottish businessmen who did their best to develop trade and industry throughout Scotland, both for its own sake and as a means of reducing the high level of emigration. He played a major part in the introduction of the cotton industry into Scotland; presented a petition in parliament on behalf of the weavers of Glasgow and Paisley against unfair restrictions on Scottish linen; and founded the Dundee Bank. He also promoted the establishment of lighthouses around the Scottish coasts and gave great encouragement to the Scottish fishing industry both by opposing the crippling salt laws and by playing a leading role in the establishment of the British Fisheries Society. In addition he supported and promoted schemes for the development of roads in the Highlands and in the vicinity of his Angus estates. His eager pursuit of new ideas resulted in the introduction of cold-storage into the British fishing industry.

It is as an improving landlord that Dempster is chiefly remembered. The eighteenth century in Scotland, as in England, was an age of improvement and there were few more eager proponents than Dempster. His grandfather had amassed a fortune and, like many of his contemporaries, used it to acquire landed estates on which he presumably intended to return to the life his forebears had left.¹ Dempster, however, was not content to live the life of a laird in a romantic recreation of the past: both during his time in parliament and afterwards he strove energetically to introduce the latest agricultural methods. At the same time he exhibited a remarkable zeal for treating his tenants with humanity and generosity. He secured them in their farms by long leases, abolished the archaic and burdensome system of personal services, and generally encouraged them to prosper, rather than

exploiting them. On his Highland estates he preferred to engage in far-reaching schemes to keep his people on the land rather than forcing them to make way for sheep.

Despite such a record and his popularity during his life, for a century or more after his death Dempster was lost to public view. Few people in history can have fallen so quickly into such ill-merited obscurity. References to him in writing were few, and the tide only began to turn with the honourable mention of his political activities reviewed in William Law Matheson's The Awakening of Scotland in 1910.² In 1934 James Fergusson published his edition of the correspondence between Dempster and Fergusson's ancestor, Sir Adam Fergusson, which remains to this day the only substantial published work on Dempster. Fergusson's introductory comments remain true:

“Few people to-day who are not moderately well-read in the social history of the eighteenth century have so much as heard the name of George Dempster. Even those familiar with the Johnson-Boswell circle, or with the books which chronicle the sayings and doings of the Edinburgh ‘Literati’ will have met with only occasional references to him.”³

In the present century Dempster's political activities and also his efforts on behalf of agriculture and commerce have received numerous references, but too brief to give more than a hint of Dempster's interesting and attractive personality. There have been some exceptions: Dempster's involvement with the fisheries received fairly full treatment in Jean Dunlop's The British Fisheries Society 1786-1893, published in 1978 but written in 1952,⁴ while his ideas of agricultural improvement and his friendship with Sir John Sinclair were dealt with in Rosalind Mitchison's Agricultural Sir John published in 1962.⁵ Dempster's skill as a correspondent was demonstrated by the selection of his letters to G. J. Thorkelin edited by E. H. Harvey Wood in 1972.⁶ Finally, more recently Dempster's writings on his work for the British Fisheries Society and on agricultural improvement have been edited and published in microfilm form by William Johnstone.⁷

The life of an individual with such an extraordinary range of interests and activities as George Dempster poses problems for a biographer attempting both to do justice to his multi-faceted life and distinctive personality and contain the work within a reasonable compass. Furthermore, given the interest and liveliness of Dempster's letters, which provide vivid insight into his personality, the temptation to quote at greater length than strictly necessary is strong. The intention of this work is to present as well-rounded a biography of Dempster as is possible within the scope of a single volume. Particular emphasis has been placed on his political career, which hitherto has received the least treatment apart from the various fairly brief references mentioned above. An attempt has also been made to draw a picture of Dempster's exceptional and charming personality, so clearly apparent in his correspondence.

Dempster's life has been covered in broadly chronological sequence but with exceptions where the nature of the subject matter demands a thematic approach. Thus chapter 1 deals with his early life and election to parliament while chapter 2 deals with his early career there (up to 1767). The remainder of his parliamentary career (which ended in 1790) is dealt with in chapters 4 to 7, each chapter covering a complete parliament (i.e. the interval between general elections). Chapter 3 covers Dempster's involvement with the East India Company, which took place primarily in the period 1763-1774. Chapter 8 is concerned with his activities regarding fisheries, lighthouses and roads, mainly in the period 1784-1790, and chapter 9 covers the agricultural improvements he made at Dunnichen. Chapter 10 deals with Dempster's promotion of the cotton industry in Scotland and in particular the building of the cotton mill at Stanley, Perthshire, during the period 1783-1799. Chapter 11 describes Dempster's improvements at Skibo, Sutherland, which occupied him from the date of its purchase in 1786 until 1800. Finally, chapter 12 completes the story with Dempster's last years from 1800 until his death in 1818.

In transcribing Dempster's manuscripts I have as far as possible adhered to the original spelling and capitalisation. Names of places and persons, and certain other words, where abbreviated in the original have been expanded between brackets, and very occasionally punctuation has been augmented to make the meaning clear.

Introduction: Notes

1. James Fergusson, Lowland Lairds (1949), p.15.
2. William Law Mathieson, The Awakening of Scotland: A History from 1747 to 1797 (1910), passim but especially pp.58-59, 94-97.
3. James Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster to Sir Adam Fergusson 1756-1813 (1934), p.xv.
4. Jean Dunlop, The British Fisheries Society 1786-1893 (1978).
5. Rosalind Mitchison, Agricultural Sir John: The Life of Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster 1754-1835 (1962), passim but especially pp.85-86, 92, 198-199.
6. E. H. Harvey Wood, 'Letters to an Antiquary: the Literary Correspondence of G. J. Thorkelin (1752-1829)' (unpublished PhD thesis for the University of Edinburgh, 1972).
7. William T. Johnstone (editor), 'Two New Towns for Scotland: Tobermory and Ullapool' (1982); and Dempster on agriculture by George Dempster of Dunnichen (1732-1818) (1983).

CHAPTER 1

EARLY LIFE AND ELECTION TO PARLIAMENT 1732-1761

George Dempster was the descendant of an ancient family; the surname Dempster is derived from doomster, an old name for judge or executioner and of great antiquity in Scotland.¹ From at least the middle of the fourteenth century the honourable office of dempster of parliament was held by the Dempster family in Aberdeenshire. It is recorded that David Dempster of Auchterless and Carolstoun held the office in 1370, in the reign of King David the Second, followed by his son Andrew who had the office of dempster confirmed to him and his heirs by a charter under the great seal from Robert the Second. In September 1460 his son, David, third baron of Carolstoun, resigned the office to the abbey of Arbroath.²

George Dempster belonged to the junior branch of the family, descended from James, second son of James Dempster of Muireisk, living in 1574, and representative of David Dempster of Auchterless and Carolstoun.³ Of his immediate forebears both his great-grandfather and grandfather in different ways appear to have been remarkable men. His great-grandfather, the Reverend John Dempster (c.1641-1708), was translated from Brechin to Monifieth in 1676 thus becoming the last Episcopal minister there. He was long remembered for his (perhaps excessive) piety:

“Of a high moral nature he was unremitting in his endeavours to eradicate evil-doing, and his horror of vice frequently carried him to extremes that could not have been exceeded by the most bigoted covenanting divine.”⁴

He married Anna Maule, widow of Alexander Erskine, chamberlain to the earl of Panmure. She had three sons to her first husband, and to John Dempster five sons and two daughters.⁵

George Dempster's grandfather, after whom he was named, studied at Edinburgh University and obtained a Master of Arts degree there in 1700.⁶ He shortly afterwards commenced business in Dundee as a grain merchant and was very successful, rapidly amassing a large fortune. This he used to purchase a series of estates, including Dunnichen, Newbiggin, Omachie, Laws and Ethiebeaton, all in Forfarshire. Dunnichen, acquired in 1729, was where he chose to build a house and after which he and his successors were designed.⁷ Some of his fortune was made by the export of grain, and his house and stores in Dundee, together with two newly-laden ships, were reported to have been attacked and plundered on 5 February 1720 by a mob convinced that the export of grain was the cause of their starvation.⁸ If this was indeed an example of a 'meal mob' then it must have been among the earliest in Scotland; it predates any mentioned by Kenneth Logue in his account of the subject.⁹ However, George Dempster senior is known also to have taken "a very decided part in politics" and it has been suggested that this involvement may have been the cause of the riot.¹⁰

George Dempster junior appears to have inherited characteristics from both these contrasting relatives. From his great-grandfather he inherited public spiritedness (though not piety: Dempster had distinctly sceptical religious views) and from his grandfather his interest in politics and "decided" views. One thing not inherited was his grandfather's business acumen.

George Dempster senior died on 2 June 1753, aged 75, and his property passed to his eldest son John, born in 1700, who did not enjoy it for long since on 3 November 1754 he died from a fall from his horse at his house of Newgrange, near Arbroath.¹¹ John Dempster had married twice: in 1730 to Isabel Ogilvie, daughter of Patrick Ogilvie of Balfour, and in 1740 to Margaret Hamilton, daughter of Patrick Hamilton of Kilbrachmont.¹² He left a large family comprising 12 children;¹³ unfortunately surviving records are few and not all of their names

and birthdates are known. They included by Isabel Ogilvie, Margaret (or Peggy; 1731-1764), George (the subject of this thesis), Patrick (b.1733), and Jean (1736-?1770); and by Margaret Hamilton, Helen (d.1831), Ann (d.1805), Charles (c.1751-1772), and John (later known as John Hamilton, c.1753-1800). The remaining four children included John (d.1803).¹⁴

George Dempster, the eldest son of John, was born on 8 December 1732 at his grandfather's house in Dundee (the same house that had been ransacked twelve years previously). The house was situated in Alexander Kyd's Close, later known as Gray's Close, leading off the north side of the High Street.¹⁵ It was still standing in the present century, although the site now forms part of the Overgate Centre. Little is known about his early life, and there is even some doubt as to which school he attended. Dempster's great-nephew George Soper-Dempster (1804-1889) stated that he was educated at Leuchars in Fife, and certainly later in the century a small boarding school run by the local minister was recorded as existing there.¹⁶ However, most authorities state the school as being Dundee Grammar School, and this seems more likely and is supported by the only reference to his schooldays in Dempster's surviving correspondence. In 1804 he referred to being "in much the same state of Health and Spirits I enjoyed in my 7th year on entering the Grammar School."¹⁷ He may, of course, have attended both, as suggested by James Fergusson.¹⁸ What is known is that on 24 February 1748, in his sixteenth year, he entered St Andrews University under James Kemp, Professor of Greek.¹⁹

Life at St Andrews at this period would have been very uncomfortable for the students. Both the city of St Andrews itself and the university were in a state of considerable decay. As regards the city this was due to a combination of factors, but chief among them were the departure of the archbishops and loss of ecclesiastical primacy in 1689, and the changes in the patterns of Scottish trade, with industry beginning to concentrate in a few large centres, and with the opening up of American trade

detracting from the significance of the lesser east coast ports. The university was in decline because of the poor financial position of the colleges - none of them had been adequately endowed and in the case of St Salvator's and St Mary's their few endowments consisted mainly of the teinds of various parishes which had been annexed to the colleges but were gradually diverted back to their original purpose without any compensation being made.²⁰ Contemporary accounts are unanimous on the wretched state of both the city and the university:

“St Andrews, with its three colleges, had dwindled into a state bordering on decay. The modern tenements were built of timber, and the older houses were in ruins. The streets, meanly paved, yielded a crop of grass which was mowed by sheep; while less frequented thoroughfares had crossings of boulders, by means of which pedestrians could, in wet weather, avoid stepping into pools of mud. In the heart of the city, a street was named the Foul Waste, and the name was appropriate; it was the receptacle of abomination of every sort, and constantly emitted a loathsome smell... . The three colleges were greatly dilapidated. St Leonard's Halls were the repositories of farm produce and winter fodder. The Common Hall of St Salvator's College was a dreary vault, with cobwebbed roof and earthen floor... . For breakfast, we received half an oaten loaf, with half a chopin of beer; the latter was brewed on the premises and could not have been of worse quality. Dinner was at three o'clock served in the Common Hall. Broth and beef constituted the fare four days weekly... . Thrice a week we dined on fish or eggs. Tea or coffee were unknown. Our evening meal consisted of a two-penny loaf, with a jug of the college beer. Each burser's apartment was eight feet square. The bedsteads were timber tressels, and the bedsteads were rough and hard. Each room had a fireplace, but as smokey chimneys were the rule, we seldom used fire, except when extremity of cold rendered smoke with a little heat more tolerable than starvation. Each bursar provided and kept clean his knife and fork; but the professors, in consideration of deducting from our bursaries sixteen shillings and eightpence, gave us the use of silver spoons.”²¹

In the year before Dempster's arrival at St Andrews, the colleges of St Salvator's and St Leonard's had united (24 June 1747). St Salvator's was selected to be the home of the United College in which, after a year spent in St Leonard's, the masters and students (with Dempster among their number) took up residence in November 1748.

Little is known of Dempster's life at St Andrews, but one undoubted achievement was his winning of the prestigious Silver Arrow medal in 1750.²² This archery competition was a

prominent feature of university life in St Andrews in the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century. It was held under the auspices of the Faculty of Arts in June of each year, and seems to have been open to all students of the university. The winner had the privilege of presenting a silver medal to be hung upon the Arrow. The contest normally took place at the Bow Butts on the edge of the links. It appears to have been an event of some note in the university calendar, involving

“[a] brilliant procession to the Butts, the archers splendid in traditional costume and [a] more riotous return, volleys of arrows rising above the houses of the patrons and friends of the competitors, and the final junketing in the lodgings of the victor, whose silver medal would shortly hang with its fellows upon the Arrow itself.”²³

Dempster was one of the last winners of this medal, since the competition was discontinued in 1754.²⁴

Despite the evident discomfort and the upheaval, both physical and academic, consequent upon the union of the colleges, there is no evidence that Dempster did not enjoy his time at St Andrews. He seems to have retained an affection for both the city and the university for the rest of his life. He was provost of St Andrews for many years and MP for the group of burghs in which it was included and it was to St Andrews that he returned to spend the final years of his life. On a number of earlier occasions, he demonstrated his continuing affection for the university. For example, in 1787, he introduced his friend and distinguished Icelandic scholar Grimur Thorkelin to the university for conferment of the degree of LLD, in appreciation of which Thorkelin, albeit not until 1826, made a handsome donation to the library.²⁵ Later, in 1812, Dempster was involved in schemes to present the university with an observatory and a “chemical apparatus”.²⁶ In correspondence also he regularly recommended St Andrews when asked advice on the education of his various friends’ children.²⁷

In part, this loyalty may have derived from a camaraderie developed among the small body of masters and students in the face of shared hardships; there is also evidence that despite its dereliction, “life at St Andrews retained much of its old quality and charm”.²⁸ Dempster left St Andrews without taking a degree but this implies neither lack of academic success nor a premature departure; it was apparently quite common for students at this period to complete their studies and leave without bothering with the formality of examination:

“It might seem that the decay of St Andrews was reflected in its degree system as much as in its buildings. Students still completed their four years’ course in Arts, but the final examination and disputation of theses had fallen out of use and as the century advanced, fewer and fewer troubled to take the degree of Master of Arts. On the other hand, these procedures could quite reasonably be regarded as purposeless (and costly) formalities and their abandonment did not necessarily imply any lowering of educational standards.”²⁹

From St Andrews Dempster went to Edinburgh, to study for the Bar. Again, university records for the period are few, and there is no evidence for either his matriculation or for his graduation. The only class he is known to have attended is that taught by the redoubtable Charles Mackie (1688-1770), the first Professor of History there.³⁰ Dempster is recorded as having attended the history class in 1750.³¹

Being of a gregarious and convivial nature, Dempster entered fully into the social life of both university and city. Edinburgh at this time was entering upon its greatest period of social and intellectual glory, gaining a European reputation for culture and learning, and thus offered great scope for a man of Dempster’s social talents. He became one of the first members of the Select Society and later (see chapter 2) also joined the Poker Club. The Select Society was founded by the painter Alan Ramsay and a group of his friends and was to become perhaps the most famous institution of the Scottish enlightenment.³² It held its first meeting on 23 May 1754 in the Advocates’ Library, when its intention was stated to be for members by practice to improve themselves in

reasoning and eloquence, and, by freedom of debate, to discover the most effective methods of promoting the good of the country.³³

Intended as its name suggests to be select, it was soon inundated with applications for membership from gentry, lawyers and others. From its commencement as a small group of 15 literati its membership rose rapidly despite the rejection of a significant proportion of the applicants, and the original membership limit of 50 had to be raised to 100.³⁴ Its membership was remarkably heterogeneous and by mixing together the young of the ruling elite with the literati it became a powerful influence on those who could confidently expect to become the leaders of Scottish culture and society at large. The society's objects were to be achieved through debate conducted within strict formal rules: there was to be no interrupting of speakers, and no naming of anyone present. Any subject could be proposed for debate, "except such as regard Revealed Religion, or which may give occasion to vent any principles of Jacobitism."³⁵ The general tenor of the questions, ranging over economics, politics, morals and culture, indicates that the society regarded its concern to be with social progress in its broadest sense. The society moved from debating general issues to more specific and practical problems relating to the current economic and cultural progress of Scotland: problems of agricultural and economic improvement, legal and political reform, the treatment of servants, etc. "Within a year the society had become the patron of what was nothing short of a campaign for the general improvement of Scottish society at large."³⁶ One subject which began to take up much of the society's time, and one in which Dempster took a strong interest, was the militia issue.³⁷ The general subject of national defence and military organisation was first addressed on 2 April 1755 but three months later the central military and political question was posed directly: "whether a standing army or a militia properly regulated be most advantageous for Great Britain?" Discussion of this took two sessions, on 23 July and 6 August 1755.³⁸ The issue was returned to at the end of 1756, to coincide with the re-introduction of the English militia bill in the house of

commons and public agitation in its favour, and again in November 1759. Finally, in a variation of the same theme, in July 1760, the society debated the more general question of the compatibility of a commercial and military spirit in one nation.³⁹ An indication of the seriousness with which Dempster involved himself with the militia issue was his appointment in November 1759 to the membership of a committee to campaign for a Scottish militia⁴⁰ and his publishing in 1760 of a pamphlet to promote the militia cause.⁴¹

As part of its programme of improvement in public speaking, the Select Society in 1761 “undertook the Herculean task of annihilating the Scottish Language, or rather of refining it, in such a manner, from the vernacular idiom, as to become English both in purity and pronunciation.”⁴² The ability to write and speak English was seen at the time both as the ‘Open Sesame’ to an equal partnership between Scotland and England (to which Scots at that time aspired) and as essential to making a living in England.⁴³ As the Select Society put it in their statement in 1761:

“As the intercourse between this part of Great Britain and the capital daily increases, both on account of business and amusement, and must still go on increasing, gentlemen educated in Scotland have long been sensible of the disadvantages under which they labour, from their imperfect knowledge of the English Tongue, and the impropriety with which they speak it.”⁴⁴

The Society proposed to import qualified English teachers to give instruction:

“What gave rise to this chimerical project ... was the important incident of old Sheridan’s arrival at Edinburgh, who had made the tour of Great Britain, as an itinerant lecturer on education. ...

“Mr Sheridan’s lectures continued for four weeks; and such was the rage for speaking with an English accent, that more than three hundred gentlemen, among whom were the most eminent in the country for rank and learning, attended him. ...

“These lectures were delivered in St Paul’s chapel; and during their continuance, the church was crowded with ladies and gentlemen, most of whom began to affect a nicety of pronunciation in their ordinary discourse. Even the grave academic gave way to the prevailing fashion of the day; and Dr Robertson was so much enamoured of it that he sported on all occasions his progress in speaking English, and to the day of his death, persevered in the practice of enunciating his words with the most pointed correctness.”⁴⁵

“Old Sheridan” was Thomas Sheridan (1719-1788) - the Irish father of the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan - who had gained fame for his skilful direction of the theatre in Dublin before moving to London.⁴⁶ Dempster appears to have been one of the most active promoters of this new branch of improvement and with some success, to judge from a comment by James Boswell: “I breakfasted with Dempster, whom I found ... improved much in speaking English... .”⁴⁷ One outcome of Dempster’s enthusiasm was that he was nominated one of the sixteen directors of ‘the Society for promoting the Reading and Speaking of the English Language in Scotland’, which was set up in July 1761 as one of several offshoots of the Select Society.⁴⁸

For the most part, however, the desire to learn to speak with an English accent proved a fashion of short duration, fading as quickly as it had begun.⁴⁹ The Select Society itself flourished until 1757-1758 when declining enthusiasm among its members, and the fact that many of them had left Edinburgh, led to a drastic fall in attendance. It finally expired in 1764.⁵⁰ One view is that the society fell victim to its own success and attracted too many members who joined for reasons of fashion or prestige rather than real interest in its proceedings:

“So long as the Society continued select it flourished, but its celebrity proved its ruin, a seat in it being courted like a place or pension. Its numbers were over-augmented.”⁵¹

Dempster’s stay in Edinburgh had a profound effect on him and the experience laid the foundation for the ideas and attitudes he was to hold for the remainder of his life. At the university, and much more so in the Select Society, he met and mingled with men who in many cases were to become the most influential members of society, attaining positions of leadership and power. Among those with whom he was to form lifelong friendships were Henry Dundas (later first Viscount Melville, and holder of a number of government posts), Adam Ferguson (later Professor of Moral Philosophy at

the university), James Boswell, William Johnstone (later Sir William Pulteney), William Nairne (later Lord Dunsinnan), William Robertson (later principal of the university) and many others. One of his closest friendships, however, was with another Adam Fergusson (with a double 's'; later Sir Adam Fergusson of Kilkerran, Bart., advocate and MP for Ayrshire). Dempster and Fergusson maintained a lifelong correspondence of which the former's letters have survived and been admirably edited by one of Fergusson's descendants, James Fergusson. They remain the most complete and interesting series of Dempster's letters.⁵² No such influence seems to have been exerted by St Andrews; it is likely that while there Dempster was not yet mature enough to be ready to develop lifelong views and friendships. Although he clearly enjoyed his time there, and retained an affection for both city and university for the rest of his life, there is no evidence of any lasting friendships formed there, or of any influence on his later thinking having emanated from there.

In November 1754 Dempster's father died (see p.8) and Dempster inherited his fortune, becoming thereby moderately wealthy. His father's estates by this time comprised some 6,000 acres and yielded £769 per annum⁵³ (worth about £77,000 today⁵⁴). On 4 March 1755 Dempster was admitted as a member of the Faculty of Advocates⁵⁵ and the following year he set off on the grand tour with Adam Fergusson, who had been similarly admitted on 23 December 1755. They proceeded to Ghent, and then on to Brussels, arriving on 19 April 1756.⁵⁶ Once in Brussels, they spent some time sightseeing but their main purpose was not mere pleasure but in acquiring the education and accomplishments of well-bred gentlemen. At the Académie Royale in Brussels they took lessons in fencing, dancing, and riding, and they were privately tutored in French and German. The academy appears to have contained some colourful characters who provided Dempster and Fergusson with material for private jokes; the fencing master was a Scotsman named MacDonald and many years afterwards in a letter to Fergusson, Dempster was to recall the shouts of the riding master: "Epaule droite en avant, Monsieur Dempstair! La Langue, M. le Chevallier! N'ébranlez pas M. le Baron!"

[Right shoulder forward, Mr Dempster! The tongue (i.e. bit) M. le Chevalier! Keep your balance, M. le Baron!]⁵⁷

Dempster and Fergusson made a number of friends among the British and other visitors in Brussels, some idea of which can be gleaned from Dempster's correspondence. Shortly after his return to Great Britain, Dempster asked Fergusson to remember him to a number of their joint acquaintances:

“Let me think of my friends with you, Good Mr Wyder [Weijder], Mr Needham, Mr Inge, Webb, etc. all deserve more compliments from me than I have time to bestow. My best respects to the Callemberg family. I have sent a couple of political cards to amuse the Count when he cannot make out his whist party. The puppets hanging in this order - next the Chan[cello]r [Lord Hardwicke] is L[or]d Hol[demes]s Jr, New[cast]le, Fox, Sir G[eorge] [Lyttelto]n, An[so]n.”⁵⁸

Weijder was apparently the bursar, or an equivalent official, of the Académie Royale. ‘Needham’ was Turbeville Needham, a Roman Catholic priest and a man of considerable learning and versatility. He was at this time forty-three years old and had been living on the continent for five years. Some time before his death, in 1781, he had become rector of the Académie des Sciences in Brussels.⁵⁹ Webb was another young man beginning his grand tour after leaving Cambridge. Count Callenberg belonged to an Austrian family and had “a very fine large old-world house” in Brussels, “very indifferently furnished in everything but mirrors, and some pictures,”⁶⁰ where he lived with his two daughters and where card-parties were frequent. Of Mr Inge nothing is known. Dempster's reference to leading political figures of the day in his mention of Count Callenberg is an early instance of the interest in politics which was to dominate his life over the following three decades.

Dempster and Fergusson left Brussels in July 1756 and spent two months on a tour of the Low Countries. They travelled to Tournai and Namur and then on to Huy from where they sailed down the Meuse to Liège, then on to Spa and Aix-La-Chapelle. They then entered the United Provinces and saw Utrecht and Amsterdam, before returning by way of the Hague to Antwerp, arriving back in

Brussels on 11 September 1756. Although Utrecht at the time was a famous centre for legal studies, there is no evidence that Dempster and Fergusson did more than pass straight through. From Brussels they had planned to travel together through Germany, Switzerland and Italy, and by mid-November were ready to set out when Dempster was recalled suddenly to Scotland as his eldest sister, Peggy, was seriously ill. Although she recovered he never managed to complete his grand tour, and Fergusson continued alone.

On arrival in London, Dempster went straight to Drury Lane to see a performance of John Milton's masque 'Comus' - "In dirt and boots I flew there and found good fortune had just preserved one place in the whole house for me." He clearly enjoyed the performance which he described in rapturous terms in a letter to Fergusson.⁶¹ After spending three days in London, he proceeded rapidly to Edinburgh, observing with some dismay the presence of large numbers of Hanoverian troops, brought from Germany at the start of the Seven Years' War to forestall a possible French invasion, an action which had contributed to the recent resignation of the duke of Newcastle's ministry:

"All the way up I found England dyed with red. Three coats of four were of that colour. I was not less alarmed for my country than I was for myself that morning I observed my chamber pot filled with blood. Both one and t'other mark some inward disorder. Every humane spirit lament[s] the usage of the Hannoverians."⁶²

In Edinburgh, Dempster stayed at first with his Uncle David Willison, a merchant married to Dempster's aunt Katherine Dempster (1714-1804). His house was in Forrester's Wynd (now demolished, it stood between Libberton's Wynd and St Giles's); later Dempster either rented or bought a house in the city.⁶³ His sister Peggy he found suffering from hysteria, and arranged for her removal to the country where she slowly began to recover. Other family business began to occupy him and, despite his evident desire to resume his grand tour, this was to be repeatedly postponed and finally abandoned altogether. He spent time on estate and family affairs in Dundee and in organising

the education of his younger brothers and sisters.⁶⁴ However, he maintained a keen interest in his friend Fergusson's continuing travels and his letters to Fergusson contain many requests for detailed information about the countries Fergusson was passing through:

"... you have seen with what a furious rage I burn for information about whatever is curious or uncommon either in the manners of foreigners or in their countries. ... Pray let me know what you think of the country of Germany, is it fertile? is [it] populous? Are their forms of government calculated to promote the good of mankind, or are the poor and industrious exposed to the contempt, subservient to the will, oppressed by the tyranny of the great and proud? ... You have been at Geneva. Pray tell me how does liberty look in that country where she flourishes luxuriantly and where none of her branches are lopped off, where people live as much independent of their superiors, as human affairs can admit of, and where that sacred blessing is not bought at the price of internal factions, or oppressive taxes. What is the character of the individual in Switzerland? ... Does the mountainousness of their situation contribute greatly to their security and does their breasts glow with that noble *Amor Patriae* with which the members of a republic are more frequently and more warmly inspired than the subjects or slaves of any other government? There, my dearest friend, are the points which ... I long most to be informed of."⁶⁵

As a result, perhaps, of having been abroad for a much shorter period of time than he had planned, there is evidence from Dempster's correspondence that he felt cramped and restless for some time after his return to Scotland:

"I returned too soon to be much improved by anything I could learn, and am just an apple plucked immaturely from the tree, a loaf taken half baked out of the oven, sower and unpalatable, a mere rude block with the first traces of a statue cast upon it... while you, happy man, are daily advancing towards that perfection which is only to be attained by long continued travels through different countries."⁶⁶

He found Edinburgh inferior to the continental cities he had been visiting both in terms of the style of dress, which in Edinburgh to his eyes seemed simple and rustic compared with European richness and flamboyance, and in the manners of the people:

"I must own to a little surprise to return to a country ... [and] find a man pass for a gentleman without a laced coat or diamond ring, and to hear from Naime that he had been visiting Lady Boyde in a valet de chamber's frock and an unpowdered brown greazy head. Good God! exclaims I inwardly, which of the two is best? The simplicity of dress practised at home or that richness and shew so universal abroad? ... Naime watches my notions with all the vigilance of a Mentor to take care that none of 'em betray affectation, conceit or a contempt of the homely

objects that surround me. And notwithstanding that I second his endeavours, and labour to take myself down like an overstrained instrument to the low pitch of the rest about me, I have not entirely escaped the observation of the remarkers here, and some of 'em brand me (unjustly, God knows) with the imputation of extravagance, and look on the ruin of my fortune as the inevitable consequence of a laced coat and a powdered wig."⁶⁷

William Nairne (?1731-1811) was the second son of Sir William Nairne, second baronet of Dunsinnan, and had been admitted advocate one week after Dempster, on 11 March 1755. Dempster's sentiments are not untypical of the prevailing attitudes of educated Scots at the time. A number of commentators on Scottish society in the late eighteenth century have remarked on the sense of provincial inferiority which seemed to pervade Scots culture, affecting all ranks.⁶⁸ In at least one writer's view it provided one of the main driving forces behind the Enlightenment itself.⁶⁹ However, within eight months or so of his return to Scotland Dempster affected to have lost his dissatisfaction with his native country, and wrote:

"I am now as much familiarised to home as if [I] had never been abroad, and I view the dirt of Edinburgh, the narrow closes, the high public stairs, the ill dressed men, the inconstant weather, the cold days and long nights, with as much indulgence as if I had never experienced better."⁷⁰

In December 1756 Dempster was among those who attended John Hume's 'Douglas', a play which caused uproar in Edinburgh through having been written by a Church of Scotland minister, at a time when the Church frowned on its members even attending the theatre, let alone writing plays.⁷¹ In the following February he reported to Fergusson:

"Nothing ever afforded more entertainment to this country than the 'Douglass', Mr Hume's tragedy. The novelty of a play being writ by a member of the Church, by a Scotsman, and first represented [i.e. performed] in Scotland, has given rise to a vast deal of fun. And paper bullets have been flying with great vehemence ever since, first between the snarlers at the merit of the piece and its partizans and lastly between the presbytery of Edinburgh who censure the author and have even gone to the length of reprimanding him for being guilty of the crime of tragedizing, when the Church of which he is a minister condemns stage playing as immoral and profane. Their opposers are the moderate people who cannot think a man in the wrong for giving scope to a resistless genius in compositions which were highly esteemed by the ancients and have ever been thought the noblest fruits of the

human brain, provided vice is not countenanced and the love of virtue appears to be [the] moral which the play wou'd enforce."⁷²

Dempster's love of the theatre had been demonstrated by his eagerness to see and reaction to 'Comus' and his views coincided with those of the moderates. However, his reaction to 'Douglas' was rather lukewarm, despite his apparently having gone to see it several times:

"As to the merit of the piece itself I am neither disposed to give it that high rank which many do nor to depreciate it so much as others have done. My expectation was very highly raised, before I saw it, and very greatly disappointed when I heard it re[fa]d. I was desired to bring a white handkerchief and yet I walked off dry eyed tho' few people are more open to these tender representations than I am. ... The last time however that I saw this piece represented it gave me more pleasure, he having made some very judicious alterations, by dividing some scenes, adding others and varying altogether the manner of their deaths."⁷³

The 'Douglas' affair featured prominently in the debates of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for 1757 and a number of ministers were threatened with strong disciplinary action for having attended the play. They included, most notably, one of Dempster's friends, the Rev. Dr Alexander Carlyle of Inveresk (1722-1805). Surprisingly, in view of his interest in the theatre, on the 27 May 1757 Dempster, who had become an elder, seconded a proposal forbidding the clergy to attend the theatre. However, it seems likely that his motive was to support Carlyle, since the motion he seconded was the most lenient of those being suggested.⁷⁴ With this support and that of other moderates, Carlyle was able to survive the attacks on him.

No record survives of Dempster's career as an advocate, although he did apparently practise, if only for a relatively brief period:

"... Mr Dempster did not long practise at the Scottish bar; indeed, after advocating a few causes, in which he displayed talents that might have proved highly beneficial to himself, and useful to his clients, by cultivation, he declined the honours of the wig and gown, and instead of remaining a lawyer, aspired to become a legislator."⁷⁵

In his letters to Fergusson, Dempster made only two brief references to his legal career; one shortly after his return to Edinburgh from the continent when he wrote of “my own inclination to do something in the Parliament House”⁷⁶ and some two years later when he looked forward to both himself and Fergusson living to a ripe old age and “both at that time, I hope, invested with the purple, and - as we cannot both - one of us filling a certain elbow chair [i.e. that of the Lord President of the Court of Session].”⁷⁷

Although Dempster’s talents might have led him to a profitable career at the Bar, in 1760 he turned his back on the law and decided to enter parliament, offering himself as a candidate for the Perth district of burghs comprising Perth, St Andrews, Dundee, Forfar and Cupar (Fife). Dempster was the first of his family to attempt to enter parliament and no record exists of his motive for doing so. He had the financial means to support a parliamentary career which was beginning to enjoy higher social status and thus becoming more attractive than that of an advocate.⁷⁸ Both were traditional occupations for sons of the landed gentry “as no man of fortune is bred in North Britain to the church, and the army and navy were not deemed eligible for an eldest son.”⁷⁹ Factors in his decision must have been his general public spiritedness and desire to improve the lot of his fellow countrymen, and also his interest in politics, which is manifest in his correspondence at all periods in his life. This interest may have been sharpened by his experience of the Select Society, whose debates were conducted partly in imitation of parliamentary procedure.⁸⁰ Dempster clearly enjoyed the debates and his involvement with the society increased markedly in the years leading up to his decision to enter parliament; he was nominated to no fewer than six Select Society committees in 1759-1760.⁸¹

Since 1743 the Perth burghs had been held by Captain Thomas Leslie of Stenton who thus had considerable experience of electioneering and enjoyed also the support of the duke of Newcastle and

of his own brother John, earl of Rothes.⁸² The Perth burghs were at the time noted for corruption and venality. John Robinson wrote of them in 1774 “These burghs are very open, venal and expensive, and few choose to engage with them.”⁸³ The procedure in a district of burghs was for each burgh council to elect a single delegate who voted for their choice of parliamentary candidate at the presiding burgh, each of the burghs taking it in turn from one election to the next to be the latter: in 1761 it was Perth. In a district comprising four burghs, which Perth burghs district was not, the delegate for the presiding burgh had an additional casting vote.⁸⁴

Dempster first announced his candidature on 28 August 1760 to the town council of Dundee, and on the following day he wrote to Thomas Leslie:

“Tho’ I have not the honour to be personally known to you, yet I think it my duty to let you know that I intend to stand Candidate against next General Election for that District of Burroughs which you at present represent in Parliament. The first public Declaration I have made of my Intentions was yesterday in this Town [Dundee].

I leave it to others to tell you how little you have to apprehend from so young and so inconsiderable an Opponent as me: but I beg leave to assure you myself that I regret very heartily that our interests should stand in competition, and I beg you’ll believe that the little Opposition I make shall be conducted with that politeness and moderation which one Gentleman owes another and which in particular I owe to a man of your rank & Distinction.”⁸⁵

Despite the modest tone of this letter it is clear from a letter he wrote to Fergusson in September 1760 that Dempster was being disingenuous, and he entered the contest with enthusiasm and fierce determination:

“Don’t imagine however that a man so deeply engaged in politics as I just now am would write you a letter purely to let you know how sorry he was that he could not pay you a visit. No, no, within a twelvemonth of a General Election no candidate without just suspicion of imprudence, ever writes a word which does not tend to promote his own interest. Attend then to the politician.

The general rendez-vous of the hunters is this year held in one of my burroughs. This is a burrow which has been long entail’d to the Lessly family. The only tenor by which they hold it is that awe and respect which the inhabitants of a little burrow naturally feel for a man who lives in splendor and makes a parade in their

neighbourhood. Shew, rank and titles have more effect than a wise man is inclined to allow them upon the minds of the vulgars. Judge them what a diminutive contemptible figure G.D., not naturally very ostentatious, will cut when compared with the Earle of Rothes, commander in chief in Ireland etc etc etc etc - with his bawhorses [officers' baggage horses] and his sumpter horses and his led horses and his footmen and gentlemen and blacks and coaches and chaises. Upon this occasion, great as the disproportion is, we must stand a comparison. Upon this occasion I must not give way to the natural dictates of modesty and slide in behind the mob while he [Leslie] enjoys unrival'd their full attention. For once I must play the frog and endeavour to puff myself up to the size of this mighty court fed ox. I have, however, devised a strategem which I hope will avail me. Like a vain lady who cannot buy, I am determined to borrow ornaments, and propose launching out into the sea of popularity borne up by borrow'd bladders. ... I am to write to the king and speak to the members. I have bespoke leave to hang on this lord's arm, to ride that knight's horse, to dine with this set of peers and sup with that, to dance, laugh and lap dog all the fine women... In short, I want to appear what I never wished to be: familiar with the great only upon account of their elevation, and a favourite with the women purely because I am a man of fashion - for that week, I mean."⁸⁶

It was during this month (September 1760) that Dempster was chosen provost of St Andrews, an office which he was to hold continuously until 1776, and on 29 September he became also a member of Dundee Town Council, which again marked the start of a long association with that body.⁸⁷

Matters were complicated during November by the intrusion of a third candidate, Captain Robert Haldane of Gleneagles (1705-1767), whose family had held the seat earlier in the century. Haldane, however, was attempting to cultivate several other seats at the same time and later withdrew from the Perth burghs contest.⁸⁸ From October to December 1760 Dempster was in regular correspondence with Sir Gilbert Elliot of Minto (1722-1777), a fellow member of the Select Society, an enthusiast for the Scottish militia and as a government minister (Lord of the Admiralty) in a position to give Dempster considerable assistance with both patronage and advice.⁸⁹ In his letters Dempster recorded the progress of his campaign; St Andrews unsurprisingly declared in his favour as did Forfar, but he failed to secure Cupar or Dundee.⁹⁰ By December, therefore, the outcome depended on Perth where the issue remained doubtful until almost the last moment, when the council finally returned a delegate

pledged to vote for Dempster. This favourable declaration, which was not made until March 1761, came about as a result of pressure from the duke of Atholl. When Patrick Yeoman, the provost of Perth, wrote asking if councillors could be allowed to vote for Leslie the duke wrote back making it clear that he favoured Dempster as the candidate.⁹¹ It appears that the earl of Bute (with whom Elliot was closely allied) had formed a favourable opinion of Dempster which he impressed upon the duke of Argyll who in turn persuaded Atholl to swing the burgh of Perth to Dempster and thus secure his election.⁹²

On 20 April 1761, therefore, Dempster was duly elected as a member of parliament. Undoubtedly his geniality and apparent gift for public speaking had been in his favour, as had the powerful support from Sir Gilbert Elliot. However, it seems clear that a major consideration was his willingness to spend large sums of money for persuasive purposes; the campaign was horrendously expensive and has been estimated to have cost around £10,000⁹³ (equivalent to £1 million today). At the time, even £3,000 - £4,000 was regarded as a heavy cost for a parliamentary seat,⁹⁴ and when Robert Haldane (one of Dempster's opponents in the Perth burghs) attempted to purchase the seat of Bridgport, a pocket borough controlled by Lord Coventry, he was told it would cost him £6,000: desperate though he was to secure a parliamentary seat, he regarded this as exorbitant.⁹⁵

Much of Dempster's funding appears to have been borrowed money, from Fergusson among others, and over the next few years various hints appear in his correspondence that reveal his financial embarrassments. Dempster referred directly to his campaign expenditure in a letter to Fergusson:

“With regard to the means, Sir Adam, I am sorry to say they are not quite so sanctified in our corner as I could wish. For money has influence and as it is largely administered by my opponent must not be spared by me.”⁹⁶

Nevertheless, this huge and crippling cost had at least brought about the desired outcome and so in the autumn of 1761 Dempster headed south to London to attend the twelfth Parliament of Great Britain which met at Westminster on 6 November 1761.

Chapter 1: Notes

1. For discussion of the role of the dempster (or judex), see G. W. S. Barrow, 'The Scottish judex in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries'. The Scottish Historical Review vol. 45 (1966), pp.16-26; and John Bannerman, 'The Scots Language and the Kin-based Society'; in Derick S. Thomson, Gaelic and Scots in Harmony (1988), pp.1-19. See especially pp.13-14.
2. William Anderson, The Scottish Nation; or, the Surnames, Families, Literature, Honours, and Biographical History of the People of Scotland (3 vols. 1867-1871), vol.2 pp.28-29; George F. Black, The Surnames of Scotland. Their Origin, Meaning, and History (1946), p.204.
3. Anderson, Scottish Nation, p.29.
4. J. Malcolm, The Parish of Monifieth in Ancient and Modern Times with a History of the Landed Estates and Lives of Eminent Men (1910), pp.98-99.
5. Ibid.
6. [David Laing] (editor), A Catalogue of the Graduates in the Faculties of Arts, Divinity and Law of the University of Edinburgh since its Foundation (1858), p.168.
7. Malcolm, Parish of Monifieth, pp.313,319,323; Forfar Register of Sasines, vol.22 f.403: Scottish Record Office [hereafter SRO], RS/35/22.
8. Robert Chambers, Domestic Annals of Scotland (3 vols. 1858-1861), vol.3 p.452.
9. Kenneth J. Logue, Popular Disturbances in Scotland 1780-1815 (1979).
10. Andrew Jervise, Epitaphs and Inscriptions from Burial Grounds & Old Buildings in the North-East of Scotland with Historical, Biographical, Genealogical and Antiquarian Notes (2 vols. 1875), vol.1 p.108.
11. Alexander Lowson, Portrait Gallery of Forfar Notables (1893), p.2; Andrew Jervise, Memorials of Angus and the Mearns. An Account Historical, Antiquarian & Traditionary (2 vols. 1885). vol.2 pp.216,335; The Scots Magazine, vol.16 (1754), p.500. For his date of birth, see General Register Office (Scotland) [hereafter GRO], Old Parish Registers: Dundee Register of Baptisms & Marriages, 282/3.
12. GRO, Dundee Register of Baptisms & Marriages, 282/12.
13. Dempster to Pulteney, 3 June [1760]: Huntington Library, PU182.
14. GRO, Dundee Register of Baptisms & Marriages, 282/4. Additional information from British Library: Oriental and India Office Collections [hereafter India Office], Personal Records, O/6/14, p.471; and Marine Records Misc., L/MAR/C/652, p.35. See also the genealogical table appended to the end of Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster.
15. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.1.

16. Jervise, Angus and the Mearns, vol.2 p.336; Sir John Sinclair Bart. (editor), The Statistical Account of Scotland, vol.18 (1796), pp.600-601.
17. Dempster to William Adam, 9 December 1804: Blair Adam Muniments.
18. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.3.
19. James Maitland Anderson (editor), The Matriculation Roll of the University of St Andrews 1747-1897 (1905), p.1.
20. R. G. Cant, The University of St Andrews (1946; new edition 1970), pp.77-78.
21. Rev. James Roger (1767-1849), quoted in Charles Rogers, A Century of Scottish Life: Memorials and Recollections of Historical and Remarkable Persons with Illustrations of Caledonian Humour (1871), pp.44-46. Charles Rogers was the son of James Roger, but unaccountably chose to spell his surname with an 's'.
22. Cant, University of St Andrews, p.153.
23. Ibid., p.95.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., p.97. See also B. S. Benedikz, 'Grimur Thorkelin, the University of Saint Andrews, and Codex Scardensis'. Scandinavian Studies vol.42 no.4, November 1970, pp.385-393.
26. Dempster to William Adam, 17 April 1812: Blair Adam Muniments.
27. E.g. Dempster to Robert Graham of Fintry, 28 October 1785: SRO, GD151/11/8/34.
28. Cant, University of St. Andrews, p.84.
29. Ibid., p.90.
30. L. W. Sharp, 'Charles Mackie, The First Professor of History at Edinburgh University'. The Scottish Historical Review vol.41 (1962), pp.23-45.
31. Charles Mackie, 'Alphabetical List of those who attended the Prelections on History and Roman Antiquitys from 1719 to 1744 Inclusive.': Edinburgh University Library [hereafter EUL], Ms. Dc.5.24², p.207.
32. Two excellent general accounts of the Select Society are: Davis D. McElroy, Scotland's Age of Improvement. A Survey of Eighteenth-Century Literary Clubs and Societies (1969), pp.48-67; and Roger L. Emerson, 'The Social Composition of Enlightened Scotland: the Select Society of Edinburgh, 1754-1764'. Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, vol.94 (1973), pp.291-329.
33. The Scots Magazine, vol.17 (1755), pp.126-127.

34. Emerson, 'Select Society', p.292.
35. 'Rules and Orders of the Select Society, instituted on Wednesday the twenty-second day of May 1754' (Ms.23.1.1): National Library of Scotland [hereafter NLS], Advocates Ms.23.1.1.
36. Nicholas Phillipson, 'Culture and Society in the 18th Century Province: The Case of Edinburgh and the Scottish Enlightenment', in L. Stone (editor), The University in Society (2 vols. 1975), vol.2 pp.407-448; p.445.
37. John Robertson, The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue (1985), pp.85-86.
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39. Ibid., p.86.
40. Ibid., p.108; the event was reported in The Scots Magazine, vol.21 (1759), pp.603, 659-660.
41. [George Dempster], Reasons for extending the Militia Acts to the Disarmed Counties of Scotland (1760).
42. [Richard Phillips] (editor), Public Characters of 1809-10 (1810), pp.245-246.
43. Janet Adam Smith, 'Some Eighteenth Century Ideas of Scotland'; in Phillipson and Mitchison (editors), Scotland in the Age of Improvement. Essays in Scottish History in the Eighteenth Century (1970), p.11. For a general discussion of the Scottish establishment's disapproval of broad Scots see Adam J. Aitken, 'The Good Old Scots tongue: Does Scots have an Identity?'; in E. Haugen et al. (editors), Minority Languages Today (1981), p.83.
44. Quoted in Ernest Campbell Mossner, The Life of David Hume (1954), p.372.
45. [Phillips], Public Characters, p.246; an account of these lectures was given also in The Scots Magazine, vol.23 (1761), pp.389-390.
46. For a brief sketch of his character and life, see Frederick A. Pottle (editor), Boswell's London Journal 1762-1763 (1950), p.34.
47. William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Frederick A. Pottle (editors), Boswell for the Defence 1769-1774 (1959), p.52.
48. The Scots Magazine, vol.23 (1761), pp.440-441, which gives a list of regulations of the new society and a complete list of the directors.
49. [Phillips], Public Characters, p.248.
50. Emerson, 'Select Society', pp.299-300.

51. Alexander Allardyce (editor), Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century, from the Mss. of John Ramsay, Esq., of Ochertyre (2 vols. 1888), vol.1 p.321 n.
52. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster.
53. The acreage is mentioned in Dempster to Edmund Burke, 26 September 1768: Sheffield City Archives, WWM/MF/76, 1/223. For the rental value, see Alex. J. Warden, Angus or Forfarshire, the Land and People, Descriptive and Historical (5 vols. 1880-1885), vol.3 p.198.
54. Present day (January 1996) monetary values have been calculated using the relevant tables in B. R. Mitchell, British Historical Statistics (1988), chapter 14, for 1760-1914, and the government's Retail Price Index (together with its predecessors) for the subsequent period.
55. Sir Francis Grant (editor), The Faculty of Advocates in Scotland 1532-1943 (1944), p.53.
56. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.5. The following account of Dempster's and Fergusson's travels is an abridgement of pp.5-8.
57. Dempster to Fergusson, 28 February 1795: ibid., p.255; this quotation appears additionally on p.6.
58. Dempster to Fergusson, 26 November 1756: ibid., p.14.
59. Ibid., p.7.
60. Alexander Fergusson (editor), Letters and Journals of Mrs Calderwood of Polton from England, Holland, and the Low Countries in 1756 (1884), p.333.
61. Dempster to Fergusson, 26 November 1756: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.11.
62. Ibid., pp.12,15.
63. Dempster to Fergusson, 5 and 11 December 1756 and 19 February 1757: ibid., pp.17,22 and 27 respectively.
64. Dempster to Fergusson, 19 February 1757: ibid., p.27.
65. Dempster to Fergusson, 30 April 1757: ibid., pp.31-32.
66. Dempster to Fergusson, 19 February 1757: ibid., pp.26-27.
67. Dempster to Fergusson, 5 December 1756: ibid., pp.15-17.
68. Janet Adam Smith, 'Some Eighteenth-Century Ideas of Scotland' and John Clive, 'The Social Background of the Scottish Renaissance'; both in N. T. Phillipson and Rosalind Mitchison (editors), Scotland in the Age of Improvement (1970), pp.107-124 and pp.225-244 respectively.
69. Clive, 'Scottish Renaissance'.

70. Dempster to Fergusson, 28 August 1757: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.36-37.
71. Dempster to Fergusson, 16 December 1756: Ibid., p.25. For an account of the controversy see Richard B. Sher, Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment. The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh (1985), pp.74-93.
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73. Ibid., pp.28-29.
74. [Nathaniel Morren] (editor), Annals of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 1739-1766 (2 vols. 1838-1840), p.129; Alexander Carlyle, Anecdotes and Characters of the Times, edited by J. Kinsley (1973), p.163; Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.25.
75. [Phillips], Public Characters, p.248.
76. Dempster to Fergusson, 16 December 1756: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.22.
77. Dempster to Fergusson, undated but end September 1758: ibid., p.46.
78. John Stuart Shaw, The Management of Scottish Society 1707-1764. Power, Nobles, Lawyers, Edinburgh Agents and English Influences (1983), p.23.
79. [Phillips], Public Characters, p.243.
80. See, for example, the references to parliamentary terminology at the meetings held on 6 February 1759 and 18 December 1759: 'Rules and Orders of the Select Society', pp.137 and 148 respectively.
81. Ibid., pp.130,132,143,144-5,148 and 155.
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83. William Thomas Laprade (editor), Parliamentary Papers of John Robinson 1774-1784 (1922 reprint), p.7.
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86. Dempster to Fergusson, 3 September 1760: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.50-51.

87. The Scots Magazine, vol.22 (1760), p.504; Dundee Town Council Minute Book vol.10, entry for 29 September 1761: City of Dundee District Council Archive and Record Centre.
88. John Murray of Strowan to duke of Atholl, 2 November 1760: Atholl Muniments, 47/12/137; Sedgwick, House of Commons, vol.1 p.402; Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.2 pp.564-565.
89. For a short account of Gilbert Elliot's political career see Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.2 pp.390-394.
90. Dempster to Elliott, 5 October, 19 October, 13 November and 2 December 1760: NLS, Ms.11015 ff.59-60, 61-62, 73-74 and 77-78 respectively. For a brief analysis of the campaign see Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.1 p.509.
91. Patrick Yeoman to duke of Atholl, 27 March 1761; and duke of Atholl to Patrick Yeoman, 27 March 1761: Atholl Muniments, 46/13/102 and 46/13/103 respectively.
92. Alexander Murdoch, 'The People Above'. Politics and Administration in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Scotland (1980), p.98.
93. [Phillips], Public Characters p. 249; Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.56.
94. Fergusson, 'Dingwall Burgh Politics', p.103.
95. Adam Drummond to duke of Atholl, 19 February 1761: Atholl Muniments, 47/13/46.
96. Dempster to Fergusson, 14 October 1760: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.56.

CHAPTER 2

PARLIAMENT 1761-1767

Once in parliament Dempster lost no time in attracting attention. Although the king's speech was read on 6 November 1761, the real business of the house of commons did not start until 13 November, when the address to the king was moved. John Wilkes moved some criticisms of the speech, characteristically in fairly strong terms, and Dempster seconded him with an apparently successful maiden speech, as Horace Walpole recorded:

“Dempster, a young Scotch member, seconded Wilkes, though less peremptory in opposition; for though he pleaded for the extension of the militia to Scotland, and said the militia had felt the heavy hand of administration, yet he censured the German war, as having neither object nor end; condemned faction, and said, he was pleased to see that his Majesty had emancipated himself from the chains that had been prepared for him.”¹

In view of Dempster's enthusiasm for a Scottish militia and his opposition to the use of Hanoverian mercenaries mentioned in a letter to Sir Adam Fergusson (see p.18) the first two parts of this report are unsurprising. The reference to the king's emancipation is less obvious, but probably refers to the king's gradual easing out of the trusted counsellors of the old régime, under the guidance of his mentor, the earl of Bute.²

Dempster's speech appears to have been as striking as he had hoped, for James Harris, another new member of parliament, also commented on it:

“Dempster, a young North British Lawyer followed [Wilkes] & with an assurance, that for its unexampled Novelty, gave great Entertainment, immediately arraigned the Cock-pit method of a minister's bringing an Address thither in his Pocket; that it should be the act of a Committee for that purpose appointed etc. he then fell on the expence & Justicity of the German War.”³

Another commentator was Lord George Sackville, a friend of the king, who a few days later wrote to General Irwin:

“A new Scottish member, a Mr Dempster, showed a strong desire of speaking and seems to have abilities sufficient to make him an object. In short, he promises well, and though he diverted the House by a becoming ignorance of its forms, yet he proved that he neither wanted language, manner nor matter.”⁴

In view of the election campaign assistance Dempster had received from Sir Gilbert Elliot and Lord Bute it might have been expected that he would be a government supporter; Bute was then Secretary of State for the Northern Department and later became (from 29 May 1762 until his resignation in 1763) First Lord of the Treasury.⁵ However, the expected statement of loyalty did not come, and Dempster had to be prompted by Sir Harry Erskine on behalf of Bute:

“After showing him the necessity of attaching himself to some person or body of men, and entering on your Lordship’s character, I asked him if he had made any connexion with any other person...he declared he had not. I advised him if he meant to attach himself to you to tell you so... he said he chose to do it in writing... as an evidence to produce against him if he should act contrary to his professions.”⁶

Dempster accordingly confirmed his attachment to the government and as an expression of his loyalty on 11 December 1761 duly attacked William Beckford, one of Pitt’s allies, whose motion for Spanish papers he called “foolish & factious, foolish as it was intrusted in perusing two Newspapers; factious as it tended to set up a first Minister [Pitt].”⁷ On 15 December Dempster again supported the administration by speaking against the tax on windows, in a speech which drew from Harris the accolade that he had introduced “a bold Figure” [of speech].⁸

However, there were already signs that Dempster was finding it difficult to adjust to parliamentary procedures and tending to behave with a self-defeating impetuous enthusiasm. On 1 December 1761, during a debate in a committee on the importation of Irish beef, pork and butter “Dempster dashed away with spirit against the Bill, & said several good things, but rose too often & made people tired.”⁹

Dempster became restive as a government supporter. The English militia act of 1757 was due for renewal in the 1761-2 season and thus there was a chance to extend it to Scotland. However, opinion was split even in Scotland: when the burghs and counties were canvassed to rally support the sixteen burghs which declared an opinion were evenly divided for and against. Those against included Dempster's own burgh of St Andrews. In these circumstances the government was unenthusiastic about promoting a bill for a Scottish militia, although Elliot succeeded in obtaining support when he declared that he would move a bill.¹⁰ Unfortunately, illness prevented this and Dempster, in exasperation, stated that he would move for it himself, and in a letter to Alexander Carlyle also declared, rather rashly, that he would make a similar motion each year until a Scottish militia bill was passed:

“When militia is talked of many people talk of economy both of men and money who during the whole course of their Administration have discovered the most scandalous prodigality of both on every other occasion. Nothing can be clearer than that standing Armies depopulate & [a] Militia peoples a Country. The more we are exhausted the more use for a Militia. I have all along expected that Mr Elliot would move for ours, tho' if the English Bill was only temporary he was doubtfull. His distress [illness] is now past the worst but his recovery is so slow that I doubt if he'll be out [in] time enough to make the motion. I hope some more respectable countryman than me will do it but if they will not I have signified my intention to move for it. But I only do it because I think it my duty, because One ought to squeak when his toes are trod upon but not from any [but] the most distant glimmering of hope that we will obtain it. I intend to renew the motion every Session remember Carlisle I tell you so, keep my letter and if any alteration in my situation should produce an alteration in my sentiments & in this design inclose it to me in a Blank cover. It will be a severe but a usefull monitor.”¹¹

Pressure from English ministers, led by the duke of Newcastle and the earl of Hardwicke, led to the scheme being abandoned; they well knew that Bute could not afford to seem to be too partial to the Scots. Following Bute's lead the Scottish members voted on 22 March not to introduce a Scottish militia bill.¹² When the English militia was debated during March 1762, Dempster, his exasperation complete, on the 18th “absurdly charged the Countys, when the Men had not been embodied, with Cowardice.”¹³

Dempster found himself increasingly at variance with most of his Scottish colleagues; on 26 March 1762 when the Lord Advocate of Scotland (Thomas Miller), supported by Elliot and Wedderburn, moved for a bill to shorten the winter Law term in Scotland:

“Dempster got up & opposed it - said it would only tend to create Expence & give trouble; that our Sort of men had not yet given their Consent, the Suitors... - that all Judges were lazy, & old Councillors were covetous...”¹⁴

He broke completely with Bute and his friends when on 9 and 10 December 1762 he spoke and voted against the peace preliminaries (which resulted in the Treaty of Paris of March 1763).¹⁵ He remained at odds with them in the new year, for on 7 February 1763 he again poured scorn on the proposed peace treaty,¹⁶ and on 7 March spoke in opposition to the Budget.¹⁷

It is clear that party politics, and the need to vote with a party against the dictates of his conscience, were distasteful to Dempster, as he wrote to Sir Adam Fergusson in 1775, shortly after Sir Adam had become MP for Ayrshire:

“I have long thought what I have no doubt you are by this time convinced of -that unless one preserves a little freedom and independency in Parliament to act in every question and to vote agreeably to the suggestions of one’s mind, a seat in Parliament is a seat on thorns and rusty nails.”¹⁸

He was aware that the developing party system resulted in speeches during debates having less influence on members’ voting intentions than their party allegiance: “a call of the House is now like its debates mere matter of form.”¹⁹ By honestly following his conscience and supporting any measure he felt to be in the public interest, regardless of its author, Dempster became an impractical politician, finding himself time and again amongst a tiny minority. He also denied himself any possibility of a ‘place’ or office, however minor, within a ministry. However, in his first years in parliament, Dempster seems to have nurtured some hopes of rising to high office and to have felt that

his independent stance need not be an impediment to this. James Boswell recorded the following conversation with him in February 1763:

“Dempster drank tea with me. We talked of the House of Commons, and schemes of rising in the world. Dempster said he had a great deal of ambition, and yet much contentment. I asked him what his ambition extended to. He answered, ‘To be the first man in the Kingdom’ - a fine idea no doubt but a chimerical one. I hinted that servility to the Court might be necessary: to stoop in order to rise. But he maintained that a man who kept himself quite independent, and who showed that he resolutely acted according to his conscience, would acquire respect, and would make his way honourably. He said that a Member who sets up on that footing must be laughed at for some time, because all the Patriots have at last come in, for proper considerations; at least the exceptions are very few. But he declared to me upon his word that he was determined to persevere in rectitude, let the consequences be lucky or the reverse.”²⁰

Notwithstanding his enthusiastic involvement in the house of commons, Dempster seems to have been in Edinburgh a good deal during 1762. He became a member of the Poker Club founded in 1762 by Alexander Carlyle and his friends as a replacement for the now defunct Select Society and which included a similar cross-section of society in its membership. The name was coined by Dr Adam Ferguson as a quaint allusion to its stated purpose - as a club to ‘stir-up’ the country with regard to the militia bill, to which Dempster had referred in his maiden speech in parliament and which was a parliamentary issue to which he remained committed. The Poker Club’s meetings were much more informal than those of the Select Society, which led at least one commentator to conclude that it was no more than a general debating society and standing excuse for convivial evenings:

“the Poker Club ... met at a house called the Diversorium, in the vicinity of the Netherbow. The sole object of the members was conviviality, and claret being then sold at eighteen pence per bottle, we believe the chief, if not only beverage, was Bourdeaux.”²¹

The Poker Club’s role as a convivial social club is supported by Carlyle’s brief history of the club’s early years which he prefixed to the minutes for 1774-84 and reproduced in his memoirs.²² However, the Poker, like the Select Society before it, provided the literati with a social forum in which to cultivate acquaintance with the gentry over the dinner table and thus imbue them with their

values and aspirations. Rather than campaign as an organised body it relied on its influential members to keep applying pressure for a militia.²³ Despite various vicissitudes it continued to meet until the mid-1780's, providing all the while a basis for agitation on the militia issue.²⁴ That Dempster himself regarded the Poker Club as having a serious purpose is clear from a letter he wrote to Carlyle, in which he introduced another topic close to his heart, county electoral reform:

“Without meaning to enter into the American Controversy I can hardly regret it since it is like to procure us a Militia and has actually shewn us the use of it. Some of my Correspondents in Scotland friends to Militia have writ to me, that they think nothing should be said concerning it [a militia bill] till they see if any body will attack it. I own I am of a different Opinion. I think the Poker should take up the Pen, Both to stifle opposition from impertinent scribblers, and to reconcile the Country to it ... When the Poker has accomplished its favourite Point of a Militia may I beg they will turn their Attention to the representation of Scotland and urge its Extension so as to let the industrious Farmer and Manufacturer share at least in a Privilege now engrossed by the great Lord the Drunken Laird and the Drunkener Baillie.”²⁵

Dempster did not confine himself totally to politics. During his early years in London he spent a lot of time in the company of James Boswell, with whom he had become friendly in Edinburgh,²⁶ and a mutual friend, Andrew Erskine, Lord Kellie's brother. One of the first records of Dempster's friendship with Boswell was in October 1760, when Alexander Donaldson, an Edinburgh bookseller, published A Collection of Original Poems by the Rev. Mr Blacklock and Other Scotch Gentlemen.²⁷ It was just sufficiently successful to result in the publication of a second volume (under a slightly different title) and Erskine, who had contributed to the first volume, encouraged Boswell and Dempster to contribute some pieces for the second.²⁸ Dempster's four contributions, although unremarkable, provide an early instance of a poetical bent which manifested itself again later in life. Early in 1763, when Dempster, Boswell and Erskine were all in London together they collaborated on another literary project, this time a critique of 'Elvira', a play by David Mallet, who had changed his name from Malloch. As well as objecting to his change of name Dempster, Boswell and Erskine

felt that his manners were too arrogant for one who was the son of a tenant farmer, and who had in his youth been a janitor in the High School of Edinburgh.²⁹

The first idea was to attend the play and ‘damn’ it on its first night, 19 January 1763. At the time the right of theatre-goers to make an uproar if they disliked a piece was legally established and freely exercised and it was not uncommon for groups to organise the ‘damning’ of a new play: that is, to so intimidate the actors and manager that there would be no announcement from the stage that the play would be repeated. A play damned on its first or second night resulted in the author losing his benefit (the third night) and receiving nothing whatever.³⁰ The three collaborators entered the theatre under assumed names (“Dempster was Clarke; Erskine, Smith: and I [Boswell], Johnston”³¹) but despite their best efforts at hissing and catcalling were unable to arouse much support from the audience and eventually were forced to desist. After the play, however, the idea of a written condemnation arose:

“We were in high glee, and after supper threw out so many excellent sallies of humour and wit and satire on Malloch and his play that we determined to have a joint sixpenny cut [pamphlet], and fixed next day for throwing our sallies into order.”³²

The outcome was a pamphlet entitled Critical Strictures on the Tragedy of Elvira³³ which seems in the event to have been mostly written by Dempster, despite some misgivings. He commented: “We have hardly a right to abuse this tragedy: for bad as it is, how vain should either of us be to write one not near so good.”³⁴ The play itself went on to enjoy moderate success, while reviews of the pamphlet were severe. It was dismissed by The Critical Review in a single sentence: “We shall bestow no further notice on these strictures than to say they appear to be the crude efforts of envy, petulance, and self-conceit.” This provided one epithet for each of the authors, and according to Boswell they entered into a humorous contention as to which adjective belonged to whom.³⁵

While in London Dempster stayed in a succession of rented rooms or lodgings, never remaining long in any of them. His first London address was St James Place, close to Green Park, from where he wrote a letter to William Johnstone (later Sir William Pulteney) in January 1762.³⁶ In May and June of 1763 Boswell records Dempster as having taken 'country lodgings' in Kensington, and at the beginning of July 1763 that he had moved to Manchester Buildings, Westminster.³⁷ The last of these was a row of bleak tenements by the River Thames on the site of the present New Scotland Yard. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries its location conveniently close to the house of commons made it popular with MPs and other people connected with politics; in the 1770's, for example, James Macpherson of Ossian fame lived there.³⁸

Domestic comforts were not entirely lacking, however, since Dempster's sister Jean (1736-?1770) kept home for him during this period. Unfortunately, little is known of her but from Boswell's account she seems to have been a pleasant, level-headed woman who provided a good companion for Dempster. Boswell's own opinion of her, as of Dempster himself, tended to depend on his own mood at the time. Thus, on one occasion she was described as having "a good deal of gentleness of manners as well as cleverness" while on another she was "an ugly disagreeable wretch."³⁹ It appears that she is the sister referred to as being in decline in a letter from Dempster to Sir Adam Ferguson in 1770,⁴⁰ and in fact she may have died in 1770 for afterwards Dempster seems to have lived a typical bachelor existence, as the following extract from Boswell's Journal indicates:

"We called together at Dempster's, who was gone abroad and left his dining-room in perfect Scotch confusion. ... I wrote down the following inventory of a Scotch Member of Parliament's dining-room furniture: Upon one table a stone basin with dirty water; a china goglet,... or water-bottle with water in it; a case of razors; a shaving-brush, shaving-box and soap-ball, a strap, and a tin jug for warming water in. Upon one chair a pair of ruffles, dirty. Upon another chair a pair of white stockings and a pair of black ditto, a stock, a clothes-brush, a towel, and a shaving-cloth, dirty. Upon the arms of two chairs placed close together a flannel waistcoat without sleeves. Upon another chair a dirty shirt. Upon another ditto four combs, a pair of scissors, and a stick of pomatum. Upon the carpet a long piece of blue and white check spread out, a tea-chest, two shoes at a considerable distance from each other, a flannel powdering-gown, a pair of slippers. Upon the chimney-piece

innumerable packets of letters and covers to be franked, a book, a pamphlet, some newspapers, and a snuff-box. Hanging upon brass rails two hats, a sword and belt, a belt without sword. Stacking in a corner a very long cane with a gold head.”⁴¹

On 15 July 1763 Dempster, calling on Boswell, learned of the latter’s recent meeting with Dr Samuel Johnson. Boswell was suffering a severe hangover as a result of staying up late the night before drinking port with Johnson, but Dempster saw no reason to criticise him: “Dempster came and saw me, and said I had better be palsied at eighteen than not keep company with such a man as Johnson.”⁴² Encouraged by this appreciation of his hero Boswell invited Dempster to dine at his chambers in Downing Street to meet the great man, the fourth member of the party being Boswell’s uncle, Dr John Boswell. The evening appears to have been a lively one, but distinctly unharmonious despite the efforts of Dr Boswell to lighten the atmosphere among a series of arguments. The first of these concerned the price-reducing activities of Alexander Donaldson the Edinburgh bookseller (the publisher of several of Dempster’s and Boswell’s poetical efforts, see p.38). Until 1710 there was no copyright law in England, but publishers assumed a right in perpetuity. In that year a law was passed limiting the period of copyright at fourteen years, with a power of renewal for another fourteen if the author was still alive at the end of the first term. Notwithstanding this, English booksellers, who dominated the trade, continued to assert the perpetual right at common law until challenged by Donaldson who was finally vindicated in the house of lords.⁴³ According to Boswell’s account:

“Mr Johnson ... abused Donaldson as a rogue who took advantage of the law to cheat his brethren... ‘fourteen years is too short a term. It should be sixty years.’ ‘But’, said Dempster, ‘Mr Donaldson is anxious for the encouragement of literature. He brings books so cheap that poor students may buy them.’ ‘Well,’ said Johnson, ‘allowing that to be his motive, he is no better than Robin Hood, who robbed the rich in order to give to the poor.’ ‘Come,’ said the Doctor, ‘here’ is a health to bold Robin Hood.”⁴⁴

Later in the evening there was a more extended argument on the relative worth of wealth against personal qualities:

“Dempster argued on Rousseau’s plan that the goods of fortune were nothing to a wise man, who ought only to value internal merit. Replied Johnson: ‘If man were a savage ... this might be true. But in civilized society we all depend upon each other, and our happiness is very much owing to the good opinion of others. ... A man who has a good coat upon his back meets with a better reception than he who has a bad one.’ ...

“Dempster then argued that internal merit ought to make the distinction amongst mankind. Replied Johnson: ‘Mankind have found from experience that this could not be. How shall we determine the proportion of internal merit? ... A man is born to hereditary rank, or his obtaining particular offices gives him a certain rank. Subordination tends greatly to the happiness of men. There is a reciprocation of pleasure in commanding and obeying. Were we all upon an equality, none of us would be happy, any more than single animals who enjoyed mere pleasure.’ ...

“Thus did Mr Johnson show upon solid principles the necessity and the advantage of subordination, which gave much satisfaction to me, who have always had strong monarchical inclinations but could never give strong reasons in their justification. The republican Dempster was fully silenced; but being obstinately fond of his shallow views, he would not own his conviction.”⁴⁵

However, it seems likely that the argument was less one-sided than Boswell cared to record and that Dempster’s quick wit caused Johnson considerable discomfiture. His side of the argument appears to have been characterised by ill-temper rather than eloquence, so much so that the peace-making Doctor Boswell was induced to remark to Boswell on his departure, with reference to Johnson, “There are few people in Edinburgh who would keep company with this man.”⁴⁶ Johnson himself complained to Boswell two days later:

“he did not like Dempster. He said he had not met with any man of a long time who had given him such general displeasure. That he was totally unfixed in his principles, and wanted to puzzle other people.”⁴⁷

Dempster’s opinion of Johnson after this evening has not been recorded, but it is likely that it remained a benign one; he certainly commented favourably on Johnson’s Journey to the Western Islands in 1775.⁴⁸ A feature of Dempster’s personality throughout his life was his cheerful willingness to become and remain friends with people with whom he differed profoundly on political or other grounds.

In 1763 Dempster involved himself in another major activity, the founding of the first bank in Dundee. During the early part of the year he attended a number of meetings of merchants and manufacturers in Dundee to discuss the establishment of a bank.⁴⁹ At that time there were no banks outside Glasgow and Edinburgh although in most towns, Dundee included, there were a few shopkeepers who acted informally as bankers by dealing in exchange - that is, they would give cash for bills on London, or sell bills on London to people wishing to transfer money to other parts of the kingdom.⁵⁰ The Bank of Scotland had twice attempted to establish a branch in Dundee - in 1696 and 1731 - but failed each time.⁵¹ However, Dundee was by now becoming a fast-growing centre of commerce whose banking needs were outgrowing the capacity of these informal arrangements. A proper bank was needed to:

“[supply] an elastic circulating medium (whether of coin only, or of coin and notes jointly), one whose amount varies easily as the wants of the community, changing from week to week and from year to year, require. [And to accommodate] respectable and experienced men of an enterprising disposition with the means of carrying on business to a larger extent than their own capital would permit.”⁵²

The outcome of the Dundee meetings was the foundation of the Dundee Bank which began business on 1 August 1763 under the name of George Dempster, Esq. and Company. That Dempster played a leading role is clear from the choice of name and from its constitution, which “reflected the Whig-democratic ideas of Dempster.”⁵³ The partnership was broadly based with the great majority of the 36 partners being Dundee traders and only 8 being landed gentlemen of the region.⁵⁴ The intention was to involve a major part of the town’s business community in the new bank, tied into it by shareholding. The initial capital of £12,600 was divided into 63 shares of £200 each with each subscriber being allowed to hold no more than 3 shares. Nine subscribers, Dempster included, held the maximum number. The contract of co-partnery, placing unlimited liability on the partners, was to last for seven years, renewable thereafter by a decision of two-thirds of all the partners. General

meetings of all the partners were to be held twice a year.⁵⁵ The preamble to the contract set out the objects of the new company as follows:

“The persons subscribing being sensible of the great inconveniency which the merchants and manufacturers of this part of the country lie under by reason of their distance from Edinburgh, and the difficulty of procuring Loans and negotiating Cash Accompts with the Banks there established, Have agreed, and hereby agree, to unite and join themselves into a Society or Company for Issuing and Circulating Notes of hand, payable at their office in Dundee, for lending money on Cash Accompts, Bills, or Personal Securities, for purchasing Bills of Exchange, and discounting Inland Bills or Notes. ...”⁵⁶

Although there were one or two crises, notably in 1765 and 1772, and despite the fact that in at least one view the bank “excelled all the other small banks in iniquity, by postponing legal payment for twelve months”⁵⁷ the Dundee Bank prospered - so much so that in 1792 a second bank, the Dundee Commercial Bank, was established.⁵⁸ The Dundee Commercial Bank’s business was transferred to the Dundee New Bank on the latter’s creation in 1802, and in 1838 the Dundee New Bank in turn was taken over by the Dundee Banking Company (i.e. George Dempster, Esq. and Company).⁵⁹ The Dundee Bank continued successfully until it amalgamated with the Royal Bank of Scotland, in 1864.⁶⁰

Having seen the Dundee Bank successfully launched, Dempster seems to have taken little or no part in its day-to-day operations. He was not one of the directors⁶¹ and his involvement seems to have been mainly confined to attendance at shareholders’ meetings. Further evidence of his declining involvement is the decision in 1777 to change the name of the company to the Dundee Banking Company and to dispense with the earlier designation of George Dempster, Esq. and Company.⁶² Dempster’s involvement with banking was not confined to the Dundee Bank for he also became one of the original partners of the Perth United company, formed by the merging of six recently founded small Perth banks, which commenced business on 6 May 1766.⁶³

In August 1763 Dempster paid a visit to Paris; his reason for doing so is not clear, but it may have been to assist his friend, and later fellow MP, the lawyer Andrew Stuart (1725-1801) who had been there since the previous August collecting evidence on behalf of the duchess of Argyll in 'the Douglas cause'. Several of Stuart's other Edinburgh legal friends also visited Paris to assist him.⁶⁴ While in Paris Dempster received a cry for help from Boswell, who himself was in a state of misery and despair in Utrecht because his father had forced him to go there to study law:

"I recollected that Dempster was in Paris. I wrote to him my situation and begged that he would meet me in Brussels. ... I got a letter from Dempster who had come from Paris to Brussels, 62 leagues in 30 hours a strong proof of his regard for me, and generosity of soul. It was hard to think that he had set out before my letter bidding him write first, could reach Paris and so he had missed seeing me."⁶⁵

One of Dempster's most attractive characteristics was his willingness to help others in distress; this is a particularly striking example of his "generosity of soul".

In parliament Dempster continued to take a fairly independent line. In his maiden speech he had appeared to support Wilkes, but on 15 November 1763 he voted against him in the debate on whether or not issue number 45 of Wilkes' North Briton was a seditious libel against the king.⁶⁶ The suggestion that Dempster did this out of patriotic resentment at Wilkes' attacks on Scotland in the North Briton is probably correct;⁶⁷ Dempster may also have still felt some loyalty towards Bute, against whom Wilkes was particularly vitriolic. On 9 December 1763, following an attempt to assassinate Wilkes by Alexander Dunn, a Scots officer in the marines, Dempster convinced the house that Dunn was mad by refuting the latter's assertion that Wilkes still had friends in Scotland:

"Talking of Wilkes having still Friends in Scotland (Dun had said so in a Letter) Dempster told us that he had travelled [a] great part of Scotland this Summer, & yet no man could be more generally detested there, than Wilkes was."⁶⁸

Nevertheless, Dempster opposed government tactics against Wilkes after the publication of North Briton No. 45. The government issued a general warrant which was executed by treasury agents on

30 April 1763.⁶⁹ (A general warrant was not directed to a named person but ordered the arrest of all concerned; in this case all those involved in the production of the North Briton together with the seizure of their papers). Although ultimately on 20 January 1764 Wilkes was expelled from membership of the house of commons⁷⁰ the question of the legality of general warrants was in doubt and was an issue on which the parliamentary opposition hoped to discredit the administration. Accordingly, the subject was debated in February 1764. On this occasion, Dempster, opposed to Wilkes but equally firmly opposed in principle to general warrants, on 14 February spoke and voted against the government.⁷¹ The government in the end was saved by the Welsh and Scottish members - once again Dempster was out of step with his Scottish colleagues.

On 19 March 1764 a bill was introduced into the house of commons to regulate the Scottish banks, in particular to outlaw the 'option clause' whereby the banks could, at their option, refuse immediate payment on their notes and instead promise payment with interest in six months.⁷² The Dundee Bank (George Dempster, Esq. and Company) had from the first operated a 'double option' clause,⁷³ and not surprisingly, therefore, Dempster opposed this measure, saying "if his Countrymen had no Cash in Scotland, they had good things here."⁷⁴ The motion was dropped without a division.

Various political groups continued to hope for Dempster's support: in May 1764 Newcastle listed him 'doubtful',⁷⁵ suggesting that Dempster, whether or not he had been formally approached on Newcastle's behalf, had certainly not made it clear that such an approach would be categorically rejected; and in June 1765 Robert Nugent (one of the MPs for Bristol, who, in December 1766, became President of the Board of Trade) sought, unsuccessfully it appears, to secure his allegiance for Grenville.⁷⁶ On 9 January 1765 he attended the Cockpit meeting to hear the speech and address,⁷⁷ but on 6 February 1765 spoke and voted against the Stamp Act.⁷⁸ This was the commencement of a long involvement with American affairs, in which his support for the American

colonists never wavered. Grenville had introduced this measure to meet the cost of military defence in the American colonies by imposing an American stamp duty - a tax on papers required in official transactions. The main controversy about the stamp duties was that they were the first direct tax upon the colonies - hitherto only indirect taxes had been collected as part of the general system of regulation of trade. The tax accordingly aroused fierce hostility in America although it was generally popular with the landed classes at home since the whole purpose was to minimise the land tax.⁷⁹

Dempster had his mind made up on the issue from the outset: ten years later he wrote to Sir Adam Fergusson:

“I know not what your opinion may be on this head. It is a nice subject and one of the few in politics whereon I know the sentiments of good men are diametrically opposite. From the first proposing of the Stamp Act mine has been neat and decided. I spoke a few words against it and divided with 39 members [Dempster’s memory is playing him false here; the vote was 49 - not 39 - against 245]. I then thought what I now think, that were I King of Great Britain and all the ministry, if the Americans would invite me to tax them I would reject the task and for their sakes and for my own leave it to themselves. The ministry are, I see, determined to adhere to their system, the Americans to their natural rights. God knows how it may end. I foretell it will begin with bloodshed in America and end with a change of ministers and measures in England. I don’t desire to hear from you on this subject.”⁸⁰

That Dempster should so soon have adopted such an uncompromising position is somewhat surprising since he had no American connections and the subject had not appeared in his correspondence. The general subject of the American colonies, their importance to Britain and the policies which should be applied to them had been debated by the Select Society⁸¹ and this presumably helped Dempster form his opinion.

In the spring of 1765, George III, after an illness which may have been the first attack of his madness (although dismissed as a cold by Grenville) decided there must be a council of regency for fear he might die while his heir was an infant.⁸² During the ensuing regency bill debates Dempster spoke

twice, on 9 May when he eulogised the king and deferred to his judgement in the selection of a regent,⁸³ and on 11 May when he supported a motion against any female regent marrying a Catholic.⁸⁴ The regency council was to comprise various members of the royal family and the main point at issue appears to have been the eligibility of the king's mother. On ministerial advice, the king agreed to her exclusion to avoid parliamentary opposition to the bill as a whole, only to find an amendment moved to reverse this decision to the applause of the opposition - to the mortification of the king who was thereby made to appear an undutiful son.⁸⁵

In July 1765, the Rockingham government assumed office and Dempster gave them his support. It is likely that the main reason for his doing so was the willingness of Rockingham to seek and secure an accommodation with the American colonists and rescind the Stamp Act. Considerable political manoeuvring, both inside and outside parliament, was necessary to achieve this, but in February 1766 it was finally achieved by introducing a bill to declare the right of parliament to tax the colonies and when this had passed through both houses to follow it immediately by a bill repealing the Stamp Act.

Dempster's support of Rockingham earned him immediate recognition by his being appointed secretary to the Order of the Thistle, to replace the recently deceased Sir Harry Erskine.⁸⁶ This was the only office he was ever granted during his parliamentary career; the appointment was for life and was said to be worth, at most, £500 a year.⁸⁷ It has been suggested that Dempster cared little for this appointment and did not treat it seriously.⁸⁸ Yet it is noticeable that in most of the extant portraits of him, done at various times throughout his life, he is to be seen wearing the sash and medal of the Order, and his letter of thanks to Rockingham seems uncontrived and genuine enough:

"I really believe I have not a Tythe of the pleasure in receiving this office that your Lo[rds]hip has in conferring it. But if there is a man in England that would Entertain a more gratefull sense of the favour you have done me then Myself, I wish my first year of it may be my last."⁸⁹

Dempster's appointment as secretary to the Order of the Thistle made necessary a by-election in the Perth burghs. An English act passed in Queen Anne's reign to prevent the bribing of MPs by appointments to office had been extended to Scotland in the first parliament after the union.⁹⁰ An MP who had accepted office was required to seek re-election. Dempster won the by-election without contest on 17 January 1766.⁹¹

It would appear that Dempster now began to harbour modest hopes of further office in the Rockingham administration, whose general philosophy he clearly found congenial and whom he could support at least most of the time without endangering his principles. When Boswell first met Dempster again on 17 February 1766 after his return from the Grand Tour he observed: "Dempster had a real ministerial look."⁹² However, the Rockingham ministry was destined to have a short life and in the early summer of 1766, after a considerable amount of political in-fighting, William Pitt assumed power, and on terms of his own choosing. He accepted a peerage as earl of Chatham and gave up his seat in the house of commons, taking an appointment in the ministry as Lord Privy Seal, a post with no specific duties. He appointed the duke of Grafton as First Lord of the Treasury (in effect Prime Minister),⁹³ but remained himself the guiding elder statesman. Dempster's view of the new administration was one of complete distrust. In July 1766, while these changes were not yet complete, he wrote to Fergusson:

"The changes already made in the ministry are so generally known, that I may safely refer you to news papers and private letters for a full and just account of them. Pitt, who before only guided the war and despised the disposal of places, is now sovereign arbiter of all the offices in Great Britain. This he thinks perhaps a tolerable amusement in peaceable times. His object from the first moment of his former resignation was to attain this perch of power. He has inflexibly adhered to his resolution of accepting no divided power. He says he is too old for it: in this there is magnanimity. The Bedford set and G. Grenville are proscribed, all the other parties he breaks down and with their pieces forms his administration. Many of the Duke of Newcastle's friends remain, several of Lord Bute's are taken in. His own small set nobly provided for. In the trifling and inferior departments no alteration will be made. Whether he will pay off the debt he has contracted, and repair the injuries which times, and traitors, have done to the constitution, whether his power will be permanent or the machinations of the back stairs shake and

shiver his ministry like former ones time only will shew. I myself believe he will not pay off our debts, I believe he will not help the constitution, and that he will break his neck upon the back stairs.”⁹⁴

Not all the members of the Rockingham group resigned with Rockingham, and General Conway was among those who elected to continue in office under Chatham, not resigning until January 1768. Conway, like Dempster, was a consistent opponent of the American War and the British policies which led to it. Dempster was his longstanding admirer: many years later he wrote to Fergusson “ I name you the minister now living who has acted most to my liking in the course of almost twenty years experience - General Conway.”⁹⁵ In November 1766 Conway invited Dempster to attend the pre-parliament meeting to hear the king’s speech and Dempster was therefore faced with a possible conflict of loyalty. He made his allegiance to Rockingham clear by seeking his advice on whether or not to accept Conway’s invitation and combined the request with a short eulogy on Rockingham himself:

“I have been so unlucky as to miss your Lordship today at Grosvenor Square. My intention was to have ask’d your Lo[rds]hip whether I should attend at Gen[era]l Conways tomorrow Evening at the reading of the speech to which I am invited. It will give me pleasure to regulate my parliamentary conduct in what ever shape is agreeable to you. Let me say even more pleasure now than when your Lo[rds]hip was at the head of the Treasury. While in that situation the strongest declarations of attachment might admit of a double construction; at present your Lordship will not think I flatter when I express my very high esteem both of your Public & private Character.”⁹⁶

Rockingham’s reply has not survived and Dempster’s decision is not known. His continued support for Rockingham was confirmed when he voted with the group on the Land Tax on 27 February 1767.⁹⁷ With the Rockinghamites in opposition, however, any modest ambitions for office he might have been harbouring had to be put in abeyance.

Chapter 2: Notes

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CHAPTER 3

THE EAST INDIA COMPANY

Dempster's involvement with the East India Company formed yet another strand of his activities during his early years in parliament. He became a 'proprietor' (i.e. shareholder) in November 1763 when he acquired £2,000 of stock¹ and almost immediately took an active part in the debates of the general court of proprietors at India House in support of the party of Laurence Sullivan, which opposed Robert Clive and later supported Warren Hastings.²

Although the main reason for Dempster becoming a proprietor was probably simply that it was a good financial investment, it is likely that he was 'recruited' by George Johnstone, brother of William Johnstone/Pulteney with whom Dempster had become friendly while studying for the bar in Edinburgh. Johnstone was at the time building up a powerful Scottish faction among the proprietors in support of his younger brother John (see pp.59-60) and was to become one of the most influential proprietors of the period.³ The East India Company's role as a parallel centre of political power to the house of commons would also have appealed to Dempster; Professor Sutherland has shown how the affairs of government and the company were becoming increasingly intertwined.⁴ It is reasonable to assume that a man with political ambitions, as Dempster certainly then was, would wish to become involved with the company.

Finally, the East India Company offered considerable scope for patronage, useful to a politician representing as venal a constituency as the Perth district of burghs. Appointments in the company's civil administration and as commanders of its ships were much sought after, particularly by Scotsmen, and were controlled by the court of directors who shared the patronage among themselves and their friends.⁵ It is significant that Dempster's initial investment of £2,000 was the minimum

required to qualify him to become a director, indicating that from the start he harboured ambitions in this direction.⁶

The second half of the eighteenth century was a crucial and turbulent time in the company's history. Robert Clive's victory at the battle of Plassey in 1757 established the company in Bengal as a stronger political power than the local Mogul representative, the Nawab, and further steps were taken during this period towards the assumption of full governing power by the company. In the mid-1760's Clive took over the Bengal revenues although he allowed the Nawab to maintain the pretence of power by allowing the latter's officials to collect them. Meanwhile, in the south-east of India, the British capture of Madras from the French in 1746 enabled the company to strengthen its position at the expense of its main European rival.⁷

These military successes resulted in a great increase in the wealth, as well as the responsibilities, of the company and the promise of huge profits had a predictable effect on the behaviour both of the directors and proprietors at home and the company's servants in India. Up to the 1760's most proprietors were interested in the company's shares only as a safe investment, and took little interest in internal politics. This quiescent phase ended when expansion and increased profits, and wildly exaggerated expectations of better to come, led to frantic speculation in the company's shares on the London, Paris and Amsterdam stock markets.⁸ Amongst the proprietors powerful factions (akin to political parties in parliament) developed as a result of the desire on the part of individuals to influence the selection of directors for their own ends.⁹ In India the company began to lose control over its servants there as they began amassing fortunes for themselves more in the spirit of conquering rulers than of merchants and traders.¹⁰ In this they were encouraged by the controversial example of Clive, who when the Nawab of Bengal granted the company a 'jaghir' (or payment for a nominal office of honour) worth £27,000 per year took it for himself instead. Great fortunes could be

made, and were, by company servants in India through unscrupulous private trade with the Indian natives using the company's privileges but without its consent.¹¹

One of the most successful of these adventurers was John Johnstone (1734-1795), a servant of the company in Bengal, who had served in the artillery at the battle of Plassey.¹² During his stay in India he amassed an immense fortune, said to have amounted to £300,000¹³ (worth £30 million today) which if true was equal to that of Clive himself.¹⁴ However, by 1764 the abuses of Johnstone and his fellow adventurers had become so widespread and excessive that a torrent of letters of complaint was pouring into East India House, the company's labyrinthine headquarters in Leadenhall Street, and a crisis had been reached. Henry Vansittart, governor of Bengal, in attempting to regulate the private trade only succeeded in provoking an open revolt among the company's Bengal servants. The company's response was to dismiss John Johnstone and three other senior servants in Bengal.¹⁵

Johnstone, however, had powerful relatives. His elder brother, George (1730-1787) entered the debates in the company's court of proprietors to protect John's career and soon organised a powerful faction using the formidable number of connections (Scotsmen to a man) he was able to bring into the field, including George Dempster. Dempster had become acquainted with the family through another brother, William Johnstone (1729-1805) whom he met in Edinburgh. Both men were members of the Select Society and William Johnstone later joined Dempster as a member of parliament (as did both George and John) and became a lifelong friend. He was the third son of Sir James Johnstone, third baronet of Westerhall, and succeeded his brother (also Sir James) as fifth baronet in 1794. He married Frances Pulteney, niece of the earl of Bath, in 1767, and on her inheriting Lord Bath's enormous fortune took his wife's name (it is as William Pulteney that he appears in Dempster's correspondence). He was a keen agriculturalist, like Dempster, and founded the Chair of Agriculture at Edinburgh University in 1791.¹⁶

The Johnstone group supported Clive's efforts to acquire the Bengal governorship and replace Vansittart in return for a promise to assist John Johnstone's reinstatement. Clive, duly elected, failed to make this a condition of his return to Bengal and this caused the Johnstone group's not unjustified suspicions of his good faith to increase rapidly. At a particularly stormy meeting of the court of directors on 2 May 1764 where the debate focussed on the future of Clive's jaghir the Johnstone group neatly manoeuvred the proceedings to achieve John Johnstone's reinstatement as the price of Clive's retaining his jaghir.¹⁷ On arrival in Bengal, however, Clive found that the reinstated John Johnstone was already engaged once more in the very practices for which he had earlier been dismissed. Clive called for a fresh prosecution against him, and refused to abandon it despite renewed pressure from the Johnstone group in the court of proprietors.¹⁸ The Johnstones henceforth became bitter and lifelong enemies of Clive as a result of what they saw as his repeated betrayal of their interests despite their support of his. This brought them into the opposition coalition at East India House which was led by Laurence Sullivan. Sullivan had dominated the company's politics from his first election as chairman of the court of directors in 1758 and continued to do so until his eclipse by Clive in the election of April 1765.¹⁹ It was at this election that Dempster, who seems to have found common ground with Sullivan, first stood, unsuccessfully, as a candidate for one of the vacant directorships, on the 'proprietors' list'.²⁰ (There were generally two lists of candidates at each election, one the 'house list' of names proposed by the directors, the other the 'proprietors' list' of those proposed by the proprietors. Often the same names appeared on both lists.)²¹

Dempster's parliamentary and East India Company activities now began to impinge on one another. After the fall of the Rockingham administration the Chatham administration (so-called, although nominally under the leadership of the duke of Grafton, see p.49) attempted to curb the worst excesses of the East India Company by imposing stiff terms for the impending renewal of its charter

involving the introduction of a measure of parliamentary control over its affairs. Chatham's proposal was that all the Indian territory recently gained by the company must be placed under the sovereignty of the crown, although it then might be leased out to the company on suitable terms.²² Within the company the Sullivan party (at this time in opposition, the directors being led by Clive) were anxious to defeat this proposal and through Dempster and the Johnstones were successful in gaining the support of the Rockingham party in parliament.²³ Various bargaining positions were adopted both within parliament and within the company, almost all of which depended on some proportion of the company's revenues being taken by the government in return for varying degrees of freedom from interference. Dempster supported Sullivan's terms for a settlement, which involved making a clear distinction between the territorial and the trading revenues, believing that the proposals being put forward by the directors under Clive, which involved some form of partnership between the government and the company with a sharing of all revenues, would lead to the loss of the company's independence.²⁴ At a meeting of the court of proprietors on 12 March 1767:

“Sir James Hodges... moved that the Court of Directors of the East India Company do lay the same [terms for an extension of the Company's charter] before the House of Commons as the basis of an accommodation and was seconded by Sir George Colebrooke. This motion was much opposed by Mr Sullivan [sic] and Mr Dempster, as letting the Government into a partnership with the Company would soon end in the absolute dependency and ruin of the latter.”²⁵

Concurrently with these negotiations during 1766-1767 determined efforts were made to increase the company's dividend from its traditional level of 6% to 12½ per cent or even higher (Sullivan's terms for a settlement had at one stage included a dividend of 15%).²⁶ Dempster and the Johnstones were particularly vociferous supporters of this project, which appears to have been masterminded by their ally, the Irish adventurer Lauchlin Maclean (c.1728 -1777).²⁷ Maclean and Dempster seem to have collaborated quite closely,²⁸ and it is also clear that Dempster was engaged in 'splitting' his stock in order to create further votes for his side.²⁹ Excitement over the prospect of such an increase in the dividend resulted in great speculative pressure on East India stock, which boomed until the bubble

burst with the world credit crash of 1772-1773.³⁰ Dempster's motive on this occasion would appear to have been purely the hope of speculative profit to help pay off some of his debts at the time; in July 1766 he had written to Sir Adam Fergusson mentioning his purchase of East India stock (the only such reference in his surviving correspondence) and significantly it was mentioned in connection with a debt owed by Dempster to Fergusson:

“The case is this. I have given orders to pay off debts to the extent of £3000, now I am uncertain whether there will remain sufficient to pay you the whole of principal and interest. I have therefore taken upon me to ... pay off everybody else and only to give you the residue, nay more, ... because I am uncertain whether I shan't need it for a bargain of East India stock which I believe is made for me in Holland. In short I cutt and carve upon your debt with much more freedom than I will suffer you to do upon mine when the tables are turn'd, and you by your extravagance and Parliamentary contests shall be £500 in my debt.”³¹

Only Dempster's close friendship with Fergusson could allow him to make the last comment in this quotation without causing offence. In any other context it would have been cavalier and insulting.

Agreement on the extension of the company's charter was finally reached in June 1767 in negotiations between the duke of Grafton and the company. The government's position had been thrown into confusion by the collapse of the earl of Chatham from nervous exhaustion on 16 February 1767, which made it impossible for him to continue with his ministerial duties.³² The position within the company was no less confused, but the agreement reached stipulated that the company should pay the government £400,000 per year from the administrative (i.e. territorial) and trading profits of Bengal and that the company's dividend be limited by statute to 10%. This was only a temporary solution, to be reviewed after two years.³³ In the midst of this at a meeting of the court of proprietors on 6 May 1767 the Johnstone group succeeded in having the prosecutions against John Johnstone and the other dismissed servants abruptly stopped.³⁴

As part of this arrangement the company paid a substantial sum to the government as the price for being left undisturbed. However, it was manifestly incapable of governing itself responsibly: both the raising of the dividend and the reinstatement of the dismissed company servants were dangerous and irresponsible, motivated entirely by self-interest and personal gain.³⁵ Dempster did not come out well in this, for he clearly seems to have put loyalty to the Johnstones and hopes of personal benefit from the higher dividend and from the consequent higher price of East India stock above higher scruples. He fully deserved Horace Walpole's condemnation, in regard to the proceedings of the 6 May debate:

“The indecency and insult of this proceeding raised high resentment in the House of Commons; and though Dempster and W. Burke, two of their own members, ventured to avow their own share of the criminality, justifying themselves as proprietors, (a character which surely, as judges, they ought to have avoided,) yet the moderation of Conway prevented the House from proceeding to rigour and censure, though he said with firmness, that if the Company should hang out the flag of defiance, he should be ready to meet it.”³⁶

However, it is possible to have some sympathy with Dempster, since in the tangled affairs of the company, proprietors' and directors' interests and loyalties were often hopelessly divided. As J. Steven Watson described it:

“On the one hand the Company's shareholders [i.e. proprietors] wanted as high a dividend as possible. This meant reforming the system in India so as to prevent money leaking into the pockets of Company servants. On the other hand those directors who had friends or relatives still labouring in the Indian heat had a vested interest in allowing the bad old system to continue. ... It is not possible to simplify and to label men as corrupt or as reformers in this battle of interests, in which a man might be at once a shareholder and a representative of servants on the make.”³⁷

In light of this, Dempster's behaviour, which to modern eyes seems less than creditable, is easier to understand, since he was both a proprietor and had friends and relations working for the company in India.

In March 1767 Dempster continued to oppose Clive by obstructing attempts to continue Clive's jaghir for a further ten years.³⁸ Dempster's action was to have troublesome consequences for his parliamentary career, since it resulted in Clive sending a supporter and protégé, Robert Mackintosh, against him as a rival candidate for the Perth burghs later that year. Dempster was returned, but only after an expensive and impoverishing campaign beset with legal complications (see chapter 4).

In 1767 Dempster stood again on the proprietors' list of nominations for one of the directorships but was once again unsuccessful.³⁹ Two years later, in 1769, he finally succeeded, securing election with 781 votes, placing him 21st in terms of votes out of the 24 directors.⁴⁰ This election of April 1769 was one of the most fiercely contested of any during the eighteenth century, being the one in which Laurence Sullivan made his great and at last successful drive to regain power.⁴¹ It would appear that Sullivan's success was owed in no small measure to Dempster's efforts in helping to win over his friends, the Johnstones, at the last minute - a move which swung the election Sullivan's way.⁴² Towards the end of 1769 the interaction of Dempster's parliamentary and East India Company careers led to an uncomfortable division of his loyalty. In 1769 Grafton's provisional regulation of the company's affairs arranged two years previously (see p.62) had either to be put on a permanent basis or modified. In the event it was decided that the agreement should be continued with the payment to the government held at £400,000 and the dividend ceiling raised to 12½ per cent. This led to a reconciliation between Sullivan and Grafton and Sullivan henceforth in parliament allied himself with the administration.⁴³ Dempster however remained with Rockingham in opposition and thus found himself in two camps: with Sullivan (and thus Grafton) within East India House; opposed to Grafton (and thus Sullivan) in parliament. Instead of wholeheartedly committing himself to one camp or the other, Dempster attempted to maintain both allegiances for as long as practicable. Edmund Burke wrote to Rockingham:

"He [Dempster] thought as I do about Sullivan's coalition. He told him, that it should make no difference in his line in the India House, that there, he would as

firmly stand by him as he would continue to oppose his new friends in Parliament. That his political connexions was with your Lordship only and would always be so; but that if Mr Sul[ivan] should find that course of conduct prejudicial to his interests in Leadenhall Street, that he would at an hour's notice disqualify for the Directorship. This was what I expected from Dempster... not to sacrifice one duty to another; but to keep both if possible - if not, to put it out of his power to violate the principal."⁴⁴

Day-to-day running of the company was handled by a series of committees, places on which were allocated amongst the directors according to their experience and background. Dempster spent all his years as a director as a member of the committee of law suits, which deliberated on questions of litigation in which the company might be involved. Unsurprisingly, directors with a legal background were usually members of this committee. It was a fairly prestigious committee to be on, being ranked second after the correspondence committee in the company's informal hierarchy.⁴⁵

Debates at India House at this period were considered to be the equal of those in the house of commons, and were attended with equal interest.⁴⁶ Dempster was an active and enthusiastic participant, as the following entry in Boswell's journal for September 1769 indicates:

"Dempster called on me and carried me with him to the India House, where I heard some debates on sending the supervisors to India, and felt that I could debate these too if I were a proprietor. I was happy to hear Dempster doing very well. I was here till near five. It was good to think that these people here in London had power over immense countries at so great a distance."⁴⁷

In 1772 Boswell was to record:

"I breakfasted with Dempster, whom I found ... appearing to be as happy as I could wish him. Parliament and the East India Company had accustomed him to manly employment, and I could see that he was really satisfied with his situation. He is conscious of acting with honour and fidelity and spirit, and he feels himself happy in having a share in the great deliberations both as to this nation and the empire in India. He said he would not give up the enjoyment of the two sessions which he had sat in Parliament for any consideration."⁴⁸

In his early involvement with the company's affairs Dempster appears to have been motivated by loyalty to the Johnstones and personal gain through speculation. Yet over the years, as his involvement deepened, his attitude increasingly reflected that towards his parliamentary activities and he developed a reputation for outspokenness in standing by principle rather than allowing himself to be governed by loyalty to a party. Thus, he told Burke that he preferred in company matters to 'act from my own Sentiments, with the purity of which I am satisfied, than adopt those of others whose sincerity I suspect.'⁴⁹

Dempster was unsuccessful in the elections for directorships in 1770 and 1771 but just scraped home in 1772 with 587 votes, the lowest number of votes of any of the successful candidates.⁵⁰ On this occasion, unlike the two immediately preceding, he was not placed on the house list drawn up by the court of directors, possibly owing to a disagreement with the chairman, Sir George Colebrooke. This disagreement, the subject of which is unknown, is referred to merely in passing in two letters from Dempster to Sir Adam Fergusson.⁵¹ He was, however, the sole candidate proposed by the proprietors, which says much about his popularity among the latter.⁵² Dempster's success on this occasion appears to have been attended with considerable and lively celebration. On the following morning Boswell attempted to have breakfast with him but soon left in disgust:

"I breakfasted with Dempster. He had carried his election as one of the East India Directors; so I was surrounded with people congratulating him and among others he had at his levee Count Lauraguais, whom I could not bear... I could get no good of Dempster."⁵³

Unfortunately, nothing is known about Count Lauraguais. During the period following his second election as director, Dempster followed a rather more high-minded policy towards the East India Company than hitherto. He began to take a keen interest in Indian conditions and concerned himself closely with the company's proposed reforms.

By the spring of 1772 continued public outcry over the company's corruption and abuses in India together with a further financial crisis in its affairs were forcing a reluctant government into taking action, and Lord North (prime minister in succession to Grafton from January 1770) introduced the East India Judicature Bill which was to form eventually the basis of the Regulating Act of 1773.⁵⁴ The company's response was to propose sending out supervisors to India to assess conditions on the ground and restore law and order. (In 1769 an earlier group of supervisors sent out under the experienced Vansittart had been lost at sea).⁵⁵ Dempster enthusiastically supported the plan and took a close interest in the supervisors' selection, agreeing with the choice of Andrew Stuart and Dr Adam Ferguson (both friends of his) as possible supervisors,⁵⁶ and also sounding out Sir Adam Fergusson's willingness to be a candidate.⁵⁷

Another person approached by Dempster was his Rockingham group colleague Edmund Burke (1729-1797), with whom Dempster also appears to have become friendly, to whom Dempster wrote:

“when I consider what a field for Genius probity and Industry is open to you in that Country [India] I must make up my mind to it, and join in the requests, that you will consent to be one of our Supervisors. ... We need information in Policy commerce military and Law matters. You will find that country in a singular and almost unprecedented state of Anarchy and Despotism. You will have a system of Government to contrive for it and as Artists say upon a new principle - I throw out my Ideas to you. They are such as I meant to have regulated my own Public Opinions and Votes by as a Director. How happy it will make me would you take the trouble to correct them, and to instruct me.”⁵⁸

There is no record that Burke responded to these overtures; Andrew Stuart was willing to be a supervisor and was acceptable to the directors, but great difficulty was experienced in finding suitable and willing colleagues for him. In 1772 the East India Company's chairman, Sir George Colebrooke, wrote to William Mure of Caldwell, baron of Exchequer:

“I am sorry to tell you that, for want of getting able and proper colleagues to go out to India with Andrew Stuart, his and the Company's business, in point of the Commission, is at a stand, and is likely to remain so, till the Parliament has taken into consideration the affairs of the Company, and passed some laws for the better regulation of that part of the world.”⁵⁹

The delay and apparent procrastination in selecting supervisors on the company's part led to an impatient parliament blocking the scheme and undertaking enquiries itself.⁶⁰ Dempster objected strongly to the idea of government interference. When on 24 February 1773 the court of proprietors voted in favour of propositions giving up some of the company's freedom in return for financial assistance he rather dramatically resigned as a director:

“declaring, that the propositions likely to be agreed to [by the government] were such, that the duty he owed the company, the constitution, and himself, reduced him to the necessity of avoiding to have any hand in carrying them to parliament.”⁶¹

During the following months he actively campaigned on the issue in East India House and in May 1773 was appointed to a committee of proprietors charged with preparing a petition against the bill.⁶² In parliament, he was a frequent opposition speaker in the debates of March-June 1773 on North's Regulating Act (the parliamentary side of Dempster's East Indian activities will be covered in later chapters). In a letter to Fergusson Dempster expressed no regrets over his resignation:

“You left me soon after I had resign'd the direction. Let me assure you I have never once repented that step. The contests which have subsisted ever since among the proprietors, directors and ministry would have teized me out of my senses, and I should have died under the uneasiness of seeing so noble an object so very inadequately administer'd. By the influence of the min[i]stry, which the several alterations in the charter has very much increased, a decent plan of governing that country has been rejected and the same unlimited and undefined powers are entrusted with the Governer General and Council which occasioned the despotism, the anarchy and the peculations which have hitherto prevail'd in Bengal.”⁶³

Dempster was profoundly dissatisfied, as this letter shows, with the Regulating Act. Although it brought, for the first time, the East India Company's affairs within the influence of the government, it evidently seemed to Dempster that the appointment of a governor-general to reside in Bengal, to which the other presidencies would be subordinate, gave more opportunities for continued maladministration than for effective control by the home government.

Dempster stood again as a candidate for re-election as director against the ministerial lists in both 1773 and 1774,⁶⁴ but failed to be elected on both occasions. Henceforth, while remaining a proprietor, he confined his debating activities with regard to East Indian affairs to the house of commons, and there is no record of his participating further in the debates within East India House.

A final link between Dempster and the East India Company existed through two of his brothers from his father's second marriage, Charles and John (see pp.8-9) who entered the company's service. Charles Dempster went out as a writer to Bengal in 1769, but died there only a few years later, in 1772.⁶⁵ John Dempster, with whom Dempster was on particularly close terms, from around 1780 took to calling himself John Hamilton Dempster, possibly to distinguish himself from another brother also called John (d.1803). John Hamilton Dempster entered the company's marine service in 1768, his first voyage being as fourth mate of the Devonshire to Madras and China.⁶⁶ In time he became a captain, and after commanding sundry smaller vessels rose to command the East Indiaman, Ganges in 1781 at the age of 27.⁶⁷ He later commanded two other Indiamen, the Rose and the East Talbot.⁶⁸ Laurence Sullivan wrote to Warren Hastings on 15 May 1779 to recommend "the brother of my valuable friend Mr Dempster," and ask Hastings to befriend him.⁶⁹

There is no evidence that Dempster used his influence as a proprietor or as a director in any improper way to advance the career of John Hamilton Dempster. Nevertheless, he frequently solicited favours for friends and constituents and their relatives. The following reply to a request from Fergusson is typical of many throughout Dempster's correspondence, and also illustrates the dilemma he often found himself in between assisting someone in obtaining employment for a relative and his own perceptions of the needs of the company:

"... I omitted taking notice of the only part of your letter to which you had reason to expect a speedy answer: a cadetship to India! now that the war is at an end! easy

to be obtained! It is easy asking, but I'll give any body 100 guineas that will procure me that very favour to enable me to fullfill a possitive engagement I am under to the son of one of my constituents. Yet there is no doubt the favour m[a]y be obtained. But it must be either by some of the ministers or from the chairman or deputy chairman of the East India Company. Perhaps even this channel may fail. For the wisest thing the Company could do would be to lighten rather than add new burthens to their military and civil departments abroad, and to lower their establishments of every kind in order to redress the immense disorder into which the late war has thrown their finances."⁷⁰

The war referred to was the American Revolution which had spilled over into India when the French entered the war on the American side. Lady Haden-Guest has used this letter as evidence that Dempster disliked seeking favours for his friends and relatives⁷¹ but his correspondence overwhelmingly demonstrates the opposite. All his life he received such requests and with the very occasional exception of a note of doubt as illustrated in the letter quoted above, he seems to have been only too happy to do his best to oblige the individuals concerned. As late as 1801, for example, long after he had ceased playing any active role in the East India Company's affairs and could easily have excused himself he wrote to William Dundas, nephew of Henry Dundas:

"From old habit I am still tempted to be a kind of Office Broker, and to let the wants of others be known to those who have it in their Power to assist them. The present application is one not unconnected with Mr [Henry] Dundas's situation, as Chancellor of the University of St Andrews. It is owing to the extreme modesty of the Party, that it falls to my lot to mention it. Dr John Hunter Professor of Humanity there, whose learning and diligence help to support its Credit, has I think sixteen children on whose maintenance and education he spares no Pains. Others place a single child out in the World, now and then. He has them to dispose of in Pairs, every year. He has a very promising Pair of Boys quite ripe for for [sic] Cadets to India this year..."⁷²

Sir James Fergusson's opinion accords far better with the available evidence:

"One of the most attractive traits in Dempster's character was his readiness at all periods of his life to show kindness and encouragement to young men who were beginning their careers without advantages. For many he found employment in the East India Company's service, where his influence was considerable."⁷³

Withdrawal from the direction of the East India Company did not lead to any reduction of Dempster's interest in East India affairs nor of his active involvement in pursuing that interest. From now on, however, the stage for his speeches on East India matters was to be the house of commons, where Indian affairs formed one of the major topics to which he addressed himself for the remainder of his parliamentary career.

Chapter 3: Notes

1. India Office, Stock Ledger, L/AG/14/5/13 p.180.
2. India Office, General Court Minutes, B/256 pp.234-235; James Parker, 'The Directors of the East India Company 1754-1790' (unpublished PhD thesis for the University of Edinburgh 1977), p.82.
3. For a brief summary of George Johnstone's East India Company career, see Parker, 'Directors of E. I. Co.', pp.150-153.
4. Lucy S. Sutherland, The East India Company in Eighteenth Century Politics (1952), especially pp.5-6 and 19-20.
5. Sutherland, East India Company, pp.19-20; G. J. Bryant, 'The Scots in India in the Eighteenth Century'. The Scottish Historical Review, vol.64 (1985), p.30; C. H. Philips, The East India Company 1784-1834 (1940), pp.14-15.
6. Philips, East India Company, p.4; Martin Moir, A General Guide to the India Office Records (1988), pp.24-25.
7. This background material has been taken from Sutherland East India Company, and Parker, 'Directors of E. I. Co.'.
8. Sutherland, East India Company, pp.138-139.
9. Parker, 'Directors of E. I. Co.', p.330-332.
10. Ibid., pp.425-426.
11. For a succinct account of these abuses, see Watson, Reign of George III, pp.160-161.
12. Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.2 p.687.
13. Ibid.
14. Sutherland, East India Company, p.82 n.1; P. J. Marshall, East Indian Fortunes: the British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century (1976), p.237.
15. Sutherland, East India Company, p.116.
16. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.67-68. For Pulteney's political career see Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.3 pp.341-343. For the Chair of Agriculture see Ian J. Fleming and Noel F. Robertson, Britain's First Chair of Agriculture at the University of Edinburgh 1790-1990. A History of the Chair Founded by William Johnstone Pulteney (1990), pp.14-15.
17. Sutherland, East India Company, p.131.

18. Ibid., p.146.
19. For the story of the struggle between Sullivan and Clive, see Sutherland East India Company, pp.81-377.
20. Parker, 'Directors of E. I. Co.', p.82.
21. For more detail, see Sutherland, East India Company, pp.33-34.
22. Watson, Reign of George III, p.124.
23. Sutherland, East India Company, p.155.
24. Parker, 'Directors of E. I. Co.', p.82; for a more detailed discussion of the various complex proposals that were put forward, see Sutherland, East India Company, pp.153-166.
25. James West's report to Newcastle, endorsed 13 March 1767: British Library, Add. Mss.32980 f.272.
26. Sutherland, East India Company, p.158.
27. James N. M. Maclean, Reward is Secondary, p.181. This book provides a detailed biography of Maclean.
28. Ibid., p.223-225.
29. India Office, Stock Ledger, L/AC/14/5/16, p.226.
30. Charles Wilson, Anglo-Dutch Commerce & Finance in the Eighteenth Century (1941), pp.169-174.
31. Dempster to Fergusson, 26 July 1766: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.62-63.
32. Watson, Reign of George III, p.125; Sutherland, East India Company, p.160.
33. Watson, Reign of George III, p.125; Sutherland, East India Company, pp.173-176.
34. Sutherland, East India Company, p.171.
35. For an exposition of this view, see ibid., pp.173-176.
36. Walpole, Memoirs of George the Third, vol.3 p.22.
37. Watson, Reign of George III, pp.163-164.
38. India Office, General Court Minutes, B/257 pp.44-51; Sir John Malcolm, The Life of Robert, Lord Clive collected from the Family Papers communicated by the Earl of Powis (3 vols. 1836), vol.3 pp.201-203.
39. Parker, 'Directors of E. I. Co.', p.83, citing The London Magazine, vol.36 (1767), p.200

40. Parker, 'Directors of E. I. Co.', p.83; also p.467 (for a list of the directors and votes cast for each in 1769).
41. For an account of this election, see Sutherland, East India Company, pp.187-188.
42. Maclean, Reward is Secondary, p.228.
43. Parker, 'Directors of E. I. Co.', p.83; Watson, Reign of George III, p.165.
44. Burke to Rockingham, 9 November 1769: Thomas W. Copeland (general editor), The Correspondence of Edmund Burke (10 vols. 1958-1978), vol.2 pp.106-107.
45. Parker, 'Directors of E. I. Co.', p.337.
46. Sutherland, East India Company, p.108.
47. Boswell's Journal, 14 September 1769: Frank Brady and Frederick Pottle (editors), Boswell in Search of a Wife, 1766-1769 (1957), p.308.
48. Boswell's Journal, 22 March 1772: Wimsatt and Pottle, Boswell for the Defence, p.52.
49. Dempster to Burke, 4 August 1772: Copeland, Correspondence of Edmund Burke, vol.2 p.323.
50. India Office, General Court Minutes, B/258 p.40; Parker, 'Directors of E. I. Co.', p.468.
51. Dempster to Fergusson, 25 January and 8 February 1772: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.74-75.
52. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.73.
53. Boswell's Journal, 10 April 1772: Wimsatt and Pottle, Boswell for the Defence, pp.103-104.
54. Watson, Reign of George III, p.168.
55. Ibid., p.166; Maclean, Reward is Secondary, pp.236-238.
56. Dempster to Fergusson, 8 February 1772: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.75
57. Dempster to Fergusson, 2 October 1772: ibid., p.78.
58. Dempster to Burke, 4 August 1772: Copeland, Correspondence of Edmund Burke, vol.2 pp.321-322.
59. Sir George Colebrooke to baron William Mure, undated, 1772: Mure, Caldwell Papers, vol.3, pp.207-208. For a brief account of the difficulties surrounding the selection of the supervisors, see Sutherland, East India Company, p.217.

60. William Cobbett and T. C. Hansard, The Parliamentary History of England (1066-1803), (36 vols. 1806-1820), vol.17, cols. 559-675.
61. The Scots Magazine, vol.35 (1773), p.529.
62. India Office, General Court Minutes, B/258 p.239.
63. Dempster to Fergusson, 31 January 1774: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.80-81.
64. Parker, 'Directors of E. I. Co.', [p.84] wrongly numbered p.83; Alison Gilbert Olson, The Radical Duke. Career and Correspondence of Charles Lennox third Duke of Richmond (1961), p.160 n.; The Gentleman's Magazine, vol.44 (1774), p.187.
65. India Office, Personal Records, 0/6/14 p.471; The Scots Magazine, vol.34 (1772), p.276.
66. India Office, Marine Records Misc., L/MAR/C/652 p.35.
67. *Ibid.*, L/MAR/C/653 p.203. John Hamilton Dempster's career to this point can be traced more or less in its entirety in L/MAR/C/652 and 653.
68. India Office, Court of Directors Minutes, B/104, pp.705, 715 and 823; B/129 (1799) p.320; [India Office], List of Marine Records of the Late East India Company, and of Subsequent Date, preserved in the Record Department of the India Office, London (1896), p.82.
69. Sullivan to Hastings, 15 May 1779: British Library, Add. Mss.29143, f.247.
70. Dempster to Fergusson, 22 September [1783]: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.120.
71. Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.2 p.316.
72. Dempster to William Dundas, 26 January 1801: SRO, GD51/4/1014.
73. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.47 n.1.

CHAPTER 4

PARLIAMENT 1767-1774

By 1767 Dempster had established his popularity among his constituents: according to John Ramsay of Ochtertyre, "Mr Dempster was exceedingly beloved by high and low, being accounted a man of honour and probity. He was therefore warmly supported by the most considerable families in the country and by the leading people in the towns ...".¹ Dempster must therefore have been disagreeably surprised when, in the summer of 1767, a rival appeared and offered himself to the electors as a candidate at the next general election.

This rival candidate was Robert Mackintosh (1727-1805), son of Robert Mackintosh of Dalmunzie, minister of Erroll, and admitted advocate in 1751.² Although able and promising he made himself unpopular by his longwindedness and his argumentative and bad-tempered personality. Disappointed that his business did not increase as he grew older he quit the Scottish bar in 1761 and travelled to London. It is believed that he did so in the company of the duke of Queensberry who was going there to congratulate the young George III on the latter's recent accession to the throne. Mackintosh was hopeful of the duke's patronage in enabling him to enter parliament for the Dumfries burghs in 1761, but these hopes were dashed when the duke was obliged to accommodate the administration, by making the lord advocate, Thomas Miller of Glenlee, the member instead. Mackintosh promptly transferred his allegiance to Lord Temple thereby foolishly depriving himself of the powerful protection of Queensberry, who at that time had the ear of both the king and Lord Bute, while at the same time attaching himself to a man whose politics were diametrically opposed to Queensberry's, and who was likely to obstruct the promotion of Queensberry's known friends. Lord Temple apparently recommended Mackintosh strongly to the Rockingham administration to be a Scottish judge; but the president, the lord advocate, fiercely opposed his appointment on the grounds that he

was not suited to it. Sir David Dalrymple was preferred. Mackintosh was next found in the company of Robert, first Lord Clive, whose acquaintance he appears to have made at the debates at East India House. Mackintosh took an active part in these debates, aligning himself against Laurence Sullivan's party when it was strongly opposing Clive being sent to Bengal with discretionary powers in 1764. During the tempestuous debates Mackintosh's contribution appears to have been of his customary considerable violence and even more considerable length:

"If his harangues rather excited the indignations of the other party than convinced it, the length of them and their acrimony are said sometimes to have put some of his opponents to flight. Be that as it may, they served to endear him to the noble nabob [Clive], who was then wallowing in wealth."³

In 1765 or 1766 Mackintosh purchased the estate of Auchintully in Atholl, and not long after appeared as a candidate for the Perth burghs. In view of Dempster's well-known zealous championship of Laurence Sullivan and, in conjunction with the Johnstone group, his having done everything in his power to obstruct Clive's mission to Bengal and the continuance of his *jaghir* (see p.64), this attack on Dempster was seen as a piece of revenge. It was generally thought that Clive had financed the purchase of Auchintully and was also funding Mackintosh's election campaign. By October 1767 Dempster's popularity (and continued willingness to bribe generously) had secured for him the presiding burgh of Dundee and two others, Forfar and St Andrews.⁴ A particularly fierce contest took place for Cupar. On 7 October Mackintosh succeeded in being elected as a councillor and was also placed on the short list for provost. Dempster's party was also strong, however, and its man was chosen as the burgh's delegate for the forthcoming general election (or so his party claimed).⁵ Accusations of bribery, of deliberate exclusion of members from the meeting, and of other acts of skulduggery were hurled by both sides.⁶

Despite Clive's massive financial support and Mackintosh's vigorous attempts to discredit Dempster, by October 1767 it was becoming clear that Mackintosh was losing the struggle: his

hectoring style and unfortunate manner made a poor personal showing against Dempster's established popularity. However, Mackintosh and Clive were not yet ready to give up the fight. On 5 October, when defeat seemed almost certain, Mackintosh caused the Sheriff-depute of Fife to issue two writs of commitment for bribery and corruption against Dempster, who was thereupon arrested. Dempster immediately found bail, and there the matter rested for two months or so.⁷ The next stage was the execution of criminal letters (i.e. the raising of a prosecution against Dempster) which took place on 21 November 1767 at the instance of Mackintosh and an ex-bailie of Cupar, Robert Geddie.⁸ The delay gave Dempster time to prepare a line of defence; on 11 November 1767 he wrote to his powerful fellow Rockinghamite MP, Edmund Burke, to seek his advice:

“My Antagonist threatens me with so many Lawsuits that I am uncertain if it will be in my power to get to Town [London] till after the Holidays. If he really puts these threats in Execution I shall certainly complain of a Breach of Privilege. May I beg therefore you will let me know if this can be done by a Letter to the Speaker or in any shape while I am Absent. You know I am Bail'd to appear Personally whenever summon'd in any of our Criminal Courts. Can I then leave Scotland without endangering my Bail? Am I not to all intents and purposes a Prisoner? And as such detain'd from attending my Duty in Parliament? Will not my Captivity be more manifest, and make a greater impression on the House when my Complaint comes as it were from Gaol than if I was to make it myself to the House? It is of consequence to be well advised as to these points, and I apply for your advice because I know you able to advise me and I believe you not indifferent to my Concerns.”⁹

Burke's reply has not survived, but he presumably supported Dempster's argument for Dempster duly claimed the privilege of a member of parliament to be immune from appearing in court to answer the charge while parliament was sitting. At the same time he asserted that he had “no unwillingness to stand forth in his defence against this calumnious and vexatious prosecution, brought in consequence of political spleen and disappointment.”¹⁰ Mackintosh seems to have obtained prior warning of Dempster's intended line of defence because on 16 November he wrote to George Grenville to solicit his “opinion and interposition” if the case should come before the house of commons.¹¹ Mackintosh and Geddie claimed that parliamentary privilege could not apply in this case

but after long and spirited debates in the court of judicary the judges found, on 7 December, that Dempster's objection held good, and adjourned the case for the duration of the current parliament.¹² Both parties had used strong language in these preliminary debates and both had threatened to bring the matter before the house of commons: Dempster by his complaint of breach of privilege, and Mackintosh by a complaint of delay of justice under pretence of privilege. In the event, however, neither complaint was presented.¹³

Dempster continued to attend parliament until its dissolution on 11 March 1768. The bribery case was still unresolved and he now no longer enjoyed parliamentary privilege for his conditions of bail. He felt unable to be a candidate for the Perth burghs and withdrew; his friend William Pulteney stood in his place. Pulteney was also standing as a candidate for Cromartyshire. Despite Mackintosh's protests (see below), Pulteney on 13 April 1768 was duly elected as MP for the Perth burghs.¹⁴ Pulteney was also successful in Cromartyshire, being elected there on 26 April 1768¹⁵ and thus found himself returned for both seats. Mackintosh's protests against Pulteney's election for the Perth burghs resulted in a formal petition and Pulteney also faced a petition in Cromartyshire. Dempster successfully invoked Rockingham's assistance on Pulteney's behalf in both elections, and the petitions were withdrawn.¹⁶ Evidently Clive was still active behind the scenes, for on 3 May 1768, John Walsh wrote to Clive:

"There will certainly be a petition against Pulteney for the five [Perth] burghs. Mackintosh and he have each one undisputed burgh [Perth and Dundee], one burgh has somehow no return [probably Cupar], and the other two have chosen double delegates, those on Pulteney's side are Dempster for both places who is under prosecution, and if cast it affects him and the election just equally as if he had stood himself: the other candidate Mackintosh in consequence may be returned for three burghs and be the Member. These matters... will require management in the House."¹⁷

On 13 May 1768 Pulteney chose Cromartyshire, and vacated the Perth burghs, whereupon the Speaker issued a warrant for the election of a member to the vacant seat. The ensuing by-election

went ^{un}surprisingly for Dempster who defeated Mackintosh probably by 4:1, the margin by which Pulteney had earlier won the seat,¹⁸ and on 4 April 1769 was again returned for his old constituency. The sole burgh voting for Mackintosh is likely to have been Perth.

The bribery case against Dempster went to the house of lords, who referred it back to the Scottish courts.¹⁹ Dempster did not deny that he had been attempting to bribe council members but employed a variety of defences; he argued for instance that the precise crime he was charged with did not fall under either statutory or common law; bribery was only an extension of the hospitality candidates customarily offered their constituents; the persons he was accused of trying to bribe had not actually accepted the bribes and so Mackintosh had not suffered by it; and so forth.²⁰ After several adjournments and much learned quibbling among the counsel for both sides it was finally concluded on 1 August 1768 with the dismissal of the charges against Dempster. Whether Dempster had actually bribed anyone was neither denied by the defence nor proved by the prosecution. The court of justiciary found that the charges against Dempster were “vague and uncertain as to place, mode, and circumstances of the crime libelled”, and that in any case Mackintosh and Geddie “had no title to bring this prosecution, which should have been at the insistence of the King’s Advocate.”²¹ Since bribery was a common feature of elections at the time it seems that what counted most with the judges was the relative likeability and popularity of the two contestants. According to John Ramsay of Ochtertyre:

“... the favour of the public was decidedly on the side of Dempster; and what was more, his arguments prevailed with the judges. After putting off the trial for six or eight months, on account of privilege, the libel was at last dismissed as not relevant... This, joined to the fate of the election, must have been a dreadful mortification to a man of Mr Mackintosh’s sanguine temper, which flattered him with the hopes of carrying everything in his own way. If it did not give him a better opinion of the judges, let it be remembered that a set of abler, purer, more disinterested men than those who were then Lords of Justiciary never sat upon that bench.”²²

Both parties paid a heavy price for their involvement in this contest. As regards Mackintosh, Clive appears to have become severely disenchanted with him and to have felt that his wealth had been ill spent. A violent rupture took place between them:

“No accounts are less pleasant to settle than those between election-mongers and their employees. And Mr Macintosh wanted not enemies who may have misrepresented him to his Lordship. Be that as it may, a demand for a very large sum of money was made upon the former [Mackintosh] in a very harsh manner, which, being unable to pay, necessitated him to sell the greatest part of his property in Scotland. And if it did not reduce him to a state of bankruptcy, it surely put his affairs into great disorder, which must unavoidably have made a deep impression on a mind sufficiently irritable.”²³

Mackintosh never again attempted to enter parliament and spent the remainder of his life either in practice as an advocate, with limited financial success, or engaged in attempting to salvage the York Buildings Company's investments in Scottish estates forfeited after the 1715 Rebellion.²⁴ While in London he had become acquainted with a large number of people connected with this company and on his return to Scotland he was its governor and principal shareholder. He seems to have borne his lack of success in both the political and legal spheres with fortitude. In 1783 Boswell met him in Edinburgh:

“Mr R. Mackintosh, who after an absence of many years appeared at our bar today ... interested me as an able unfortunate man. His stately appearance too had influence upon me. I had been very keen against him in his contest with my friend Dempster, and knew not how he might think of me. ... He addressed himself to me very politely, and I sat down by him and had some good talk He talked in a style much above common, with a force and a command of expression and a manly manner which I admired, while I felt for him on account of the state of his affairs, which I was told was bad.”²⁵

As for Dempster, the campaign and litigation costs, added to his other debts, appear to have been the last straw that forced him in 1771 to sell all his estates apart from Dunnichen itself. He sold in all about 2500 acres, just under half the amount he had inherited. His correspondence and other evidence suggest that the sale of these estates was an action he regretted for the rest of his life.²⁶ Nevertheless, for Dempster to have both fought off the election challenge of Mackintosh who had all

the support of Clive's wealth and political connections, and to have managed to escape from the bribery charge despite his almost certain guilt, was a not inconsiderable achievement. Dempster here displayed remarkable tenacity and determination, allied with political and legal guile.

During the last session of parliament before the 1768 general election Dempster was provided with a final opportunity before the dissolution to demonstrate his continuing loyalty to Rockingham, by voting with him on the Nullum Tempus Bill.²⁷ This was introduced by Sir George Savile on 17 February 1768 and arose out of Sir James Lowther's claim upon part of the duke of Portland's Cumberland estates, held by the Portland family for 70 years after a grant by William III. Lowther (son-in-law of Lord Bute) petitioned for a lease of the property, which he claimed was not included in the original grant, and it proved impossible to establish the truth of the matter from the title deeds. The petition required bringing back into use the antiquated law and prerogative maxim of "Nullum tempus occurrit Regi", by which no length of time of possession would be a bar against the claims of the crown. As all the lands in the kingdom were presumed at different times to have been held by the crown, and many of them, from the loss of authentic deeds and papers might be liable to the revival of claims of a similar kind, landed proprietors were much alarmed. Despite a promise to the duke of Portland that no action would be taken while he was pursuing research into past title deeds, the treasury granted Lowther his lease. Portland then had no remedy but to demand legislation to extend the provisions of an act of James I which barred claims by the crown against any title which had been quietly enjoyed for 60 years before the passing of that act. Hence the Nullum Tempus Bill.²⁸ The Rockingham group supported the measure, which was opposed by the administration. Rockingham himself was very strongly in favour, giving it the highest priority and doing all he could to achieve success.²⁹ He wrote "I hardly ever knew a more important question agitated in Parliament"³⁰ and described to the duke of Newcastle his efforts to round up votes:

"I hope we shall make a good figure in the House of Commons on this occasion..."

I take all the pains I can to send and speak to all and every one where I have a chance of being persuasive, for really I am so fully convinced both of the propriety and of the necessity of this revival of the principle of the bill that I am exceedingly anxious for its success and I am persuaded that if we make a great figure upon it this year in one or two years this bill will be forced by the public upon the Ministers.³¹

His strong interest in the bill was doubtless partly because the duke of Portland was a prominent member of the Rockingham group, and partly because of the belief that Lowther's main, if not sole, motive was to increase his electoral influence in the forthcoming election by virtue of the votes commanded by the disputed land. The government faced stiff opposition during the debate and only avoided defeat by persuading the commons to postpone the bill, winning the vote by the narrow margin of 134:114 (excluding the tellers).³² The government incurred considerable odium over this issue: the treasury were perceived as acting high-handedly towards a property owner and the opposition denounced the arbitrary use of royal power. The issue was resolved in 1769 when an act was passed to correct the fixed into a moving limitation, so that 60 years' possession would be for all future time an answer to crown claims.³³ Dempster, while voting for the bill primarily out of loyalty to Rockingham, is also likely (as a landowner himself) to have been influenced by the threat to landowning interests raised by Lowther's action, by the popular clamour in favour of the bill, and by his own inclination to maintain strict limits on the power of the crown.

Back in the house of commons for the new parliament commencing 10 May 1768 Dempster remained faithful to the Rockingham group (still in opposition) and voted with them again when, on 8 May 1769, the house heard the petition of the freeholders of Middlesex against its decision to declare Henry Luttrell the duly elected candidate instead of John Wilkes.³⁴

Further proof of Dempster's loyalty to Rockingham came in November 1769 when Laurence Sullivan, Dempster's East India Company ally, went over to the government and Dempster promptly

scotched rumours that he was about to follow suit (see pp.64-65). John Wilkes' case arose once more in January 1770, and Dempster on 25 January once again voted with the Rockingham group.³⁵

Dempster is not recorded as having spoken in the debate but his vote for the minority showed his support for the principle that the rights of electors were paramount over the will of parliament (in effect, of the government) as well as his continuing loyalty to Rockingham.

On 16 February 1770 during a further debate on Wilkes, Dempster strongly supported criticism of Speaker Sir Fletcher Norton's conduct. Norton had criticised Sir William Meredith for not giving advance notice of a motion on so contentious an issue.³⁶ Dempster declared:

"If this motion [that Norton's conduct was disorderly] appears upon our Journals, I must give it an affirmative. I must declare, Sir, (the Speaker) that I think you have violated the freedom of debate. What you have done is a violation of order. You have censured a member [Meredith] for want of candour. Does it not follow, that every member who makes a motion is guilty of want of candour, if he does not communicate it to the Chair?"³⁷

On the vote being taken, Speaker Norton was acquitted. Dempster's stance demonstrates that despite his support for the electors over parliament in the Wilkes case earlier in the year, he was nevertheless quick to support the dignity and rights of members of the house of commons. He showed similar strength of feeling on the subject towards the end of the year, when on 10 December 1770 his next recorded parliamentary activity occurred. Dempster had been one of a group of MPs listening to the proceedings of the house of lords. An emergency motion regarding British military weakness had been introduced and the house was cleared on the grounds that unexpected business had arisen and that foreign agents might be present taking notes.³⁸ Dempster and the other MPs returned to the commons in high dudgeon where Dempster announced:

"I hope we shall not proceed on any business till we have done ourselves justice upon this insult committed by the House of Lords. I was one of those who underwent the indignity of being turned out of their House; and I therefore move that this Committee [the House was in Committee on the Ordnance Estimates] do immediately break up, that we may consider what ought to be done on this occasion, with the Speaker in the chair."³⁹

A debate followed during which various proposals for demonstrating the house of commons' displeasure with the lords were put forward and which concluded with the adjournment of the proceedings for the day as being a sufficient mark of protest.

During Lord North's administration Dempster remained loyal to Rockingham but felt free to speak his mind in parliament on issues which he himself felt strongly about but where this strength of feeling was not necessarily shared by the remainder of the Rockingham group. Thus on 7 December 1770 when war with Spain threatened in consequence of the latter's seizure of the Falklands Islands Dempster spoke strongly in favour of increasing naval strength by more than the 40,000 men proposed by the government, combining this with a criticism of policy towards India:

"I am bold to say that 40,000 seamen are not sufficient. Unless some ships of the line can be sent to the East Indies, that part of the world will be in danger from France, in case of a war. ... My object in troubling the House is to state my conviction, that if our possessions in that quarter of the globe were properly attended to, sufficient resources would be found to carry on a war to whatever extent you pleased. From thence you might derive, not an ideal, but a real revenue of more than three millions and a half, paid as regularly as our taxes and customs. The affairs in that part of the world are badly attended to. I mean to blame nobody. ... It will require the labour of many painful years in this House, to devise plans for the good government of that vast empire; but it is a task that would well repay that labour."⁴⁰

In a further debate on 7 December 1770, on the army estimates, Dempster repudiated suggestions that Britain, for lack of men, should recruit German mercenaries or Irish Catholics, arguing instead for conscription and a Scottish militia:

"Good God Almighty! have we not a government that can compel every man to fight in the common cause? I have no idea that the pressing system is confined to seamen. It extends to every man who can bear arms. If we have war, it must be a war of invasion. A large part of the coast of this island is destitute of defence. In Scotland, we have no militia. though there is a large force here, we hardly expect a great portion of the standing army to be quartered in that part of the kingdom."⁴¹

Dempster was equally emphatic in his opposition to the bill introduced on 4 March 1770 by Sir George Colebrooke, chairman of the East India Company and also an MP, for the raising of a force to include German and Irish Catholic regiments, to be paid by the company, for the protection of their Indian possessions. He clashed violently with Colebrooke when the latter accused him of a breach of confidence in revealing to the commons matters discussed confidentially at East India House.⁴² Dempster retorted:

“I am surprised that the honourable gentleman [Colebrooke] should accuse me of a breach of confidence. It is a long time since he communicated his plan to me; and was I to remain tongue-tied till it had got into the hands of all the world? There is not much confidence between me and the honourable Director: whenever he reposes any in me, I shall keep it with fidelity.”⁴³

Dempster objected “to every part of this bill but the title”, but the nub of his argument was that it would create a large new standing army largely of foreign, possibly unreliable, troops regulated unfavourably compared with the existing British home army. Further, the officers although paid by the company would be appointed by the crown, thereby dangerously increasing the latter’s influence:

“By this bill gentlemen will find that all those barriers which our ancestors thought necessary to secure the people against standing armies are totally omitted. Your army [i.e. the home army] is paid by yourselves, and paid every year: this is to be under the control of the Crown. Your army lasts for one year only: this is to be continued for three, and must consequently be more unfavourable to liberty. Another precaution has been totally laid aside. Your standing army must be composed of British subjects: a third part of the army about to be raised is to consist of foreigners. ... This is a wide departure from the principles of our ancestors, and may be attended with consequences highly prejudicial to liberty. ... Experience shews that foreigners employed in our service have ever been prone to desert; and in going over to the enemy, they carry with them the European mode of warfare.”⁴⁴

Notwithstanding Dempster’s passionate and well-argued speech, the bill passed 105:63. This conflict with Colebrooke was clearly deep-rooted, and may have been the one referred to by Dempster in 1772 when he was not included on the East India Company’s house list of candidates for directorships (see p.66).

In March 1771 there was a series of debates on whether or not the house of commons should prosecute several London printers for having published extracts of parliamentary proceedings. A standing order of the house forbade proceedings from being reported, although this rule was widely ignored. Publicity surrounding the Wilkes case, unfavourable to the government, led to efforts at enforcement, and accordingly three London printers were summoned to answer charges of having published parliamentary proceedings.⁴⁵ Dempster, again departing slightly from the orthodox Rockingham line, on 12 March 1771 censured the commons' "avidity for prosecution" as below the dignity of parliament, and also objected to the idea that MPs should think themselves so privileged as to ignore the rights of the people:

"I see a new scene opened that affects the liberty of the press... I do not like to see people so passionately fond of privilege."⁴⁶

In a later debate on the same subject, on 18 March 1771, Dempster went further, arguing that publishers could never be prevented from printing accounts of debates, and that in any case the public had a right to be provided with accounts of parliamentary proceedings:

"There is no possibility of preventing the publishers of newspapers from printing an account of our proceedings. The people have, I contend, an undoubted right to examine into and canvass the conduct of their representatives."⁴⁷

On 6 February 1772 Dempster again voted with the Rockinghamites, this time on the English Clerical Petition promoted by the loose alliance of dissident churchmen, dissenters, unitarians and radical theorists generally known as the 'dissenting interest.'⁴⁸ These people were united by a common concern about the relations between church and state and about liberty in general, and as their political consciousness grew so their ideas became increasingly similar. Their ultimate purpose was to secure the equality of dissent with Establishment. In applying to parliament in 1772-1773 to extend the scope of the Toleration Act by relieving the dissenting clergy of the obligation to subscribe

to most of the Thirty-nine Articles, they trusted in the state to relieve them of the power of the state, rather than relying on their older argument that the civil magistrate could not and should not interfere in matters of conscience. They thus relied on the spirit of secular enlightenment among the leading political figures. Their trust in this instance was misplaced, for the motion to bring in the petition was defeated 217:71.⁴⁹

This was a relatively minor issue, not applicable to Scotland where similar rights were already enjoyed, in which Dempster had no particular interest and is not recorded as having spoken. Nevertheless, he clearly enjoyed the debate, probably because despite the vote the debate appears to have been conducted on non-party lines and was therefore free of party manoeuvrings and distortions. Although Dempster in his correspondence frequently discussed politics in general he very rarely gave more than a passing mention of parliamentary proceedings themselves. Yet of this minor debate he wrote the following fulsome report to Sir Adam Fergusson:

“On Wednesday there was an admirable debate upon the subject of dispensing with the clergy subscribing the 39 Articles. Tho’ the ministry took the side of the Established Church, yet it was with such a liberal latitude to their friends that the debate was no party one and therefore pleasant, temperate and instructive. Convenience and quiet were strongly urged on one side, freedom and truth well supported on the other. Toryism and High Church display’d their banners and had their partizans not few in number, toleration and free thinking had theirs. The sense of the House however would be very erroneously guessed at by the division, for the question was decided by the firm retainers to the Treasury who seem’d to care but little about the merits of it. And I am yet to believe that in consequence of yesterday’s debate the universities will be freed to relax that part of their discipline by which students of 16 years of age, are at present obliged to subscribe to those articles.”⁵⁰

Dempster’s enthusiasm on this occasion almost certainly stemmed from the non-party nature of the proceedings and provides an early indication of his growing frustration with the normal form of parliamentary debate where members were prepared to argue and vote against their true beliefs in order to maintain party unity. Not for him the example of his contemporary, James Ferguson,

younger of Pitfour (1735-1820, said never to have been present at a debate, nor absent for a division) who declared: "I have heard many arguments which convinced my judgement, but never one which influenced my vote."⁵¹

In 1772 Dempster was for the second time elected as a director of the East India Company (see p.66) and in parliament closely concerned himself in the proposed reforms of the company. By the spring of 1772 continued public outcry over the state of the company's affairs both at home and in India was compelling a reluctant Lord North to take action (see p.67). General John Burgoyne (1722-1792), later of North American fame, expressed the general feeling of the house of commons that the company's situation was so serious as to demand parliamentary enquiry when on 13 April 1772 he introduced a motion to set up a select committee on East India Affairs (which was carried without a division⁵²), Dempster:

"objected greatly to the enquiry by the select committee, saying he was sure it would end in nothing, that he remembered a few of those committees, but never found they came to anything decisive; and, therefore, that a committee of the whole House would be the most proper."⁵³

Dempster objected to this enquiry being conducted by a small group of MPs rather than to the principle of an enquiry as such. It is possible that he felt that a small group would be more likely to contain members hostile to the East India Company than would a committee comprising the whole of the house of commons.

On 16 April a select committee of 21 members was chosen by ballot; unsurprisingly, perhaps, Dempster was not among those chosen. On the same day Lord North's East India Judicature Bill was given its second reading, on a motion by Laurence Sullivan, and passed successfully into the committee stage.⁵⁴ Dempster spoke strongly against the bill, particularly that part of it vesting the appointment of judges in the crown:

“that though not satisfied with the Bill in question, he had consented to have it brought in, because he had learnt from the best authority that the minister had declared he did not wish to see the ministry nominate so much as a writer to the Company; that, as he found that he had receded from his promise, he was against the Bill; that the crown was already too powerful; that it had the nomination of too many offices, and that he was afraid that circumstance had frequently too much influence on the House; that he would not throw more weight into a scale that was too heavy; that thus it would proceed from less to more, till it swallowed up all Bengal; that the East India Company was certainly an empire within an empire; that it raised and paid large armies; that it held courts martial and courts of justice; that it had a Mutiny Act, made peace and war, and exercised every other act of sovereign authority; that therefore no objection could be made to the Company’s nominating the judges, which might not be made with equal propriety to any or all of these acts; that therefore the objection was absurd, as it went, when pursued to its fullest extent, to the annihilation of the Company.”⁵⁵

North had set up his own ‘secret committee’ from among his friends in the commons in opposition to Burgoyne’s select committee, to consider the company’s affairs.⁵⁶ Dempster forcefully opposed this committee also:

“The proceedings of this secret committee are the most extraordinary I ever heard of. The very idea of a secret committee is unconstitutional, and only allowable in cases of a criminal nature. ... The Report strikes at the very charter and constitution of the Company. It is the most unprecedented and unparliamentary proceeding I ever knew. I am far from denying the power of parliament, and their right to superintend the Company; but before they venture to dispossess the Company of its privileges, they should be first assured of those privileges being abused.”⁵⁷

When the vote was taken, the motion for leave to bring in North’s bill was passed 114:45. In the main debate on the bill which followed on 17 and 18 December 1772 Dempster spoke three times. In the first of these speeches he complained again about the secret nature of the committee of secrecy and pointed out several errors in their report,⁵⁸ while in the second he spoke strongly against the bill for its unconstitutional withdrawal of the right of the company to appoint its own supervisors (or by implication take any other reforming or remedial action that it might consider necessary) and argued that left to its own devices the company would correct abuses more speedily than could parliament (it is reasonable to treat this claim with a degree of scepticism, in view of the years of inactivity, or ineffective activity, that had preceded this debate):

“... when I consider that it [the Bill] not only puts a sudden and arbitrary stop to the exercise of legal, chartered rights, but also prevents the Company for such a series of months from redressing those grievances and making those savings which are absolutely required to reinstate them in their former credit and opulence, I cannot but give it my strongest negative. ... Recollect also... that, if this Bill passes into a law you put it into the power of the Lords, or of the King, to prevent you from making any salutary regulations, or at least from carrying them into execution for the space of six months or more... . This parliament may be prorogued, before you have time to complete the intended inquiry, and to form your great plan for the salvation of Bengal. What will in that case become of the Company’s interest, and its credit? What will become those of the nation? They will both sink together, and be involved in one common ruin.”⁵⁹

In the third speech Dempster defended the company, and himself as a director, against accusations that the company had been reluctant to deal with abuses and slow to prosecute known embezzlers of its funds. The basis of his defence was the time taken for reliable information and proofs to reach London from India. He argued that the company had been quick to act against individuals as soon as the facts were established and that if it had been permitted to send out supervisors the situation in India itself could be quickly remedied by having people on the spot with delegated power to take action. He concluded by criticising the government for not having impeached Lord Clive (not mentioned by name but it seems clear that it is he who was the intended target):

“The secret committee was evidently calculated to screen great criminals and to bring the show of accusation against those whose conduct, if publicly examined, would appear laudable. It was intended to counteract the select committee [Burgoyne’s committee], and, I believe, it is very well known that it proceeded from the advice and suggestion of the grand defaulter of unaccounted millions in India. What more is wanting to render it suspicious?”⁶⁰

The bill passed 153:28. Dempster was one of the ‘no’ tellers together with Lord John Cavendish. In these debates Dempster appears to have been maintaining his loyalty to the Rockingham group and to Laurence Sullivan (in his struggle against Clive), and not necessarily stating his own inner convictions. The next series of debates on India took place during March 1773 and during them Dempster resigned his directorship of the East India Company (see p.68). On 2 March 1773 there was a debate on the East India Company’s request for a loan from the government. Dempster

defended the company against a hostile opening address by Lord North saying that it had a right to government loans by virtue of the immense benefit of its trade to Great Britain, and he also stated that "the Company have an undoubted, a clear, and an exclusive right to the territories possessed in India, whether acquired by conquest or otherwise."⁶¹ Again, on 23 March during a debate on resolutions for restraining the East India Company's dividends Dempster spoke in support of Laurence Sullivan and George Johnstone and against Lord North in asking for the matter to be delayed a day or two while negotiations between the company and government were carried on, and advocated an increase in the dividend to 8%.⁶² On both occasions Dempster remained in concert with both the Sullivan party and the Rockinghamites. Much the same can be said of Dempster's brief recorded interventions in East India debates on 30 March, 25 May and 15 June.⁶³

These debates led to North's Regulating Act of 1773⁶⁴ with which Dempster was very much dissatisfied (see p.68). Although the company's financial problems were relieved by a government loan of £1.4 million a raft of reforms of the Indian judiciary was introduced of which the most significant was the elevation of the Bengal presidency above those of Madras and Bombay. This supreme presidency was to be ruled by a governor-general and a council. The first holders of these offices were nominated by parliament (in effect, by the government) but vacancies on the council were to be filled by the East India Company's directors subject (until 1778) to the king's veto. The whole plan would operate only until further thought could be given to the company on the expiration of its charter in 1780.⁶⁵ Dempster's view was that this arrangement merely gave more opportunities for continued maladministration, rather than effective control by the home government (see letter quoted on p.68).

The Rockingham group, while lamenting the wanton and wasteful record of the company, still felt that a change in persons rather than principles was all that was required. They suspected that Lord

North was attempting to gain control of the immense field of patronage that existed in India, in order to use it as a source of political influence. They defended the sanctity of the chartered independence of the company because it was the only way to keep trade and patronage out of the grip of the crown. They wanted the company to run its affairs better, but to do so while retaining its independence and freedom from ministerial interference.⁶⁶ However, Lord North's plan met with commons' approval. He was acquitted of attempting to increase the patronage of the crown and was thought to have shown moderation in imposing only the minimum authority on the company while resisting the temptation to interfere in its affairs beyond what was needed to stabilise its trade and put the Indian acquisitions into order.⁶⁷

Dempster, for his part, made a better showing in this series of debates than in those of 1767 (see chapter 3). While he maintained allegiance with the Rockinghamites, Sullivan and the Johnstones, his speeches show a regard for the public good and he does not appear to have been motivated purely by self-interest or the personal interests of his friends, as was the case earlier with regard to John Johnstone. In his speech to the house of commons on 23 March 1773, for example, he pleaded for consideration to be given to the East India Company proprietors "a set of men who had already been but too much and too frequently imposed upon."⁶⁸ Their investments, after all, underpinned the whole enterprise of the company.

In February 1774 Dempster was a frequent speaker in favour of the liberty of the press in the proceedings in the house of commons against the Reverend John Home for an alleged libel upon the Speaker, Sir Fletcher Norton.⁶⁹ The libel in question appeared in The Public Advertiser, published by Henry Sampson Woodfall (1739-1805), in which the 'Junius' letters were printed. Dempster set out his views in a speech on 11 February:

"We are talking of preserving our power: let us consider of what our power consists: is it not the power of the people? Can we destroy their liberty without

destroying our own? And I look upon this motion to be levelled entirely at the greatest of blessings we enjoy, the liberty of the press; a liberty, Sir, that is the means of our public money being expended so well as it is; it keeps men honest through fear of being exposed; and those that oppress the people now, would oppress them ten times more, were it not for the censure they are liable to through this channel.”⁷⁰

In a continuation of the debate on 14 February Dempster argued against the house committing Woodfall to prison, on the grounds that this was the most severe punishment that the commons had power to inflict, and Woodfall was not guilty of the highest offence. Dempster at the same time admitted to being a regular reader of Woodfall’s newspaper.⁷¹ At the end of the debate it was resolved nevertheless 152:68 that the Sergeant at Arms should take Woodfall into custody. On 24 February after further debate, Dempster seconded the motion for Woodfall’s discharge, but the question was passed in the negative without a division.⁷²

During the early part of 1774 Dempster also spoke and voted against the Booksellers Copy-Right Bill which was an attempt to reverse the house of lords’ judgement in favour of Alexander Donaldson who had challenged English booksellers over the 1710 copyright legislation. This case had formed part of the subject matter of Dempster’s argument with Dr Johnson at James Boswell’s lodgings in 1763 (see p.41). Dempster’s particular objection to the bill was that in his view it was designed to reverse a judgement of the supreme court of the land, although this was denied by the other side in the debate. The bill was passed by the commons but thrown out by the lords.⁷³

Dempster’s main parliamentary activity for the rest of the session concerned America. During debates in March 1774 on the Boston Port Bill and in May on the Bill for Impartial Administration of Justice in Massachusetts Bay Dempster opposed Lord North’s American policy and reaffirmed his opposition to the now repealed Stamp Act. On 23 March he asserted:

“that he knew of no Act to which he gave his hearty consent in a more willing manner, than to that which was for the repeal of the Stamp Act; he said, our

disorders had arisen from our attempts to tax the Americans by that odious Act; he was very sure the destruction of America would be certain if we should offer to tax it. Have we not, said he, given an extent of power to his Majesty, to prevent the port of Boston from ever being reinstated if the King should think proper? What limit or line is drawn to define when it will be proper, right, and just, that the port of Boston should be reinstated? He said, the dignity of parliament was by no means concerned in the disputes with our colonies, and we should treat them as our children, nourish and protect them.”⁷⁴

In the Massachusetts Bay debate on 6 May 1774 Dempster took a similar line in defending the American colonies from what he saw as oppression by the mother country and in particular objected to the proposal to bring American colonists to Britain to stand trial as being against both the colony’s constitution and a “deprivation of the right of every British subject in America”, saying:

“I, perhaps, Sir, may be wrong in my ideas; but I have looked into the history of that country with care and circumspection, and it has inspired me with the highest veneration for those who were the first settlers; they emigrated when that Star Chamber doctrine was practised in this country. Oppressed as they thought themselves by the mother country, by the cruelty of those arbitrary laws, sooner than suffer themselves to be oppressed by tyranny, they chose rather to combat with tygers and Indians in America, than live in a place where oppression and tyranny ruled. ... Let gentlemen consider, that if we tax America at this present period, her trade and every thing else will decline. I think that Boston has the most merit with this country of any place I know; she is a most valuable ally, or a subordinate colony; take it in either sense, her possession is inestimable; but I really fear very much, that the Americans are to be thus treated without the parties being heard. I do not like to see public liberty and the rights of persons infringed.”⁷⁵

The American issue was to feature largely in Dempster’s future parliamentary career. He seems even at this stage to have given the matter considerable thought, and he did not depart from the principles he set out in these speeches.

Dempster participated in a wide range of other debates during this session. On 17 May 1774, for example, he made a lengthy speech on a subject close to his heart, the state of the linen industry. He strongly supported the government’s proposed bounty on printed linen, arguing that it would provide much needed relief to the linen manufacturers while not harming the cotton and woollen industries,

since both were sufficiently protected by other legislation.⁷⁶ The following day, 18 May, he made a long speech attacking the government over the budget. He criticised the administration for its profligacy and lack of care in not using increased revenue to pay off the debt incurred during the Seven Years' War.⁷⁷ Attacks on the government on its handling of the nation's finances became a regular feature of Dempster's parliamentary conduct in the years to come. On 26 May he spoke against the Quebec Bill⁷⁸ and on 10 June attempted unsuccessfully to introduce a clause extending the law of Habeas Corpus into the province.⁷⁹

Parliament was dissolved on 30 September 1774. During this parliament Dempster had made a remarkably large number of speeches, on an equally remarkable range of topics. An analysis of the debates of 1768-1774 reveals him to have spoken on no fewer than 193 occasions; only 16 MPs out of the total of 692 made more speeches, and these were mainly members of the administration who would be expected to speak in most debates.⁸⁰ However, it is possible that Dempster thereby weakened his impact. There were subjects, such as America, where he held genuinely passionate views; but he also seemed unable to resist intervening in debates of much lesser importance to him and by so doing lessened the impression he made on key issues.

Dempster by now was becoming tired and disillusioned with parliament. In January 1774 he wrote to Sir Adam Fergusson (who himself was facing a hard battle for his Ayr constituency, which he eventually won):

“Should your efforts prove at the last unsuccessful you may console yourself by reflecting that you are only disappointed in a situation of which I who have enjoy'd it for 13 years am almost tired. The self interested principles upon which our public men here act destroys much of the satisfaction that would attend a seat in a less corrupted assembly of representatives. Were I to choose my walk of life again with all the experience I have had it would be a private one.”⁸¹

From now on such sentiments were to be expressed with increasing frequency in his correspondence.

Chapter 4: Notes

1. Allardyce, Scotland and Scotsmen, vol.1 p.423.
2. The account of Robert Mackintosh's life given here is taken from Allardyce, Scotland and Scotsmen, vol.1. pp.417-473, supplemented by Irma S. Lustig and Frederick A. Pottle (editors), Boswell: The Applause of the Jury 1782-1785 (1982), p.65 n.8; and Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.65.
3. Allardyce, Scotland and Scotsmen, vol.1. p.422-423.
4. The Scots Magazine, vol.29 (1767), p.665; Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.1 p.509.
5. The Scots Magazine, vol.29 (1767), p.665.
6. Cupar Burgh Records: Council Minutes 1752-1770: St Andrews University Library, B/13/14/5 (unpaginated).
7. The Scots Magazine, vol.29 (1767), p.665.
8. Ibid., p.666.
9. Dempster to Edmund Burke, 11 November 1767: Sheffield City Archives, WWM/MF/76/1/189.
10. The Scots Magazine, vol.29 (1767) p.666.
11. Mackintosh to Grenville, 16 November 1767: Smith, Grenville Papers, vol.4 p.191.
12. The Scots Magazine, vol.29 (1767), p.669.
13. Allardyce, Scotland and Scotsmen, vol.1. p.424.
14. Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.1 p.508.
15. [House of Commons], Members of Parliament, England Scotland & Ireland (1878), p.147. For an account of Pulteney's struggle to win Cromartyshire, see W. Ferguson, 'The Electoral System in the Scottish Counties before 1832'; in Sellar (editor), The Stair Society Miscellany Two (1984), pp.281-283.
16. Dempster to Rockingham, 12 December 1768 and 7 January 1769: Sheffield City Archives, WWM R1/1128 and R1/927 respectively.
17. John Walsh to Robert Clive, 3 May 1768: Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.1 p.509, quoting National Library of Wales, Clive Mss.
18. Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.1 p.508.

19. The Scots Magazine, vol.30 (1768) pp.164-165.
20. Ibid., pp.337-343, 401-406.
21. Ibid., p.407.
22. Allardyce, Scotland and Scotsmen, vol.1. p.424.
23. Ibid., p.425.
24. For the York Buildings Company, see David Murray, The York Buildings Company. A Chapter in Scotch History (1883, reprinted 1973).
25. Boswell's Journal, composited from 26 February and 27 February 1783: Lustig and Pottle, Applause of the Jury, pp.64-65.
26. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.56-57, 347.
27. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.16 col.413.
28. The account of the background to the Nullum Tempus Bill has been taken from Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History vol.16 cols.405-414, and Watson, Reign of George III, pp.144-145.
29. John Brooke, The Chatham Administration 1766-1768 (1956), pp.244 et seq.
30. Rockingham to Perry Wentworth, undated, but shortly after 17 February 1768: quoted in Brooke, Chatham Administration, p.244.
31. Rockingham to Newcastle, 14 February 1768: British Library, Add. Mss.32988, ff. 307-308.
32. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.16 col.405.
33. Watson, Reign of George III, p.145.
34. Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.2 p.315. For the story of Wilkes' attempts to gain election for Middlesex see Watson, Reign of George III, pp.131-140.
35. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.16 col.798.
36. J. Wright (editor), Sir Henry Cavendish's Debates of the House of Commons during the thirteenth Parliament of Great Britain, commonly called the Unreported Parliament ... (2 published vols. 1841), vol.1 pp.458 et seq.
37. Ibid., p.468.
38. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.16 cols.1322 et seq.
39. Ibid., col.1323.

40. Wright, Cavendish's Debates, vol.2 p.177.
41. Ibid., p.190; Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.2 p.315.
42. Wright, Cavendish's Debates, vol.2, p.338.
43. Ibid., pp.338-339.
44. Ibid., pp.339-340.
45. For more detail see Watson, Reign of George III, pp.141-142.
46. Wright, Cavendish's Debates, vol.2 p.385.
47. Ibid., p.453.
48. Background material on the dissenting interest has been taken from John Norris, Shelburne and Reform (1963), pp.82-84.
49. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.17 col.296.
50. Dempster to Fergusson, 8 February 1772: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.76.
51. E. and A. Porritt, Unreformed House of Commons, vol.2 p.8. For more detail on Ferguson of Pitfour, see Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.43 n.1.
52. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.17 col.453.
53. Ibid., col.461.
54. Ibid., cols. 463-464.
55. Ibid., cols. 474-475.
56. For more detail see Watson, Reign of George III, p.168.
57. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.17 col.560.
58. Ibid., col.650.
59. Ibid., cols.657-658.
60. Ibid., col.666.
61. Ibid., col.807.
62. Ibid., col.816.
63. Ibid., cols.828, 884-885, and 925.

64. 13 Geo.III cap.63
65. For a synopsis of North's Regulating Act see Watson, Reign of George III, pp.169-170.
66. Ibid., p.170.
67. Ibid., pp.170-171.
68. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.17 col.816.
69. Ibid., cols.1003 et seq.
70. Ibid., col.1015.
71. Ibid., col.1020.
72. Ibid., col.1047.
73. Ibid., cols.1077 et seq.; The Scots Magazine, vol.36 (1774) pp.530-533; W. Ferguson, Scotland 1689 to the Present (1978, paperback edition), p.219.
74. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.17, cols.1175-1176.
75. Ibid., col.1317.
76. Ibid., cols.1154-1158.
77. Ibid., cols.1342-1345.
78. Lord North to the king, 26 May 1774: The Hon. Sir John Fortescue (editor), The Correspondence of King George the Third from 1760 to December 1783 (6 vols. 1927), vol.3 p.106.
79. The Scots Magazine, vol.36 (1774), p.304.
80. P. D. G. Thomas, 'The Debates of the House of Commons 1768-1774' (unpublished PhD thesis for the University of London 1958), pp.225-232.
81. Dempster to Fergusson, 31 January 1774: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.80.

CHAPTER 5

PARLIAMENT 1774-1780

Dempster was unopposed at the 1774 general election.¹ After the expense attending his previous general elections he was in no mood or financial position to engage in a third hard-fought contest and it is likely that if a rival candidate had appeared Dempster would have withdrawn. On 12 September he wrote to Sir Adam Fergusson:

“I need not tell you that I am fully determined to be at little or no expense about my own election. You know enough of my finances to be satisfied that a contrary resolution would be madness in the extreme. The impropriety of continuing in Parliament with so small a fortune as mine frequently comes across me, and but that it would be equally foolish to relinquish an interest which no body seems disposed to contest with me I should be at no loss to take my resolution.”²

Earlier in the session he had written to William Pulteney:

“To say truth since I have tried myself and found that I neither possess knowledge accuracy of head nor readiness in speaking enough for taking a share in the Debates of the House my Parliamentary rage has subsided a Good deal. As an amusement and as being a field wherin a man of little envy in his Nature sees abler men than himself exert their Talents play their Factions and Govern the Universe, none can be compar'd with it. But it is an amusement for a man either of more rigid Economy or ampler Fortune than me to indulge himself in: For what with two contested Elections, Farming & the expense of Living in London my Fortune is very much circumscribed, at least I am much straitened for Cash ... If I don't find a wife with some money I propose possitively to quit Parliament at the End of the Present one, but even this object I am ill qualified to pursue with that assiduity which it requires. I wish'd to have mention'd all this to you in a Chat in the Chair for which I own its much fitter than for a Letter; but I have a wonderfull shyness about mentioning subjects which disquiet me.”³

Dempster did, in fact, get married during the recess, the wedding taking place about a fortnight later than the letter to Fergusson quoted above. It was announced in *The Scots Magazine* thus: “[Sept.] 26th. At London, George Dempster, Esq; of Dunnichen, member for Perth, Dundee etc. to Miss Rose Heming, sister of George Heming, Esq; of Caldecote-hall, Warwickshire.”⁴

Dempster was surprisingly reticent about his forthcoming marriage: no prior reference to it occurs in any of his surviving correspondence. As has been seen, even in a letter to Sir Adam Fergusson, his closest friend, written only a fortnight before the event, he made no mention of it. In December 1774 Dempster wrote enigmatically to Ralph Izard, an American he had befriended in London when they were neighbours in Berners Street, "I would have answered your last kind letter, from Switzerland, had I not been prevented by a very particular business."⁵ Izard replied:

"I am at last favored with a letter from you. The St James's Chronicle is entitled to my thanks for being more explicit than you are; and you will find that I did not wait for your information, but availed myself of the newspaper intelligence, to offer you my congratulations on your marriage."⁶

This exchange tends to confirm that Dempster was in fact being reticent, rather than that a lack of surviving correspondence makes it appear so. His diffidence may have been caused partly by the fact that, at the age of 42, Dempster was marrying fairly late in life and his bride was some sixteen years his junior.⁷

Rose Heming was the younger daughter of Richard Heming, a member of assembly in Jamaica, and owner of a number of sugar plantations in that island, chief among which were Cave Hall and Sevillea, both in St Anne's Parish, in the north of the island.⁸ She had three brothers - Samuel (the eldest), George and Francis; and one sister, Elizabeth.⁹ Her grandfather, Samuel Heming, had also been a sugar planter and appears to have been the founder of the Jamaican branch of the family.¹⁰ Rose Heming spent her youth in Jamaica but sometime after her father died (c.1755)¹¹ she and her brother George travelled to England where in about 1769 George rented Caldecote Hall in Warwickshire and settled there, later marrying Amelia Bracebridge, daughter of Philip Bracebridge of Lindley Hall, Leicestershire.¹² How Rose and George Dempster came to meet is not known.

Dempster's new wife had some money of her own and in consequence he found himself in rather less straitened financial circumstances after his marriage than he had been before. The Jamaican sugar planters were as renowned for their wealth as the East India Company's 'nabobs' and Dempster might have expected to find himself very wealthy. Surviving records show that Richard Heming owned 2796 acres which was a sizeable holding by the standards of the time.¹³ However, under the terms of his will the bulk of his estate went to his eldest son Samuel, and Rose received only £2000¹⁴ (still a sizeable sum, worth £200,000 today). The marriage from the start was a successful and happy one. To Sir Adam Ferguson's brother Charles, Dempster wrote:

"My wife ... is better temper'd than myself and plays whist and quadrille like an angel, and as for happiness I protest to you I did not know what it was till I was married."¹⁵

There were no children of the marriage, which caused Dempster some passing concern but which he accepted with good grace. Comments he made to Pulteney relatively early in his married life find echoes in his correspondence in later years:

"As yet there is no appearance of Children, which I am not indifferent about. But I am sometimes so glad that I have not the anxiety and incumbrance of a Family & sometimes so sorry to be deprived of the natural Pleasures of them, that the Ballance is a mere trifle. And in the meantime I am extravagantly happy in a wife who neither frowns speaks nonsense nor spends money."¹⁶

From the time of his marriage Dempster's attitude to his career changed markedly. The signs of disillusionment with parliament increased and in his correspondence he began to talk of settling down to a more domestic life as a farmer. However, his unopposed success in the general election of 1774 caused him, temporarily at least, to change his mind and gave him renewed vigour to represent his constituents in parliament. He was genuinely moved by the support given to him by the burghs, which appears to have been due solely to his popularity there; to Pulteney he wrote:

“I need not tell you that I left London in Sept[embe]r last with very little hope of seeing it again, having determined if opposed not to stand a Contest for the best of reasons. I therefore married a young lady I loved meaning to end my life at my Plough’s tail and believing I had chosen a very good Companion for my retirement. In this last I was not mistaken for my wife has the sense of a man, the manners of a Gentlewoman, is never out of humour and makes an economical cheerful Country Wife. In the first I was exceedingly so for Perth a hostile Town declared for me on the day almost of my Arrival the rest of the Towns followed the Example paid all my Bills and certainly confer’d honour upon me, which I am determined to repay by continuing to act in Parliament according to the best of my own Understanding.”¹⁷

And to Ralph Izard:

“I thank you for your congratulations, upon the honourable manner in which I have been re-elected. No circumstance of my life ever affected me more. I do assure you, I came down, resolved, in case of the slightest opposition, to engage in no contest, but to spend the remainder of my life in contented - really contented retirement, and being fully satisfied that neither riches nor grandeur add to our happiness. And now that I am sent back again to Parliament, I only return, the more attached to the privileges of the people, and to independency of thinking and voting.”¹⁸

Although his wife’s money must have gone some way to improving his personal finances, for reasons of economy Dempster decided not to attend the next session of parliament but instead to spend the winter at Dunnichen. He had originally intended to travel alone to London to attend the session,¹⁹ explaining to Sir Adam Fergusson: “When single I lived on my salary [presumably the income from being secretary to the Order of the Thistle] in London the year round - as a married man this is impossible.”²⁰ However, at the last minute, despite his renewed determination to serve his constituents, he had not the heart to leave his wife alone in Scotland, as this extract from a letter to Pulteney shows:

“When the time for going to London arrived I could not budge. I found my heart tied to my wife. It was impossible to leave her for the first winter in a Cold Climate and in a bad House. And my finances would by no means admit of my carrying her to Town. So I am now begun to employ the Money that my Winter Campaign [i.e. in Parliament] would have cost me in making my House commodious enough for Folks of our humble views.”²¹

The exact nature of the repairs and additions carried out at Dunnichen on this occasion are not known (in a letter to Sir Adam Fergusson at about the same time Dempster merely referred to “several repairs and additions to... my house and offices”²²) and in several of the letters quoted here Dempster also mentioned that he was continuing to clear his estate of debts incurred during his earlier electoral battles. Dempster clearly enjoyed his winter stay at Dunnichen. When writing to Boswell to thank him for his present of Johnson’s Journey to the Western Islands he wrote:

“Never did three months roll on with more swiftness and satisfaction. I used not only to wonder at, but pity, those whose lot condemned them to winter any where but in either of the capitals. But every place has its charms to a cheerful mind. I am busy planting and taking measures for opening the summer campaign in farming; and I find I have an excellent resource, when revolutions in politics perhaps, and revolutions of the sun for certain, will make it decent for me to retreat behind the ranks of the more forward in life.”²³

Boswell and Johnson did not visit Dempster during their tour, despite passing quite close to Dunnichen, most probably because at the time Dempster would have been in London attending parliament. As has already been mentioned (p.42) Dempster was most complimentary in his remarks on Johnson’s Journey and so ill-will between the two is unlikely to have been the cause.

Later in his parliamentary career Dempster usually seems to have taken care to arrange his affairs so as to make it possible for Mrs Dempster to accompany him. His next attendance in parliament (unaccompanied by his wife) was not to be until the autumn session of 1775. During the remainder of this year, while enjoying the pleasures of a rural life, he nevertheless took an active interest in political affairs and in particular, those appertaining to the rapidly escalating quarrel between Britain and the American colonies. He was in regular correspondence on this subject with Ralph Izard, his American friend. Ralph Izard (c.1742-1804) had been living in England since 1771. In 1777 he was to move to Paris and afterwards be appointed by congress as commissioner to the court of Tuscany.²⁴ Although corresponding with many of the leading men in America he appears to have

had an awkward and inflexible temperament, and soon quarrelled with Benjamin Franklin, congress's leading representative in France. When, in 1780, Izard was recalled (not having been received by the Tuscan court) Franklin noted "No soul regrets [his] departure" and that he was a "hot-tempered" man "who would raise quarrels in Heaven".²⁵ In March, 1775 Dempster confessed to Izard that during the last session of parliament "I had discharged my duty on the only cause of consequence, I mean that of America, last year, very conscientiously and very fruitlessly."²⁶ In April 1775, almost as the first shots of the American Revolution were being fired in Lexington, he wrote to Izard:

"I most sincerely lament the threatening appearance of things beyond the Atlantic. Like you, I once hoped the storm would blow over, and like you, I now fear it thickens again. I know not if I am so fortunate as to agree with you in another opinion. I think, the Americans and their friends to blame, for not making use of the opening Lord North gave them this winter [the conciliatory resolution of February 1775].

A ministerial declaration that it is not expedient to tax America, was a great concession from men who had talked so different a language. Had I been in town, I am afraid I should have differed from all my friends [presumably the Rockinghamites], closed in with the idea, and seconded an address to the King to instruct his Governors to apply for a subsidy by way of requisition."²⁷

Towards the end of this letter Dempster gave another illustration of his growing disillusionment with politics:

"I find a rural and retired life, much the best suited to my disposition. I have led a life so full of tranquillity and contentment that I think with horror of quitting my plough to resume my political labours next winter, which, however, I shall certainly do, in return for the very honourable manner in which my constituents imposed that burthen upon me."²⁸

Already the 'honour' and 'privileges' of his earlier letters had become a 'burthen'. As to his hope that Izard would share his opinion of Lord North's Conciliatory Resolution, he was to be disappointed, for Izard in his reply was fairly scathing.²⁹ This reply must have reinforced Dempster's view, expressed earlier (January 1775) to Sir Adam Fergusson:

“The ministry are, I see, determined to adhere to their system, the Americans to their natural rights. God knows how it may end. I foretell it will begin with bloodshed in America and end with a change of ministers and measures in England.”³⁰

In order, perhaps, to fortify himself against the ‘horror’ of his return to parliament, in August Dempster and his wife hosted a lavish ball in Dundee, jointly with a wealthy Indian ‘nabob’, which appears to have been a fairly riotous occasion to judge by the surviving account of it.³¹ Dempster returned to London for the autumn session of 1775; shortly before leaving Scotland, in September, he wrote to Pulteney expressing his thoughts for the coming session. By this time Dempster’s fears concerning America had been fully realised, for the colonies were now in open and bloody rebellion. Despite this, from the tone of the letter it would appear that Dempster was in a more positive frame of mind than earlier when he had written to Izard; to Pulteney he wrote:

“When I cabbaged [i.e. stole or thieved] a winter from Parliament last year I determined to make it up by a very punctual Attendance during the remaining Sessions, and in consequence of that Resolution I hope to see you in London a day or two before the meeting. Pray God we may meet to some good purpose, and that our Minister’s heads may descend from their Empty visions of subduing the most virtuous part of the British Empire.”³²

In the same letter Dempster informed Pulteney that much to his regret his finances still did not permit him to take Mrs Dempster with him to London.

Once in parliament Dempster used the occasion of the address of thanks debated 26-27 October 1775 for a major speech on the American question, which represents the clearest surviving statement of his views:

“There is no subject on which I have employed more reflection, than on the grounds of our present dispute with America; the result has been an opinion by which I believe I shall abide as long as I breathe; it is, Sir, that in my conscience I think the claim of the Americans is just and well-founded, to be left in the free exercise of the right of taxing themselves in their several provincial assemblies, in the same manner that Ireland now does and has always done. By this beautiful part of our constitution, our wise ancestors have bound together the different and

distant parts of this ^{mighty} empire; by this single principle, heretofore inviolate, they have diffused in a most unexampled manner the blessings of liberty and good government through our remotest provinces. Look, Sir, into the history of the provinces of other states, of the Roman provinces in ancient time; of the French, Spanish, Dutch and Turkish provinces of more modern date, and you will find every page of it stained with acts of oppressive violence, of cruelty, injustice and peculation: but in the British provinces the annual meetings of their little assemblies have constantly restrained the despotism, and corrected the follies of their governors; they watch over the administration of justice, and from time to time enact such salutary regulations as tend to promote their happiness and well being. And what, Sir, I beseech you, could insure the regular meeting of those assemblies ever troublesome to governors, but their retaining in their own hands, like us at home, the power of granting the funds necessary for defraying the current expense of government. Were your provincial assemblies deprived of this power, I cannot see wherein the government of America would differ from that of Indostan. And have our enquiries, in a former session, into the administration of Bengal, made us in love with the eastern species of government? Do we seriously wish to transplant the rapine and cruelties of India to America?"

He continued by strongly supporting the idea of sending commissioners to America empowered to receive submissions, remove oppressive restrictions and offer other indulgences. However, he felt it was vital that these commissioners should be able to deal directly with the American congress:

"There is but one step more necessary to be taken, and peace will, in my humble opinion, be certain and infallible; and in relation to that step alone have I ventured to rise on the present occasion. It has already been touched on by an hon. gentleman (Mr James Grenville) who always expresses himself with elegance and propriety. The point I mean, Sir, is that his Majesty's commissioners may be empowered to treat with the Congress. I am convinced, Sir, that America will not listen to a treaty through any other medium; it stands to reason and common senses he will not; for the Congress is not only the sole existing power at this moment in America, but it is to the union formed by means of the Congress, that America owed its strength, and its formidable power of resistance; without such a union, twelve [sic] wide-spread, far-distant provinces, thinly peopled and individually weak, could never act with effect in defence of what they think their violated rights; nor is it to be supposed they will dissolve this firm bond of union till their grievances are redressed. May I, then, be permitted very humbly to join my feeble voice to the hon. gentlemen's and entreat the ministry that no false pride, no misplaced idea of dignity and authority may induce them to forbid the commissioners from treating for and seeking peace where alone peace may be found. Let the commissioners be vested with discretionary powers, and left at least without an express prohibition to treat with that body; or let some means be devised of legalising a Congress, by calling one pro re nata under his Majesty's authority."³³

He concluded by expressing the hope that the tax on tea, like the other taxes imposed since 1764, would be repealed and that the two countries would be returned to full friendship. He reminded the house that he had uniformly voted and spoken in defence of these opinions for the previous eleven years.

However, Dempster was to be disappointed in his hopes of a conciliatory approach to the American question. The address of thanks, in its final form, made it clear that far from sending commissioners, let alone repealing the tax on tea, the government was bent on enlarging the military establishment and prosecuting the war in America with increased vigour.³⁴ Dempster was aware that not just the government, but the bulk of the house of commons favoured this course. In June 1775 he wrote to Ralph Izard:

“You observe the insensibility of the merchants and all ranks of people. This does not surprise me. Be assured, the measures pursued by government towards America, are not generally unpopular.

In Scotland, (myself, and a very few more excepted,) the whole body of the gentry, and of the independent and enlightened class of people, are, to a man, on the side of the administration. When you see never more than eighty in Parliament opposing the ministry, you may depend upon it, the measure is not thought a bad one; for corruption does not reach so deep. Many members support the minister who are not supported by him.

In his party, you will find most of the country members. This is the true barometer of the higher orders in England. There is a principle against America, as well as for her, insomuch, that it would not be easy for a ministry, more favourable to her, to bring the bulk of the House over to their opinion.”³⁵

The futility of Dempster’s attempts to persuade his fellow MPs to follow a more conciliatory line was clearly an important factor in his growing disillusionment with politics. In the same letter he wrote to Izard:

“I am so apt to be dogmatical in my opinions, and to fly off at a tangent in consequence of them, that, to say truth, I am sick of politics, as men generally are of a business for which they are not over well qualified. I came down to Scotland, almost in hopes my constituents would have dismissed me from their service,

meaning to pass the rest of my life in easy, rural occupations, having enjoyed more true happiness and content, since the 26th of September last, (my wedding day,) than ever I knew before. In my retreat, it would have been an eternal source of satisfaction, that I have, all along, endeavoured to discharge my duty to my country, disinterestedly, and that I have early and invariably dissuaded Parliament from pursuing those measures, relative to America, which are likely to end either in the loss, or what is still more to be regretted, the destruction of that country.”³⁶

In a letter to Izard written shortly afterwards Dempster expressed admiration for the system of government that was emerging in America:

“It will give me pleasure to hear of the proceedings of the Continental Congress. Our unfortunate misunderstanding with that country, has produced one curious spectacle for the philosopher. We shall see the rise, in our own time, of the greatest and finest state that ever was formed.

At least, I have a strong presentiment, that this Congress will assume the government of America, in the greater and more general points, leaving the interior government to the committees in the respective counties or provinces. This is a constitution of so much freedom, and so likely to preserve the power of the state, in the wisest, best and ablest hands, that it promises to exceed Rome in grandeur, and Great Britain in liberty.”³⁷

During the debate on the American Prohibitory Bill in December 1775 Dempster predictably opposed the prohibition of trade with America, but, equally predictably, supported that part of the bill relating to the sending of commissioners with wide discretionary powers. The bill passed its second reading on 11 December, the vote being 112:16. The voting list has not been preserved, but to judge from the short speech Dempster made on 5 December³⁸ it would appear that he voted for the bill, despite his opposition to the prohibition of trade.

On 20 February 1776 Charles James Fox opened a debate on America with a motion demanding an enquiry into the causes of the lack of success of the British forces in North America. Dempster, in a short speech, supported the proposed enquiry and criticised the administration for appearing to have

something to hide. He also took the opportunity to condemn the Quebec Bill, saying that in his opinion:

“no Turkish emperor ever sent a more arbitrary and oppressive mandate, by a favourite bashaw, to a distant province, than that Bill was, with the instructions to the governor, which accompanied it”³⁹

The motion was lost 240:104.

Although America took up most of Dempster’s energies during this session, he also found time to give attention to another favourite topic, that of the Scottish militia. On 2 November 1775 Lord Mountstuart (1744-1814), son and heir of the earl of Bute and MP for Bossiney, had announced his intention of moving a militia bill for Scotland.⁴⁰ Organised agitation in support of this bill was slow to develop in Scotland and Alexander Carlyle took the opportunity to write to Dempster to remind him of his pledge of 1762 to introduce a militia bill annually until the measure was passed (see p.35).

Needless to say, Dempster had not done this and his reply betrayed his embarrassment:

“Reverend Mr William [sic] Carlyle I tell you once for all, if you come across us Politicians with Letters of a Dozen Year old, and remind us of Points to which we have pledged ourselves at that distance of time you will be a most dangerous man to correspond with. However since I have never once moved a Question [i.e. the militia bill] that I pledged myself to move every year I am not much surprized at your being a little uneasy about the fate of that measure now that it has been moved.”⁴¹

He went on to say that the parliamentary secretary, John Robinson, had drafted a bill at Mountstuart’s request but that it was written in English rather than Scottish terms and was “as applicable to China as Scotland” and had had to be revised by a Scottish committee which included Henry Dundas (appointed Lord Advocate in 1775), William Pulteney, Sir Adam Fergusson and Dempster himself. On 5 March 1776 the bill was read for the second time, and debated. Both Dempster and Sir Adam Fergusson accordingly spoke in favour, but there were powerful voices

against it, most notably that of Edmund Burke on the grounds that as Scotland was not properly taxed, some five-sixths of the expense of a Scottish militia would fall to be paid by English landowners.⁴² In this he was acting as spokesman for the Rockingham group: on this occasion Dempster deserted his former allegiance.⁴³ The bill survived its second reading and was sent into committee, but was killed on 20 March, despite the support of Lord North and the government,⁴⁴ when the commons considered the committee's report, the vote being 112:93.

Dempster appears to have had high hopes of the bill's success, boosted no doubt by the administration's support, and on its defeat left London early for Dunnichen. He wrote to Pulteney:

"The rejection of the Militia Bill enabled me to gratify my Impatient desire for Home a few days sooner than I proposed, when we had the flattering Hope of its becoming a Law."⁴⁵

On arrival at Dunnichen (after a journey of four days and twelve hours, which he considered remarkably quick) Dempster found his wife in perfect health but one of his sisters, who had been staying at Dunnichen since the Dempsters' marriage, apparently in a terminal stage of a consumption.⁴⁶ It is not clear which of Dempster's sisters this was, nor the outcome.

Dempster spent the summer of 1776 quietly at Dunnichen, which ended on a happier note than it had begun with the marriage there of one of his sisters, Helen, on 3 October.⁴⁷ She married George Burrington, a captain in the service of the East India Company who had a daughter, Charlotte, by a former marriage. Burrington's name recurs regularly in Dempster's correspondence from now on, mainly in connection with Dempster's efforts to further Burrington's career in the East India Company. Burrington and Helen seem to have left for India soon after the marriage, and certainly spent many years there.⁴⁸

In December 1776 Dempster was back in London, this time accompanied by his wife.⁴⁹ He continued in opposition and on 16 April 1777 voted against the payment of the king's civil list debts.⁵⁰ This request came at an embarrassing time for the government since the cost of the American war was beginning to escalate alarmingly.⁵¹ On 18 April Dempster made another speech, nominally supporting the king, but at the same time demanding an enquiry:

“No man would more cheerfully co-operate in relieving his Majesty from his domestic embarrassments; nay, at all events, to pay his Majesty's debts; but while his zeal would prompt him go thus far, his duty as a member of that House, must compel him to know in what manner those debts were contracted.”⁵²

The debates concluded with parliament agreeing to settle the king's debts and increase the civil list.⁵³

On 15 May Dempster continued in a financial vein by attacking Lord North's fiscal measures in the debate on the budget, criticising the lack of progress in reducing the national debt and advocating a sinking fund:

“Mr Dempster observed, that the noble Lord [North] had been now ten years at the head of the finances, and, instead of paying off any part of the national debt, he believed he had added considerably to it. When a person of his Lordship's confessed talents, had failed in making any progress in so desirable a work, he despaired ever to see the debt lessened: he therefore thought it would be better for money to be borrowed in such a manner, that the very nature of the loan should create a virtual fund for discharging the sum borrowed; such as borrowing sums at a proportionate increase of interest, which should cease at the end of 61 or 99 years, the interest and principal to be extinguished together. It would, in fact, be paying so much of the debt thus borrowed, every year.”⁵⁴

Later in the same debate, Dempster criticised the system of awarding contracts, suggesting that they were insufficiently publicly advertised and thus awarded at higher prices than they ought to be.⁵⁵

Dempster's interest in the nation's finances seems to have been perennial, and hardly a budget debate went by without a substantial contribution from him, sometimes going into considerable and intricate detail. This concern is ironic in view of the state of his personal finances which were so often in a parlous condition.

Dempster's last recorded intervention in this parliamentary session occurred on 22 May 1777 when he defended Lord Pigot and opposed Lord North's efforts to have him recalled. Sir George Pigot (1719-1777) as governor of Madras aroused the anger of his own council when on orders from home he attempted to restore the ruler of Tanjore. The council put Pigot in prison, where he subsequently died. Although opinion on the merits of the case was divided among the East India company directors, in parliament the opposition espoused Pigot's cause against the administration. Dempster attributed the whole of the troubles at Madras to the intrigues and corruption of the nabob of Arcot to raise a faction against Pigot both in India and in Britain.⁵⁶

Dempster's finances took a turn for the better in August 1777 when to his surprise he found himself a beneficiary of Sir Robert Fletcher, fellow MP and friend. Sir Robert Fletcher (c.1738-1776) had a brief and stormy career. He was appointed a writer at Madras in May 1757 but transferred to the army four months later. He was several times dismissed from the service but secured reinstatement each time. He was knighted for gallantry in action in 1763 and eventually, in 1774, became a brigadier-general. In parliament he represented Cricklade between 1768-1774. He was one of the faction on the council at Madras led by George Stratton which, in 1776, quarrelled with, and eventually imprisoned, Lord Pigot, the governor, as related above. Fletcher, ill with tuberculosis, left soon after (in October 1776) in the Greenwich on a voyage to restore his health. He died at Mauritius on 24 December 1776.⁵⁷

Dempster estimated that he would receive £700-£1000 per year from this bequest (worth £70,000 - £100,000 per year today); one of the items was a house in Madras which had cost £4,800 and which could be let for £550 per year: "This alone is an Empire to us [i.e. to Mr and Mrs Dempster]."⁵⁸

Such a large bequest from this source is somewhat unexpected since there is no record in Dempster's surviving correspondence of any close relationship between him and Sir Robert Fletcher, or of any reason why he should have been such a major beneficiary. Dempster himself seems to have been genuinely surprised (and delighted) at his good fortune. Ralph Izard heard the news from a cousin in London (and the fact that he saw fit to mention it in a letter mainly about much weightier matters indicates that the surprise was general) and commented in reply:

“Accept my thanks... for the intelligence of my friend Dempster's good fortune. I most sincerely rejoice at it - and believe that nobody on Earth is more deserving of it. ... A few more instances of [Fortune's] discernment will convince me that she is not so blind, as some folks would make us believe;...”⁵⁹

It would appear that the surprise extended to at least some of the other beneficiaries, and not pleasantly so: the will had been composed by Sir Robert himself and contained ambiguities which led to disputes, making it necessary for Dempster to remain in London for some weeks to help resolve them and to turn down a social invitation from Pulteney.⁶⁰ The affair rumbled on somewhat acrimoniously into the following year, and in April and May Dempster wrote on several occasions to Sir Adam Fergusson concerning it and Dempster's efforts to avoid a lawsuit by appointing arbitrators instead.⁶¹ Dempster's reasons for the latter are of interest in shedding light on his views regarding India at this time:

“I saw every reason of propriety as well as interest in preventing the will of Sir Robert Fletcher from becoming the subject of a public lawsuit. The first idea that occur'd to me was the indecency of the three people whom Sir Robert Fletcher certainly consider'd as most dear to him, going to war among themselves about the division of his property. But what weigh'd with me the most powerfully was the injury which the memory of our benefactor would sustain by rendering public the nature of the property which our friend died possessed of. Few fortunes acquired in the East will bear a very minute investigation. Individuals make fortunes there as princes acquire dominions in Europe. Force as well as justice are too frequently employed by both. Sir Robert in his will leaves me certain sums of which his attornies have memorandums, this is all he says on that head. Will it become his executors to tell the Chancellor in open court, that the Nabob had promised the Commander-in-Chief of the Company's forces ten thousand pound about the time

that the Company's Governor, and that Governor Lord Pigot, was by the intrigues of that very Nabob deprived of his government, of his liberty and in consequence of his life? That the Nabob had authorized the remittance of £2500 and was daily expected to pay the remaining £7500? ... Would one wish to tell the world, that this legacy is also a largesse from the Nabob's family?"⁶²

The 'three people most dear' to Sir Robert appear to have been Dempster, Sir Robert's widow and another writer in India, Edward Cotsford.⁶³ While Dempster was very properly anxious to protect Sir Robert's reputation he apparently saw no impropriety in receiving a share of the proceeds of what was by all accounts one of the most disgraceful and disreputable incidents in the entire history of the East India Company's administration. But then he was merely conforming to the accepted standards of the age.

Although in view of the disputes over the will Dempster must have expected to have to wait some years before receiving any tangible benefit, it was presumably on the strength of the bequest that he embarked on a visit to France at the end of 1777. The Dempsters were accompanied by Charlotte Burrington, Sir Adam Fergusson, George Heming (Mrs Dempster's brother) and Heming's wife. Some years previously (in 1772) Dempster had promised to accompany Sir Adam on a European "jaunt" but had been prevented from doing so by lack of money.⁶⁴ This expedition may have been, in part, a fulfilment of that promise. However, in a letter to Sir Adam written after the latter had returned alone to England, a comment by Dempster suggests that problems with his own health and worries associated with the legal wrangles over Sir Robert Fletcher's will were also significant reasons:

"Many thanks for your obliging inquiries concerning my health which is perfectly reestablished, and what I value more, my memory is I think stronger than ever I remember it, after being materially affected by the repeated shocks I had before leaving England."⁶⁵

While the party was in London, on 12 December, William Pulteney suggested to Dempster and Sir Adam that they should try to meet Benjamin Franklin when they were in Paris.⁶⁶ Pulteney was acting as an unofficial envoy between the government and the Americans, the war with whom had reached a critical point. Burgoyne had been defeated at Saratoga the previous October and this was to lead to first France in 1778, and then Spain in 1779, joining with the Americans against Britain. Concerned about rumours of the impending treaty between America and France Pulteney approached Lord George Germain (1716-1785), at that time secretary of state for the colonies, proposing that Dempster and Fergusson could sound Franklin out about peace terms.⁶⁷ Although Franklin is known to have received a stream of visitors in the spring of 1778 there is no record of Dempster or Fergusson being among them. Pulteney himself saw Franklin in March, but the latter's terms proved too harsh and Pulteney thus was unable to prevent the treaty from being signed.⁶⁸

Dempster's party spent the New Year in Paris, soon after which Sir Adam returned to England, while the others left Paris for Orléans.⁶⁹ Here they rented a house on the banks of the Loire a few miles outside the city which Dempster seems to have found much to his liking. In a series of letters to Sir Adam Fergusson he provided lengthy and complimentary descriptions of the surrounding countryside and the way of life of its inhabitants:

“I have great doubts if France has ever yet been visited by an impartial eye. To the rusticity of the lower people which you remarked, you may add an observation of mind, which surprized me no less. I have been in several of their cottages which are exceedingly clean, and every external symptom marks their being abundantly rich. Their horses are in good condition, themselves and their children are bundled up in immense quantities of substantial clothing, and I do assure you, that in all my walks through their vineyards and gardens I have never seen a weed.”⁷⁰

In the same letter Dempster mentioned that he was shortly to attend the local law court “to hear a great cause pleaded” and gave Sir Adam a brief description of the French legal procedure. Clearly Dempster's interest in legal matters was undiminished. Likewise his interest in politics: Dempster

wrote at length to Sir Adam giving his views on the contemporary situation, particularly with regard to America. Not unnaturally during the Dempster party's stay in Orléans they were surrounded by speculation and gossip concerning the proposed treaty and Dempster would have been hard pressed to ignore American matters even if he had been naturally inclined to do so. He wrote to Sir Adam at some length on the subject in February, expressing the hope that Lord North and his ministers were at last anxious to extricate themselves from the American conflict, but fearing that unless the commissioners whom it was proposed to send to Philadelphia were given the power to recognise the independence of the thirteen colonies the whole exercise of sending them would be futile:

“Yet it is equally certain that every effort towards reconciliation will be ineffectual, unless the independency of America shall be made the basis of a treaty of peace. Nothing short of this will do. ... I am aware of the ridicule of an individual offering advice to administration. This letter is however something more. I mean it as a piece of intelligence, that America will listen to nothing but independency at present. Please tell my Lord Advocate [Henry Dundas] so and let him if he pleases make it known to Lord North.”⁷¹

The tone of the last part of this letter, where Dempster refers to the letter as being “a piece of intelligence” suggests that he did in fact succeed in contacting Franklin while in Paris. Correspondence with his only other American contact at the time, Ralph Izard, had by then ceased.

The series of letters to Sir Adam Fergusson from Orléans are of particular interest since, unlike at home, he had the leisure to write at length and reflectively. From these letters it is clear that Dempster enjoyed his stay at Orléans and returned home much refreshed and reinvigorated as a result. His mood would have been further improved by good news from London concerning Sir Robert Fletcher's will. He heard in May that the arbitration had been settled in only six weeks instead of the year or more he had been expecting, and on terms very much in his favour.⁷²

It is not clear when exactly the Dempsters and the Hemings returned from France, but Dempster was back in parliament in the spring of 1779: on 10 March he made a short speech in support of Lord Newhaven's motion for a committee on the state of Irish trade and commerce (to investigate ways of alleviating the economic distress currently being experienced there). For once Dempster found himself on the winning side, the motion being passed 47:42.⁷³ On 18 March Dempster opposed the petition from Scottish Roman Catholics presented to the commons by Edmund Burke. This requested the extension to Scotland of the provisions of the 1778 (English) Catholic Relief Act to permit Catholics to serve in the armed forces. The proposal aroused fierce opposition among Scottish Presbyterian lowlanders and there were riots in Glasgow and Edinburgh.⁷⁴ The Rockingham group in general favoured the relaxation of intolerant laws but Dempster had to think also of his constituents and ingeniously offended no-one by praising the behaviour of the Roman Catholics and their loyalty to the crown but at the same time arguing that:

“the people of Scotland in general had not the least inclination to persecute the Roman-Catholics; but if any compulsion was made use of by parliament, he would not answer for the consequences, they might be fatal to them. As the matter now stood, all tumult would subside, they would enjoy their accustomed toleration, and the corporations of Edinburgh and Glasgow would certainly indemnify the sufferers by the late riots.”⁷⁵

In April 1779 Dempster again demonstrated his support for liberty of the press by taking a leading part in opposing Lord North's bill to grant Oxford and Cambridge universities the monopoly of printing English almanacs. On 28 April Dempster proposed a motion to delay by three months the bill's second reading (defeated 129:42), protesting that the monopoly was unfair. He mentioned that in Scotland anyone could publish almanacs and in consequence their quality was much higher, the booksellers vying with one another in accuracy.⁷⁶

Perhaps surprisingly Dempster did not use the opportunity of the debates during March and April 1779 on the conduct of the American war to launch a major attack on the administration. He confined himself to a minor intervention on 29 April protesting about Lord North's introduction of an amendment preventing the commons, then in a committee of the whole house, from examining Lord Cornwallis.⁷⁷ However, on 15 December 1779, during the debate on Edmund Burke's plan of public reform and economy (to reorganise public expenditure to make it more efficient and thus lessen the need for extra taxation), Dempster, while supporting Burke's plan, did launch an attack. The cost of the war was putting great pressure on the public finances, which occasioned Burke's proposal, and this gave Dempster the excuse he needed:

“In my conscience I am persuaded, that the influence of the crown is the true cause of the mischievous origin, the destructive progress, the absurd conduct, and the obstinate prosecution, without view or hope, of this accursed American war; which is now universally felt, and generally acknowledged, as itself the cause of all the other misfortunes of Great Britain, and principally of the present naval greatness of the House of Bourbon. I am as heartily convinced, that the King's interest is as much affected by it as that of the subject. If it continues, and goes on as it has done, I vow to God, I do not think his Majesty will sit securely on his throne. I am bound to remove this evil, as I cordially love my sovereign. I think myself bound to it by my faith, by my allegiance, by the sacred oath I have taken to his Majesty.”⁷⁸

Dempster continued to support Burke, and to attack the government, in the following year. In the debate on 20 March 1780 he strongly defended Burke's Establishment Bill for abolishing various civil list offices and pensions and criticised the ministry for its high-handed behaviour in the house:

“Mr Dempster rose to defend his hon. friend (Mr Burke) who, he perceived, was almost exhausted, from the imputation of his wishing that House to consider his Bill as his edict, and expecting, like the king of France, that the house of commons would implicitly register it, *ipse dixit*, without examination and without discussion. What his hon. friend had said warranted no such interpretation, but it might very fairly be put on the conduct of the minister [Lord North] who had for a series of years treated that House as if it had been the parliament of Paris. If the minister chose to pursue the American war, what had he to do, but to bring the edict, and it was instantly registered! If he wanted more money, no matter how much nor how ill the people could afford it, the moment the edict was produced by the minister, the House registered it, and granted the money!”⁷⁹

During this session Dempster also took advantage of another opportunity to speak in support of a Scottish militia, when on 3 December 1779 he seconded the motion of Lord George Gordon (1751-1793) respecting the defensive state of Scotland:

“Mr Dempster approved much of the second proposition [regarding the general arming of North Britain], because he was against all partial favours or local distinctions. England was armed, Ireland was armed; North Britain was defenceless, and had, very improperly, been denied a militia for their immediate protection.”⁸⁰

Gordon, however, postponed the second proposition. It is not clear why he introduced this motion, except that as an anti-Catholic agitator, responsible for the London riots named after him that took place in the summer of 1780, he might have been attempting to arouse anti-Catholic feeling in Scotland by calling for a militia in place of relaxation of the rule effectively preventing recruitment of Catholics into the British army (see p.119).⁸¹

On 6 April 1780 Dempster voted in favour of John Dunning’s famous resolution “that the influence of the Crown has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished”,⁸² an action for which he was later to be labelled by his opponents in the forthcoming election as “a traitor to Scotland.”⁸³

The session ended on 8 July 1780 and the dissolution of parliament took place, unexpectedly, on 1 September, a general election taking place in the autumn. Dempster headed north again to face his constituents in his fourth general election.

Chapter 5: Notes

1. Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.1 p.509.
2. Dempster to Fergusson, 12 September 1774: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.82.
3. Dempster to Pulteney, 6 May: undated, probably 1769: Huntington Library, PU190.
4. The Scots Magazine, vol.36 (1774), p.502.
5. Dempster to Izard, 3 December 1774: Anne Izard Deas (editor), Correspondence of Mr Ralph Izard of South Carolina, from the year 1774 to 1804 (1844), p.32.
6. Izard to Dempster, 21 January 1775: ibid., p.42.
7. Dempster to William Smith, 1 December 1810: NLS, Ms.5319 ff.151-154.
8. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.81; British Library, Add. Mss.12436 ff.58-59 and 12431 f.153.
9. British Library, Add. Mss.34181 f.22.
10. Ibid., f.21.
11. Ibid., f.22.
12. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.81-82.
13. British Library, Add. Mss.12436 ff.58-59.
14. British Library, Add. Mss.34181 f.21.
15. Dempster to Charles Fergusson, 26 January 1775: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.87.
16. Dempster to Pulteney, 31 March 1775: Huntington Library, PU165.
17. Dempster to Pulteney, 15 March 1775: ibid., PU164.
18. Dempster to Izard, 5 March 1775: Deas, Correspondence of Mr Ralph Izard, p.56.
19. Dempster to Izard, 3 December 1774: ibid., p.32.
20. Dempster to Fergusson, 26 January 1775: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.85.
21. Dempster to Pulteney, 31 March 1775: Huntington Library, PU165.
22. Dempster to Fergusson, 26 January 1775: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.85.

23. Dempster to Boswell, 16 February 1775: printed in Boswell's Tour of the Hebrides, published in 1785: R. W. Chapman (editor), Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland and Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson L.L.D. (paperback, 1970, reprinted 1979), p.437.
24. Deas, Correspondence of Mr Ralph Izard, pp.v-xi; David Schoenbrun, Triumph in Paris. The Exploits of Benjamin Franklin (1976), pp.154, 226 and 231.
25. Schoenbrun, Triumph in Paris, p.226.
26. Dempster to Izard, 5 March 1775: Deas, Correspondence of Mr Ralph Izard, p.55.
27. Dempster to Izard, 30 April 1775: ibid., pp.73-74.
28. Ibid., p.74.
29. Izard to Dempster, 31 May 1775: ibid., pp.78-80.
30. Dempster to Fergusson, 26 January 1775: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.86.
31. T. Ruddock to Sir Robert Gordon of Gordonstoun, 20 August 1775: HMC, Laing Manuscripts Report (2 vols. 1914-1925), vol.2 pp.477-478.
32. Dempster to Pulteney, 19 September 1775: Huntington Library, PU166.
33. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.18 cols.792-794.
34. Ibid., cols.795 et seq.
35. Dempster to Izard, 7 June 1775: Deas, Correspondence of Mr Ralph Izard, pp.87-88.
36. Ibid., pp.86-87.
37. Dempster to Izard, 6 July 1775: ibid., pp.96-97.
38. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.17 col.1062.
39. Ibid., col.1146.
40. Robertson, Militia Issue, p.130. For more detail and background to the bill see pp.130-132.
41. Dempster to Carlyle, undated but probably November or December 1775: EUL, Ms.Dc.4.41 item 90.
42. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.17 cols.1228-1231.
43. Robertson, Militia Issue, p.132.

44. Ibid.
45. Dempster to Pulteney, 2 April 1776: Huntington Library, PU167.
46. Ibid.
47. The Scots Magazine, vol.38 (1776), p.566.
48. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.89.
49. The evidence for this is a short note written to Pulteney, 26 December 1776: Huntington Library, PU168.
50. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.19 col.139.
51. Watson, Reign of George III, p.208.
52. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.19 col.142.
53. Ibid., col.160.
54. Ibid., col.264.
55. Ibid., col.268.
56. Ibid., cols. 286-7. For background see Watson, Reign of George III, p.221; and at greater length, Maclean of Glensanda, younger, 'The Early Political Careers of James and Sir John Macpherson', *passim*.
57. Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.2 pp.440-441; Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.92-93.
58. Dempster to Pulteney, 1 and 8 August 1777: Huntington Library, PU170 and PU171 respectively.
59. Izard to a cousin in London, 14 August 1777: Deas, Correspondence of Mr Ralph Izard, pp.323-325.
60. Dempster to Pulteney, 8 August 1777: Huntington Library, PU171.
61. Dempster to Fergusson, 16 April and 29 May 1778: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.101-106.
62. Dempster to Fergusson, 16 April 1778: ibid., p.102.
63. Ibid., pp.102-103.
64. Dempster to Fergusson, 8 February 1772: ibid., pp.76-77.

65. Dempster to Fergusson, 16 April 1778: ibid., p.104.
66. William Pulteney to Lord George Germain, 12 December 1777: HMC, Stopford-Sackville Report (2 vols. 1904-1910), vol.2 p.85.
67. Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.3 p.342.
68. Schoenbrun, Triumph in Paris, pp.203-208.
69. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.89.
70. Dempster to Fergusson, 1 February 1778: ibid., p.90.
71. Dempster to Fergusson, 4 February 1778: ibid., pp.94-95.
72. Dempster to Fergusson, 29 May 1778: ibid., p.105.
73. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.20 cols.249-250.
74. Watson, Reign of George III, p.235.
75. The Scots Magazine, vol.41 (1779), pp.134-135.
76. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.20 col.605.
77. Ibid., col.721.
78. Ibid., col.1302.
79. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.21 cols.308-309. For background see Watson, Reign of George III, pp.231-232.
80. Ibid., col.1179.
81. Robertson, Militia Issue, pp.136 and 184.
82. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.21 col.371.
83. Rockingham to Sir Lawrence Dundas, October 1780: quoted in Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.2 p.316.

CHAPTER 6

PARLIAMENT 1780-1784

Although at the previous general election Dempster appeared to have very nearly decided not to stand again as a candidate, he seems to have had fewer such doubts in 1780. This was despite (or perhaps because of) a determined attempt by the government to unseat him. In June 1780 James Macpherson (1736-1796, politician and versifier of 'Ossian' fame) acting for North's parliamentary secretary, John Robinson¹, wrote to Professor Adam Ferguson:

"Now to business. I was, this morning, with R[obinson]. He wishes to have the Perth etc. [burghs] out of D[empster]'s hands. The B[urgh]s are five - Five hundred [pounds] to each of three, which makes a Maj[orit]y. One or two hundred to each of the delegates. The two principal ones take nothing. They only wish for a friend of R[obinson]'s - and that friend to be a countryman. The mode is this: Let a clever fellow, a man of business go to the spot, or take some method of sounding them. They are ready to treat. - R[obinson] thinks our friend the Col[onel Fletcher-Campbell] who left us, the other day, the fittest man possible. The thing is certain, by common, but able management. Let it be set about immediately - before D[empster] turns his face to the North Pole."²

Adam Ferguson (not to be confused with Sir Adam Fergusson) was one of Dempster's old friends from his Edinburgh days and was now Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University. It would seem that Macpherson was unaware of this friendship and Ferguson, while outwardly complying with Macpherson's plan, could well have been secretly keeping Dempster informed. John Fletcher-Campbell of Boquhan (d.1806) was the youngest son of Andrew Fletcher, Lord Milton (1692-1766). At this time he was lieutenant-colonel of the 32nd regiment of foot and after commanding the regiment for 24 years as major and lieutenant-colonel felt himself overdue for advancement. The government advised him that his chances of succeeding to the full colonelcy of the regiment would be enhanced if he agreed to oppose Dempster.³ Fletcher-Campbell accordingly toured the constituency in the summer of 1780 but received only lukewarm support. Both the duke of Atholl and Henry Dundas, the lord advocate, whose co-operation had been counted on, stood aside.

On 6 August Ferguson reported progress: Cupar was for Fletcher-Campbell, Perth was ambivalent while St Andrews and Dundee seemed firmly for Dempster. Dundas' behaviour was particularly disappointing:

“As the L[ord] A[dvocate] who is supposed to speak the language of Administration is silent this Business becomes Proportionately Difficult. ... D[empster] is exceedingly Popular. Every man of us disposed to wish him personally well. It is painful to be against him upon any other Idea than that his seat must be disposed of to some body else if not to us.”⁴

The “some body else” may have been the duke of Atholl's nephew, whom the duke was threatening to send into the fray against the government.⁵ Fletcher-Campbell fought a lacklustre campaign; he clearly lacked Dempster's charisma and suffered accordingly. He reported his own progress in doleful letters to Macpherson.⁶ Cupar was the presiding burgh this time and remained firmly against Dempster. Surprisingly St Andrews, where Dempster had been provost between 1760-1776, turned against him. The councillors there were embarrassed themselves about this, and at a meeting on 29 September 1780 voted a lengthy, apologetic special thanks to him, conceiving themselves:

“bound in Justice and Gratitude to express in this public manner their grateful sense and approbation of his former conduct towards them. And that altho a Majority of this Council were Induced to choose...the open & avowed Agent of his Antagonist, which step they are very sorry, it is not now in their power to Recall, yet that neither Mr Dempster himself nor the Impartial world may suppose that the Esteem and affection of this City and corporation for him, is by that wrong step Extinguished and Obliterate the Council [wish]...to assure him, that the corporation have and retain for him the most cordial and sincere regard & attachment for him which they will manifest on all proper occasions.”⁷

However, Dundee, Perth and Forfar all voted for Dempster and accordingly he was re-elected on 2 October 1780.⁸ Although Fletcher-Campbell's personal qualities must have played a part in his defeat he put the blame squarely on the Scottish members of the government who had ignored North's endorsement of him as the official candidate.⁹ It is unclear what part Dempster himself played, but in a letter to Sir Adam Fergusson he affected innocent surprise at his re-election:

“Considering I have neither money nor influence nor merit and how much of all three my antagonist if he had not also modesty might justly boast of, the successful

issue of this short campaign is a matter of real surprize to me. I loiter'd one full week at Harrowgate from a doubt of undertaking new contests of a political kind, and had I given way to my own dislike to them and not thought I owed it to my friends to present myself at least, I should have returned to London and thanked my district."¹⁰

To Sir William Pulteney he wrote:

"I must sincerely give and take Congratulations on our Elections [Pulteney had also been successfully re-elected]. If all the Constituents of England were like ours more of its Representatives would be like you and nothing else is wanted to set us on our legs again."¹¹

There is in this correspondence none of the pessimism which attended the 1774 general election.

There is no doubt that Dempster relished his victory and was looking forward to once more taking his place in parliament.

During 1781 the East India Company featured frequently in the house of commons' proceedings and was used by the Rockingham group as a means of harassing the government.¹² Dempster spoke frequently and invariably in support of the company against the ministry, both to maintain his allegiance to Rockingham and also, no doubt, because of his own position as a proprietor and one with relatives and friends with East Indian interests. On 30 April, for example, during the debate on Lord North's motion for a committee of secrecy to enquire into the causes of the war in the Carnatic, Dempster argued against an immediate renewal of the company's charter (which would almost certainly have been on worse terms than the company currently enjoyed) while the Carnatic war was still continuing:

"Mr Dempster rejoiced at the approaching enquiry, but recommended it to the noble Lord not to make a bargain with the Company for the renewal of their charter for any length of time just at this crisis, which he described as a most unfit season for it, but to continue the exclusive trade for another year by a short Bill. He said, the territorial possessions of the Company... tottered to their foundations just now; it would be equally injurious to the public and the Company, therefore, to demand a large sum of money from them [an almost certain condition of a new charter], while the state of their affairs was so unsettled."¹³

Again, on 9 May during a general debate on the affairs of the East India Company Dempster:

“rose, to add his persuasions... that the noble Lord [North] in the blue ribbon would not think of driving a bargain with the Company for the renewal of their charter, just as circumstances stood at present, but would leave them the little remains of commerce which they yet enjoyed, as a source of provision against the difficulties that were to be expected, and continue the charter for another year by a short Bill. He reminded the noble Lord, that the potentates in India were at once merchants and princes, and that depriving the Company of all their cash, and exhausting the treasury would be a most dangerous expedient.”¹⁴

The debates continued wearisomely through May and June 1780 with Dempster arguing generally for the company to be left in peace from government interference, for its charter rights to be respected and for the charter to be extended for at least one, and preferably two years.¹⁵ On 23 May he found himself in opposition to Edmund Burke, fellow Rockinghamite, when Dempster ventured to suggest that the company’s territorial acquisitions should properly belong to the crown (Burke felt strongly that they belonged to the company).¹⁶

Although in general supporting the Rockinghamites, Dempster could disconcert his parliamentary colleagues by speaking his mind without regard to the party line. For example, when on 21 June 1781, during one of the East India debates, Charles James Fox attacked Dempster’s friend George Johnstone (William Pulteney’s brother) for incompetence at the naval action at St Jago (one of the Cape Verde Islands), suggesting that his naval command was a reward for going over to the administration, Dempster joined Lord North in defending Johnstone’s ability and integrity. He observed that “he never formed his friendship on such sandy ground as party consideration.”¹⁷ and was obviously motivated more by considerations of natural justice and friendship than by those of party loyalty.

Dempster did not attend the winter session of 1781-1782, feigning illness. He must have found the previous session a disheartening experience, as is evident from a letter he wrote to Pulteney:

“I ... return you many thanks for the trouble you have had in attending to make my excuse of sickness which I am happy to find the House has received and that I enjoy at the same time perfect Health.

Alas! what would you or I do were we to exhaust our lungs from June to January talking in a House where nothing originates and which serves only as the organ of Administration, and an Engine to squeeze money from the people whose property they are appointed to protect. I remain where I am without the least remorse, and think with some regret on the approach of the next session of Parliament, having in some measure pledged myself to attend there on some points relative to the linen manufacture.”¹⁸

Dempster's absence meant that he did not take part in the debates and divisions which led, in March 1782, to the fall of Lord North's administration. His surviving correspondence makes no reference to this event, but given Dempster's previous hostility to Lord North he cannot have regarded this other than with some satisfaction. However, such was his current jaundiced view of politicians that even the prospect of the end of the American war failed to elicit much enthusiasm from him. In another passage from the letter to Pulteney just quoted he remarked:

“I see we are neither to carry on nor to abandon the American War, which is in the character of the present [i.e. Lord North's] Administration. We don't carry on the war in hopes of reducing America, but to furnish a pretence to [Lord] G[eorge] G[ermain] to keep his place, lest they should be forced to ask a better man to accept of it. I am persuaded if our ministers had been successful and popular they would have jumped long ago. And I am in some doubts whether it is not in the nature of a Monarchy to be administered by desperate and Ambitious men.

I have won several Betts by L[or]d Sand[wich] & L[or]d G[eorge] G[ermain] retaining their offices till Xmas [1781] and would take an Even bett they will be in possession of them next Xmas [1782] if they live so long.”¹⁹

The last part of this extract suggests that the fall of the North ministry came as a surprise to Dempster, who seems to have been resigned to its continuing for another year at least.

Dempster's first recorded intervention after his return to parliament came during a further debate on East Indian affairs when on 24 April 1782 he spoke strongly in defence of his friend Sir Elijah Impey (1732-1809), the chief justice of Bengal, who was being threatened with recall and impeachment.²⁰ Then, on 7 May, he supported William Pitt's motion for an enquiry into parliamentary representation and urged its extension to Scotland, saying:

"He was well convinced that there were abuses that ought to be remedied. In the part of the country to which he had the honour to belong, where the forms of election were different from those in the other parts of Britain, there were several peculiarities of a most inconvenient and improper nature. He would mention one in particular, the case of superiority: he was himself the superior of a land, with which he had no other connection; he neither lived upon it, nor received the rents; it was the property of another person; but he, as superior, had a vote, and the proprietor had none, though in every respect entitled, except by the forms of a local mode of tenure, to the rights of a freeholder."²¹

Dempster was referring to his obtaining in 1770, with Sir Adam Fergusson's help, a 'fictitious vote' in Ayrshire, presumably to enable him to support Sir Adam's political interest there.²² This speech throws a considerable amount of light on Dempster's views on Scottish county politics, although strangely a year later he was to voice his disapproval of similar proposed reforms for the burghs and refused to support them (see p. 135).

On 10 May 1782 in the debate on the 'Earl of Shelburne's Plan for Arming the People' Dempster was an enthusiastic supporter of the plan:

"Mr Dempster gave the plan his hearty consent; the people voluntarily taking arms was a never-failing source of defence; in Elizabeth's days they had saved their country at the time of the armada; and no danger whatever befell, or ever threatened the constitution by arming the people at that period."²³

Dempster no doubt hoped that the proposed scheme could be extended to provide a Scottish militia; however again he was on the losing side: the plan was dismissed without a division.²⁴

Lord Rockingham succeeded North on the latter's fall in March 1782, his administration comprising a mixture of his own supporters and those of the earl of Shelburne. In general Dempster continued to support Rockingham in power as he had during his long period in opposition and might have expected some minor office as a reward for his, albeit rather erratic, loyalty (although his surviving correspondence makes no mention of any such hope). However, none came during the Rockingham administration's short life and any hopes he might have entertained were dashed by Rockingham's premature and unexpected death on 1 July 1782. Dempster's exclusion might perhaps be explained by the intense rivalry for 'places' between Rockingham and Shelburne supporters both before and after the former's death. The change of ministry interrupted yet another debate on India, during which Dempster was again defending Sir Elijah Impey.²⁵

During the recess, in the autumn of 1782, Dempster made an impromptu visit to Brussels. He and his wife, together with several relatives and friends had been staying at Margate. The women remained there, but Dempster, his brother-in-law Thomas Gordon and two other friends decided to make a fortnight's tour through the United Provinces and Belgium taking in Brussels.²⁶ This journey was filled with nostalgia for Dempster who remembered his visit there in 1756 with Sir Adam Fergusson. He wrote to Sir Adam from Brussels:

"I embrace the opportunity... to execute my determined purpose of writing to you from a place where every stone and tree recalls to my memory the year 1756."²⁷

Dempster was favourably impressed with the political situation in Belgium, although his growing disenchantment with the house of commons might have coloured his views. In the letter to Sir Adam Fergusson just quoted he admired the long period of peace enjoyed by Belgium, its low level of taxation, and the evident prosperity of its people - all of which he ascribed to their benign government:

"I have not been idle in political researches and have learnt more of the constitution of Flanders and Brabant than I should have done in twenty years if you could

suppose me to have remained all that time twenty-three years of age [i.e. his age in 1756]. This country has enjoyed perfect peace since the year 1764. Their taxes which are light have neither been augmented nor diminished and the provinces are in the highest state of cultivation and population....The Emperor...is I fancy one of the best princes in Europe next to our own."²⁸

Belgium was then under the rule of the Austrian emperor Joseph II (1741-1790), noted as a well-meaning but heavy-handed reformer. Despite Dempster's democratic inclination he seems to have been led into considering that rule by a benevolent despot was preferable to that by a corrupt and administration-dominated parliament. In a later letter Dempster repeated his views, providing a fascinating insight into his political thinking at the time:

"Everything I have seen in the Low Countries [i.e. Belgium] convinces me of the justness of my observations with regard to its prosperity. But there is more causes of it than those I have assigned. The principal one is money. It is the States [i.e. state assemblies] who give it. When they assemble they can only give answers to such propositions as the Emperour lays before them. To those their deliberations are bounded. They don't even make the Laws. Those are made by the Emperour with consent of his courts of justice. So the people are neither a political assembly nor a legislative one, but mere purse keepers, and very rigidly and uncorruptly they perform this important function.- Quere: taking the animal man altogether; his natural factiousness; his instability, his tendency to encroach on the aristocratic and regal part of a free constitution - wether this is not as great a share of power as he ought to have. A well drawn comparison between their constitution and ours would be a most instructive treatise."²⁹

The Belgians themselves did not share Dempster's enthusiasm; only seven years later, in December 1789, they staged a revolt, driving out the Austrians and restoring their ancient privileges by establishing the Republic of the United States of Belgium.

Dempster appears to have supported the Shelburne administration which succeeded that of Rockingham (and was equally short-lived). On 18 February 1783 he voted for Shelburne's peace preliminaries to conclude the American war saying that it was "a thing absolutely necessary for the country."³⁰ (See speech of 16 April quoted below). The Shelburne administration was followed, with effect from 2 April 1782, by a third unstable ministry, the Fox-North coalition which lasted until

December 1783. Despite his opposition to Lord North, Dempster supported the coalition albeit with considerable reserve. One of the most serious and urgent of the many problems confronting the new ministers was the state of the country's finances - such was the shortage of money that the discharge of servicemen following the end of the war was delayed because arrears of pay could not be met, and serious unrest was threatening. An early task of the new government, therefore, was the negotiation of a loan of £12 million. Dempster took his customary interest in the nation's finances and during the debate on the terms of the loan, on 16 April 1783, spoke in support of it but urged economy on the new administration:

“Mr Dempster considered the loan made but the present ministers, just as he had before considered the peace made by the last ministers, viz. as a thing absolutely necessary for the country, and therefore worth accepting, though it might not be so advantageous as we had a right to expect. He farther said, our wars were not at an end; though we had concluded the war abroad, we had a war to wage at home, a war upon the national debt, which he trusted we should attack with ardour and combat with perseverance. The best means of lessening the burdens the country laboured under, was by making small peace establishments. It was an idle notion, that keeping them up on an expensive scale in time of peace, enabled us to go to war again with energy. He recommended an imitation of the conduct of government during the peace that followed the conclusion of the treaty of Utrecht. A state after an expensive war, in his opinion, like a man after severe labour, ought to lie down and rest. By that means only, could it recover its strength and vigour.”³¹

The subject of money and a loan cropped up again within a week, this time in connection with the East India Company. On 25 April 1783 there was a debate on a bill to empower the company to borrow money, and to pay a dividend of 4% on its capital. This debate, which became quite heated, concerned the continuing financial difficulties of the company, out of which it emerged that only by a relaxation of all government claims, a revision of its expenditure, and the right to raise a considerable loan, could it be put on its feet again after the crippling effects of the recent war.³² Dempster's speech in this debate is of interest as showing a marked change in his attitude to East Indian affairs:

“Mr Dempster thought that eight pounds [i.e. 8%, proposed as an amendment by an earlier speaker] was too great a dividend for the Company to make under their present circumstances. As a proprietor, he should think it wiser to receive no dividend at all at present; but as it might be necessary for the Company's credit to

have a dividend, he agreed ... that at a proper stage a motion should be made, to alter the words four per cent to three per cent. Mr Dempster said, he wished the territorial acquisitions had not been made; he believed they had proved a serious and a solid encumbrance to the Company."³³

In the event the bill passed with its main provisions unchanged.

Dempster here was advocating a reduction in the proposed dividend, or even the paying of no dividend at all, which is a marked contrast to his stance in 1767 when he was a leading proponent of a dangerous increase in the level of the dividend (see pp.61-62). The last part of this speech, respecting the company's territorial acquisitions, is consistent with the line he was taking in 1781 (see p.129) and was a point on which he continued to be at variance with his Rockingham group colleagues.

Before the summer recess the opposition, led by William Pitt, challenged the Fox-North coalition with a motion for parliamentary reform. This was moved by Pitt on 7 May 1783 in an attempt to embarrass the administration by exposing their lack of agreement on the issue.³⁴ Dempster, despite his earlier support for Pitt's motion for an enquiry into parliamentary representation, chose on this occasion to disapprove of Pitt's proposed reforms, set out in three resolutions - to reduce bribery, to disqualify corrupt boroughs, and to augment the representation of the counties by a number of seats to be agreed later. Dempster voiced his disapproval as follows:

"Mr Dempster was against the motion, as he did not know the sentiments of his constituents on the subject; and as he was the representative of a borough, he could by no means give his assent to a vote that would lessen the influence of his constituents. He voted last year for a committee, because there the necessary enquiries might be made into the real errors. If any part of the representation of this country wanted reform, it was that to which he had the honour to belong, and this was not the species of reform which would apply to their grievances."³⁵

This was a major debate, attracting a great deal of attention: over 500 members were said to be present;³⁶ Dempster is likely therefore to have chosen his words with care. Although his speech avoids directly contradicting the line he took in the previous year, his arguments are somewhat unconvincing and it was unusual for him to disapprove of proposals such as these without suggesting a constructive alternative. Although his support for the interests of his constituents was probably genuine, in other respects his views on the constitution were undergoing some revision, as indicated by his views on Belgium.

On 5 June 1783 Dempster presented a report on the Scots corn petition and “drew with wonderfull ability and philanthropy” a picture of the famine conditions then existing in Scotland. He succeeded in securing the agreement of the commons to bring in a bill to allow corn to be imported into Scotland for a period of four months, paid for from the land tax. He also successfully moved for an address to the king “praying him to give such relief as his wisdom should seem meet, and assuring him that the House would make good the expence.”³⁷ Dempster was by now viewed as a champion for any Scottish cause, but he strongly resented any accusation of partiality: in a speech on the budget, also on 5 June, he proclaimed that “the sooner all national distinctions between the two kingdoms were forgot the better it would be for both.”³⁸

The advent of the Fox-North coalition provided a further opportunity of an office for Dempster but this time he may have been thwarted by the curtailment of posts by the recent economic reform legislation that Dempster himself had supported. For example, eight lord commissionerships at the Board of Trade, three places in the Board of Works and six clerkships and clerk comptrollerships at the Board of Green Cloth had all been swept away by Burke’s civil list reform. The union of two substantial factions threw such pressure on the remaining resources that even most great political families had to be content with one place each,³⁹ and someone like Dempster had virtually no chance.

It is interesting to speculate whether the realisation of this was behind Dempster's apparent change of heart on the subject of economic reform, when during a debate on the Exchequer Regulation Bill on 23 June 1783 he spoke in favour of retaining a number of sinecure posts (it must be emphasised, however, that nowhere in his surviving correspondence does Dempster admit to any hopes of office or any disappointment at not obtaining a place, and the views expressed here were consistent with those he seems to have formed since his Brussels visit):

“Mr Dempster said, no man was a warmer advocate for lessening the undue influence of the crown than he was; but he must acknowledge, he was a friend to a certain necessary degree of influence, such as this Bill established. Without having great and lucrative involvements to hold out to high and distinguished characters, as a desirable reward for merit and exertion, he was convinced a monarchy like that of Great Britain could not be expected to hang long together: he therefore must declare, he approved of the mode of filling up the blank for the tellers' salaries, even admitting that they were perfect sinecures. With regard to the clerks and deputy tellers, he knew but little of the nature of their offices in the Exchequer; and before he said a word respecting them, he wished to know whether their offices were sinecures likewise? [Mr Burke told him they were not; they were offices of great trust and responsibility, of actual business, and daily attendance.] That being the case, Mr Dempster said, he could by no means agree, that £400 a year was a sufficient salary, even were the gentlemen who held them single men, and had no families. In this town, the Committee must know, that £400 a year was but a scanty provision for any gentleman; but if the deputy tellers had families, it was impossible for them to live upon it with any degree of comfort, or in any manner the least respectable.”⁴⁰

The session ended on 16 July 1783 and that autumn Dempster and his wife visited Scarborough which at that time was a favourite resort for ‘fashionable company’. While there he wrote several letters to Sir Adam Fergusson which make it clear that while having an enjoyable and relaxing holiday he continued to ponder the current political situation. On 21 September he wrote:

“Our weather at Scarbro' has resembled yours exactly, and like yours the latter season promises very well. I have lived out of doors on the Cliff almost every day of the last week and really enjoy a kind of Elysian life. Ride in the morning, chatt and saunter all day and conclude the evening with a rubber in Mr Marsham [Charles Marsham (1744-1811), eldest son of the second Lord Romney] and his wife Lady Fanny's party. ... He I find with pleasure equally impressed with the necessity of vigorous measure for discharging our public debts - clear for a bill appropriating a million annually and unalienably. His son is with him, in whose

time this grand object may be finally accomplished while the lad will be only in his 60th year. I said if I had such a boy I would have him like Hanibal sworn at the altar to perpetual enmity [sic] to the National Debt, which appears a more legitimate object of general vengeance than the extirpation of a formidable neighbour. I long for the commencement of this great work... It is not unpleasant to have some thing in view to make one wish for the return of frost and snow which we are so sure of whether we wish for it or no.”⁴¹

The last part of this extract indicates that Dempster had regained his enthusiasm for parliamentary politics and was looking forward to the return of parliament. The same positive attitude imbued his next letter to Fergusson, from which it is clear that during his summer break Dempster had been thinking further about the ‘hidden’ patronage in parliament represented by the granting of reciprocal favours. This letter demonstrates that Dempster was becoming reconciled to the inevitability of those aspects of parliamentary behaviour (political in-fighting, the need on occasion to vote against personal principles for the sake of party, etc.) which hitherto he had found very difficult to come to terms with:

“I wish it were possible to rid our political constitution here at home of some glaring contradictions. It is expected that we Members of Parliament should be independent men and men of influence at the same time. That we should be ready to serve our country by opposing bad measures, and our constituents by supporting every ministerial measure, and that we should disregard the frowns and yet court the favour of our rulers. It is a wonderfull grumble and a wonder the grumble does not unhinge our brains. The only way I find of settling the matter in my brain is to ask little favours for my friends of any of the group of ministers that I stand nearest to, just as I should do a pin or pinch of snuff, and to let the higher duties of my station be as little affected by the one as the other. But this is not very correct, for Imo., your little favour is perhaps a great one to the person for whom it is obtained and the person who grants it may not agree with you in the justness of the epithet of little. 2^o By our nature we are susceptible of great impressions from small causes. The manner in which the most trifling favour is granted often stamps a great value on it, and our minds are capable of receiving a bias from thence very unsuitable to that coolness and indifference with which they ought to view political objects. 3^{tio}. When you ask a minister to do a favour for you or your friend it founds an expectation that you will in return confer a favour upon him. True indeed, the favour granted and expected are somewhat incommensurable. And one would be justified for laughing at a minister who should wonder at your refusing him 20 millions to carry on a foolish war, because at your request he had granted Andrew Blackburn a place in the Customs worth £15 a year.

But the true spirit of our constitution ought to make it criminal in a member of Parliament to offer any constituent the smallest personal favour. We shall never sit

quite at our ease in Parliament till it may be said as an honourable circumstance in our lives that we never obtained the slightest favour at Court either for ourselves or others - Quere: at what distance is this era in our constitution? You may easily discover, my dear Sir Adam, that I am entertaining you with a chapter of my greater work now almost ready for the press, my Treatise on Political Morality."⁴²

Dempster returned to London in time for the opening of the new session of parliament on 11 November 1783. This saw the almost immediate introduction of Fox's India bill, which was to be the main subject of debate for this session. The bill made a sweeping attack on the powers of the East India Company many of which were to be transferred to a body of seven commissioners nominated in the act. These would be succeeded by nominees of the crown who, however, thereafter would have security of tenure second only to that of judges. Nine assistant commissioners were to manage the commercial affairs of the company. The first nine were to be chosen from among the proprietors and their successors by an open vote in the court of proprietors. Misrule in India was to be checked by careful provision for the more complete subordination of the governor-general and council to the commissioners who would be based in England.⁴³ By limiting the power of both the crown and the governor-general the bill fulfilled Dempster's wishes and he gave it his full support. The bill was introduced on 18 November, "in an excited House, the public gallery filled to overflowing"⁴⁴ but Dempster's first recorded speech was not until 27 November, during the second reading. Although relatively short this was a well-considered and major speech in which Dempster went further than the bill and suggested that both the company and the crown should give up all territorial claims in India, and that the company should confine itself to commerce only. However, his loyalty to the company as a proprietor was undiminished and he was careful to recommend that due regard be paid to the court of proprietors (they, in a meeting held on 21 November, had been vehemently against the bill⁴⁵):

"Mr Dempster said, this was one of the greatest and most important questions that ever came before the House: he hoped, therefore, it would be deliberately discussed and wisely decided. With regard to the violation of charters, he thought all chartered rights should be held inviolable, the rights derived from one charter only excepted - he meant the charter of the East India Company. That was the single

charter that ought, in his mind, to be destroyed for the sake of this country, for the sake of India, and for the sake of humanity. He complimented lord John Cavendish on his wish, declared in the House more than once, that every European was driven out of India, and that we only enjoyed the commerce of the part of Asia, in like manner as we enjoyed that of China. He lamented that the navigation to India had ever been discovered, and conjured ministers to abandon all idea of sovereignty in that quarter of the globe. It would be much wiser for them to make some one of the native princes king of the country, and to leave India to itself. After cautioning the House against running down the court of proprietors, Mr Dempster said, he saw which way the House was inclined, and therefore he should withdraw, as he would not vote against his principles for the throne of Delhi.⁴⁶

Dempster's last remark is a little obscure, but suggests that he realised that his proposals were too radical for the house at that time. It certainly did not mean that he intended to withdraw his support for the bill, for he is recorded as having voted in favour of it.⁴⁷ In doing so he was once again able to enjoy being on the winning side, for the Fox-North coalition achieved its greatest triumph with this division, securing 217:103. The bill itself, though passing successfully through the commons, was later to be defeated in the house of lords as a result of the king's controversial intervention.⁴⁸

On 18 December 1783 the king took the opportunity of this house of lords defeat to dismiss Fox and North, appointing William Pitt as his new prime minister.⁴⁹ Both Lady Haden-Guest⁵⁰ and James Fergusson⁵¹ opine that Dempster was absent during the change of administration, but in fact a letter to Adam Smith survives, dated 18 December 1783 and written from London, demonstrating that this was not so, and that Dempster in fact stayed on during this turbulent time. The letter to Adam Smith is of interest in that it appears to be the only surviving account by Dempster of a committee on smuggling to which Dempster had been appointed, under the chairmanship of William Eden, joint vice-treasurer of Ireland:

"I dare say you have heard of a smuggling Committee, lately appointed. I promised to Mr Eden, our Chairman, that I would drop you a hint of the intention of the Committee to desire the favour of your attendance in Town after the Holidays. Strange Events have since happened which render doubtfull the existence of the House itself and, of course, of all its Committees even to the beginning of the Holidays. So far as I can judge there is as great a probability of your seeing some of the Committee in Scotland as of the Committee seeing you in London. Should,

however, the present surmises of a dissolution prove groundless, the Committee will be indebted to you for your Ideas of the most effectual means to prevent smuggling which, by all the Information we have received, has come to an alarming height, threatening the destruction of the Revenue, the fair trader, the Health and Morals of the People.”⁵²

The anticipated dissolution of parliament, which seemed to be inevitable and imminent, did not in fact take place until 25 March 1784. Dempster must have left London for Dunnichen immediately after 18 December, for on 23 December he wrote from Dunnichen to Sir Adam Fergusson.⁵³ In this letter he mentioned to Sir Adam his intention of returning to London in the first week of January, making his stay in Dunnichen a very brief one - only just sufficient to include Christmas and Hogmanay: clearly he was giving politics considerable priority.

During 1782 and 1783 Dempster was troubled by the financial embarrassment of John Fordyce of Ayton in Berwickshire (1735-1809), a lifelong friend of Sir Adam Fergusson's, whose brother Charles had married Fordyce's sister. Fordyce was receiver-general of the land-tax for Scotland.⁵⁴ Dempster, Fergusson and Pulteney (and possibly others) stood surety for Fordyce who evidently had got into financial difficulties possibly as a result of speculating with money held on behalf of the government as part of his official duties. In February 1782 Dempster wrote to Pulteney:

“I had just heard of the Treasury's resolution respecting J[ohn] F[ordyce]. The appointing his Deputy I. M. [identity not known] who will have no difficulty in finding Sureties, is I think favourable to us all. And much more likely to be continued with him than in the former Receiver. But I daily look for an Explosion in those affairs, which will go far to reduce me to my former penury, just after having emerged from it. But as there are worse things in the world than Poverty to one who has no children nor no ambition to be rich, I think myself pretty well prepared to meet my Fate.”⁵⁵

By December 1783 matters were looking a little more hopeful and Dempster was writing to Pulteney:

“I understand Fordyce dreads a demand from the Ex[che]q[ue]r about Xmas that can only be passed off by his proposal of a surrender being accepted or at least under consideration at that Time. My Opinion is quite decided as to the

Expediency of this measure. There is a strong precedent in Sir Wm. Young's case, where the Treasury accepted a surrender of a Crown Debtor's Effects and forbore calling upon the Sureties who were rich and responsible men. The late Duke of Queensbury was one. I am also persuaded the Effects assigned to us will be very unproductive, and scarce worth looking after. If the Treasury accept of them they will manage them in their own way, the Debt will grow antiquated and I hope the Sureties escape At least this is the only prospect I have of escaping inevitable ruin which the payment of £10 or £12,000 would completely accomplish."⁵⁶

The affair continued into the summer of 1784 but merited only brief mentions in Dempster's correspondence until in July 1784 Dempster was able to report to Fergusson "... Ford[yce's] affair is in a fair way of being agreeably settled."⁵⁷ Dempster's earlier grim forebodings were fortunately not fulfilled on this occasion: many years later (in 1807) Dempster reminisced in a letter to Fergusson that "None of us [were] a halfpenny poorer for our suretship."⁵⁸ Enclosed with this letter was some verse, presumably composed by Dempster at the height of the crisis, bemoaning his fate:

"Ode to Ruin : Anacreontic. 1772

What folly, Dempster to pursue
 Affluence ever shunning you!
 Ah! What avails thy prudent care,
 When to spend, and when to spare?
 Your wife denied a rout and coach;
 Your dress the Parliament's reproach;
 Dwell in Soho; on cowheel dine;
 Cork and recork your pint of wine -
 For see our honest Charles fail'd;
 And Ayton with him headlong trailed;
 The public cash with Ayton flown;
 And you his surety quite undone.
 Oh! would to God that this were all,
 The good Sir Adam too must fall,
 And lively Whiteford, strange to say,
 Be ruin'd by another's play.
 Quit then, my friend, the foolish chace:
 Begin, tho' late, a nobler race.
 Seek pleasures fitter for thy age:
 Seek wisdom in the Stoic's page:
 From Sidney learn to rule the state:
 Or think on Chatham, and be great
 Or seek in friendship, and the bowl,
 To drown the cares that fret thy soul,
 And spite of Chamberlyne's extent
 Be free, be happy, be content.

Finis⁵⁹

Whiteford was almost certainly Sir John Whitefoord of Ballochmyle (c.1730-1803), a prominent Ayrshire landowner and neighbour of Sir Adam's; Sidney probably refers to George Sydney, 1st viscount (1733-1800) who served in the cabinets of Chatham, Rockingham and Shelburne and after whom Sydney, Australia was named. The reference to Chamberlyne is not known. The poem appears to be misdated by Dempster: 1772 should read 1782. Sir James Fergusson was led by this to speculate that it was a reference to the great banking crash of 1772, involving Sir Alexander Fordyce.⁶⁰ However, Fergusson admitted that there were difficulties with this: for example, Dempster nowhere else referred to Alexander Fordyce as "Ayton", nor was he as friendly with him as with Sir John; also, in the covering letter Dempster referred to the poem as having been preserved by Mrs Dempster, making a pre-1774 date unlikely. On balance it is probable that the poem relates to the affair of 1782-1783.

The early months of 1784 were dominated by the anticipated dissolution of parliament.⁶¹ Dempster himself opposed a dissolution and favoured a union of the parties so that "something decisive" might be done for India.⁶² On 23 January 1784 he made a strong speech during the 'Debate in the Commons on the expected dissolution', in which he opposed the dissolution and praised Pitt's India bill:

"Mr Dempster thought it impossible that there could be any serious design of dissolving parliament, because he could not think it possible that the minister who framed the King's Answer could be so indelicate as to proceed to such a measure. If every other consideration was out of the way, the season of the year and the depth of snow in the country ought to be an insuperable objection. There were physical impossibilities to the return of a new parliament. In the county where he lived, it was hardly possible to pass from seat to seat; and if there should be a dissolution, he who had the greatest muscular powers would carry the election. But could it be seriously imagined that any set of men who had the welfare of the country at heart, would postpone all public business, in such a moment as the present, for sixty days? He could not believe it. In regard to the new India Bill moved for by the right hon. gentleman[Pitt], he rejoiced in his having renewed his

plan; it was full of vigour, efficacy, and regulation. He would now be able to modify it in respect of patronage, and he might make it generally palatable. If we must keep the East Indies, which he, for one, lamented that we must, he trusted the right hon. gentleman would provide that no more officers, civil or military, should be sent to India for four years to come; it was the number of officers that, in his mind, created the abuses. He also recommended the idea of gradation and succession, in order to restore the discipline of the Company.”⁶³

On 26 January Dempster attended the first of a series of meetings of moderate politicians at the St Albans Tavern. These men, recognising that there was urgent parliamentary business to be carried out, expressed a wish that rather than the country should be forced to accept the disruption of business and suspension of government which a dissolution would bring, a government of national unity should be formed.⁶⁴

On 10 February 1784 there was a debate on the ordnance estimates in which Charles James Fox attempted to block approval of the estimates as part of a campaign to make Pitt’s position untenable.

Despite his nominal adherence to Fox’s party, Dempster pleaded moderation:

“Mr Dempster said, that ever since the Revolution, a principle had obtained in this country, which had made the public business go on smoothly, and without interruption: it was a principle of moderation which had prevented the prerogative of the crown and the privileges of the House of Commons from being brought into collision. If the crown and people should ever be engaged in a struggle between prerogative and privilege, he, as one of the people, would have no difficulty to determine which side to take; but his mind looked with horror to the event.”⁶⁵

This short speech very eloquently expresses Dempster’s distaste for party political manoeuvring, especially where it obstructed the business of good government. (The report on the ordnance estimates was ordered to be re-committed on the following day, which is what Fox had hoped for.)

Dempster pleaded moderation again on 1 March 1784 during the debate on Fox’s ‘Motion for an Address to the King to remove his Ministers’:

“Mr Dempster stated what had occurred that day at the St Alban’s tavern, and wished that gentlemen on both sides would concede a little, and not suffer

grammatical obstacles to stand in the way, when he trusted in God that all others were pretty well removed. The two gentlemen who had negotiated this business deserved every thing from their country that gratitude could bestow; and he wished that they had yet four-and twenty- hours to try their efforts farther”⁶⁶

The “two gentlemen” were presumably Portland and Pitt who were conducting negotiations throughout February under the guarded auspices of the king; in this case the “grammatical obstacles” would refer to the somewhat elliptical communications that passed between them.⁶⁷

Fox’s motion was passed by a majority of only 12 (201:189), considerably less than the 40 or so he had commanded earlier. Successive votes during March reduced his majority still further, until Pitt succeeded in getting the mutiny bill passed by the commons. He had clearly impressed members that he could lead a credible ministry, and it was time to test that credibility in the nation at large. On 25 March 1784 the long-awaited dissolution of parliament finally took place.⁶⁸ Dempster was to face his electorate for the sixth and (as it turned out) last time.

Before his re-election was quite certain Dempster wrote to Fergusson giving him, *inter alia*, some thoughts on the forthcoming election. Dempster’s attitude on this occasion makes an interesting comparison with that during some of his earlier campaigns; there is neither the determination to succeed at all costs that characterised his first two elections, nor the sense of disillusionment that was evident in 1774. Rather, there is a sense of acceptance that his parliamentary career was reaching its end, regardless of the outcome of this election:

“I shall not believe myself elected till I see the return, nor let myself doubt of your election till all of those for Scotland are made. Perhaps you feel [sic] a little like myself. I play upon velvet. If I am chosen - well. If thrown out - better still. More health, than in London, more amusements and better suited to my tastes than in the factious brawlings of St Stephen’s Chapel. More command of my time and place - better proportion between my fortune and my station. My career closed with the pleasing reflection of having done more good to my constituents than to myself, and a few years of life perhaps left to complete my business as a spectator of this earth, to survey Italy, enjoy the genial heat of a warm climate, and fathom some of

the sciences with a deep sea line of which I have hitherto only skimmed the surface."⁶⁹

Dempster was returned unopposed in the ensuing general election of April 1784. All the five burghs declared for him without his even having to put in an appearance.⁷⁰

This was a considerable achievement for Dempster; the election saw a complete turnaround in the balance of the house of commons with 160 Whigs losing their seats (the so-called 'Fox's Martyrs'). It is remarkable that Dempster should have been able to hold his seat with no serious opposition and little apparent expense or effort, particularly in view of the Perth burghs' notoriety for venality. It provides striking testimony to the esteem and popularity in which he was held in all five of the burghs, which had by this time rendered his position virtually unassailable.

This was to be Dempster's last general election and during his final spell in parliament in anticipation of the close of his parliamentary career he was already turning his energies towards other things. During the second half of the 1780's he interested himself seriously in the Scottish cotton spinning industry, the fisheries, the purchase of an estate at Skibo in Sutherland and agricultural improvements both to this estate and his existing one at Dunnichen. These activities form the subject matter of later chapters. Dempster now tried to use parliament to advance those causes, especially that of the fisheries for the sake of which he was prepared to be conciliatory towards Pitt - despite his general hostility to the latter.

Parliament reconvened on 18 May 1784; Dempster's first impressions of the new members and of the first few days of the proceedings were not encouraging - he wrote to Fergusson (who had not been re-elected for Ayrshire although he was shortly to represent Edinburgh):

"You make a horrid blank to me in the House of Commons. I am like Daniel in the lions' den. The new members, 170, with the exception of hardly ten shew anger

and displeasure in their countenance. They look like the master of Bridewell sent to keep its inhabitants to their work. Or like our India committees sitting at the India House and examining clerks, secretaries and directors with a jealous and distrustfull eye. For the moment they are faithfull representatives of the zealots that sent them. Make haste and join us. ... - Nothing but wrangling hitherto in the House of Commons.”⁷¹

Nevertheless, despite the unprepossessing appearance of the new house and the immediate political in-fighting and manoeuvring that seems to have characterised the start of the new session, Dempster was able to regard the proceedings more dispassionately and with a less jaundiced eye than would have been the case a few years previously. Evidence of this is provided by a jocular little note he sent to his friend and neighbour Robert Graham of Fintry (for whom see p.234):

“You will see by the news Papers Charles Fox open’d the Parliament with a pretty violent speech about the Westminster Return. A thing Wilkes said to those sitting round him on the occasion made us all laugh. I think (says he) Charles’s Scotch Blood is like to get up.

This is all.”⁷²

Dempster’s reference to “Charles’s Scotch Blood” relates to Fox’s election in 1784 to the Northern district of [Scottish] burghs which Fox regarded as a dubious compliment, commenting: “I am chosen for Scotch Burghs. Whether this is good or no I doubt.”⁷³

Dempster’s change to a more cheerful attitude was to be most helpful to him in winning parliamentary support for the series of projects he was about to introduce.

Chapter 6: Notes

1. For more on James Macpherson, see Maclean of Glensanda, younger, 'The Early Political Careers of James and Sir John Macpherson'. For more on John Robinson (1727-1802), see Laprade, Parliamentary Papers of John Robinson, introduction.
2. James Macpherson to Adam Ferguson, 10 June 1780: NLS, Ms.16736 ff.10-11.
3. Ronald Maclean Sunter, 'Stirlingshire Politics, 1707-1832' (unpublished PhD thesis for the University of Edinburgh, 1972), p.558. For the background to Fletcher-Campbell's election campaign see pp.556-562.
4. Ferguson to Macpherson, 6 August 1780: NLS, Ms.16736 ff.27-28.
5. Fletcher-Campbell to Macpherson, 7 August 1780: *ibid.*, ff.29-30.
6. Fletcher-Campbell to Macpherson, 7 and 27 August 1780: *ibid.*, ff.29-30 and ff.38-39 respectively.
7. St Andrews Burgh Council Minutes: St Andrews University Library, B65/11/7 pp.240-241.
8. Fletcher-Campbell to Macpherson, 27 August 1780: NLS, Ms.16736 ff.38-39; Namier and Brooke House of Commons, vol. 1 p.509; Dempster to Fergusson, 26 August 1780: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.109.
9. Sunter, 'Stirlingshire Politics', p.558.
10. Dempster to Fergusson, 26 August 1780: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.109.
11. Dempster to Pulteney, 12 October 1780: Huntington Library, PU173.
12. Sutherland, East India Company, p.307.
13. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol. 22, cols.134-135.
14. Ibid., col.204.
15. Ibid., cols.311-313; 320-321; 534.
16. Ibid., cols.320-321.
17. Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.2 p.316; J. Almon and J. Debrett (editors), The Parliamentary Register; or History of the Proceedings and Debates of the House of Commons, vol.3 p.653.
18. Dempster to Pulteney, 5 February 1782: Huntington Library, PU174.
19. Ibid.

20. The Scots Magazine, vol.44 (1782) pp.401-402; for the background to this affair see for instance Sutherland, East India Company, pp.384-385, and Watson, Reign of George III, p.308.
21. Cobbett and Hansard, History of Parliament, vol. 22 col.1435.
22. Dempster to Fergusson, 17 July 1770: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.69; see also p.68.
23. Cobbett and Hansard, History of Parliament, vol. 23 col.10.
24. Ibid., col.12.
25. Ibid., col.197.
26. Dempster to Fergusson, 27 September 1782: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.111.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., pp.113-114.
29. Dempster to Fergusson, 8 October 1782: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.115-116.
30. Cobbett and Hansard, History of Parliament, vol.23 col.780.
31. Ibid.
32. For the background to this debate, see Sutherland, East India Company, pp.374-376.
33. Cobbett and Hansard, History of Parliament, vol.23 col.801.
34. John Cannon, The Fox-North Coalition: Crisis of the Constitution, 1782-4 (1969), pp.91-94.
35. Cobbett and Hansard, History of Parliament, vol.23 col.874.
36. Ibid., col.826; Cannon, Fox-North Coalition, p.92.
37. The Scots Magazine, vol.45 (1783) pp.415-416.
38. Almon and Debrett, Parliamentary Register, vol.10 p.125.
39. Cannon, Fox-North Coalition, p.83.
40. Cobbett and Hansard, History of Parliament, vol.23 col.1073.

41. Dempster to Fergusson, 21 September 1783: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.117-118.
42. Dempster to Fergusson, 22 September 1783: ibid., pp.120-121.
43. For a more complete analysis of the provisions of Fox's India Bill see Sutherland, East India Company, pp.398-401. See also Watson, Reign of George III, pp.263-265.
44. Cannon, Fox-North Coalition, p.114.
45. Ibid., p.117.
46. Cobbett and Hansard, History of Parliament, vol.23 cols.1301-1302.
47. See Cannon, Fox-North Coalition, p.121 n.1 for analysis of the surviving voting lists.
48. See ibid. chapter 7 for an account of this.
49. Ibid., pp.143-145.
50. In Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.2 p.316.
51. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.123.
52. Dempster to Adam Smith, 18 December 1783: William Robert Scott, Adam Smith as Student and Professor (1937), pp.287-288 (original in Glasgow University Library, Bannerman Mss.).
53. Dempster to Fergusson, 23 December 1783: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.123-124.
54. Ibid., pp.68-69.
55. Dempster to Pulteney, 5 February 1782: Huntington Library, PU174.
56. Dempster to Pulteney, 3 December 1783: ibid., PU178.
57. Dempster to Fergusson, 21 July 1784: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.135.
58. Dempster to Fergusson, 9 March 1807: ibid., p.303.
59. Included with a letter Dempster to Fergusson, 9 March 1807: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.301-302.
60. Ibid., pp.300-301.
61. For background to this period, see Cannon, Fox-North Coalition, chapter 9.
62. Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.2 p.316; Almon and Debrett, Parliamentary Register, vol.13 p.295.

63. Cobbett and Hansard, History of Parliament, vol.24 cols.422-423.
64. See Cannon, Fox-North Coalition, pp.176-180, 190-196; also Watson, Reign of George III, p.269.
65. Cobbett and Hansard, History of Parliament, vol.24 col.582.
66. Ibid., col.712.
67. See Cannon, Fox-North Coalition, p.195 n.1.
68. For background to the events leading up to the dissolution of parliament see ibid., chapters 10 and 11; Mrs E. George, 'Fox's Martyrs: The General Election of 1784'. Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, fourth series, vol.21 (1939), pp.133-168.
69. Dempster to Fergusson, 5 April 1784: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.126.
70. Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.1 p.509.
71. Dempster to Fergusson, 26 May 1784: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.130-131.
72. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 18 May 1784: SRO, GD151/11/8/21.
73. Quoted in Ferguson, 'Dingwall Burgh Politics', p.107.

CHAPTER 7

PARLIAMENT 1784-1790

Dempster made his first recorded speech in the new parliament on 23 June 1784 when he spoke at length on a familiar subject for him, the parlous state of the nation's finances and the urgent need for corrective action. He argued for additional taxation and for the establishment of a sinking fund to pay off the accumulated national debt¹. In the last part of the speech Dempster changed tack and introduced a subject which hitherto he had not raised in parliament but which was henceforward to be a major topic for him - the need to improve the state of the British fisheries. He asked the house:

“for a committee to be appointed to inquire into the state of our fisheries and our commerce; he wished also that the committee might have power to extend its inquiries to our navigation. At present commerce was heavily burthened, thro’^g the clogs put upon our navigation, particularly in that part of the kingdom to which he more immediately belonged; there a vessel could scarcely cross a creek, without being put to as much expense and inconvenience for papers to warrant her sailing, as if she was clearing out for a long and extensive voyage abroad. Mr Dempster pointed out the absurdity of several of our custom-house regulations, where, in respect to many commodities, a shipper who was about to send a cargo coastwise, was obliged to swear that he would not carry the cargo abroad, although if he had only entered it for exportation, he would have been entitled to a drawback on the same identical commodity. In Scotland, however, the difficulties upon merchants and shippers of goods were infinitely greater, in consequence of there not being at any of the Scotch custom-houses any table of established fees. Mr Dempster concluded with moving for the appointment of a committee to inquire into the state of our fisheries, navigation and commerce.”²

Pitt replied with a sympathetic speech but suggested that the remit of Dempster's proposed committee was rather too wide and would lead to its becoming embroiled in endless discussions. Given the enquiries that had already been carried out, and proposals resulting therefrom that were shortly to be put before the house, he suggested that its scope for enquiry should be restricted to the fisheries. Dempster readily agreed, and the motion was accordingly amended, put to the house and carried. The tenor of these proceedings, and the willingness of both sides to agree to the other's proposals is in such striking contrast to Dempster's parliamentary efforts hitherto as to suggest that

some stage management must have taken place, and that Pitt had agreed to support Dempster over the fisheries in return for Dempster's support for the sinking fund proposals. If so, Dempster was at last showing signs of becoming a practical politician rather than a lone idealist.

Further evidence of a pact between Dempster and Pitt occurs in the next major series of debates in which Dempster was active, those concerning the government of India. On 16 July 1784 Dempster made a speech declaring that he would oppose Pitt's India Bill, but only after a series of exchanges with Pitt which are remarkable for the degree of compromise which Pitt seemed willing to offer Dempster:

“Mr Dempster said, he would state his objections to the principle of the Bill, but without arguing upon them. The negative of the crown upon the Company's appointment - [Mr Pitt said in a low voice across the House, ‘I will give up that.’] - The appointment of the three commanders in chief - [‘I will give that up also.’] - Very well, said Mr Dempster; if you give up the next point to which I object, I will vote for the Bill: I will never consent that the court of proprietors shall be deprived of their franchises: I think the loss of our freedom would soon follow - [Mr Pitt gave an unfavourable ‘No’] Mr Dempster said, then he would oppose the Bill. He objected to the selection of judges out of the House of Commons; they had not a judicial capacity; and he, for one, would not be forced to be a judge. He begged to suggest to the House what he had often thought would be the best thing that could be done with the territorial possessions. He knew the House would not listen to a proposition for restoring them to the natives; probably they would not govern them better than we did; he would not abandon the large body of our fellow subjects who were actually in India, earning their bread, he might truly say, with the sweat of their brow; but he would propose, that his Majesty should be requested to send over one of his sons, and make him King of that country: we might then make an alliance or federal union with him, and then we could enjoy all the advantages that could be derived from the possession of the East Indies by Europeans - the benefit of commerce.”³

The bill passed its second reading 271:60. These proceedings show all the signs of prior management; the fact that the one objection of Dempster's which Pitt would not accede to was the last of the three raised by Dempster, and the fact that this was the only one of the three which Dempster, in spite of himself, felt compelled to support with argument, suggests that Dempster knew in advance what Pitt's reaction was likely to be. It is interesting that Pitt was willing to give up two

of his proposals, since as the vote shows, he was assured of a massive majority in any event and did not need Dempster's support. Dempster, too, was more willing to compromise than at first appears since had Pitt acceded to all three of Dempster's objections Dempster himself would have given up both his objection to the manner of appointing judges and his radical proposal to hand the government of India over to one of George III's sons. Clearly Dempster was making great efforts to conciliate Pitt, and was having considerable success. The one point Dempster would not give way on was any weakening of the court of proprietors; as a continuing proprietor himself he continued staunchly to defend his fellow proprietors. He defended them again on 19 July 1784, while Pitt's bill was still in committee, saying:

"he never would consent to the annihilation of a court, which in his opinion had more than once served this country; and he ventured to say that it was not possible to name one instance out of twenty in which the court of proprietors had been in the wrong in its decisions."⁴

On 10 August 1784 Dempster opposed Pitt's proposed increase in the window tax, intended to pay for a reduction in the level of tea duty from 112 % (at which high level it was a temptation to smugglers) to 25%. This was one of the first of a series of measures Pitt was to introduce over the next few years in an effort to reconstruct the tax system and increase the tax revenue - a preoccupation of various administrations since at least 1760.⁵ Dempster, while fully supporting the principle of paying off the nation's debt, managed to fault almost every one of Pitt's proposed taxes, this being no exception. To its proponents this change was entirely beneficial in that it would lessen smuggling, provide a tax which was easily assessed and difficult to escape, and which fell most heavily on the wealthy with large houses while the benefit of cheap tea was felt by the whole community. Dempster argued that country districts, especially in Scotland, would be disadvantaged:

"Mr Dempster said, his constituents had not been silent on the subject. They had written to him, to require his endeavours to have the tax laid in a manner nearer to something like a degree of equality and fairness; as the tax stood in the Bill, the reverse of fairness was the characteristic of it. He said, he wondered not at the two members for the city standing up and praising the tax. It took off a heavy tax on London, and distributed it to the farthestmost parts of the kingdom. In London most

of the high priced tea was drunk, and in London there was the greatest facility of getting it from the India Company, and the greatest difficulty in smuggling it. The alteration, therefore, was abundantly in favour of London, and against the country, particularly the northern parts of the kingdom. He exemplified his argument by providing a written calculation of what a street in Scotland, consisting of sixty houses, would pay towards it, and how much Lombard-street, which he also conceived to contain sixty houses, would pay towards it. ... He also pointed out the necessity of allowing the country dealers to return their stocks of unsold tea to the Company, as well as the town dealers, observing, that as the latter were near the warehouses of the Company, they could take out their teas by the single chest, whereas the country tea dealers were obliged to keep a much larger stock in hand."⁶

This was a typical Dempster speech on financial affairs, containing fairly detailed calculations of the effect of the new tax. Also noteworthy was Dempster's regard for his constituents and his emphasis on the effect of the measure on Scotland. He clearly spent some time on preparing this speech: a letter at the time to Sir Adam Fergusson was prefaced by an apology that he was unable to write at length because "I am so busy with this d-d Budget."⁷

Similar considerations governed Dempster's next series of recorded speeches in February 1785 on the commercial regulations between Britain and Ireland. Pitt's propositions on this subject, introduced into the house on 22 February, were an attempt to solve the problem of trade with Ireland. Unrest in Ireland as a result of economic depression threatened to cause the country to follow the same path as the American colonies. At the same time the repeal of Poyning's law in 1782 had given the Irish parliament greater legislative independence than had been intended: in theory it could, subject only to the king's veto, impose its own customs tariffs even on English goods.⁸ With the sole exception of the East India Company's monopoly Ireland was entitled to equal trade with British colonies without being bound by the Navigation Acts which were the cornerstone of British mercantilist policy. An elaborate system of bounties and duties on the export of Irish and British goods to each other was perceived by the Irish parliament as being unfavourable to Ireland and by 1785 it was tempted to impose additional duties on mainland British goods. Pitt's plan was to fuse

the two economies into one and admit Ireland into the whole colonial trade in return for which Ireland would be required to contribute to the cost of the Royal Navy since the latter provided protection for the trade routes used by the Irish.⁹ Pitt's propositions met with little support or gratitude; Manchester merchants were indignant at what seemed to them a blow to their business, while the Irish suspected treachery behind what was a genuine offer of relief from a heavy burden.

Dempster supported Pitt despite doubts about the effect of the proposals on Scotland:

"Mr Dempster said, that whatever particular objections the propositions now made might seem liable to, there was at present every reason to approve them in the general. ... If the particular circumstances of the times had induced this country to grant somewhat more than might appear necessary, he was not satisfied even with that, when he contemplated the sad effects with which a contrary system was attended in our conduct to America. Objections of nearly a similar nature had been made of the cheapness of the labour in Scotland at the time of the Union, and yet since that time Scotland had not grown richer, nor England poorer. ... let our conduct be to pursue a vigorous and effective measure for redeeming the country from the embarrassments which a long and expensive war brought upon it, and endeavour to put ourselves on the nearest footing of equality. He was determined to give his most cheerful assent to a system which promised to reconcile the affections of our sister kingdom, and invite her in the same pursuits of interest and affection."¹⁰

Numerous petitions against Pitt's propositions from British manufacturers were delivered to the house of commons during March and April and after further debates (with no recorded contributions from Dempster) Pitt finally moved the resolutions on 12 May 1785. During the debate which followed Dempster made a short speech generally supportive of Pitt and expressing satisfaction at amendments made during the debate:

"... at the same time remarking, that there were also other objects of much concern to both countries which ought to be included in the present arrangement: one related to the fisheries on the coast, in which much disturbance continually prevailed, by the Irish sailors spoiling the nets and otherwise ill-treating the English fishermen, and the latter retorting in their turn. He then read a resolution, which he intended to propose to the House on this subject. Another subject, which he thought should also be attended to on this occasion was, an extraordinary duty imposed in Ireland on British lawns and linen gauzes. This he stated to have taken place, at a time when Ireland was actuated by vindictive motives against Scotland, where this manufacture was in a flourishing state."¹¹

During May all of Pitt's resolutions were carried through the commons, albeit against strong opposition, and on 30 May the report was brought forward and committed to the house of lords, where it also had a stormy passage.

The report returned to the commons (with some amendments) on 19 July 1785. After further strong opposition it passed its third reading and an address to the king was made on 29 July. On that morning Dempster wrote to Sir Adam Fergusson, giving some insight into his current thinking on the subject:

"I am half full dressed to accompany the resolutions to St James's. They have a horrid pelting awaiting them in Ireland. What provokes me is the Irish supposing I wish to take the trouble of making laws for them when we have trouble enough making them for ourselves. Sheridan said our laws were light summer things run up for our own use but would never do for exportation."¹²

On 11 August Pitt's resolutions got the reception from the Irish parliament that Dempster had foreseen and leave to bring in the bill was refused. So great was the resistance in Ireland that Pitt abandoned the project. Dempster favoured Sir Adam with further thoughts on the subject in a letter of the 22 August:

"Adieu Irish propositions. In the next bargain I believe both you and I will look a little sharper towards the interest of the manufacture of linen, in which the Irish had certainly an uncompensated advantage, that I was not without my apprehensions would have proved fatal to our only great Scotch manufacture. They have it indeed at present; but by mere sufferance, which we will not be weak enough to continue when its bad tendency becomes apparent. This is the first great measure I have seen fail in the hands of a ministry from want of numbers. I own I am not without my apprehensions of the consequences, unless a new negotiation shall be open'd by commissioners from both nations. ... I do by no means regret the advances we made to Ireland, altho' undoubtedly our linen was the victim devoted to be sacrificed at the alter of peace."¹³

After the defeat of Pitt's propositions in the Irish parliament Dempster seems to have dismissed the Irish from his mind for the time being. In a letter to Fergusson written shortly after he commented "I am as indifferent about them [the Irish] since they rejected our propositions as you can be."¹⁴

On 14 March 1785 Henry Dundas put before the commons the resolution that ‘A Committee be appointed to enquire into the state of the British fisheries.’ Dempster seconded this motion “convinced of the necessity of an investigation” and it passed without opposition.¹⁵ A committee was appointed accordingly, chaired by Henry Beaufoy, MP for Great Yarmouth and almost certainly with Dempster as one of its members.¹⁶

A month later, on 18 April, Pitt moved for leave to bring in his bill for the reform of parliament, which among other things made provision for the disenfranchising of thirty-six rotten boroughs.¹⁷ Curiously, in view of his strong interest in the subject, Dempster is not recorded as having spoken in the debate or as having voted for the motion (which was defeated).¹⁸

Dempster’s time in the spring and early summer of 1785 was also taken up with the state of the nation’s finances. On 11 April there was a short debate on Pitt’s proposal to create a sinking fund to pay off the accumulated national debt, a project of which Dempster was a very warm supporter (see pp.113 and 137-138). He reiterated his support on this occasion, but expressed alarm on hearing that Pitt did not propose to introduce the scheme until the following year:

“Mr Dempster said, that what had fallen from the right hon. gentleman [Pitt] had given him very great concern. He had entertained hopes that the right hon. gentleman had designed to begin his scheme immediately. The reason why he hoped so was, his conviction that there was no time to be lost, as our enemies had got the start of us. France having already provided a sinking fund, which, with the sums that would very shortly fall into it, would enable her in a few years to get rid of the greatest part of her national debt. On this account, and that we might not have our enemies beforehand with us on so important a point, he was extremely anxious that no time should be lost, nay, he would even wish the right hon. gentleman should borrow the million, rather than not begin to create the sinking fund this year. The money to be raised would be no more than £50,000 to pay the interest; and one million a year dedicated to the sole service of paying off the national debt, would, in 54 years, pay off near 200 millions.”¹⁹

Pitt's response was sympathetic, but he stuck with his plan to commence the fund the following year and his proposals were agreed. Dempster's speech is of interest in the stress he laid on the need for national defence - an argument he would use frequently in support of his ideas regarding the Scottish fisheries. It is not clear whether he really believed in the need for defence or merely used this because he thought it would carry weight with his fellow MPs.

In February 1785 Dempster presented to parliament on behalf of the Glasgow weaving trade a petition against the heavy duty on printed linen.²⁰ He intervened briefly again on 20 April in the debate on the repeal of the cotton tax, when he regretted that Pitt had not seen fit to repeal the similarly heavy tax on printed linens, and thus help the Scottish printed linen manufacture.²¹ Dempster's next major activity concerned the budget. In the opening debate on 9 May Dempster spoke against a number of Pitt's measures, in particular the post-horse tax (introduced by Pitt the previous year) which Dempster felt was falling unnecessarily heavily on Scottish farmers:

“... in the northern part [of Great Britain] its operations were oppressive in a most insufferable degree. Many farmers there were utterly unable to pay it. Their rent did not amount to more than 2, or 3, or £4 per year. They consequently had but one horse, which did everything, and they could not do without; but for which, if they rode but once in twelve months, they were obliged to pay. This was destroying the very means of their subsistence.”²²

Another of Pitt's proposals was to increase the tax on shopkeepers, and by way of compensation to either withdraw the licences of hawkers and pedlars altogether, or increase the cost of them to a punitive level. Dempster expressed outrage, both because it favoured vested interests against the ‘little man’ and because the travelling salesmen performed a useful function in country areas:

“... least of all, could he acknowledge himself satisfied with the proposition of abolishing hawkers and pedlars. He was astonished at the Right Hon. Gentleman's [Pitt's] having entertained any such idea. Was he aware that it would not only turn many thousands of persons out of their bread, but prove the source of infinite inconvenience to the inhabitants of distant parts of the King's dominions [i.e. Scotland]? There were, he said, in the north, many persons so situated, that the shop must come to them, as it was utterly impossible for them to go to the shop. This was exactly the case with the hawkers and pedlars, who might be considered

as moving shops, and if they were abolished, the description of persons to whom he had just alluded would be deprived of the opportunities of furnishing themselves with the necessaries."²³

Dempster on 10 May also opposed Pitt's proposed tax on maidservants, arguing that it would be preferable to deal with abuses of franking of letters by MP's by which they enjoyed the privilege of free postage, and also "a tax might be laid on all persons wearing watches; and in fact a variety of other modes might be adopted preferable to the one on maid-servants."²⁴ (In fact, Pitt did introduce a tax on clocks and watches in the 1790's).²⁵ Dempster's opposition had little effect for all of Pitt's resolutions were passed.

On 4 July 1785 Henry Beaufoy introduced a 'Bill for the Encouragement of the British Fisheries.' Dempster gave this very strong support but its reception by the commons was lukewarm. Several members, including Pitt, were inclined to postpone the matter until the following session, given the radical and wide-ranging nature of the proposals and the lateness of the session which meant a thin attendance of only about 30-40 members in the house.²⁶ However, on 5 July:

"Mr Dempster defended the resolutions, and thought there could be no reason for postponing the business to another session. He said, that if gentlemen did not attend their duty in parliament, it was no argument, why matters of such consequence should be prevented from going forward; for though certainly it was desirable to transact the present business in a full House if such a one were to be had, it was of such a nature, that if it would be done in a House consisting of but two members it ought to be so, rather than left undone."²⁷

Dempster's remark on members who neglected their duty is somewhat ironic coming from him, since he was not above taking time off from his parliamentary duties himself. As a result of this pressure from Dempster, and also from Beaufoy himself, the question was put; it passed in the affirmative without a division. Beaufoy presented his bill on 7 July, when it met with no opposition, and it passed through the commons on the 15th, and the lords on the 19th. The success of this bill could only have been achieved as a result of Pitt's support, which appears to have been gained by

Dempster's agreeing to be more conciliatory towards Pitt's proposals (see pp.152-153). This legislation resulted in the establishment of the British Fisheries Society, of which Dempster was a leading founder member (see chapter 8).

This was Dempster's last recorded parliamentary activity for 1785 and he appears to have returned to Dunnichen until the following year. On 18 February 1786 he spoke and voted against Richmond's expensive plans to fortify Portsmouth and Plymouth dockyards as unnecessary and extravagant.²⁸ On 6 April he supported Pitt's sinking fund again in the debate on the second reading of the 'Bill for the Reduction of the National Debt', but:

“... grounded his fears of the success of the plan upon the peace establishment, as it was stated it would be in the year 1790, being considerably higher than it ought to be in many respects, particularly the navy, the army, and the ordnance; it behoved the House to turn their eyes back to the ancient peace establishments in 1755, and they would see, that this country remained in a state of perfect security and peace, and perfect readiness for war, with establishments far short of those proposed for the year 1790.”²⁹

On 12 April 1786 Dempster spoke in the debate on the 'Laws respecting the Greenland Whale Fishery' which had entered the committee stage. The main proposal was to reduce the bounty paid from 40 shillings per ton to 30 shillings, in the interest of reducing the cost to the public purse. Dempster was, as has been seen, keen to see reductions in public expenditure, but he was even more keen to support the fishery:

“Mr Dempster remonstrated on the ill-chosen time for proposing a measure likely to affect the British fisheries, just after the close of the war, when so many of our brave seamen were turned ashore from the navy. He assured the right hon. gentleman [Mr Jenkinson], that the fisheries could not exist unless the 40s bounty were continued, and expressed some surprise at his having declared, that he did not believe the gentlemen concerned in the Greenland fishery when they had asserted as much. Those gentlemen were men of as much honour and credit as any in the kingdom. He conjured the right hon. gentleman not to economize the public money so rashly as to risk the existence of the Greenland fishery, which was one of the most important branches of our commerce as well as one of our best nurseries for our seamen.”³⁰

The motion passed by 41:15. Dempster continued his campaign in support of fisheries and coastal trade when on the 19 May he “moved several resolutions for placing lighthouses on certain parts of the coasts in the north seas, which he stated to be of the utmost importance to the safety of the navigation in many places on the coast of Scotland, where vessels were frequently lost for the want of such lights.”³¹ Dempster’s resolutions passed without a division and the ‘Act for Erecting Certain Light-houses in the Northern Parts of Great Britain’³² became law on 27 June 1786.³³ It provided for the establishment of the Northern Lighthouse Board, and for the building of four lighthouses: on the Mull of Kintyre and on Kinnaird Head in Aberdeenshire (both completed 1787),³⁴ on the point of Scalpa in Harris and on North Ronaldsay in Orkney (both completed 1789). In October 1789 another act,³⁵ also instigated by Dempster,³⁶ authorised the erection of a further lighthouse in the south of Arran.

Dempster’s sterling efforts on behalf of Scottish industry and fisheries received recognition on 13 July 1786 when:

“The Royal Boroughs of Scotland at their annual convention at Edinburgh, unanimously voted a piece of plate, value one hundred guineas, to George Dempster, Esq. of Dunnichen, for his unremitting attention to the trade and manufactures, and fisheries of this country, and for his patriotic exertions for its welfare and prosperity.”³⁷

There is no record of Dempster’s reaction to this gift, but it must have given him considerable satisfaction and some compensation for the frustrations he had experienced in parliament.

Much parliamentary time in 1786-1787 was taken up by East Indian affairs, for it was then that Edmund Burke commenced his determined campaign to secure the impeachment of Warren Hastings. Hastings (1732-1818, an exact contemporary of Dempster’s) had been governor of Bengal 1772-1774 and governor general of India 1774-1785 and was accused of having exceeded his

authority and of abusing the native population. Given the turbulent and corrupt condition of India it is probable that there was some truth in the charges, but Burke set out to heap all the troubles of the sub-continent on to Hastings' shoulders. The rest of the parliamentary opposition found India to be a useful subject with which to attack and embarrass the government.³⁸

Hastings had been a protégé of Laurence Sullivan and through him had secured an alliance with the still powerful Johnstone group in the East India Company's court of proprietors. Dempster continued to be a leading member of this group.³⁹ George Johnstone was the most substantial of Hastings' champions in parliament and the one most feared by Hastings' enemies.⁴⁰ Dempster now placed his support for the Johnstone group ahead of that for the Rockinghamites and did not hesitate to oppose Burke's attacks on Hastings in debate after debate. His first salvo in defence of Hastings was fired on 13 June 1786 when he:

“... reasoned on the customs of the East compared with the customs of Europe; and said, that great allowance ought to be made for the extreme difference between the two. He urged many arguments in support of the meritorious services of Mr Hastings, terming him the saviour of our possessions in Hindostan, and declaring, that France, during the course of the last war, considered him to be of so much importance, that they rested all their hopes of success in India on the chance of his being recalled. In short, if the late governor-general deserved impeachment at all, it certainly was for that foolish disinterestness which would not suffer him to bring home a larger fortune.”⁴¹

Further speeches on similar lines followed on 21 June 1786 and 20 February, 15 March and 14 May 1787.⁴² Not that Dempster defended the abuses being perpetrated by the company's servants in India; in his speech on 20 February he was forthright in condemning the unfortunate consequences of the British presence in India but absolved Hastings from blame:

“Mr Dempster said, that it was not merely Muzuffer Jung [one of the native princes with whom the company had quarreled] who swallowed large quantities of opium, and intoxicated himself with liquors and herbs which had a similar effect; every prince in India did the same in order to lose the sense of the poverty and distress the British government had brought on them, and the devastation that British rapine had occasioned in their territories. But this was no new matter; they had taken opium, and made themselves drunk with liquors and herbs long before

Mr Hastings was in India, and they did the same now Mr Hastings was in England. It was the sad resource they had been driven to ever since we set foot in India to deprive them of their personal rights and riches.”⁴³

In 1788 the commons heard, and rejected, an attempt to impeach also Sir Elijah Impey, Chief Justice of Bengal, who was accused of having conspired with Hastings⁽ⁱ⁾ the judicial murder of one of Hastings’ opponents in Bengal, the Maharajah Nuncomur, hanged for forgery in 1775 after trial by jury.⁴⁴ Dempster defended Impey, although as much for reasons of personal friendship as to maintain solidarity with the Johnstone group. On 7 and 8 February 1787 Dempster made two attempts to get Impey’s case heard in the house of commons.⁴⁵ Two surviving drafts of letters from Impey to Dempster dated 1782 and thanking the latter for his assistance⁴⁶ suggest that Dempster was a personal friend of Impey and had been involving himself in Impey’s affairs for some time. On 29 November 1782, for example, Impey wrote:

“Since the date of my last my obligations to you have been greatly increased, & [I] am unable to make the acknowledgements to you which my gratitude suggests. Since P. N.’s [identity unknown] letter has not failed to report to me your strong acts of friendship ... Burrington [Dempster’s brother in law - see p.126] brought Mr Watt [identity unknown] to my House who left your letter he brought from you. ... I should be dead to all [sense?] of honour gratitude & humanity if I did not place you & Governor [George] Johnston [sic], his warm kindly and friendly letters to me, & the part that he has taken in the protection of my character & fortune ...”⁴⁷

On 19 March Dempster opened a debate in the house of commons on his own ‘Motion for a Bill to explain and amend the East India Judicature Act.’ An indication of the importance attached by Dempster to this subject is given by the fact that he had on 27 February postponed the debate, in the face of Pitt’s protests, on the grounds that at that time the house was insufficiently attended.⁴⁸ In this opening speech Dempster moved for the repeal of the East India Acts of 1784, 1785 and 1786 and proposed a completely new type of government under a viceroy, council and representative assembly of resident Europeans.⁴⁹ On this occasion he accepted the fact of British rule over India but argued

for some form of democratic representation for native Indians (there are echoes of his views on the government of the American colonies):

“It was a maxim, not to be controverted, that it was impossible for that government to be a good one, in which the people were not allowed to have any share. The government of India, while the affairs managed there were merely the affairs of a trading company, might be sufficiently well conducted by a governor and council; but the case was widely different in the government of an empire. He was of opinion, that the change of circumstances in India pointed out the necessity for a change of government, and that a much better government than the present might be successfully adopted. Suppose, for instance, a government in the nature of a vice-royalty were instituted, and a viceroy was to be appointed, with a privy council to advise with in matters of government; he might also have a legislative council, and something like representation be given to India, as the capital towns and districts might be empowered to elect and send deputies. Such a house of representation might be empowered to receive petitions from the natives, and to grant redress. That would give the natives a degree of confidence in the British Government, hitherto unknown in India.”⁵⁰

This was clearly a serious and thoughtful attempt to bring about reform of both the judicial system and the legislature in India and the proposals are very much in line with the democratic principles Dempster advocated both for America and for Great Britain itself. The proposals were restrained, and free of the rather more unorthodox suggestions he had made earlier, such as that one of the king's sons should be sent over to rule the country (see p.153). Dempster was strongly supported in a major speech by Edmund Burke⁵¹ but lost his motion by the huge majority of 128:21. Dempster's views were too much out of sympathy with those of the administration, which had no aims for government of India beyond imposing whatever control was necessary for its prosperity and security and expecting Indians on that account to be reconciled to it. This attitude was reflected in the policies of Henry Dundas when later he was at the head of the Board of Control: he firmly opposed the transmission of European values to Indians and would not let British subjects settle in India, expecting them to trade and then leave.⁵² This was clearly with the aim of avoiding a second American situation to occur, with British colonists opposing the home government.

Unfortunately for Hastings his chief champion, George Johnstone, died in 1787 on the eve of the impeachment proceedings. Dempster remained a faithful admirer of Hastings both during his remaining time in parliament and subsequently. In August 1789 he wrote to Hastings:

“I had placed you at the side of Lord Rodney & Lord Heathfield as the third prop of a tottering Empire long before your Prosecution began and you may depend upon it, I have seen no Cause for assigning you an inferior pitch in my arrangement of great Characters. To tell you the truth I believe I ought to give you preferment. ... The vexation anxiety & agitation you continued exposed to for so many years bringing thereby the affairs of G[reat] B[ritain] in the east to a prosperous issue will ever stamp your Character in my mind as one of the most vigorous I have ever read of. The means you used for that purpose & the only means by which it could be Effective of promoting the Personal Interests of the Souls and Engines with which you wrought it is very impudent in us to find fault with.”⁵³

In the same letter Dempster reiterated his views on the proper means of governing India:

“I don’t despair of making a Convert of you to my decided and I think not hasty Opinion of the East. There are but two uses to be made of it. Make it a separate Empire & bestow it upon one of the King’s Sons, and give it a free constitution. Or restore it to its native Princes & leave it to be governed as it was before our conquest. The History of Distant provinces governed by Strangers with a delegated Power from the Mother State is my Argument for this measure. Every such accessory to any State is like a wen [wart or tumour] the bigger the worse, and certainly since Rome was afflicted by the wen of Asia Minor, Greece & Egypt, no nation has had a larger than Bengal & the Carnatic. Its wealth corrupts our State. Its merchandises supplant our own. Barley would be a better breakfast than Tea and Manchester affords as warm a clothing and as Elegant as India”⁵⁴

Dempster’s defence of Hastings has other parallels during this parliament; he was ever eager to protect individuals whom he perceived to be the victims of injustice. For example, on 20 April 1785, Dempster introduced into the commons a petition on behalf of Lieutenant-General Murray, governor of Minorca, concerning a dispute between Murray and Mr Sutherland, the late commissioner-general of the island.⁵⁵ When the petition came to be debated on 27 April Dempster could find no-one to second it, and so “it of course fell to the ground.”⁵⁶ Again, on 5 March 1787, in the midst of the major East India debates, Dempster reinforced his growing reputation as a champion of the underdog by supporting, in a minor debate, the cause of the promotion of a certain Captain David Brodie, who

had apparently been unjustly passed over. The motion was negatived, though by the relatively small majority of 100:83.⁵⁷ Similar concern lay behind Dempster's repeated calls on behalf of the American Loyalists, whom he begged the government not to forget.⁵⁸

Late in the session, on 28 May 1787, petitions for a reform in the royal burghs of Scotland which had been received from a number of Scottish towns, including Glasgow and Dundee, were briefly debated. Somewhat surprisingly, in view of his previously expressed views on the reform of the county franchise, Dempster opposed the petition, although the main point of his short speech in the debate was to defend his Dundee constituents against an accusation from an earlier speaker that they had been unduly tardy in delivering their petition:

“Mr Dempster, although he did not approve of the principles of the reform, yet would not hear, in silence, insinuations advanced against his constituents of Dundee for supineness. He was convinced they did not deserve any such censure. With regard to the proposed reform he must give his dissent to the subversion of that particular mode of government of the royal boroughs, which had existed for upwards of 200 years.”⁵⁹

This is a fairly definite statement, and appears to rule out his agreement to any reform of the burghs and not merely the particular reform contrived in the petitions. On a motion of Henry Dundas, in view of the lateness of the session and the poor attendance in the house, it was agreed to defer consideration of burgh reform until the next session when there would be time to debate it fully.

Dempster showed no sign of revising his view; in November 1787 The Times reported:

“The reform of the Royal Burroughs [sic] of Scotland will be agitated very early in the [parliamentary] session. Mr Fox, Mr Sheridan, and all that party, are engaged in its favour, whilst we are sorry to say that so amiable a character as Mr Dempster, with the whole Scots interest, have set their faces directly against it.”⁶⁰

Dempster's views on electoral reform were somewhat contradictory. Throughout his parliamentary career he consistently opposed reform in the Scottish burghs, notwithstanding their widespread and widely acknowledged corruption, while equally consistently advocating reform and widening of the

franchise in the counties. He deprecated the creation of 'fictitious' votes in the latter, but became a fictitious voter himself in Ayrshire to support Sir Adam Fergusson. In this instance he clearly placed friendship above political principle, and the same may be true of his position on electoral reform, with loyalty to his constituents outweighing other considerations.

In January 1788 Dempster wrote a long letter to Henry Dundas enclosing an even longer memorial from the linen manufacturers in Angus pleading for a continuation of the existing system of duties on imported foreign linen and bounties on the domestic product.⁶¹ Dempster continued to promote linen manufacture long after he had become interested in cotton and regarded the two industries as being able to co-exist happily (which in Angus for a long time they did⁶²). In his letter to Dundas he wrote:

“We have heard that you are an Enemy to all Bounties. I took it upon myself to ask, if your Enmity extended to Bounties for manning the navy and recruiting the Army in India. I then concluded you to be only an Enemy to bounties which do mischief, or at least do no good. And as the Bounty upon Linen, not only has done no mischief, but a great deal of Good - more good perhaps than ever was done by any single measure of political Economy, I have ventured to say, this memorial will make you a Friend to the Bounty on Linen, and to the continuance of the whole wise System of Laws for encouraging the Linen Manufacture of Scotland.”⁶³

After going on to describe the great increase in prosperity linen manufacture had brought to Angus and Dundee in particular, which he ascribed to the duties and bounties which had enabled home manufacturers to compete against Irish and German rivals, Dempster concluded:

“Now some of the greatest Linen Drapers in London have assured me, we had no advantage over the foreign till Lord North & Lord J[ohn] Cavendish's Five per Cents were added to the former duties. The rapid progress of our Manufactures since then, leads me to believe they spoke Truth. ... Our Cause therefore appears to me so good that I should be very sorry if you did not approve it with your usual firmness & spirit in a good Cause.”⁶⁴

Although absent for the winter session of parliament 1787-1788 (hardly surprisingly, considering his other commitments in 1788 - see following chapters) Dempster returned for the autumn 1788 session

and in November 1788 took an active part in the debates surrounding the king's illness and the proposed regency. These debates commenced on 19 November, shortly after the king became ill, and continued until his recovery in February 1789. On 16 December 1788 there was the first important division on the regency issue and Dempster joined the opposition in voting against Pitt's 'Resolutions relating to the King's Illness', which were passed 268:204.⁶⁵

In a further debate on Pitt's resolutions on 19 December 1788 Dempster joined the opposition in favouring full and unrestricted authority for the prince of Wales. Seeking to limit the powers of the prince of Wales as regent, Pitt proposed in his second resolution to appoint commissioners to whom the great seal could be put, empowering them to give the royal assent to bills in the king's name (including bills necessary to be passed for appointing the prince of Wales as regent). Dempster spoke out against this:

"Mr Dempster begged leave to propose an amendment to the second Resolution, which, he contended, would rescue them from the greatest solecism he had ever witnessed. The Resolution was no precedent in point for the present proceeding. Our King was not likely to be expelled the throne, because he was a King loved by his subjects; but he was a man, and consequently subject to all the calamities and infirmities of human nature. We had, at this time, a prince of Wales, the heir-apparent to the throne, of full age. Why, then, should we have a King, made up like nothing that ever was conceived before, an un-whig, un-tory-like, odd awkward, anomalous monster! He stood up as an independent man, connected with neither party, and the amendment he had to propose, was an amendment of his own, without consultation, and without connivance. He did not even know whether it would be seconded; but, such as it was, he would move it, that he might at least endeavour to preserve the constitution from what appeared to him to be dangerous."⁶⁶

Although Dempster's proposed amendment did not conflict with the Rockingham group's thinking he here took particular pains to distance himself from them. He was anxious to stress that he was speaking as an independent member and not as a member of a group (not something Dempster had ever found necessary to do previously) presumably to maintain the independent status he was now cultivating and to avoid offending Pitt. That Dempster was speaking from inner conviction seems

little in doubt; throughout his life, and more particularly during the latter half of it, he was always a staunch defender of the constitution and of the monarchy's role within it, and was quick to condemn anything he perceived as a constitutional impropriety. Dempster's amendment was lost by a majority of 73, the vote being 251:178 against.⁶⁷

Dempster continued to be a leading opposition speaker during the remaining debates on the regency during February 1789. In February 1789 the king recovered, resumed his power and thanked his ministers for loyalty.⁶⁸ Dempster for his part presented to the king a congratulatory address from Cupar town council on his recovery from illness.⁶⁹

During the summer of 1788 Dempster appears to have finally resolved not to stand again for parliament, and in the ensuing autumn and winter he so informed his constituents. On 2 December 1788 his letter of intimation was laid before the town council of St Andrews, giving as his reason a poor state of health, which prevented him from carrying out his duties as well as he would like. At the same time he expressed his gratitude for the many favours he had received. The council voted a letter to Dempster expressing their regret at his retirement and assuring him of their continued support should he change his mind.⁷⁰ In the same month there was an announcement in the press to the same effect.⁷¹

Dempster's imminent retirement from parliament did not in any way diminish his activity in it, rather the reverse. During his final year as an MP he is recorded as having spoken in debates on no fewer than 20 separate subjects, of which only the major ones can be mentioned here.

In May 1789 Dempster supported William Wilberforce's resolutions against the slave trade. In his speech, while opposing the slave trade itself, he expressed considerable sympathy for the plantation

owners and traders, urging that compensation to them should precede abolition.⁷² The fact that Dempster's wife's family owned slave-operated plantations in Jamaica must in part explain his attitude on the subject, but it also accords with his generally expressed desire to stand up for the rights of the individual citizen (in this case the plantation owner) against the power of the legislature.

During the budget debate on 10 June 1789 Dempster maintained to the last his strictures against increases in taxation and on the need for economy:

“Mr Dempster said, that he must give his feeble voice, even if he should stand alone, in opposition to the present resolutions. He could not agree to any increase of taxes being levied on the country, in the time of peace. It was then that the nation should be eased of its burthens as much as possible. He deprecated the general profusion of ministers. He meant not this as any personal reflection on the right hon. gentleman [Pitt]. On the contrary, he believed him as economical as any minister who had preceded, or might succeed him. But what he censured was the general extravagance of ministers. They disposed of the property of the public, without any care of what the country must suffer under such a perpetual increase of burthen. If they were not to feel an alleviation of this weight in the time of national tranquillity, when were they to expect it? Increasing thus, the taxes were not only improvident, but impolitic. It was by economy in peace that we were to treasure up resources for war.”⁷³

On India affairs Dempster made two speeches, one on 1 July when he protested against the extravagance of Dundas' proposed peacetime military establishment,⁷⁴ and on 13 July 1789 during the debate on the East India Company's petition to enlarge their capital. On this occasion Dempster made only a very short speech, and kept to familiar ground, arguing that the proprietors of East India stock had a good claim on the revenues from the territorial acquisitions of the company and that compensation ought to be paid if it was proposed to deprive them of this right.⁷⁵

The session closed on 11 August 1789; Dempster's last recorded speech took place on 22 July during the debate on the Corn Regulation Bill, when he supported famine relief for revolutionary France (the fall of the Bastille had taken place just one week earlier). In response to a question raised

by William Pulteney, who asked what the government's response would be to a request from France for a supply of corn to relieve distress there:

“Mr Dempster was for relieving France in this hour of her distress; 20,000 sacks of flour could not injure this country, but might materially serve the other.”⁷⁶

Dempster at first sympathised with the revolution, although from the outset he fully realised the danger ahead. In August, only three weeks after the Bastille fell, he wrote to Fergusson:

“The French chapter is so big a one I dare not begin it. Yet one word on France. I fear the proud noblesse will not submit and that the licentious populace will drive many moderate people back again to the nobles' standard and that the fair kingdom you and I visited will be deluged with the blood of its best citizens. ... I hoped the French had affected a bloodless revolution, and fondly hoped the example would have run like wild fire thro' all Europe consuming every bit of despotism in every corner of it. But I dare not wish for any event which is to cost a good man his life or any man his life without a trial.”⁷⁷

On 4 June 1790 Dempster, as president of the Whig Club of Dundee, signed a congratulatory address from that body to the National Assembly of France.⁷⁸ The Whig Club members believed that the revolution would usher in an era of peace between Britain and France with unprecedented opportunities for trade and industry. Far from being the rabid Jacobins that Edmund Burke thought, the members were, like Dempster, essentially moderate men.⁷⁹ Dempster continued to have some sympathy with the revolution even as late as the spring of 1791,⁸⁰ but ultimately the excesses of the revolutionaries caused him to regard them with the same horror as did most other British people. In September 1792 he wrote to Fergusson:

“The horrors of this French Revolution sicken me at the human race and have corrected a good deal of my democratical spirit. I pray for the King, the House of Lords and its bench of bishops and band of Scotch peers every morning. The bribes of the Treasury appear to me now like bon-bons to make restless and wicked children be quiet for their own good ...”⁸¹

The Revolution also further strengthened Dempster's belief in the virtues of the post-union British constitution; in the autumn of 1792 he declined the offer of the Dundee radicals who:

“... invited Geo[rge] Dempster by letter to become their Chairman, but he declined the honour adding among other reasons, that he was persuaded no constitution of gov[emmen]t can be better calculated to promote and ensure the prosperity and happiness of the individual and nation than ours - and that it was their duty to rest satisfied.”⁸²

Parliament was not in fact dissolved until the summer of 1790, but Dempster did not attend the final session, which ran from 21 January to 10 June. Almost certainly this was because of other demands on his time; it seems clear from his exceptional burst of parliamentary activity in 1788-1789 that he had made up his mind not to attend, and he definitely had by the summer of 1789: in a letter he wrote to Sir Adam Fergusson it is evident that he was not expecting to be back in London for a long time.⁸³

Dempster spent 28 years in parliament, almost half his adult life. Although he remained as active, or more so, after he resigned, in his correspondence he always seemed to regard his time in parliament as his ‘career’, and the time thereafter as his ‘retirement’. And yet, even after allowing for the self-deprecation which came naturally to him, it is evident that Dempster did not regard himself as a successful politician. In the 1870’s Charles Rogers (with an ‘s’), son of Dempster’s close friend James Roger (without an ‘s’), recalled:

“Though for nearly thirty years a member of the House of Commons, and fond of conversation, Mr Dempster seldom alluded to his Parliamentary experiences. His sterling independence had gained him the designation of ‘Honest George’, but it was my father’s opinion that he regretted he had so long engaged in political concerns. He had achieved his entrance into Parliament as member for the Fife and Forfar burghs, by a course of bribery on an enormous scale. To obtain the means of defeating his opponent, he sold three estates [see p.88]. He sometimes alluded to these matters regretfully, and would speak of the impetuosity of his hot youth.”⁸⁴

Dempster himself wrote of his lack of success as a parliamentarian. For example, to Principal William Robertson of Edinburgh University he wrote: “The only unfortunate Circumstance in the Case is my being on your side. I am so much out of luck, that even with the assistance of the minister I can hardly get into a Majority.”⁸⁵

And to Alexander Carlyle he wrote, with wry humour:

“When I heard of your stepping forth as a Candidate for the Hon[oura]ble ecclesiastic Office of Clerk to the Gen[era]l Assembly I was much disposed to have given you all the opposition in my power as I did to the American war the farming of the Public Revenue and the Prosecution of our Eastern Saviour Mr Hastings. And that from the sincere affection and constant and unalter'd respect I entertain for you. It is now twenty years since I have found my Opposition to any measure one of the necessary accompaniments of its success. This is true to a ridiculous degree. The approbation of the Late Peace, and the Irish commercial Propositions both failed, without another reason being pretended to be assigned for their miscarriage, but that I had voted for them. Pray can you tell me why Parliament refused a vote of approbation of the last Peace [concluding the American war]? I now tell you the reason.”⁸⁶

Dempster's lack of success as a practical politician undoubtedly owed much to the fact that, although he was aware that in order to promote measures in parliament successfully it was necessary to build up alliances with his fellow MPs, he was quite unable to do this if he insisted on voting on every occasion in accordance with the dictates of his conscience. Thus, by opposing Edmund Burke over the prosecution of Warren Hastings, Dempster lost the latter's support on other matters connected with India. Examples of this sort are legion throughout his parliamentary career. He was aware of the problem, but never able to resolve it completely in his mind and modify his conduct accordingly, except perhaps in his last session when he appears to have come to some sort of accommodation with Pitt. In 1793, after some years away from parliament, Dempster was able to offer the following reflections to Sir Adam Fergusson:

“I have... the satisfaction of considering that I am done with Parliament after a service of thirty years neither suited to my fortune nor genius, where I never was metaphysician enough to settle to my own satisfaction the bounds of the several duties a member owes to his King - his country - to purity or Puritanism rather and to party - to myself and those who depended on my protection, nor indeed to any thing - but went on floundering like a blind horse in a deep road and a long journey - and now that I have got to plain ground not quite bare of pasture one of my amusements is to look back and contemplate the paths my fellow travellers as well as myself have pursued, to the mighty events of America and France which have distinguished our age.”⁸⁷

However, against this it would appear that Dempster was respected by and popular among his parliamentary colleagues. Many of these remained his friends for the rest of his life, and contemporary accounts reinforce this impression. The following quote from Public Characters of 1809-10 is typical:

“During his public career, as a member of the House of Commons, he was always heard with singular attention. This did not proceed from his delivery, although easy and fluent, or from his person and address, although the one was handsome, and the other both popular and seductive; but from the uprightness of his character, which impressed full conviction on all who heard him, that his conduct was regulated both by his heart and understanding, without any personal or paltry consideration whatsoever. No man could pretend to any influence over his opinions; no party ever affected to depend on his vote; so that while his speeches fully illustrated the connexion between eloquence and virtue, his decisions were always regulated in strict subordination to his conscience.”⁸⁸

Unquestionably also, Dempster was popular among his constituents in the Perth burghs. As has been seen, he succeeded in maintaining and increasing his hold upon what was generally regarded as one of the most venal constituencies in the country, despite two campaigns to remove him and, apart from his first few elections, with minimal expenditure on bribes. This can only be explained by his unwavering loyalty in the house of commons to his constituents. Unlike almost all of Dempster’s fellow Scottish MPs, Dempster refused to become ‘lobby fodder’ for the administration and this, combined with personal popularity, ensured his electoral safety. It appears to have impressed Scotland at large: although Burns never met Dempster and, living in a different part of the country, could only have heard about him by remote means, yet he referred to Dempster on at least three occasions in his poetry. In ‘The Author’s Earnest Cry and Prayer’ he paid tribute to Dempster’s Scottish patriotism: “Dempster, a true blue Scot I’se warran”;⁸⁹ while in ‘The Vision’ it was to his oratory:

“Hence Fullarton, the brave and young;
Hence Dempster’s zeal-inspired tongue,”⁹⁰

“Fullarton” was William Fullarton (1754-1808), member of a wealthy Ayrshire family, who led a varied and successful career as soldier and politician. Finally, in the epistle ‘To James Smith’ Burns placed Dempster next to the highest statesman in the land, William Pitt, which gives an indication of Dempster’s prestige in Scotland at that time:

“A title, Dempster merits it;
A garter gie to Willie Pitt;”⁹¹

Sir Adam Fergusson was one of the subscribers to the Edinburgh edition of Burns’ poems, published in April 1787, but Dempster was not. Dempster apparently was not in Scotland in the winter of 1786-1787 when Burns visited Edinburgh and there is no evidence that the two ever met, although there is a tradition that Burns paid a visit to Dunnichen.⁹² Evidently Dempster could quote readily from ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ and thus Burns’ admiration of him was reciprocated.⁹³

Perhaps the conclusion that can be drawn from an examination of Dempster’s parliamentary career is that his personal qualities, and in particular his refusal or inability to speak or vote other than in accordance with his conscience, attracted respect and affection both from his constituents and many, if not most, of his fellow MPs. However, the same qualities made it impossible for him to use the parliamentary machinery of the time, reliant as it was on party loyalties and on pacts and agreements, successfully to affect legislation as it passed through the house of commons.

Chapter 7: Notes

1. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.24 cols.1013-1016.
2. Ibid., cols.1015-1016.
3. Ibid., vol.24 cols.1146-1147.
4. Ibid., col.1161.
5. For a discussion of the background to the various taxes introduced by Pitt, see Watson, Reign of George III, pp.287-288.
6. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.24 cols.1337-1338.
7. Dempster to Fergusson, 21 July 1784: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.135.
8. For a contemporary account of Poyning's law, see The Scots Magazine, vol. 42 (1780), p.77. For its repeal, see Edith Mary Johnston, Ireland in the Eighteenth Century (1974), pp.152-156.
9. An excellent summary of the problem and Pitt's proposed solution is given in Watson, Reign of George III, pp.276-278. Another useful summary is provided in Johnston, Ireland in the Eighteenth Century, pp.156-158.
10. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.25 cols.330-331.
11. Ibid., col.626.
12. Dempster to Fergusson, 29 July 1785: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.141-142.
13. Dempster to Fergusson, 22 August 1785: ibid., pp.143-144.
14. Dempster to Fergusson, 8 September 1785: ibid., p.145.
15. The Scots Magazine, vol.47 (1785) p.219.
16. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.20.
17. Watson, Reign of George III, pp.278-279.
18. A list of those voting for Pitt's motion is given in Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.25 cols.475-478.
19. Ibid., cols.429-430.
20. The Daily Universal Register [The Times], 5 February 1785.
21. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.25 col.489.

22. Ibid., col.561.
23. The Scots Magazine, vol.47 (1785) p.327.
24. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.25 cols.574-575.
25. Watson, Reign of George III, p.287.
26. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.25 cols.920-934; Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.152.
27. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.25 col.930.
28. Namier and Brooke, House of Commons, vol.2 p.317; for the debate see Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.25 cols.1096-1157; for background see Olson, The Radical Duke., pp.81-85.
29. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.25 col.1369.
30. Ibid., col.1378.
31. The Scots Magazine, vol.48 (1786) p.385.
32. 26 Geo III c.101.
33. R. W. Munro, Scottish Lighthouses (1979), p.53. See pp.51-54 for an account of the establishment of the Northern Lighthouses Board and Dempster's involvement in it.
34. Ibid., p.275.
35. 29 Geo.III cap.52.
36. The Times, 23 June 1789.
37. The Scots Magazine, vol.48 (1786) p.358.
38. For a useful brief account to Warren Hastings' impeachment see Watson, Reign of George III, pp.317-318. For more detail see John Riddy, 'Warren Hastings: Scotland's Benefactor?'; in Geoffrey Camall and Colin Nicholson (editors), The Impeachment of Warren Hastings. Papers from a Bicentenary Commemoration (1989), pp.30-57.
39. John Riddy, 'Warren Hastings'.
40. Ibid., p.52.
41. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.26 col.113.
42. Ibid., cols.149-150, 694-695, 732-733 and 1158 respectively.

43. Ibid., cols.694-695.
44. Riddy, 'Warren Hastings', p.31.
45. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.26 cols.274 and 508.
46. Impey to Dempster, [undated]1782 and 29 November 1782: British Library, Add. Mss.16260 ff. 181-182 and 205b-208 respectively.
47. Impey to Dempster, 29 November 1782: ibid.
48. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.26 cols.636-637.
49. Ibid., cols.739-741; The Times, 20 March 1787.
50. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.26 col.740.
51. Ibid., cols.745-749.
52. Michael Fry, The Dundas Despotism (1992), p.222.
53. Dempster to Hastings, 29 August 1789: British Library, Add. Mss.29171 ff.393-396.
54. Ibid.
55. The Daily Universal Register [The Times], 21 April 1785. For further background detail see ibid. 2 February 1785.
56. Ibid., 28 April 1785..
57. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.26 cols.658-659.
58. The Daily Universal Register [The Times], 24 May and 22 June 1785; 29 April and 27 June 1786; 17 and 27 February 1787; 8, 16, and 18 May 1787; 23 and 25 July 1789.
59. Ibid., col.1216.
60. The Times, 2 November 1787.
61. Dempster to Dundas, 31 January 1788: NLS, Ms.653 f.1.
62. Alastair J. Durie, The Scottish Linen Industry in the Eighteenth Century (1979), p.95.
63. Dempster to Dundas, 31 January 1788: NLS, Ms.653 f.1.
64. Ibid.
65. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.27 col.782. For the background to this vote (and for the debates generally) see John W. Derry, The Regency Crisis and the Whigs 1788-9 (1963).

66. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.27 cols.814-815.
67. [Phillips], Public Characters, p.254.
68. Watson, Reign of George III, p.305.
69. The Times, 23 March 1789.
70. The Scots Magazine, vol.50 p.619.
71. The Times, 11 December 1788.
72. Cobbett and Hansard, Parliamentary History, vol.28 cols.77-78.
73. Ibid., cols.167-168.
74. Ibid., cols.208-209.
75. Ibid., col.293.
76. Ibid., col.228.
77. Dempster to Fergusson 3 August 1789: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.197.
78. The Scots Magazine, vol.52 (1790) pp.457-459.
79. John D. Brims, 'The Scottish Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution' (unpublished PhD thesis for University of Edinburgh 1983), pp.64-69.
80. Boswell to Dempster, 19 April 1791: Chauncey Brewster Tinker (editor), Letters of James Boswell (2 vols. 1924), vol.2 p.435.
81. Dempster to Fergusson, 9 September 1792, Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.222.
82. Robert Watt to [R. Dundas?], 21 September 1792: SRO, RH 2/4/64 f.318.
83. Dempster to Fergusson, 2 August 1793: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.232-233.
84. Rogers, Century of Scottish Life, p.59.
85. Dempster to Robertson, 25 May 1776: NLS, Ms.3942 f.245.
86. Dempster to Alexander Carlyle, 10 July 1788: EUL, Ms.Dc.4.41 item 94.
87. Dempster to Fergusson, 2 August 1793: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.232-233.
88. [Phillips], Public Characters, p.254.

89. 'The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer (to the Scotch representatives in the house of commons)', in J. Logie Robertson (editor), The Poetical Works of Robert Burns (1912), p.81.
90. 'The Vision': ibid., p.56.
91. 'To James Smith': ibid., p.184.
92. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.162.
93. Ibid.

CHAPTER 8

THE BRITISH FISHERIES SOCIETY

After his last election to parliament in 1784 Dempster turned much of his attention to the improvement of the economic conditions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, which was to concern him for the remainder of his life. In the latter half of the eighteenth century there was a notable deterioration of the Highland economy, particularly in the coastal areas, accompanied by a high rate of emigration to North America. In the early 1770s British politicians were seeking ways of stemming this tide of emigrants and by the 1780s a policy of Highland improvement commanded widespread support¹. After the American Revolution the Highlanders, who had displayed first rate fighting qualities in the American campaigns, were regarded as valuable allies rather than potential rebels.² From his correspondence it is clear that Dempster was alarmed at the scale of emigration and was among those who felt that if unchecked it was likely to weaken Great Britain both economically and militarily. The American Revolution had given an impetus to this view since it was feared that the enormous diversion of manpower resulting from emigration was both weakening the resources available to the British Army while adding a commensurate strength to the Americans³ (in the event this was unfounded since the Highlanders proved to be staunch Loyalists⁴). Dempster believed mass emigration to be unnecessary, believing it possible to improve the wastelands of the Highlands for both agriculture and industry with no more effort or expense than was required for improving the wastelands of North America. The Highlanders should be encouraged to become pioneers in their own land.

Another reason for increased interest in the Highlands was the work of the Board of Trustees for Manufactures and Fisheries and even more so, the Board of Commissioners for the Annexed Estates founded in 1727 and 1755 respectively.⁵ The surveys and reports ordered by the commissioners

showed that there were far greater possibilities for improving the land and setting up manufacturers in the Highlands than had hitherto been realised.

In 1784 a number of significant events took place. The annexed estates were returned to their former owners. In many cases the returning landowner was the son of the old laird who during forty years' exile had gained wider experience and could judge his estates against the standards of other countries where new and fashionable improvements had been taking place. Several of them had studied agricultural methods in the south and some had been allowed to work small parts of their own estates under the guidance of the commissioners' factor.⁶ The resulting fresh approach to running a Highland estate had by these means become widespread by 1785.

1784 saw also the foundation of the Highland Society of Edinburgh, with John, fifth duke of Argyll as its first president (a Highland Society of London had been inaugurated in 1778),⁷ and the publication of the first of two important and highly influential reports thoroughly investigating the social and economic problems of the Highlands. This first report was by John Knox (1720-1790), a former London bookseller who, after his retirement in 1764, made sixteen tours in Scotland to study conditions in the north.⁸ His report contrasted the large sums of money spent on the American colonies with the poor returns realised and suggested that the Highlands would respond more readily to development. He also discussed the history of the fishing industry in Scotland and elsewhere and recommended the building of villages for Highland fishermen.⁹ In response to Knox's book and those of others the Treasury sent Dr James Anderson (1739-1808), a professor at Glasgow University,¹⁰ on an official tour to report on the conditions and prospects of the fishing industry in the north. His report was completed on 6 December 1784 and published early in 1785.¹¹

Dempster's interest in the fisheries was aroused during this period, probably as a result of Knox's book¹² but possibly also, as suggested by Sir James Fergusson, by a meeting with Dr Anderson arranged by Sir Adam Fergusson who had been corresponding with him.¹³ Dempster made his own tour of the Hebrides in the winter of 1784-1785, setting out on 3 January.¹⁴ His choice of season for the trip demonstrates his keenness of interest, and the urgency with which he viewed the matter. However, the tour must have been brief because on 2 February he was back in parliament in London supporting a petition from General Murray, the former governor of Minorca (see p.166). In a letter to Sir Adam, Dempster wrote:

“As to our fisheries I trust I have at last formed a few clear ideas respecting them. The seas abound with fish, the Highlands with industrious and good people. It will be the business of the legislature to bring these two to meet. But I fear it would in that country be an easier task for mountains to meet, at least they are at present much nearer one another. Should however the proper encouragement be given to the fisheries, it would produce still more important consequences to the nation, by the improvement the Highlands is [sic] susceptible of in point of agriculture. If you can suppose potato substitutable in the place of corn, there is scarce a necessary of life that might not be produced on thousands of acres now covered with heath, nor an island in the Hebrides that might not be as well cultivated and inhabited as Jersey and Guernsey.”¹⁵

These first thoughts of Dempster's show that he was well aware of both the possibilities and the difficulties of improving fisheries and agriculture in the region. His first priority was legislative help for the fishing industry and he was not slow in taking action.

In his report Anderson had lucidly exposed the many disabilities that the fisheries laboured under. Many of these stemmed from the salt laws which permitted salt imported for the curing of fish to be free from the usual high import duties but subject to so many restrictions as to make its use almost impracticable. The salt had to be landed at a custom house and carefully weighed. Any salt to be used for curing fish was then free of duty, but the fish so cured had to be produced at the same custom house not later than the following 5 April, together with any unused salt, and weighed again

to check that all the salt had been used in this way. Salt could not be transferred from one custom house to another, nor even from one ship to another, without tiresome formalities. Only herring might be cured with the exempted salt and no herring could be sold unless first presented at the custom house (which involved payment of another duty) nor could they be re-shipped after having been landed without an order from the custom house officer. Non-observance of these regulations, even through forgetfulness or ignorance, resulted in heavy penalties.¹⁶

To the difficulties inherent in these laws was added the fact that there were very few custom houses on the west coast of Scotland. At the same time, while Scots fishermen had to compete in their own waters with Dutch and other foreign busses (busses were large, decked fishing vessels¹⁷), if they attempted to fish off Ireland they were attacked by Irish fishermen, who beat them off and cut their nets.¹⁸ In 1750 an act of parliament¹⁹ had introduced a bounty system to assist the fisheries generally but in particular to encourage the building of British busses to compete with the foreign ones. Naturally, this encouragement too was hedged about with regulations which in time became burdensome.²⁰

Dempster returned to Westminster clearly determined to bring about appropriate legislation. Parliament was in a receptive mood, for both the Knox and Anderson reports were widely read and succeeded in stirring MPs to action. In March 1785 Dempster seconded a successful resolution by Henry Dundas to set up a committee of enquiry into the British fisheries (see p.158). The committee which accordingly came into being was chaired by Henry Beaufoy, MP for Great Yarmouth, but its membership otherwise is unknown so there is no proof that Dempster was a member, although it seems inconceivable that he was not. To assist its deliberations the committee called in numerous witnesses including Knox and Dr Anderson.²¹ Three reports were produced during 1785 leading to the 1785 Fisheries Act²² introduced into the commons by Beaufoy on 4 July (see p.160). This act

removed many of the worst of the old restrictions but did not deal with the payment of bounties. Accordingly the same or a similar (it is not quite clear which²³) committee produced a further series of reports in 1786 which formed the basis for a second Fisheries Act, passed by parliament in July 1786.²⁴ That Dempster was heavily involved in these later reports cannot be doubted, for in December 1785 the editor of The Daily Universal Register (renamed The Times in 1787) commented:

“The improvements of the Scots fisheries will certainly occupy a considerable part of the next session of Parliament; besides the report of Dr Anderson, who was employed by Government to make a survey of the coasts of Scotland, Mr Dempster is preparing a large volume of information on the subject.”²⁵

Dempster, apparently independently, was also pursuing another of Dr Anderson’s recommendations, that buoys and lighthouses should be established at various points around the Scottish coast.²⁶ This led to his introducing bills on the subject in May 1786 and June 1789 which duly became law (see p.162).

At about this time Dempster rendered another and far-reaching service to the fishing industry by proposing the preservation of fish in ice for transportation, laying the foundation of the vast modern frozen food industry. At Sir John Sinclair’s request Dempster wrote him the following account of this:

“You desire to know the History of Fish being carried to London in Ice. I sit down with great pleasure to give it you, that it may be authentically known to whom our country is indebted for that Branch of Commerce. ... [This] Discovery ... like many others of more importance ... [was] accidental. One Day about the year 1784 or 1785 Mr Alex[ande]r Dalrymple ... and I were shown into one of the waiting Rooms at the E[ast] I[ndia] H[ouse] in Leadenhall Street. During our attendance there among other interesting matters respecting his voyages Mr Dalrymple told me the Coasts of China abounded with Snow Houses. That the Fishers of China carried snow in their Boats and by means thereof were able in the Heat of Summer to convey Fresh Sea Fish into the very interior Parts of China. I took pen and Ink and on the spot wrote an account of this conversation to Mr Richardson [of Pitfour] who as well as others has been in the practice ever since of conveying Salmon in Ice from the River Tay

& from Aberdeen, Montrose & Inverness to London. Voyages of 5, 6 & 700 miles. In Mr Richardson I found a very gratefull Correspondent for soon afterwards I received on new years' day a Letter from him containing a Draft on his Banker for £200 to purchase a Piece of Plate for Mrs Dempster, and every year since the Discovery one of the Finest Tay Salmon is convey'd to me monthly and free from all expence by that Gentleman's order, during the whole Fishing Season. This accident also enabled me to repay many acts of kindness which I had received during my Political Career from him and his connections in the Town of Perth & laid the foundation of an intimacy with him which will subsist during our Lives, so that of all who have profited by this lucrative Branch of Trade my Profits have been the surest & of the most valuable kind."²⁷

Alexander Dalrymple (1737-1808) was in turn Hydrographer to the East India Company (from 1779) and the Admiralty (from 1795).²⁸ Richardson wrote his own account of the invention in a letter to the The Scots Magazine in October 1786 in which he was at pains to ensure that all credit went to Dempster:

“Whether this manner of conveyance can be applied to sea-fish, poultry etc., as he [Dempster] hopes, a little time will discover. Meanwhile, I think proper to notice, that should any benefit result therefrom, either to the public or individuals, to that patriotic gentleman Mr Dempster it owes its beginning in this country, and to none else.”²⁹

Meanwhile, while the Fisheries Acts of 1785 and 1786 provided a satisfactory legislative framework, the committee of enquiry had realised that for the fishing industry to be effectively organised villages would need to be established, roads built and coastal trade encouraged. Under existing conditions crofters and fishermen had to be totally self-supporting - they had to grow their own food, dig their own peat, build their own houses and carry out repairs, and also repair their boats and fishing gear. No tradesmen such as slaters, masons, coopers or joiners existed to help them and thus the time available for actual fishing was severely limited. Furthermore essential supplies such as even fishing gear itself were very hard to procure.³⁰ Once villages were founded these deficiencies would be catered for while fish could be sold to the merchants in them, rather than having to be taken round the Mull of Kintyre to Glasgow. Shops and stores could be set up to supply

the fishermen's needs and extra custom houses and post offices, both vitally necessary, could be provided. The lack of communications would also have to be dealt with: there were no roads at all on the west coast, none between the east and west coasts, and hardly any postal service.³¹ To tackle all these problems the committee recommended that a privately funded joint-stock company should be set up.³²

In the meantime the Highland Society had also been active on the subject of the fisheries. They invited John Knox to lecture to a special committee of the society during which he strongly advocated the building of villages. Copies of his lecture were sent to the king and to the house of commons committee, the outcome of which was the preparation of a bill of incorporation for a joint-stock company.³³ The ensuing Act of Incorporation³⁴ was passed at the end of July 1786 and included in its terms all the recommendations of the commons committee. Prior to this a prospectus was issued for the new company inviting subscriptions; by the end of May a list of subscribers was prepared which contained over 100 names.³⁵ Dempster and his half-brother John Hamilton Dempster were subscribers, with one £50 share each, while Sir Adam Fergusson took two shares. The name given to the new company was 'The British Society for Extending the Fisheries and improving the Sea Coasts of this Kingdom' (subsequently commonly contracted to 'British Fisheries Society'). While Dempster clearly was very active in helping to set up the society, to credit him as the principal moving force behind it, as does Fergusson,³⁶ is perhaps to overstate the case: as has been seen both the Highland Society and some of Dempster's fellow MPs were equally involved.³⁷

The society held its first meeting on 10 August 1786 at which office bearers were elected. The duke of Argyll was elected governor (to add to his existing governorships of the Highland Societies of London and Edinburgh) while Dempster and Fergusson were among the 13 directors.³⁸ The winter of 1786-1787 was devoted to seeking further support and organising the society's financial

arrangements. Then the directors were able to consider the choice of sites for fishing villages. Advice was sought from Highland landowners and it was decided that a committee should make a tour of the north-western coasts during the 1787 summer recess. Dempster and Fergusson were both chosen to be among this party.³⁹

The expedition was also accompanied by a new friend of Dempster's, with whom he was to remain in correspondence for some years afterwards. This was Grimur Johnsson Thorkelin, the Icelandic antiquary, who had come to Britain under the auspices of the Danish government to continue his researches into the early history of the Vikings.⁴⁰ Thorkelin arrived in London in August 1786 and was probably introduced to Dempster by Sir John Sinclair.⁴¹ The first surviving letter which Dempster wrote to Thorkelin, dated 27 May 1787, concerns Thorkelin's joining the Fisheries Society expedition:

“I beg the favour of your Company on Wednesday morning to breakfast about nine o'clock that we may concert finally our Time and manner of Travelling. I have undertaken to witness the laying the Foundation Stone of a new Town or two in the Western Coasts of that Kingdom, which will enable me to shew you the whole Kingdom to more Advantage than I could have done otherwish [sic.]”⁴²

During the tour Dempster and Thorkelin became firm friends and for more than a year afterwards they corresponded regularly with Dempster writing at least once a month and sometimes twice. In 1787 Dempster introduced Thorkelin to St Andrews University for the conferment of the degree of LLD, and while Dempster was in London for his last winter as an MP, in 1788-1789, Thorkelin frequently visited him at his house in Queen's Road, Knightsbridge. On Dempster's return to Scotland the letters continued though at a slackening rate, until they lapsed almost completely when Thorkelin departed for Denmark in 1791. Nor apparently did Thorkelin visit Dempster at Dunnichen on either of his later trips to Scotland. There was a belated cordial exchange of letters in 1806-07:

the depth of the friendship is indicated by the fact that Thorkelin named his third surviving son Georg Dempster.⁴³

Although one of the travelling committee's members, Henry Beaufoy, was detained in London by public engagements and made a separate tour, the main body gathered at Inverary from where they set out on 23 June 1787. Tobermory on Mull was visited, followed by Canna, Skye, Harris, Stomoway on Lewis, Lochinver and Lochbroom.⁴⁴ Thorkelin accompanied the party as far as Stomoway, after which he seems to have gone alone to visit Sir John Sinclair at Thurso.⁴⁵ Dempster clearly enjoyed the tour, despite the privations of travelling over rough country; soon after his return he wrote to Thorkelin:

"I could have wished you had been with us on our own rich expedition, which for good weather, good humour, good Entertainment, & Accommodation, could not be surpass'd. I don't know whether most to recommend the Peers or Commoners of the Committee. And as to the object of the journey Posterity will reap some benefit from it. If towns & industry are beneficial to a Country destitute of both. I am far from thinking the Highlanders idle, but in their present dispersed state, their industry turns to as little account as that of a Squirrel in a Cage. It is perpetual efforts to keep Soul & Body together in Hutts not Houses, and without any of those things we call comforts. A pot & pot hook and a few Blankets making literally the whole Furniture of a House where the smoak and the people go out at the same Hole & they & their Cattle live under the same roof.

We have had offers of many spots of 1500 and 2000 acres for our new Towns where when planted they will thrive quicker than Mushrooms and I hope last longer than Oakes."⁴⁶

Despite Dempster's optimism as shown above, and his earlier assertion to Thorkelin that he would be founding towns during the tour (see p.189), it was to be some time before construction commenced. From the many offers of land the directors resolved to commence with only two settlements to begin with, only one of which was to be primarily for fishing. This decision appears to have been reached before the travelling committee went on its tour, and remained unchanged after the

tour's completion, for Dempster reported to Francis Humberstone Mackenzie of Seaforth, a fellow director with whom he had become friendly, in April 1787:

“... I shall venture to ... [tell] you what resolutions the Society have come to.

They have resolved to begin with two stations only. The one Maritime & Commercial, the other more particularly adapted for the Fisheries. The maritime station they have fix'd on is Tobermory. ... Our Resolution as to the Spot for Fishery points at Lochbroom but is suspended for want of offers of Land from any of its proprietors.”⁴⁷

Much of this letter is taken up with a long diatribe against John Knox who appears to have been consulted by the directors and to have made some insulting comment about both Dempster and Fergusson. Even in the midst of this, however, Dempster still managed to praise the work Knox had already done and in particular his book which “first turned the Eyes of the Public to the unimproved & improvable state of the Highlands.” Dempster also made reference to early squabbles among the directors, which were only to be expected among high-ranking persons unaccustomed to cooperating together:

“I must own there were some little symptoms of Jealousy and misunderstanding among us in the beginning of the year. But Beaufoy being so perfectly a fair & Gentlemanlike a man these have disappeared entirely and given place to the most cordial and unanimous procedure in every step hitherto taken by the Directors.”⁴⁸

At the annual general meeting of the society's shareholders on 25 March 1788 Beaufoy reviewed the society's progress and was able to report that land had been acquired at both Tobermory and Ullapool [Lochbroom] and that the society was ready to begin its programme of building fishing villages.⁴⁹

The society had purchased 2,000 acres at Tobermory from its two owners, one of whom was their governor, the duke of Argyll, the transaction being completed in May 1788.⁵⁰ The directors had been impressed with the harbour there, the potential of which in their view outweighed the poor

quality of the soil, the steepness of the banks and the distance from the fishing lochs.⁵¹ At the time Tobermory had little except its harbour and the small inn where Johnson and Boswell had stayed in 1773, when Boswell had noted "twelve or fourteen vessels" in the harbour.⁵² Opinions differed among members as to the best way to proceed. Fergusson considered that Tobermory could not exist successfully as a fishing station until a town had already become established there, while Dempster and the duke of Argyll took the opposite view and felt that until it had been made into a fishing station no town could be expected to grow on the site.⁵³ The earlier intention of creating a commercial trading town rather than a fishing port at Tobermory appears to have been forgotten.

The disagreement appears to have become quite heated, for Dempster wrote to Fergusson:

"I suppress... my apology for differing so much with you as to the Tobermory operations. I hope it is our frequent diversity of opinions that makes us like one another so much. I protest it is one of my many reasons for liking you. You never appear to me more amiable than when I see your grave face and sound head prepared to blow all my speculations into the air from whence they came.

I thank you for your caution as to throwing any blame of delay on you. I am sure I have attended to it with pleasure and punctuality. For I never intentionally make mischief, and would rather Tobermory and Ulapole, the two Tarbats with the isle of Cannay on their top were sunk in the deepest gulf of the Hebrides than be instrumental in lessening the affection of two good men towards one another. It is not by such acts that cities flourish or men prosper."⁵⁴

The immediate outcome was an agreement that no action should be taken until a full directors' meeting could take place in December 1787 or January 1788. In fact it was held on 18 December 1787, when these various ideas were studied by the directors.⁵⁵ The decision reached appears to have been to commence Tobermory both as a fishing station and as a settlement. The architect Robert Mylne (1733-1811) was appointed to design the village on the recommendation of Argyll for whom he had already acted. Mylne gave his services free as a "mark of encouragement of the Society's undertakings."⁵⁶ Construction work began with the building of a storehouse (commenced in October 1788) and an application was made to the Treasury to provide a custom house, for

without these no salt could be issued for curing. Argyll, in an act of generosity showing the interest he took in the society, offered if the venture proved unprofitable not only to take back the land on the same terms as he had conveyed it to the society, but also to buy back the warehouses for two-thirds of their cost price.⁵⁷ Engineering works to protect the shoreline and for the harbour were started in 1789-1790 and soon afterwards Thomas Telford was called in to supervise them.⁵⁸ Telford was introduced to the society by Sir William Pulteney who became a director in 1790 and who had nurtured Telford's early career.⁵⁹ This was the start of a long association between Telford and the society and his powerful command of procedure soon dominated the society's construction works. Telford, too, gave his services free.⁶⁰ The village took shape during 1788 and 1789 with the custom house being completed in 1791.⁶¹ According to the Statistical Account the population by 1793 had reached about 300, with fifteen two-storey stone houses with slate roofs having been built, and a further 20-30 single-storey thatched houses.⁶²

The site selected for the society's second settlement was at Ullapool Farm, on the eastern shore of Loch Broom. Although no land at this location had been offered to the society (see p.191) an approach was made to the owner, the earl of Cromarty, in December 1787, and negotiations seem to have proceeded amicably for on 28 February 1788 they concluded in an agreement whereby the society purchased 1300 acres at Ullapool itself together with a further 300 or so acres on the nearby island of Ristol.⁶³

Soon after this purchase the society had the good fortune to be approached by a man with considerable experience in running a commercial fishery, and who offered to establish a fishery at Ullapool and provide the necessary buildings. This was a Robert Melville who was co-partner with his uncle, Robert Fall, of a large fishery and commercial business at Dunbar. This had recently gone bankrupt (not, apparently, through any fault of the partners) and Melville accordingly was seeking

alternative employment.⁶⁴ Melville himself wrote to Sir John Sinclair, who passed on his letter to the directors, while Fall wrote on his nephew's behalf to Dempster. Dempster commented to Sir Adam Fergusson:

“I have a letter from Mr Fall on the subject of his nephew's intention of settling at Ulapole. This is another fortunate circumstance for the Society. If he begins on a moderate plan I have no fear of his success. But I am a great sceptic as to any kind of fishery being able to support an extensive mode of conducting it.”⁶⁵

Melville was asked by the Directors to draw up a detailed statement of his proposal and terms. Apparently he was a little unclear as to the legal position of the society and sought Dempster's help and advice, for on 9 April 1788 Dempster wrote to Fergusson:

“I omitted in my last to mention that I had been favour'd with a visit from Mr Robert Melville, nephew to Mr Fall of Dunbar and partner in that house. It was he who carried on the Caithness fishing in which the house was concerned or rather which was created by that house. His visit was for the purpose of learning from me what sort of proposal from him the Company could consistently with their charter accede to for his making an establishment for carrying on the cod and herring fishery at Ulapole. I found he had misconceived the views as well as the powers of the Company in several respects. We made out together a set of proposals which the Directors certainly have powers to enable him to accede to. It will be for them to consider how far their acceding to them will be for the interest of the Society. He is to send me a copy of them for your use, but as he proposes being in town soon after the holidays, perhaps by this time, you will probably receive them from himself. By then the Company may at the end of five years be left with some houses on their hands, but they are such as will be wanted by others if the settlement succeeds at all. In Mr Melvil we should have a settler of great skill in the fisheries and one who will be supported with a considerable capital by his friends. These are the pours and contres, I promised to write you on the subject.”⁶⁶

A copy of Melville's proposals was enclosed with Dempster's next letter to Fergusson,⁶⁷ and the directors entered into a contract with Melville early in May 1788.⁶⁸

Presumably because of his involvement with Melville and his uncle, Dempster took much more interest in Ullapool than in Tobermory. His letters to Fergusson during April 1788 were full of it. With this interest came his usual impatience to see progress: on 12 April he wrote to Fergusson:

“Let me mention another idea that I have revolved a good deal in my mind and think on deliberation a good one. Tho’ I am not for forcing our towns in hot beds, yet I think a gentle heat might be applied with great success to the walls, especially when the plant is only beginning to sprout in a cold climate and bleak country. It is this. To build upon our lotts a very few and very cheap houses and to expose them together with the lots on which they stand to public auction, consenting to take payment by ten or any other per cent installments with the house and lot as a security for the price. The consequence would probably be our losing a little on those sold for the first year or two. But the fame of the bargains would soon spread. Many would wish to get houses at an undervalue and by this means they would sell well. This plan would furnish constant work for tradesmen who settle among us, and would create towns pretty quickly. ... it may be continued ad infinitum without any additional expence as the price paid for the first would suffice for building future houses.”⁶⁹

Later in 1788, presumably with the idea of “applying a gentle heat”, Dempster paid a visit to Ullapool eager to verify progress. Before setting out he wrote to Thorkelin:

“I am about setting out to inspect the progress of our new town of Ulapole in Loch Broom, where if it does not rise to the sound of the Lyre it springs very fast to that of the Bag Pipe. Warehouses, Quays, Inns, Pri[vate] Houses & temporary Hutts are all going on at the same time. By next year its pointed spires will rival the neighbouring mountains and adorn the Banks of that beautifull Loch.”⁷⁰

Dempster found Melville downcast because the herring shoals had deserted the loch that year and the fishing season had accordingly been poor (this was a foretaste of the problems the unpredictable behaviour of herrings was to cause the society). Dempster wrote to Mackenzie:

“I went alone to Ulapole. Alas poor Mr Melvil was then giving himself no airs. The Herrings had forgotten their summer & autumn visit to Lochbroom and Mr Melvil seem’d much dejected. The Houses he has built seem sufficiently done according to contract, but I doubt of Tyle Roofs answering in that wet & windy spot. The Inn was far Advanced well built but not then roofed & most beautifully situated. What inspired me with good hopes was the finding the people of the Country about buying and spinning Flax which Mr Melvil had imported.”⁷¹

On his return Dempster prepared a short note for the society in which, among other suggestions, he repeated his idea of speculatively building a small number of houses and selling them at auction.⁷² He nevertheless appears to have been satisfied with the progress made in one season.⁷³ The following

year Dempster, together with another director, Neill Malcolm, was responsible for drawing up the regulations for lotting out the land at Ullapool.⁷⁴

The directors do not seem to have acted on Dempster's suggestion, but probably because Ullapool was growing fast enough already, rather than through any unsoundness of the idea itself. The Statistical Account for Ullapool, published in 1794, stated that about 72 houses had been built, of stone, of which 35 had been slated and the remainder thatched with turf, fern roots and heather.⁷⁵ By 1798 there were said to be about 1,000 settlers at Ullapool, although many of them may have been only temporary, seasonal residents.⁷⁶ Meanwhile Dempster was also expending considerable energy on promoting additional settlements on Skye and Canna. The society had resolved to found only two settlements to begin with, for which Tobermory and Ullapool had been chosen (see p.191). However, during their 1787 tour the directors had recognised the need for development in Skye and had been impressed with the possibilities of one site in particular, at Lochbay, near Dunvegan in the north west of the island. The situation was not central enough, in their view, to serve the lochs of the northern Highlands and so this site was reserved for the time when the society's resources could sustain a third settlement.⁷⁷

In early 1788 Dempster learned of an imminent intended emigration from the area and, characteristically, took it upon himself to try to forestall this emigration by bringing forward the development of additional sites, in particular the one at Lochbay and another on Canna. In one of several letters on the subject to Sir Adam Fergusson he wrote:

“Along with Tallisker's original letter [Macleod of Talisker, who appears by this letter to have informed Dempster of the intended emigration] I have also sent a copy of it which I would beg you to lay before the Directors... I have no scruple in saying to you that the Directors should take this (to use a Court of Session phrase) summarily under their consideration, that is in preference almost to all their general business. That a letter should be written to Tallisker desiring him to converse with these intended emigrants, in order to know whether they could be induced to abandon their design of going away, and if they would incline in preference to

settle at Loch Bay. ... The people should be assured that the town will be immediately planned and that each of them should on moderate terms have a perpetual lease of a let in it for his house and garden and also a lease of a little land for cultivation but resumeable when the town extends so far as to make it necessary for the buildings of the town. ... If nothing will divert them from their intention to migrate there is no help for it. The Society has done its duty. If our endeavours succeed we shall have answer'd the most essential purposes of our institution in this instance by converting an emigrant body of people into a usefull community.”⁷⁸

In a subsequent letter to Fergusson Dempster, his enthusiasm rapidly overriding common sense, said not only that a quay was “all that is required to make Loch Bay one of the first situations for a seaport town in Europe” but also suggested that a further series of towns should be immediately commenced:

“In regard to the stations offer'd gratuitously at Canna, Loch Skipford and Lochs Tarbet, I really think they should be accepted, an ingenier employed to plan out towns and to lott out the land. These circumstances should be made publicly known with an intimation that the state of the Society's funds admits at present of giving settlers no further aid.”⁷⁹

Such a sudden expansion of the society's activities was quite impractical and would have overstretched its resources to a disastrous extent. In the event only Lochbay was proceeded with, but even here delays in gaining possession of the land and in commencing work meant that Dempster's and the society's hopes of preventing emigration were dashed, as a result of loss of faith in the society's intentions by the local population.⁸⁰

Prospects looked good for Lochbay when in April 1789 the society entered into an agreement to take 1,000 acres of land comprising the farms of Stein and Lusta.⁸¹ Macleod of Talisker, writing to Dempster in September of that year, appeared optimistic regarding the new settlement:

“We had a vague report that you was coming to take a look at the Isle of Mist this season. ... I most sincerely wish you was with us at seeing the plan of Stein, or rather, Dempster Town laid down & the limits of this new settlement mark'd out, which I hope will be soon done - ... & I hope to have your assistance in giving this City to be the name of Dempster TOWN... I heartily recommend the Bearer Mr Angus Shaw to your Patronage you will find him a worthy industrious Man upon

whom the Directors who made us happy with a Visit here, bestowed the Appellation of Lord Provost of Stein, tho an Ugly Snub name for a Great City. -”⁸²

Nevertheless, owing to various misunderstandings the society did not gain possession of the site until December 1790, although this did not prevent a small formal foundation ceremony from being performed on 27 September 1790.⁸³ The plan of the village was prepared by Telford, who was responsible also for the engineering works. Further problems ensued including the discovery that the local stone was too soft for building a pier or harbour breastworks, the latter being solved by Telford’s use of a special type of cement which proved so successful that it was later used extensively in the construction of the Ellesmere and Caledonian Canals.⁸⁴

The directors did not take up Macleod’s suggestion of naming the settlement after Dempster, but Dempster’s own modesty about such things may have been the reason. Angus Shaw was however appointed contractor and building commenced with a temporary inn, to Telford’s design and estimated by him to cost £30. Various misunderstandings occurred as to what was required and Shaw eventually expended £240 on an unnecessarily grandiose structure. When the society refused to pay Shaw withdrew in disgust and the dispute over payment dragged on for over ten years.⁸⁵ A letter from Dempster to Pulteney records Shaw’s unhappiness at his harsh treatment by the society.⁸⁶ Lochbay grew extremely slowly. By 1800 (some twelve years after Dempster’s original proposal) the population reached about 200, but there was a conspicuous lack of an established fishing industry: no fishermen, no fish curers and no regular fishing conducted.⁸⁷

The settlement at Canna appears to have been almost the sole responsibility of Dempster who had visited the island with the other directors on 7 July 1787. The ‘magnetic mountain’ on Canna interested Dempster sufficiently that he wrote an account of it, later published in the first volume of the transactions of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, of which Dempster was an early

member.⁸⁸ Here again the aim was to avert an intended emigration. Macdonald of Clanranald, the owner of Canna, had made an offer of a site on the island shortly after the directors' visit which was not immediately taken up. Later the fishing population on the island was threatened with removal and appealed to the society's agent at Tobermory for help. Clanranald was persuaded to renew and improve the terms of his offer, and these were accepted by the society in June 1789, for at a meeting of the directors of that month the acquisition of the Canna site was noted.⁸⁹ Dempster and Clanranald (who was not a director but an ordinary shareholder) were put in charge of this development. However, there was an existing tenant on the land, Hector Macneil, whose lease still had 12 years to run and who refused to give this up for less than £400 unless he was employed as agent at the settlement. It was agreed that he was unsuitable for the post (it was he in fact who was threatening the tenants with eviction) but Dempster hoped that he could be made to accept £100.⁹⁰ The deadlock lasted until February 1790, when it was decided that Macneil's lease must be bought before the settlement could be founded and that no more than £100 be offered him. Dempster was not present at this meeting, since his resignation from parliament meant that he no longer visited London, but the secretary forwarded all the relevant papers to him and in June 1790 Pulteney explained the position in a letter to Dempster:

“We have desired 5 or 600 acres from Clanranald not as a present like the first but at the full present value on a perpetual rent to be settled by Surveyors upon oath... We do not want all good land but pasture and Muir and such good spots as lie intermixed and the nearer the harbour the better; without this we could not make the poor people perfectly independent hereafter.”⁹¹

The continuing deadlock with Macneil and the prospects of further difficulties over the acquisition of a substantial area of land seem to have proved too much even for Dempster's energy and enthusiasm. A week after receiving Pulteney's letter he wrote to the society's secretary:

“I fear it is over with Cannay. We have a perfect right to refuse John [Hector] Macneil's exorbitant Demand, but I doubt if it be right after voting a Sum for Cannay and adopting it as a Society's Settlement to annex as a Condition a further cession of Land which will not I am persuaded be acceded to, so farewell bonny Cannay the best fishing Station in the Highlands and the most tempting spot for a

Settlement - farewell poor Inhabitants. This is a mere private Rhapsody, I will write to Mr Sec[retar]y when I hear from Clanranald"⁹²

Dempster's predictions proved correct and on 13 March 1791 the secretary wrote to Clanranald refusing his price and thereafter Canna ceased to be considered for a settlement.⁹³

Dempster's retirement from parliament meant that he was no longer able to attend meetings of the directors which were always held in London. However, he remained a director at least until 1798,⁹⁴ continued to be enthusiastic about the society's work and clearly hoped to be able to continue to serve the society. To Mackenzie early in 1790 he wrote:

"Pray let me intreat you not to resign as a Director. You will do much mischief by it. For your presence near the Scenes of our Activity has more effect than you are aware of, and you are beloved & Esteemed by every one of your Colleagues. Altho' I have no prospect of ever visiting London again, I believe that in Scotland I may be worth my Seat, by taking a trip over to Ullapole, or to Tobermory."⁹⁵

Dempster clearly felt that his own presence near the scenes of the society's activity would be as valuable as Mackenzie's and in this he was correct, for the society undoubtedly suffered in its later years from a lack of directors who lived near enough to the settlements to be able to make regular visits.⁹⁶

Dempster was involved in one last project for the society, the building of a road from Ullapool to the east coast. The need for a road between the east and west coasts had been recognised from the inception of the society (see p. 188). However, nothing was done by the society until in the summer of 1789 ^{when} Dempster, then still an MP, brought the need for roads in the Highlands to the attention of parliament.⁹⁷ This subject he regarded as of the utmost importance; in the letter to Mackenzie just quoted he called it a "Grand design; The only one now going on worthy [of] the attention of Government, except the discharge of our national Debt."⁹⁸ On 22 June 1789 a new fisheries bill

introduced by Dempster was debated and although surviving accounts mention only the fisheries proposals,⁹⁹ after the bill had gone into committee the chairman moved an address to the king that a survey of roads between the east and west coasts be made, which was accepted.¹⁰⁰ This exercise was clearly part of Dempster's accord with Pitt (see pp.152-153). On 16 July 1789 he explained the background to Mackenzie:

"I wished to have made several motions for altering the Salt & Bounty Laws in favour of the Fishery & to conclude with moving an Address to the King about the Roads. Mr Pitt said the Season was too far Advanced, but if I would give up the rest for this year he would consent to the Address. I snapt you may believe at so good an offer. Hence the solitary Address."¹⁰¹

In the same letter Dempster expressed high hopes for the road building project:

"I am sanguine in my Hopes of living to see Mrs Mackenzie driving Past in her Coach from Dingwall to Loch Broom. And the Countess of Sutherland doing the same from Dunrobbin Castle to Assynt and Strathnaver. ... A beginning at last is made on this great work. Heaven bring it to a happy conclusion."¹⁰²

Parliament approved the idea and after the directors of the Fisheries Society had been consulted as to the most essential routes, the one from Ullapool to Dingwall was selected to be built first. The contract for this was signed on 17 May 1792¹⁰³ and although initially the society bore the expense, later a Treasury grant was made available to cover the full cost.¹⁰⁴ The road was complete by September 1794.¹⁰⁵ Unfortunately, however, the new road's life was to be short and it quickly fell into disrepair resulting in demands being made for its renewal.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, this was a pioneering work that showed the way for the great project of Highland road building that was to commence early in the next century.

In the autumn of 1789, no doubt inspired by the example of Knox and Anderson, Dempster published his own account of the British Fisheries Society to date comprising the substance of two papers which he had read at general meetings of the society.¹⁰⁷ It was well reviewed by The Scots

Magazine¹⁰⁸ but does not seem to have had a large sale, for in 1792 Dempster commented ironically to Sir Adam Fergusson:

“I have mention’d this subject [roads in the Highlands] in my inimitable printed Address to the Proprietors of the Fishery [Society], a work which is fresh in every body’s memory and no doubt to be found in every body’s hand. At least I presume so for I have at least 200 copies of it in my own library and read it as often I do the Bible tho’ I do not admire it quite so much neither has it undergone so many editions.”¹⁰⁹

This seems to have been something of a swan-song on Dempster’s part for his involvement in the Fisheries Society, for henceforth it no longer featured significantly in his correspondence. The society itself never lived up to the high hopes entertained for it and the three initial settlements were all sold off in the early part of the nineteenth century. It survived until 1893 largely on the strength of a new project at Pulteneytown, Wick, which was commenced in 1803 at the suggestion of Sir John Sinclair.¹¹⁰

Dempster’s interests in the problems of the Highlands, and in particular that of emigration, remained unabated but henceforth his energy and enthusiasm were directed through other channels. As will be seen in the following chapters, he remained a passionate advocate of road building and of agricultural reform, pursuing the latter indefatigably both at Dunnichen and at a newly-acquired estate at Skibo in Sutherland.

Chapter 8: Notes

1. See for instance: Bernard Bailyn, Voyagers to the West: Emigration from Britain to America on the Eve of the Revolution (New York, 1986), pp.36-42; Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, pp.2-5; Dalphy I. Fagerstrom, 'The American Revolutionary Movement in Scottish Opinion, 1763 to 1783' (unpublished PhD thesis for the University of Edinburgh, 1951), chapter 3.
2. A. J. Youngson, After the Forty-Five: The Economic Impact on the Scottish Highlands (1973), p.120.
3. Fagerstrom, 'American Revolutionary Movement', p.92.
4. See, for example, Ian Charles Cargill Graham, Colonists from Scotland: Emigration to North America, 1707-1783 (1956), especially chapter 8.
5. For a comprehensive account of the work of these bodies, see Annette M. Smith, Jacobite Estates of the Forty-Five (1982).
6. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.2.
7. For an account of the Highland Societies of London and Edinburgh, see Sir John Sinclair, Bart., An Account of the Highland Society of London, from its establishment in May 1778 to the commencement of the year 1813 (1813), and Alexander Ramsay, History of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland, with notices of anterior societies for the promotion of agriculture in Scotland (1879).
8. For Knox, see Dictionary of National Biography, (compact edition, 2 vols. 1975), vol.1 p.1150.
9. John Knox, A view of the British Empire, more especially Scotland; with some proposals for the Improvement of that Country, the Extension of its Fisheries, and the Relief of the People (1784).
10. For Anderson, see Robert Chambers (editor), A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen (revised edition, 6 vols. 1874), vol.1 pp.38-39.
11. James Anderson, An Account of the Present State of the Hebrides and Western Coasts of Scotland (1785).
12. See, for instance, his praise of it in a letter to Francis Humberstone Mackenzie: Dempster to Mackenzie, 23 April 1787: Toronto University Library, Dempster Muniments, Ms.126 [hereafter Dempster Muniments], vol.2, item 2.
13. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.150.
14. Dempster to Fergusson, 26 December 1784: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.138.

15. Ibid.
16. Anderson, Account, pp.35-38. Dempster himself wrote a résumé of the main points in a paper enclosed with a letter to the duke of Argyll: 'Observations on the Salt Laws' (undated): SRO, British Fishery Society [hereafter BFS] Papers, GD9/1/352-355. Enclosed with Dempster to duke of Argyll, 10 May 1787: SRO, GD9/1/180-183.
17. For a more extended description of busses, see Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.9.
18. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.149-150; The Scots Magazine, vol.46 (1784) p.696.
19. 23 Geo.II cap.24.
20. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.21. A general account of the problems facing the fisheries is given in chapter 1.
21. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.20.
22. 25 Geo.III cap.65.
23. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.20.
24. 26 Geo.III cap.106.
25. The Daily Universal Register [The Times], 10 December 1785.
26. Anderson, Report, pp.94-98.
27. Dempster to Sinclair, 21 January 1800: SRO, RH4/49/2/266-270.
28. For a brief description of Alexander Dalrymple, see Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.160 n.1.
29. The Scots Magazine, vol.48 (1786), p.656.
30. Anderson, Report, pp.18-19. For more on the eighteenth-century planned village movement, see T. C. Smout, 'The Landowner and the Planned Village in Scotland, 1730-1830'; in N. T. Phillipson and Rosalind Mitchison (editors), Scotland in the Age of Improvement. Essays on Scottish History in the Eighteenth Century (1970), pp.73-106.
31. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.154; A. R. B. Haldane, New Ways through the Glens (1962), chapter 1.
32. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.23.
33. Ibid., p.24.
34. 26 Geo.III cap.106.

35. The prospectus is reproduced in Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.207; the list of subscribers is similarly reproduced on pp.208-209.
36. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.153.
37. For more detail on the background to the formation of the society see Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, pp.23-24; E. D. Hyde, 'The British Fisheries Society: its Settlements and the Scottish Fisheries 1750-1850' (unpublished PhD thesis for the University of Strathclyde, 1973), chapter 1; and Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.153-154.
38. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.25. A list of the directors is reproduced on pp.210-211.
39. For a list of names see ibid., p.30.
40. An excellent account of these researches, and of Thorkelin's life in general, is provided by Harvey Wood, 'Letters to an Antiquary'. An abbreviated account of Thorkelin's arrival in Britain and his friendship with Dempster is in Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.162-164.
41. Harvey Wood, 'Letters to an Antiquary', p.161.
42. Dempster to Thorkelin, 27 May 1787: EUL, Ms.La.III.379 f.231.
43. Harvey Wood, 'Letters to an Antiquary', p.162.
44. The tour is described in more detail in Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, pp.30-31.
45. Dempster to Fergusson, 15 October 1787: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.172. Also ibid., p.172.
46. Dempster to Thorkelin, 30 September 1787: EUL, Ms.La.III.379 f.208.
47. Dempster to Mackenzie, 23 April 1787: Dempster Muniments, vol.2 item 2.
48. Ibid.
49. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.31.
50. Hyde, 'Fisheries Society Settlements', p.88.
51. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.80.
52. Chapman, (editor), Johnson's Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland and Boswell's Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, L.L.D., p.368.
53. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.169; Hyde, 'Fisheries Society Settlements', pp.91-92.
54. Dempster to Fergusson, 15 October 1787: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.172.

55. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.81.
56. Hyde, 'Fisheries Society Settlements', p.93; SRO, BFS Abstract Minutes 1786-1788: GD9/3/38.
57. BFS Committee Meeting, 5 April 1787: SRO, BFS Abstract Minutes 1786-1788: GD9/3/11-12.
58. Hyde, 'Fisheries Society Settlements', pp.94,103.
59. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.59. For Pulteney's friendship with Telford, see L. T. C. Rolt, Thomas Telford (1958), pp.16-17.
60. Rolt, Thomas Telford, p.194.
61. 'Report of Business at Tobermory, 27 August 1791': SRO, BFS Correspondence, Abstracts, Plans etc. 1787-1795: GD9/4/387.
62. Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.14 (1793), pp.144-148. For an account of the early construction work at Tobermory, see Hyde, 'Fisheries Society Settlements', pp.93-114.
63. BFS Letter Book vol.1 1787-1791: SRO, GD9/8/188. The foundation and subsequent development of Ullapool are described at some length by Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, chapters 4-7, and by Hyde, 'Fisheries Society Settlements', pp.86-170.
64. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.46; Hyde, 'Fisheries Society Settlements', pp.144-145. For a brief account of the Falls, see Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.186 n.1.
65. Dempster to Fergusson, 25 March 1788: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.186.
66. Dempster to Fergusson, 9 April 1788: ibid., pp.189-190.
67. Dempster to Fergusson, 12 April 1786: ibid., p.191.
68. Duke of Argyll to James Maxwell, 16 May 1788: SRO, BFS Correspondence, Abstracts, Plans etc. 1787-1795: GD9/4/51.
69. Dempster to Fergusson, 12 April 1788: ibid., pp.190-191.
70. Dempster to Thorkelin, 21 August 1788: Harvey Wood, 'Letters to an Antiquary', p.301.
71. Dempster to Mackenzie, 25 October 1788: Dempster Muniments, vol.2 item 8.
72. 'Hints respecting Ullapool by Mr Dempster on occasion of his visit to that place in autumn 1788': SRO, BFS Abstract Minutes 1786-1788: GD9/3 pp.151-152.
73. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.51.
74. British Fisheries Society Directors' Meeting, 4 May 1789: SRO, BFS Abstract Minutes 1786-1788: GD9/3/199.

75. Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.10 (1794), pp.466-470.
76. Hyde, 'Fisheries Society Settlements', pp.155-156.
77. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.34.
78. Dempster to Fergusson, 5 March 1788: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster pp.176-177.
79. Dempster to Fergusson, 20 March 1788: *ibid.*, p.181.
80. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, pp.87-88.
81. Part. Reg. Sasines Inverness, RS 38 17.267: cited by Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.87.
82. Macleod to Dempster, 6 September 1789: Dempster Muniments, vol.2 item 17.
83. Hyde, 'Fisheries Society Settlements', p.191.
84. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.88; Sir Alexander Gibb, The Story of Telford: The Rise of Civil Engineering (1935), pp.268-269.
85. Hyde, 'Fisheries Society Settlements', pp.189-192.
86. Dempster to Pulteney, 17 March 1802: SRO, GD9/138/9.
87. Hyde, 'Fisheries Society Settlements', p.202. The story of the Lochbay settlement is described on pp.178-208. See also Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, pp.87-90.
88. 'An Account of the Magnetic Mountain of Cannay': Archaeologica Scotia: or Transactions of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, vol.1 (1792), pp.183-185. For Dempster's membership of this society see p.xxv. For an account of its history, see A. S. Bell (editor), The Scottish Antiquarian Tradition. Essays to mark the bicentenary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and its Museum, 1780-1980 (1981), especially pp.31-85 and 142-211.
89. BFS Directors' Meeting, 19 June 1789: SRO, BFS Abstract Minutes 1786-1788: GD9/3/222. The story of the Canna site appears in Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, pp.90-91, and in Hyde, 'Fisheries Society Settlements', pp.175-177.
90. Dempster to British Fisheries Society secretary, 21 December 1789: SRO, BFS Abstract Minutes 1786-1788: GD9/3/451.
91. Pulteney to Dempster, 8 June 1790: SRO, GD9/8/172.
92. Dempster to Mackenzie, 15 June 1790: SRO, BFS Abstract Minutes 1786-1788: GD9/3/487.

93. British Fisheries Society secretary to Clanranald, 15 March 1791: SRO, GD9/8/233.
94. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p. 135.
95. Dempster to Mackenzie, 17 February 1790: Dempster Muniments, vol.2 item 21.
96. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.135.
97. Ibid., p.126.
98. Dempster to Mackenzie, 17 February 1790: Dempster Muniments, vol.2 item 21.
99. The Times, 23 June 1789.
100. Journals of the House of Commons, vol.44 p.515
101. Dempster to Mackenzie, 16 July 1789: Dempster Muniments, vol.2 item16. Dempster gave a similar explanation to Fergusson some years later, see Dempster to Fergusson, 2 May 1792: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.214-215.
102. Dempster to Mackenzie, 16 July 1789: Dempster Muniments, vol.2 item 16.
103. BFS directors to Henry Dundas, 17 May 1792: SRO, GD9/9/93-95.
104. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, pp.127-128.
105. Ibid., p.129.
106. Haldane, New Ways, p.13. See also the scathing account of the new road in the New Statistical Account of Scotland, vol. 14 pp.89-90.
107. George Dempster, A discourse containing a summary of the proceedings of the directors of the Society for extending the Fisheries and improving the Sea Coasts of Great Britain, since 25th March 1786, and some thoughts on the present emigration from the Highlands (1789).
108. The Scots Magazine, vol.51 (1789) pp.642-643.
109. Dempster to Fergusson, 2 May 1792: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.215.
110. For the story of the society's decline and suggested reasons for it, see Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, chapters 12-14.

CHAPTER 9

DUNNICHEN

Although Dempster took great and increasing interest in Dunnichen while he was still an MP, after his retirement from parliament in 1790 he concentrated his efforts on improving his own estates and the conditions of his tenants, principally at Dunnichen but also at Skibo in Sutherland which he had purchased in 1786 (see chapter 11).

Despite Dempster's intense interest in Skibo between 1790 and 1800, he devoted the greater part of his life to Dunnichen, with whose affairs he was intimately connected from the time of his inheritance in 1754 until his death in 1818. The basic strategy at both Dunnichen and Skibo was the same: to provide greater prosperity for both tenant and landlord by a reform of agricultural practices and the conditions under which tenants worked, and by the introduction of manufacturing industry. Both parts of this strategy reflected contemporary enlightened opinion.¹ A full account of Dempster's agricultural improvements appears in the old Statistical Account for Dunnichen, which Fergusson is probably correct in believing was largely written by Dempster himself.² (It is the only account in the volume not signed by the minister, devotes considerable space to Dempster's own activities and beliefs, includes a lengthy extract from a letter written to Dempster, and is typical of Dempster's writing style.) When Dempster took over the estate the tenants, as elsewhere in Scotland, were still bound by medieval codes of loyalty and servitude to their landlords, and the land was divided up and farmed in accordance with the antiquated and inefficient 'run-rig' system.³ Dempster described conditions as he found them in a paper attached to a letter he wrote to Thorkelin:

"The farmers having no leases, or short ones, were extremely poor. ... They were also bound to grind their corn at the mill of the barony, and to employ the proprietor's blacksmith. They paid double price for their work at the mill and the blacksmith's shop and were besides saucily and ill served. The proprietor received a rent on this account from the miller and blacksmith."⁴

To the editor of The Farmer's Magazine he wrote:

"I found my few tenants without leases, subject to the blacksmith of the barony; thirled to its mills; wedded to the wretched system of out-field and in; bound to pay kain and to perform personal services; clothed in hodden and lodged in hovels."⁵

Dempster began by giving his tenants greater security by granting them leases for life and at the same time abolished all personal services: viz. thirlage to the mill and blacksmith's shop; carriage and bonnage.⁶ These he felt especially strongly about and frequently inveighed against them in his correspondence; for example, in a letter to Francis Humberstone Mackenzie:

"I shall be able to inform the public of the Progress of the War against personal services and short or no leases in the Highlands. These remains of feudality I consider as the bane of that and every Country."⁷

Another reform was the substitution of money rent in place of rent in kind in the form of oat-meal, barley, kane-fowls, yarn, mill-twine and other farm produce. Farms were enclosed with free-stone walls, more substantial houses were built on the estate and Dempster introduced the practice of planting turnips, potatoes, kale, clover and rye-grass for the winter provision of cattle and horses, the breeds of both of which were progressively improved. The run-rig system of out-field and in-field was replaced by the system of rotation of crops.⁸

These reforms were being introduced generally during the last part of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century, but Dempster was undoubtedly one of the most enthusiastic advocates of the new methods in Scotland. Towards the end of his life he lamented the fact that many of his neighbours had still not followed his example:

"There never was a less successful apostle than I have been. In a mission of forty years, I cannot boast of one convert. I still find the tenants of my nearest neighbours and my best friends, cutting down the laird's corn, while their own crops are imperiously calling for their sickles."⁹

Dempster appears to have been interested in agricultural reform from an early age: the subject seems to have been a popular one among his friends and acquaintances at the university of Edinburgh. It was certainly a topic of debate in the Select Society.¹⁰ Almost immediately on arriving in Scotland in 1756 after cutting short his Grand Tour with Sir Adam Fergusson (see p.18) Dempster wrote to him:

“I go over to Angus tomorrow and have formed many plans and schemes in the execution of which I begin to grow much interested. One for improving my estate by marle I have often mentioned to you; another for building a village, which if you’ll give me leave I’ll tell you of in some future letter, engages me extremely.”¹¹

However, Dempster’s first foray into farming improvements seems to have been less than successful; not for the last time his enthusiasm failed to compensate for lack of experience. In 1783 he recalled to Sir Adam Fergusson:

“By Pulteney’s advice I dashed into farming without either skill, time or money. My overseer was little qualified for so extensive a project, which we carried on upon credit. Farm was added to farm till I took fright in the midst of so wide a - field I ought to say - but for the sake of the metaphor I must call it so wide a sea - and was glad to make to the nearest shore and have ever since congratulated myself at having not only escaped shipwreck but made a very tolerable adventure. I began in the year 1761 and let off my last farm 1775. I am not yet ready to say that a very steady man undertaking the improvement of an uncultivated estate would not find it a very great source of wealth as well as an innocent and active amusement - provided he serves an apprenticeship to a farmer and copies his master’s economy both at home and in the field.”¹²

Fergusson, like Dempster, was an enthusiastic agricultural improver¹³; it seems to have been one of the few things they were fully agreed upon. Pulteney, too, was a leading light among the agricultural improvers and was responsible in 1790 for founding, at the university of Edinburgh, the first university chair of agriculture.¹⁴ In the letter just quoted Dempster stated that he had begun his agricultural improvements in 1761 and elsewhere he mentioned that he abolished personal services and granted his tenants leases for life on his Dunnichen estates in 1762.¹⁵ After his initial burst of activity at Dunnichen Dempster, having in his own words “taken fright”, spent the next few years

consolidating his position and gaining experience of farming. By 1768 he considered himself a “very serious” farmer, as the following extract from a letter to Edmund Burke indicates:

“I congratulate you on your purchase in Bucks [‘Gregories’, a 600 acre estate near Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire]. I am a farmer and a very serious one myself. Our Lands in Scotland are rich but unimproved owing to the badness of our Government before the revolution and the inattention of our Gentlemen since. Of late however the spirit of agriculture has gain’d ground amongst us. I have been employ’d in it for these last four years and hope in as many more to Quadruple the value of my six thousand Patrimonial Acres.”¹⁶

Dempster took a keen interest in developments in English agricultural improvements: in 1771 he wrote to Sir Adam Fergusson:

“I agree with you perfectly in your opinion of England and I don’t know but at the same instant I was making the same observation on the top of a Surry [sic] hill from whence one sees the richest cultivation as far as the eye can reach. ... In the Isle of Thanet where I have been this fortnight past the soil is a rich black mold, their manure chalk and sea weed, and their crops wheat, barley, beans, wheat [sic] etc. sometimes clover instead of beans. What profitable crops! Yet the land lets from 10 to 20/- per acre ... The forbearance of the landlords is the source of all the riches in England and for my life I cannot trace that forbearance up to any other cause but their popular county elections. Give but the landowner of £5 per annum a vote in the member with us, and give us two members to each county, and Lochabber is a vineyard.”¹⁷

Dempster’s linkage of enlightened agricultural practice with a wider county franchise helps to explain his support for Scottish county electoral reform despite his simultaneous objection to reform in the burghs (see pp.131 and 167-168). Dempster also used his journeys between Dunnichen and London to observe farming practices along the route. To Mackenzie he wrote:

“I pray you the next time you go into England to take the Lakes of Cumberland in your way for the sake of Anticipating the Pleasure your own Estate will one day afford you by the view of a wild and romantic Country all Highland fully cultivated and improved by swarms of rich and happy inhabitants.”¹⁸

He went on to describe the agricultural reforms, particularly the granting of long tenancies, that had led to this pleasing state of affairs. During his parliamentary career Dempster continued to practise farming on his own estate and derived great and increasing satisfaction from doing so, more

especially after his marriage. In the months when he was not required to be in London to attend parliament he was very busy at Dunnichen, in particular in the planting of trees from which he hoped to derive significant income. He seems to have planted a vast number, and in order to protect newly-planted trees around the farmers' fields he gave the tenants the right to one-third of their value at the expiry of the lease. Although Dempster specifically laid down that tenants were not to be held responsible for accidental damage to the trees by cattle, his policy was apparently so successful that the tenants themselves took great pains to protect the trees, even to the extent of planting replacements where necessary.¹⁹ However, in order to improve the survival rate of his trees Dempster raised them in nurseries, transplanting them to their final location only when they were fairly mature, as he mentioned to Fergusson:

“Now for our trees. I plant them very large, not from choice but necessity. They are planted round fields enclosed with stone walls from which cattle cannot be excluded, and they must therefore be both stout and tall, their size and height being their only protection. Were it profitable to raise trees from the seed on the very spot where they are intended to stand I have no doubt they would sooner attain value and beauty, than when transplanted.”²⁰

In a letter to Thorkelin Dempster described in minute detail his preferred method of raising larches from seed in nursery beds. Dempster extolled the virtues of this tree which he considered superior to the Scots pine in its ability to grow in poor soil and a cold climate.²¹

Dempster's parliamentary activities restricted his efforts at Dunnichen until 1788 when he embarked on another burst of activity. This, incidentally, was the year in which the British Fisheries Society founded its first two settlements at Tobermory and Ullapool. In this year he commenced two projects close to his heart - the draining of Loch Restenneth in order to extract shell-marl (a form of lime which was extremely valuable as a fertilizer) and the founding of a village at Letham Farm. The draining of the loch had long been a favourite project - in 1756 he had mentioned the use of marl as a

fertilizer as one of his hoped-for improvements to his estate in a letter to Fergusson, and in the same letter he had expressed his desire to found a village on the estate (see p.211).

According to the old Statistical Account huge quantities of marl existed in the area and in particular the lochs of Forfar, Restenneth, Rescobie and Balgavies, all about two miles north of Dunnichen village, abounded with it. Loch Balgavies had been drained by its proprietor, Captain Strachan, in the mid-eighteenth century and his success was followed by similar operations by the earl of Strathmore on Forfar Loch in about 1760.²² No doubt inspired by these precedents Dempster commenced a similar project to drain Loch Restenneth, which he set in motion in parallel with his scheme of village-building at Letham. In a letter to Thorkelin in January 1788 Dempster reported the commencement of both projects:

“We all enjoy supreme health. I am taking measures for draining a Lake here about a mile long & half as broad, filled with Turff [peat] & Marle two of the most vendible commodities in this Country. And I am just returned with a Land Surveyor from planning out a Manufacturing Town or Village in so favourable a spot that when plan[ne]d it may be said to be built and Inhabited. I shall apply to the King to give the people leave to choose a Magistracy for their Police and Government and there shall not be one restrictive Clause in their Charter. I purpose making my lotts 30 feet to the Street, with a small Garden behind being fully convinced Citizens should not have more Land than a House & Garden.

These occupations suit my Age & Taste so much better than the wrangling politics of St Stephen’s [i.e. parliament] that I am not sure when I shall see its inside, which I would not regret much did not you and several of my worthy friends live in the neighbourhood of it.”²³

In wishing to grant his new village a constitution Dempster was following the example of Lord Gardenstone (1721-1793) whose planned village of Laurencekirk Dempster had visited in 1783, as he mentioned to Mackenzie:

“I was last year [1783] in Lord Gardenstone’s village. It is positively a great market town with a good Inn, Post Chaises for hire & Houses of two & three stories all created from a bleak muir in his own Time.”²⁴

Lord Gardenstone's influence on Dempster with regard to village governance has been overlooked by commentators such as Professor Smout.²⁵ In 1788 Dempster was clearly bursting with energy and optimism (the mention of his good health to Thorkelin is a sure sign of this; when depressed he tended to complain of his health) and cheerfully tackling two major projects simultaneously. And all this at a time when the British Fisheries Society's activities were at their peak and demanding much of his attention. The last part of the quote shows that Dempster was now far more interested in his agricultural and village planning pursuits which provided immediate, visible achievements, than in the protracted discussion and argumentation of parliament. He did not in fact attend the winter session of parliament 1787-1788 (see p.168) and this appears to have been the year in which he finally determined to retire from politics (see p.170).

Good progress was made with all of Dempster's estate improvements during the spring of 1788 and Dempster was able to write in a similarly optimistic vein to Fergusson in March:

"I need not tell you that it is not absolutely matter of choice that I pass as much as I can of this winter here at Dunnichen. I have acquired a great deal of health by it, but that does not signify much. But it is essentially necessary on financial considerations. I am obliged to stand still, till I am overtaken by some branches of my finance that have been anticipated. To accelerate which I have at last obtained a neighbour's consent to drain a loch full of marl and peat. I have made a contract for the execution of this great work by the 15th July. I am also about to lott out a farm on perpetual leases for a manufacturing village now and town in future - by the bye. Not to mention planting stout trees round all the stone walls on my estate which afford me occupations much better suited to my capacity than any within the precincts of Westminster, except the direction of the Fishery Society where I am truly sorry I cannot attend, and for which I request you will make my apology."²⁶

At the end of July 1788 the foundations of the new village were laid, with a small ceremony, while good progress was being made with the draining of the loch:

"My great Drain now touches the Loch of Restineth and the foundations of the new village was laid last week with proper Solemnities."²⁷

The operation to drain Loch Restenneth appears to have been extremely rewarding: Dempster told Fergusson that he was hoping for a return of £900 - £1,000 per year from the sale of peat, marl, coal and lime extracted from it²⁸ and according to Public Characters, 1809-10 he made £14,000 (worth £1.4 million today) in fourteen years from the sale of marl alone from the drained area, which would suggest that his hopes were realised.²⁹ The author of Public Characters was clearly impressed with the scale and ambition of Dempster's work at Dunnichen:

“Accordingly, on his return, [i.e. on his retirement from parliament] he began to exhibit, by a practical example on his own estate, what might be achieved in the country at large. Nor were his improvements on a small scale, or his labours of an undignified kind, as he commenced by the enclosure of the farms around the paternal mansion, the draining of a lake, and the building of a village! These do not appear to be the labours of a private gentleman, but rather resemble the efforts of some northern prince, than the owner of the barony of Dunnichen.”³⁰

The building of the village of Letham was indeed an ambitious undertaking. Letham Farm, the site of the new village, had an area of 66 acres and it was Dempster's intention to establish there a branch of the linen industry, in which he had long taken an interest. In April 1781 he had urged the removal of the unfair restriction on Scottish linen as opposed to Irish;³¹ in February 1785 he had presented a petition from the weavers of Glasgow and Paisley against such restrictions (see p.159); and his support of Pitt's Irish Propositions later in 1785 was influenced by the same motive (see p.156).

At this time linen was still the dominant sector of the textile industry although it was soon to be overtaken by cotton manufacture, in which Dempster was also to take a keen interest (see chapters 10 and 11). Also in January 1788, his energy seemingly unbounded, Dempster wrote a long personal letter to Henry Dundas to accompany an even longer memorial drawn up by the Angus linen manufacturers (see p.168).

The basic strategy behind the foundation of Letham was the same as that of the British Fisheries Society's settlements and most of the other planned villages of the eighteenth century.³² If the economy of Dunnichen estate was to progress beyond the primitive medieval ruralism in which Dempster found it, with each farmer and tenant self-supporting in essentials but unable to purchase luxuries, some kind of township was essential. It would provide a market for farm produce, a commercial, communications and banking centre - albeit on a very small scale; specialised trades and crafts could be established there that could only be carried on with a denser population than the existing countryside could offer; and it could provide a base for the establishment of industry which alone could provide a sufficiently large influx of new money to cause a transformation of the people's standard of living. This last point was crucial. It had quickly been realised that planned villages could not stem emigration from the host estate unless the opportunity presented to emigrants by the industrial revolution in the towns could be reproduced in the villages. Often villages intended as industrial estates had ended by becoming rural slums when the expected industry failed to arrive.³³

In the case of Letham, towards the end of 1788 the village was sufficiently well established for Dempster to start advertising for settlers, the following being the text of his advertisement:

“ADVERTISEMENT

To WEAVERS and other INDUSTRIOUS TRADESMEN

At the VILLAGE OF LETHAM, on the Estate of DUNNICHEN, in the County of FORFAR, Land for Houses and Gardens, and little Fields, may be had.

The following are the Advantages attending this Village:

1. The Yearly Feu-duty is moderate, Forty Shillings Sterling per Acre. The first Year's Rent only to be payable two Years after the Feuers entry.
2. The Soil is Good and Early.
3. The Situation is Warm, being on the North Bank of the Water of FINNY.
4. The Village is well Watered, having Finny on the South, and another running Brook on the North side of it.

5. It is near the Kirk.
6. It has a Washing-Mill in the Village, and two Lint-Mills very near to it.

It abounds with fine free Stone Quarries, on which a Servitude is given to the Feuers; as also of a fine Haugh on both Banks of the Water, for Washing and Bleaching.
7. It is also within two Miles of Slate, and half a Mile of the Moss of DUNNICHEN, in which there is plenty of Peat and Marl.
8. As there are many Lots already taken, Masons, Slaters, Blacksmiths and Wrights, will soon find Employment in the Village itself.
9. It is situated in the Centre of a Populous, Manufacturing and Cultivated part of the Country, five Miles from Forfar, and seven from Arbroath.
10. No Personal Services of any kind are imposed upon the Feuers.

Enquire of the Proprietor, at DUNNICHEN; and in his absence, at the Gardener, or Ground-Officer there.

N.B. The Land of RESTENETH, within a few Hundred Yards of the East Port of Forfar, is also Feuing off, and the Timber on it may be Sold to the Feuers if they incline.

November 11, 1789 [sic - should be 1788]³⁴

In 1790 there were twenty families living in Letham, occupying houses of a very good standard, being generally two storeys high and built of stone and lime with slate roofs.³⁵ By 1794 the population had grown to over 200 and a fortnightly fair was being held for the sale of flax, yarn and cloth, bringing in around £500 each time.³⁶ Dempster was delighted with the immediate success and rapid growth of his new village. In February 1790 he wrote to Thorkelin:

“I am not quite idle here. The Lake is drained and found to be full of Marl, which under Dr Black and Mr Raspers auspices I am going to calcine into Lime. Letham the new village has doubled its inhabitants, Walks are cutting thro the woods on our Hill & if you should visit Dunnichen next Summer which I would wish you would make us happy by doing you will see I have not retired from Politics to end my days in Idleness. I dont think I shall be in London this winter.”³⁷

The following year (1791) Dempster was again able to write to Thorkelin in an optimistic mood and this letter is one of many in which Dempster made clear his preference for a rural life:

“You will not be sorry to hear that my Health which was daily sinking under a Town Life & the drudgery of a public Trust is perfectly restored by a Country residence & rural occupations. My village which I hardly hoped to see founded may be a Town before I bid adieu to its Inhabitants;... The Loch of Resteneth is now completely drained & furnishes Marl & Peat to a wide district. ... Every hour of my Time is filled up by some improvement & occupation more delightfull than another, so that if you should ever consider me as having made my sacrifice to Duty, it was in accepting of a public Station and not in resigning it.”³⁸

In 1789 Dempster granted the inhabitants of Letham a deed of privileges. The preamble makes clear his determination to ensure the future prosperity of the village by giving the villagers permanent and inalienable rights, thus removing the uncertainty which resulted from short leases and other conditions of tenure that could be altered at short notice at the whim of the Landlord:

“I, GEORGE DEMPSTER of Dunnichen... meaning to lett the whole farm [of Letham] on Perpetual Leases... with a view to establishing a village there, and considering that it will contribute to the prosperity of the said village, and to the conveniency of its Inhabitants that certain privileges be secured to them Irrevocably and in all time to come, Do Hereby Bind myself...”³⁹

The privileges included a bleaching green, a common for grazing cows, a common for digging clay and the right to dig stone from all quarries on Letham farm for use in building houses and boundary walls.

Later, Dempster instituted a system of self-government based on a nine-member Feuars' Committee. Dempster had had this in mind from the start, since he mentioned the idea in the letter to Thorkelin quoted above (p.214), but was unable to put it into effect until 1803. On 26 April of that year Dempster called the inhabitants to a meeting in what was later to become the Feuars' Hall and presented to them his proposals. The villagers were to choose six of their own number to act as 'assessors' to a baron bailie of Dunnichen appointed in the first instance by Dempster himself. The bailie and his assessors would have the power to appoint a clerk and a treasurer (making up the full membership of nine). The committee was to meet as often as they thought necessary to adjudicate in

disputes and the affairs of the village.⁴⁰ Subsequent committee members were elected by a remarkable and surprisingly modern method of secret voting invented by Dempster himself. Each elector was given a small grooved piece of wood in which a sliding tongue could be moved to indicate a 'yes' or 'no' vote.⁴¹

Having experienced the venality and corruption of burgh politics in Dundee and the other burghs in the Perth district Dempster was determined that his new community at Letham should be governed by a very different system. That it was successful is confirmed by its longevity - the Feuars' Committee exists to this day and according to Fergusson Dempster's voting sticks were still in use in 1933, although subsequently they have fallen into disuse.⁴² Further testimony of its success was the fact that the villagers in time rebelled against even Dempster himself:

"By 1812 the members of the Committee were so confident of their ability to run the village that when George Dempster recommended a teacher for their school, they replied 'in respectful terms' that while they 'might pay much regard to his recommendation' they considered themselves free to make their own choice"⁴³

Whatever regrets Dempster might have had about this rejection of his benevolent influence, he had proved that the inhabitants were capable of effective self-government.

Dempster believed passionately in the importance of new, planned settlements as a fundamental building block of rural prosperity. This is demonstrated by his long-standing commitment to Letham, his enthusiastic participation in the British Fisheries Society's settlements and his attempts to establish similar townships on his estate and Skibo (see chapter 11). It is also a constant refrain in his correspondence, allied to a belief that a village once founded would automatically tend to grow of its own accord, provided its inhabitants were allowed sufficient freedom. This was expressed in a letter to Mackenzie:

“I am persuaded in a free Country all Towns have a tendency to swell and encrease, and when we see any stunted miserable Place in such a Country it could be traced to some vice or defect retarding the operations of freedom. Principally indeed to the want of room. The Ground at the very gates of all our Towns is generally occupied for fields and Gardens for the few inhabitants of the Town, and if a new Settler wanted to build he would be puzzled to find a spot or the dues of Admission are too high for his Capital, or some predominant inhabitant Prevents & discourages the little and first Efforts of others who would wish to come in for a share of his Trade, or some selfish person has got a power of negativing a new Inhabitant’s proposals for settling, or something else the very reverse of freedom operates Against the powerfull effects of that political blessing.”⁴⁴

It is this belief in automatic expansion that must have underlain Dempster’s conviction, demonstrated by quotations in this and the previous chapter, that his and the British Fisheries Society’s settlements would in time become great cities. None did so, despite in the case of Letham, Dempster’s attempt to maximise political freedom to eliminate the “vice or defect” he wrote of. Nevertheless, Letham survives as an attractive and prosperous village, albeit its size barely increased once the stimulus of Dempster himself was removed. During his lifetime, however, it must have appeared to have fulfilled his dreams - it was then expanding rapidly and Letham Farm which in 1762 had provided less than £5 in rent was returning over £125 (i.e. 25 times more) in 1800.⁴⁵ Professor Smout has expressed the view that while the planned village movement superficially appears as an enormous and inevitable failure it nevertheless made a real contribution to the social and economic life of Scotland.⁴⁶ This view is exemplified by the history of the village of Letham.

Another activity which engaged Dempster during the 1780s and 1790s was road improvements in the vicinity of Dunnichen. Long enthusiastic about the importance of good roads to the Highlands he was equally committed to roads in the Lowlands. Prior to the Turnpike Act of 1792⁴⁷ public roads were maintained by statute labour - a compulsory six days’ work per year laid on the proprietors of the estates through which the roads passed. This system was unpopular and inefficient and as a result the roads were in a state of chronic disrepair.⁴⁸ Dempster was among those who felt that the

answer lay in turnpikes whereby the users of the roads would themselves pay for their upkeep through tolls. In 1782 he attempted to gain Robert Graham of Fintry's (and presumably also the duke of Atholl's) support for the creation of a turnpike from Perth to Aberdeen.⁴⁹ Nothing came of this proposal but Dempster's interest continued unabated and in 1786 (in the midst of much other activity such as that for the British Fisheries Society) he examined a turnpike road near Kilmarnock which he found to be immensely popular with the local people despite what he considered to be onerous toll levels.⁵⁰ Dempster continued his campaign for turnpikes in Angus and almost certainly as a result of his efforts the proprietors, in advance of the 1792 act, applied for and obtained their own Turnpike Act in 1789.⁵¹ In 1790 Dempster delightedly reported to Robert Graham the commencement of the Arbroath to Forfar turnpike:

“Farewel - yes something more - at Arbroath the Committee on the Forfar Road to Arbroath, have contracted for two of the worst miles ... Our gates go up in May. And we believe we shall be the first quite travelling road Turnpike in the County. There is a nice Spirit in the County now.”⁵²

The 1789 Act soon had its intended effect on road building in Angus as the old Statistical Account recorded:

“The late act ... promises soon to effect a thorough reformation on the roads of this county. ... The proprietor of Dunnichen [Dempster himself, who probably wrote this account] instructs the application of the fund to the principal farmers in the parish, who are far from grudging to pay a tax from which they reap so much benefit. ... Turnpike roads, between Cupar of Angus, Forfar, Arbroath, Dundee, Cupar of Angus [sic] and Meigle, and from Dundee to Montrose, are in good forwardness, and will probably be fully completed in the course of this and next summer ...”⁵³

The passage of the 1792 Turnpike Act resulted in considerable further activity. By its statute labour was commuted into a money payment and transferred to the maintenance of by-roads. Main roads for the first time came under government control with maintenance paid for by the tolls. In 1803 a

further act⁵⁴ transferred the expense of by-road maintenance also to the government. Dempster was highly satisfied with these developments. In 1793 he wrote to Sir Adam Fergusson:

“I have much pleasure in having contributed by my pains a large share towards the improvement of our roads. It is just sixteen years since I moved this measure in our county and stood alone, and now every town in the county communicates with another by a road little [inferior] to that [of] the Clapham or Highgate with bridges where necessary.”⁵⁵

Country life suited Dempster and his finances appear at last to have been in relatively good order, helped by the income from the sale of marl, although he was still spending his income as fast as it was earned. In 1792 he was able to write to Fergusson:

“Whether it be the tranquillity of a country life or the air of the country I know not, but these last three years’ residence at Dunnichen have given a vigour and force to my constitution which I thought it too far gone to be susceptible of. I am however very busy and with a variety of improvements nearly so poor as I was in Parliament but growing at the same time very rich. I am now the only marl and peat merchant to any account in the county. *Mea memia* are extending on all quarters, and *domus mea* is like to fall about my ears, to the terror of my wife and wonder of our neighbours; that a man who has no money should not build a house, especially as he has so fine a situation as Lochfiethie and sand at his door.”⁵⁶

Loch Fiethie, a small loch on the Dunnichen estate, was a favourite haunt of Dempster’s in his later years to which he resorted with relatives and friends for fishing expeditions and picnics.⁵⁷ Although now overshadowed by trees and rather gloomy, in the eighteenth century it was noted for its beauty.⁵⁸ Dempster did in fact build a house there but it appears to have been merely a summer house or cottage.⁵⁹ The project of a substantial house remained a dream for the rest of his life: even in his will he exhorted his heirs to build a house there.⁶⁰

During this period Dempster became firm friends with the ministerial assistant at nearby Monifieth, James Roger (1767-1849). Roger arrived at Monifieth around 1791 and stayed until 1805 when he was ordained the minister of Dunino.⁶¹ He shared Dempster’s enthusiasm for agricultural

improvements and collaborated with him on the account of Dunnichen parish for Sir John Sinclair's Statistical Account. As discussed above, it is likely that most if not all of the finished account was in fact by Dempster himself. At a later date Roger wrote a report on the agriculture of Forfarshire (Angus) for Sinclair while the latter was head of the Board of Agriculture.⁶² Another minister befriended by Dempster was John Jamieson (1759-1838), appointed minister of the seceder congregation of Forfar in 1780.⁶³ This friendship had the important consequence of inspiring Jamieson to write the first ever Scots dictionary.⁶⁴ This came about through a meeting arranged by Dempster between Jamieson and Grimur Thorkelin in October 1787. Dempster and Thorkelin had just returned from the British Fisheries Society's expedition to the west coast (see chapter 8) and Thorkelin was staying for a few days with Dempster before proceeding to St Andrews to receive the honorary doctorate conferred on him by the university. Thorkelin and Jamieson fell to discussing the peculiarities of the Angus dialect and at Thorkelin's request Jamieson promised to write down a list of typical Angus words. During this exercise, and partly as a consequence of the conversation with Thorkelin, Jamieson came to feel a respect and fascination with the dialect that he had not felt before. As a result this small beginning eventually grew into a full-scale dictionary of the Scots language, although not until many years later (1808) was it completed and published.⁶⁵

Chapter 9: Notes

1. Eighteenth-century agricultural reforms have been fully covered by a number of writers, notably Mitchison, Agricultural Sir John; James E. Handley, The Agricultural Revolution in Scotland (1963); Youngson, After the Forty-Five; Fleming and Robertson, Britain's First Chair of Agriculture. For the introduction of manufacturing industry and the associated planned village movement, see Smout, 'Landowner and the Planned Village'.
2. Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.1 (1791), pp.419-434. For James Fergusson's view of the authorship of Dunnichen Parish, see Letters of George Dempster, p.202, n.2.
3. For a description of the run-rig system see T. C. Smout, A History of the Scottish People 1560-1830 (1972, paperback edition), pp.113-114. Unreformed agriculture generally is described in chapters 5 and 6.
4. George Dempster, 'State of the Northern Parts of Scotland and the Means Pursued for their Improvement', enclosed with Dempster to Thorkelin, 31 December 1787: EUL, Ms.La.III.379/237.
5. Dempster to editor of The Farmer's Magazine, 19 February 1803: vol.4 (1803) pp.125-127.
6. An explanation of these feudal terms is to be found in Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.1 (1791), pp.432-433. In brief:
 - a. Thirlage: when the proprietor of a barony (estate) builds a corn-mill on it, all tenants must use it and no other;
 - b. Smith's shop : one blacksmith had the exclusive right to do business on the estate, for which he paid a rent to the proprietor;
 - c. Services: of various kinds, e.g. digging and fetching peat for the proprietor; carrying and spreading dung for him; doing his errands (carriage); working at any of the proprietor's work;
 - d. Bonmage: the obligation on the tenant's part to cut down the proprietor's corn.
7. Dempster to Mackenzie, 27 September 1789: Dempster Muniments, vol.2 item 18.
8. Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.1, pp.425-429.
9. Dempster to editor of The Farmer's Magazine, 19 February 1803: vol.4 (1803) pp.125-127.
10. See, for instance, Nicholas Phillipson, 'Culture and Society in the 18th Century Province: The Case of Edinburgh and the Scottish Enlightenment'; in Lawrence Stone (editor), The

- University in Society (2 vols. 1975), vol.2, p.445; and McElroy, Scotland's Age of Improvement, pp.50-51.
11. Dempster to Fergusson, 5 December 1756: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.17.
 12. Dempster to Fergusson, 21 September 1783: ibid., pp.116-117.
 13. James Fergusson, Lowland Lairds (1949), pp.100-101.
 14. For an account of this, see Fleming and Robertson, Britain's First Chair of Agriculture, pp.14-15.
 15. Proposed inscription for an obelisk to be erected at Letham; enclosed with Dempster to Mackenzie, 25 January 1789: Dempster Muniments, vol.2 items 10 and 12 respectively.
 16. Dempster to Burke, 26 September 1768: Sheffield City Archives, WWM/MF/76, 1/223.
 17. Dempster to Fergusson, 1 October 1771: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.71.
 18. Dempster to Mackenzie, 27 September 1789: Dempster Muniments, vol.2 item 18.
 19. Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.1 pp.425-429.
 20. Dempster to Fergusson, 20 March 1788: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.182.
 21. Dempster to Thorkelin, (undated): EUL, Ms.La.III.379/247.
 22. Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.1 p. 426; see also Harvey Wood, 'Letters to an Antiquary', p.323 n.8.
 23. Dempster to Thorkelin, 10 January 1788: EUL, Ms.La.III.379/239.
 24. Dempster to Mackenzie, 27 September 1789: Dempster Muniments, vol. 2 item 18.
 25. Smout, 'Landowner and the Planned Village', pp.88-89.
 26. Dempster to Fergusson, 5 March 1788: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.179.
 27. Dempster to Thorkelin, 3 August 1788: Harvey Wood, 'Letters to an Antiquary', p.297.
 28. Dempster to Fergusson, 3 August 1789: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.196.
 29. [Phillips], Public Characters, p.267.
 30. Ibid., p.255.
 31. David Baird Smith, 'Glasgow in 1781'.The Scottish Historical Review, vol.16 (1919), pp.225-226.

32. See Smout, 'Landowner and the Planned Village'. For an examination of village planning in the north-east of Scotland see Douglas Grant Lockhart, 'The Evolution of the Planned Villages of North-East Scotland: Studies in Settlement Geography, c.1700-c.1900' (unpublished PhD thesis for the University of Dundee, 2 vols.1974).
33. Smout, 'Landowner and the Planned Village', p.74.
34. Dempster Muniments, vol.2 item 9. Enclosed with Dempster to Mackenzie, 25 January 1789: Dempster Muniments, vol.2 item 12.
35. Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.1(1791), p.422.
36. Reverend James Roger, General View of the Agriculture of the County of Angus or Forfar (1794), p.9.
37. Dempster to Thorkelin, 5 February 1790: EUL, Ms.La.III.379 f.230. For a brief account of Joseph Black (1728-1799) the celebrated chemist, see Harvey Wood, 'Letters to an Antiquary', p.322 n.6, and of Rodolphe Eric Rasper (1737-1794), a German antiquarian and minerologist, p.323 n.7.
38. Dempster to Thorkelin, 25 April 1791: EUL, Ms.La.III.379/215-216.
39. Register of Deeds, Forfar Sheriff Court. 'Deed of Privileges to the Inhabitants of Letham of Dunnichen'. Dated 9 December 1789; registered 22 December 1789; cited by Lockhart, 'Planned Villages of North-East Scotland', p.168.
40. 'Rules for Letham, 26 April 1803': 'First Book of Minutes of Letham Feuars' Committee', in the possession of Letham Feuars' Committee.
41. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.203.
42. Ibid. According to Mrs Ishbell Kidd, secretary to the Letham Feuars' Committee, the voting sticks went out of use before the second world war.
43. Ishbell Kidd and Peter Gill, The Feuars of Letham (undated but c.1993), p.12.
44. Dempster to Mackenzie, July 1789: Dempster Muniments, vol.2 item 15.
45. Kidd and Gill, Feuars of Letham, p.8; inscription for obelisk to be erected at Letham: Dempster Muniments, vol.2 item 10.
46. Smout, 'Landowner and the Planned Village', p.98.
47. 34 Geo.III cap.74.
48. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.210; Haldane, New Ways Through the Glens, pp.2-3.
49. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 2 February 1782: SRO, GD151/11/8/8.

50. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 20 September 1786: *ibid.*, GD151/11/8/42.
51. 29 Geo.III cap.20.
52. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 3 February 1790: *ibid.*, GD151/11/8/77.
53. Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.1 p.430.
54. 43 Geo.III cap.80.
55. Dempster to Fergusson, 2 August 1793: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.233. For comments on tumpikes, see Harvey Wood, 'Letters to an Antiquary', p.326 n.2.
56. Dempster to Fergusson, 19 June 1792: *ibid.*, p.218.
57. See, for example, Dempster to Fergusson, 17 September 1811: *ibid.*, p.337; and Dempster to Soper Dempster, 17 September 1812: Dempster Muniments, vol.13 items 6,7.
58. Alex. J. Warden, Angus or Forfarshire, the Land and People, Descriptive and Historical (5 vols. 1880-1885), vol.1 pp.148-149.
59. Dempster to Thorkelin 25 April 1791: EUL, Ms.La.III.379/215-216; Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.6 (1793), p.530.
60. 'Trust Disposition and Settlement of George Dempster Esq.' [last will and testament]: SRO, CC/3/5/5, p.224.
61. Rogers, Century of Scottish Life, p.65.
62. Roger, General View of the Agriculture of the County of Angus or Forfar.
63. For a biographical note on Jamieson, see Lowson, Portrait Gallery, pp.17-38.
64. John Jamieson, Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language (2 vols. 1808).
65. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.169-170; Lowson, Portrait Gallery, pp.34-35.

CHAPTER 10

THE SCOTTISH COTTON INDUSTRY

Given Dempster's enthusiastic promotion of the Scottish linen industry it was not surprising that he should also want to interest himself in that of cotton. This he did in the closing decades of the eighteenth century when, after becoming friendly with the 'prince of cotton', Sir Richard Arkwright, he involved himself with the latter in a number of schemes to build cotton mills in Scotland: at New Lanark, at Stanley in Perthshire and at Spinningdale in Sutherland.¹

Arkwright (1732-1792) had pioneered factory mass production of cotton thread by means of his water-frame (patented 1769) supplemented by his carding engine (patented 1775). He had established successful spinning mills at Cromford, near Matlock in Derbyshire, and it was here that Dempster encountered him while he (Dempster) was staying for a few days at Matlock to break his journey from London to Dunnichen. He described this meeting and its outcome in a letter of January 1800 to Sir John Sinclair:

"You ... wish to know the Circumstances of the bring [sic] of the spinning of Cotton by mills according to Sir Richard Arkwright's method into our part of the Kingdom. I cannot trace that Business to its very source for Cotton was spun by Mills at Penny Cook in Midlothian and in the Isle of Bute before I ever had heard of such an Invention. But as I had some concern in engaging Sir Rich'd to instruct some of our Countrymen in the Art & also to take a share in the great Cotton Mills of Lanark & Stanley, It may not prove unentertaining to one of your Turn for Statistical Enquiries to mention a few Particulars to you, more especially as mere accident occasioned my having any concern in this matter.

Ever since the Tax on Post Horses it had been my Custom to perform my Journeys to and from Parliament with my own Carriage & Horses making time, as other Mechanicians also, supply my want of Pecuniary Power. To amuse my wife & myself & to rest my Horses I generally halted a few days at the different watering places by the way, and in the year I think 1796 [actually 1783 - see below] being particularly infatuated with the romantic Scenery of Matlock we stayed a week or ten days there. In the course of a forenoon's ride I discover'd in a Romantic Valley a Palace of a most enormous size having at least a score of windows of a Row and five or six stories in height. This was Sir Richard Arkwright's (then Mr Arkwright's) Cotton Mills. One of our Mess mates being known to the owner

obtained his Permission to see the stupendous Work. After admiring every thing I saw I rode up to Mr Arkwright's House - knocked at the door. He answer'd it himself & told me who he was. I said my curiosity could not be fully gratified without seeing the Head from whence the Mill had sprung. Some business brought him soon after to London. He conceived I had been usefull to him and offer'd to assist me in establishing a Cotton Mill in Scotland by holding a share of one & instructing the People. Private business carried him the following summer to Scotland where he visited Perth, Glasgow & Lanark & I believe Stanley for I was not then in Scotland."²

Dempster went on to describe how he became a partner with Arkwright and David Dale in the building of the cotton mills at New Lanark.³ Dale (1739-1806) was a west of Scotland manufacturer who after working as a weaver in Paisley set up a Turkey red dye works and then became an agent for Arkwright's cotton yarn. He took a leading part in introducing the cotton industry into Scotland and established a reputation as an unusually broad-minded and philanthropic employer, as did his son-in-law, Robert Owen.⁴

Arkwright at this time was eager to expand his enterprises; his patents were under threat of cancellation and in fact were cancelled in 1785, leaving the field open for others to build mills incorporating his machinery.⁵ At the same time the Glasgow Chamber of Manufacturers was being set up, holding its inaugural meeting on New Year's Day 1783. The organisation was intended primarily to help re-establish trading links with the former American colonies following the American Revolution but it took an interest in any new manufacturing or trading proposal. Arkwright may have sensed the opportunity of mobilising capital to develop a Scottish cotton spinning industry using low-cost labour and thereby doing much to thwart the ambitions of his Manchester rivals.⁶

In the event he visited Scotland in the autumn of 1784 and after being created a free Burgess of Paisley on the 29 September⁷ he proceeded to Glasgow where he met up with Dempster, almost

certainly by prior arrangement. Dempster was then on his way westwards to investigate the possibilities for manufacturing and the development of the fisheries (see chapter 8) and when he and Arkwright attended a banquet at Kelvingrove he appears to have received a rapturous reception in Glasgow, if the report in the Glasgow Mercury is to be believed:

“Thursday last George Dempster... arrived here on his tour through Scotland, to procure information relative to the state of the Manufactures Fisheries etc. Richard Arkwright... the ingenious manufacturer of cotton-yarn, was in town, on a tour to view the Manufactures of Scotland, previous to Mr Dempster’s arrival. On Friday [1 October] they were entertained by the Lord Provost [who was President of the Glasgow Chamber of Manufacturers] and magistrates in the Town-hall, and Mr Arkwright presented with the freedom of the city, Mr Dempster having received that honour on a former visit. They were invited to dine with the Lord Provost at Kelvin Grove on Saturday. The manufacturers of Anderston, through which they had to pass, in order to testify their gratitude to Mr Dempster, the patron of manufactures in Scotland, and their esteem for Mr Arkwright, assembled their workmen to receive them. On their arrival, the populace wanted to unyoke the horses from Mr Dempster’s carriage, in order to draw him to Kelvin Grove. This honour he declined, as it has been his uniform wish and practice to lead his countrymen to freedom, rather than put them under the yoke. Mr Arkwright however was forced to comply with their offer, and the calvacade proceeded, in a triumphant manner, to the Lord Provost’s country seat.

The inhabitants of Anderston, to testify their joy still further, lighted up bonfires, and prepared flambeaux to accompany them with in the evening upon their return to this city - The procession entered about half past eight, which consisted of five carriages; in the first the Lord Provost, who was followed by Mr Dempster in the second; his carriage was preceeded by a large transparent gauze-lanthon, raised upon the top of a pole, inscribed with these words, on the front and back, The Patriot of his Country. On the sides, The Guardians of our Manufactures. The other carriages were taken up by the Lord Advocate, member of Parliament for this city, etc. Mr Arkwright, Colonel Campbell of the 9th regiment, etc. In this manner they proceeded to the Saracen’s head, where they alighted amidst the acclamations of many hundreds of the inhabitants.”⁸

This description demonstrated the remarkable extent of Dempster’s popular esteem, even in a part of the country that he visited only infrequently and with which he had no family or other connection apart from his friendship with Sir Adam Fergusson. Dempster’s refusal to allow the citizens to draw his carriage so impressed a certain J. Black that he wrote a sonnet in Dempster’s honour, published in The Scots Magazine:

“Sonnet to George Dempster Esq. on hearing that he had refused to suffer his carriage to be drawn by his fellow-subjects.

Britania oft indignant has beheld
 The boasted champions of fair Freedom’s cause
 With self-importance insolently swell’d
 O’erlook Humanity’s benignant laws;
 And, while they promised millions to defend,
 Make British subjects their ignoble slaves.
 Round thee, O Dempster, Freedom’s steady friend,
 No bawling mob of misled wretches raves;
 But, while their hearts with gratitude o’erflow
 For thy unwearied patriotic zeal,
 Thy fellow subjects strive their sense to show
 Of thy great labours for the public weal,
 Thy generous soul does all respect disdain
 That would, on Freedom’s sons, impose the slightest chain.

J. Black”⁹

According to David Dale’s grandson, Robert Dale Owen, after the Kelvingrove banquet Dale took Arkwright by post-chaise to have a look at the Falls of Clyde,¹⁰ about which Arkwright was enthusiastic, saying that:

“Lanark would probably in time become the Manchester of Scotland; as no place he had seen afforded better situations, or more ample streams of water for cotton machinery.”¹¹

The outcome of the excursion was the decision by Arkwright to build the New Lanark mills with Dale and Dempster as partners.¹² After viewing the Falls of Clyde Arkwright journeyed on to Aberdeen where he was instrumental in the setting up by local manufacturers of a cotton spinning mill at Woodside on the River Don, near the city.¹³

In February 1785, shortly after the first of Arkwright’s court cases to establish his second patent (on 17 February), rumours of Arkwright’s activities began to be reported by English newspapers such as the Nottingham Journal and the Manchester Mercury.¹⁴ The former announced:

“We hear that very large Cotton Works are going to be erected at Glasgow, Perth, and Lanark, under the Patronage of Messrs Dempster, Arkwright, and some

capital Merchants, and manufacturers of that Kingdom, and that every Effort to complete the same will be made this Spring.”¹⁵

The reference to Perth was in relation to the proposed mill at Stanley (see below). It is interesting to note also that in the newspaper report Dempster’s name was placed before Arkwright’s - another indication of Dempster’s high public reputation at this period.

The building of the first of the New Lanark mills began in April 1785 and spinning commenced in March 1786.¹⁶ However, in December that year the partnership was ended following a misunderstanding or disagreement between Arkwright and Dale. This arose, according to Robert Dale Owen, when Arkwright visited New Lanark for the first time after construction of the mills and had a sudden and heated exchange with Dale about the position in which the wooden cupola housing the factory bell had been built.¹⁷ This seems a weak reason for terminating the partnership and John Butt is probably correct in assuming that the termination of Arkwright’s patent was the true reason, for without his patent Arkwright was far less valuable as a partner.¹⁸ Dempster himself described the affair in the letter to Sir John Sinclair, previously quoted:

“Some misunderstanding happening between him [Arkwright] & Mr Dale which they submitted to me I met them both at Sir Richard’s House at Cromford in December 1786. Each Gentleman offering to take the whole Concern and to take my share also. I awarded the whole to Mr Dale as being the most convenient for him to manage. Mr Dale thinking I had made him a valuable gift of my share offer’d me £1,000 by way of an equivalent for it. But I was too glad to be rid of so extensive a concern to accept of any compensation for it.”¹⁹

Dempster’s refusal of payment for his share was typical of his impulsive behaviour; he clearly was very relieved to be able to extricate himself painlessly from a project in which he was getting too involved. As with his early agricultural improvements (see chapter 9), he had allowed his enthusiasm to get the better of him and had then ‘taken fright’.

Arkwright was knighted in the same month, on 22 December 1785, and that Dempster was still on good terms with him is shown by the fact that he apparently lent Arkwright clothes and other items for the occasion. Wilhelmina Murray, wife of the duke of Atholl's uncle (Captain George Murray, RN), wrote the following account of her visit to the house of Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820, the naturalist who accompanied Captain James Cook around the world) in Soho Square:

“... [we] were not a little surprised to see little fatty [i.e. Arkwright] appear a beau with a smart powdered bag wig so tight that coming over his ears it made him deaf; a handsome striped satten Waist coat & proper coat with a sword, which he held in his hand, all provided it is supposed by Mr Dempster...”²⁰

Three weeks after the Glasgow banquet Arkwright arrived in Perth, where on 27 October 1785 he was granted the Freedom of the City.²¹ This honour was probably granted in recognition of his decision to support the establishment of a cotton-spinning mill on the River Tay seven miles north of Perth, at Stanley.²² The project involved a partnership between Arkwright, Dempster (who seems to have been one of its prime movers), Dempster's neighbour Robert Graham of Fintry, and a number of Perth merchants.²³ After gaining experience under Arkwright at Cromford one of the partners, Andrew Keay, became Stanley's first manager.²⁴ From a letter by Dempster to Graham it appears that it had been hoped that the duke of Atholl, on whose estate Stanley lay, would agree to become one of the partners.²⁵ This was not to be, but the duke (John, fourth duke of Atholl, 1755-1830), did make a substantial financial commitment to the company.

Robert Graham, twelfth of Fintry (1749-1815), was the impoverished descendant of a Dundee family whom the duke of Atholl had taken under his wing in return for various services. Graham had an estate at Linlathen near Dundee which in 1787 he was forced to sell to pay off his debts.²⁶ Dempster and he were firm friends and a considerable volume of correspondence about the mill from Dempster to Graham survives. Curiously, despite the importance Dempster clearly attached to the

Stanley project, there is not a single mention of it in his correspondence with Sir Adam Fergusson. He did, however, make occasional reference to it in his letters to Thorkelin.

The scheme probably had its beginnings in the summer of 1784, a year after Dempster's first meeting with Arkwright at Cromford. On 14 July 1784 the duke of Atholl attended a meeting in Perth with a group of local merchants and manufacturers. They were alarmed about Pitt's proposed duty on linen (see p.159 for Dempster's opposition to this measure) fearing that it would destroy Scottish linen manufacturers' ability to compete with their Irish counterparts.²⁷ At about the same time the duke received an unsigned ten-page memorandum, 'Considerations on the Cotton Manufacture', which surveyed Arkwright's achievements and the state and prospects of the textile industries and opined:

"I know but two means by which the Linen Manufacturers can escape being ruined by the rapid progress of the cotton Manufacture, one is the Invention of a means of spinning Linen yarn by Machines. Mr Arkwright is said to have discovered the art of doing so, But he is too old and too rich to prosecute an uncertain and laborious discovery. The other is for the Linen Manufacturers to betake themselves to the Manufacturing of Cotton."²⁸

The duke was accordingly agreeable to supporting the establishment of a cotton mill on his estates, and on 28 August 1784 consented to feu seventy acres of land at Stanley for the purpose of constructing a cotton mill and an associated village to the partnership of Arkwright, Dempster et al, presumably formed at about the same time.²⁹

During the following six months Arkwright was visited in Derbyshire by two of his new partners, William Sandeman and Robert Graham of Fintry. Sandeman (owner of a large bleachfield at Luncarty, near Perth³⁰) made his visit in November 1784, and from one of Dempster's letters it would appear that Dempster intended accompanying Graham on a visit at about the same time but that Graham was detained by an attack of gout. In December 1784 Dempster wrote:

“I am very sorry for you in your Gout but hope it will not prove either so serious or tedious as you apprehend. The weather at any rate is not favourable for our Derbyshire excursion. I hope his Grace [the duke of Atholl] will find leisure to take a look at the Cotton Mill at Penny-Cook, Bertram & Co. would wait on his Grace there.”³¹

This was Dempster’s first reference to the Stanley cotton mill project in his correspondence with Graham, and it is also interesting to note that Dempster was keen to maintain the duke’s enthusiasm, by encouraging him to visit a thriving mill for himself. The mill at Penicuik was the earliest to have been constructed in Scotland.³²

Graham appears to have made a speedy recovery from his gout and to have been able to accompany the duke to see the Penicuik mill. Only a week later Dempster was able to write:

“I congratulate you on your return and escape from a tedious fit of the Gout. I am also happy you and the D[uke] of A[tholl] have seen with your own Eyes the wonder of Art at the Cotton Mill [presumably the Penicuik mill] The Perth Adventurers Peter Stewart, Mr Keay & Mr Marshall are now with me and we are arranging the Plan which is to be submitted to the other concerns. Mr Arkwright is of opinion we may be spinning next August.”³³

In his next letter Dempster, in expansive mood, repeated Arkwright’s prediction, saying “The Advance cannot exceed £1000 a piece & we may be spinning and winning by August [1785].”³⁴ On both counts this was to prove over-optimistic.

However, it is clear that the project was being pushed ahead vigorously and early in 1785 Graham was able to make his intended visit to Derbyshire. Dempster appears also to have been successful in sustaining the duke’s support, for on 20 February 1785 the latter wrote to his uncle, General James Murray, reporting Graham’s visit and describing his own plans, albeit in cautious terms:

“I have an Idea of establishing the Cotton Manufacture in this part of the World. I have received proposals for Erecting Mills & ct in which the famous Mr Arkwright is to be materially concerned; I thought it such an Object that Fintry took the trouble of going the length of Derbyshire to be satisfied of the Utility and to induce Arkwright to be concerned in this Country; Arkwright in consequence

means to be here sometime in March till then I shall enter into no agreement tho[ugh] some of the men of most Capital and Spirit in Perth want to begin instantly a great supply of water is necessary and no where in the Kingdom is there such a Command as at Stanley & by perforating the Hill I can bring in any quantity of the Tay I please."³⁵

Butt appears to have used this letter as evidence that it might have been Graham who interested Dempster in the Stanley project rather than the other way round.³⁶ However, the chronology set out above makes it clear that it was Dempster who first encountered Arkwright and who introduced him to Scotland. Furthermore, at the suggestion of the other partners, the new company was called George Dempster and Co., and was so described in the old Statistical Account for Perth, published in 1796.³⁷ This illustrates the leading role that Dempster must have played in the establishment of the new venture. (Slightly confusingly, both then and subsequently the company continued to be referred to also as The Stanley Company or The Stanley Cotton Company).

In February 1785 Dempster reported the first of a number of difficulties between the company and the duke of Atholl:

"I have a letter from Mr Stewart [Patrick Stewart, one of the partners] informing me the Duke of Atholl will not lett Stanley for more than 21 years. Be assured no undertaking can go on with so triffling a term, at least of such risque and magnitude, and for one I could not be any way concerned in it myself nor would I advise you or our Perth Friends to be so. I wish you would step up to Perth and from there take P[atrick] Stewart with you to Dunkeld and try to induce the Duke to consent to the 99 years for the mill & little Land wanted for other Houses & for extending the works. I have also a Letter from his Grace which I have answered tonight and urged every Argument to induce him to agree with us. ... Be assured the Duke will be in the wrong not to agree with us. Mr Arkwright said immediately on hearing the proposed term of 21 years, it was too short unless renewable on paying a small fine."³⁸

This was the start of what appears to have been a series of difficult negotiations between the duke and the partners, in which Graham appears to have been the chief intermediary. So fraught did things

become that at one point he begged to be allowed to relinquish this role, and had to be persuaded by Dempster to continue.³⁹

Matters were not helped by Dempster's desire to make the new village into a "Town of Free Barony" by which he presumably meant giving it a constitution on the lines he devised for Letham.⁴⁰ The duke was amenable to this idea, and instructed his lawyer to make the necessary arrangements using Lord Gardenstone's charter for Laurencekirk as a model.⁴¹ Opposition came from one of Dempster's own partners, Andrew Keay, who told George Farquhar, the duke's lawyer:

"he did not much admire the idea of a burgh of barony there, as giving the Government of it to those elected by a parcel of low manufacturers might be a source of discord instead of Utility."⁴²

Interminable delays in obtaining the charter followed: in 1791 the partners were complaining that it had still not been granted, which was preventing people from taking feus from the company.⁴³ Despite a further plea from Dempster to the duke,⁴⁴ Dempster was eventually forced to drop the proposal and Stanley became part of the barony of Nairne, sheriffdom of Perth.⁴⁵ It is noteworthy that thereafter the duke took care to maintain maximum control over the new village (see below).

Arkwright himself negotiated directly with the duke, and appears to have had greater success. Early in 1785 the two met at the King's Arms inn at Perth and progress must have been made, because on 10 May 1785 Dempster reported to Graham that Arkwright had promised to settle things speedily between the duke and the company⁴⁶ and on 12 May the Derby Mercury stated that some 40 to 50 trainee workpeople from Perthshire had arrived at Cromford.⁴⁷

By 17 May a breakthrough had occurred: the duke agreed to Arkwright's appointment as sole arbitrator between the company and the duke on such matters as length of lease, annual rent, and the

duke's financial contribution. Although not willing to become a partner, Atholl agreed to pay for the construction of the building to house Arkwright's machinery and to spend £2,000 on houses for the workforce, on which sum he was to receive interest at 7½ per cent.⁴⁸

On 26 May, in a letter to Graham, Dempster expressed his satisfaction with this agreement:

"Your & Mr Stewart's letters afford me great pleasure. I am happy the disagreeable work of bargain making is over. Last post brought me the Terms of the agreement which are in every point agreeable to me because I think them fair and well concerted; for a variety of reasons which occur to yourself as well as to me & need not therefore be repeated. I shall press the completion of the business by the copartnership being regularly settled. I hope no difficulties will occur in the Course of that business to prevent your being one of the number for I am confident it will be an advantageous concern. These are carefull able & [illegible] Heads belonging to it who will work hard to avert loss. I do not know to what extent it is capable of being pushed but I mean the extension to be made out of the profits that while we are spinning Cotton we may play upon velvet. But I am far from being so sanguine as to the success of any money making prospect. I trust you'll easily find support for your share of the Advance which will not I hope exceed £1,000. Where I shall find it God knows but providence will send some good body to lend it me."⁴⁹

Like the duke, Arkwright, although willing to give the company full support, seemed unwilling to commit himself as a partner. In July he undertook to give up his share once the mill became profitable and at Dempster's suggestion it was agreed that Arkwright's share would be divided equally between Dempster and Graham, the latter's half share being a gift from Dempster.⁵⁰

In July Dempster went with Arkwright to see a mill at Rickmansworth near London⁵¹ and in October reported that Arkwright still had high hopes for the Stanley venture.⁵² In November Dempster planned to spend a few days with Arkwright in Derbyshire and anticipated that cotton spinning would have commenced by Christmas⁵³ (the earlier August deadline not having been met). This was the last forecast made by Dempster, so the probability is that spinning did indeed commence at about this time.

The company was put on a firmer legal footing when on 2 December 1785 Arkwright signed a provisional contract of co-partnership between himself and the other partners. For some reason, although signed on this date the contract was not registered until over a year later, on 1 January 1787.⁵⁴

As anticipated by Dempster, each partner agreed to advance £1,000 and this share could be sold only to another partner or with the consent of the majority of the partners. Arkwright was indeed exempted from this clause in that once the project became profitable he could assign his share to Dempster or, if Dempster declined, dispose of it as he liked.⁵⁵ Arkwright was quick to exercise his right of withdrawal, for when the feu contract between the duke of Atholl and the Stanley company was drawn up on 13 February 1787 he had been replaced by William Stewart, a Perth merchant.⁵⁶ Presumably Arkwright's withdrawal from the partnership came too soon for Dempster to feel able to take up Arkwright's share.

The mill constructed by the Stanley company, the earliest of the group of structures now on the site, has been known variously as the Bell Mill, West Mill, Brick Mill and, locally, the Arkwright Mill.⁵⁷ It is a fine six storey building 90 feet x 33 feet on plan. Interestingly, while the basement and ground floor levels were built of stone the remainder was of brick. Segmentally arched sash windows were used throughout and the gables face north and south with two bellcotes - one on the north end and the other at west centre. The interior has wooden floors and beams supported on cruciform cast-iron columns (about 6-10 feet high) in a single row placed slightly off-centre. In the topmost storey two of the columns are wooden (the remainder being cast-iron) and these support an open timber roof. Sometime during the nineteenth century the ground and first floors were combined into one flat, but otherwise the structure remains unaltered.⁵⁸ Power for the mill was provided by the River Tay. To the north of the mill, above the bend at Inchbervie, a tunnel about 800 feet long was driven through

Shiel Hill, at one point being 127 feet below the top of the hill. The head of water available was 16 feet, enabling the Stanley wheels to produce a total output of 200 h.p.⁵⁹

This mill lade was planned by James Stobie, the duke's factor for this part of his estates. Stobie also drew up the plan of the village, almost certainly because Atholl was anxious to maximise his control over it.⁶⁰ Dempster's suggested name for the village, Taycliffe, was not adopted.⁶¹ Stobie's plan, upon which the present-day village is based, used a grid-iron layout around a central square. The village is well located on top of Shiel Hill thereby separate from the mill which is by the river. It thus seems less like a factory town by not being overshadowed by the means of its livelihood.

The project experienced fluctuating fortunes. One of the means by which the partners hoped to gain an advantage over their competitors was by the use of cheap labour, and in 1788 labour was successfully imported from the Highlands, as Dempster reported at the time to Thorkelin:

"... I shall in a few Posts send you the rise & Progress of Stanley. 80 People came to us from the Highlands (80 families) [sic] which have all proved sober virtuous & industrious. By their means we lower our wages to the current price of Cotton Yarn & suffer less by its fall than most other Cotton spinners."⁶²

However, any benefit derived from the employment of Highlanders was outweighed by other factors and there were a number of calls for fresh capital. In June 1789 Dempster wrote to Graham expressing alarm at the need for additional funds, and also at the falling price of cotton goods:

"As to our Perth business [i.e. the Stanley Cotton Mill] I signed this last Bond for a large sum tho it was not as usual accompanied by a single line from Mr MacVicar [David MacVicar, who seems to have replaced Andrew Keay as manager] acquainting me to what purpose the money is to be applied, which he has on all other occasions commonly informed me of. Now I am really afraid this Mill is a losing concern and if so the losses will not I fear be on a small scale. I wish you would join me in getting for once a Balanced account of our business there. The cotton cloth is selling so cheap here in London that I should hardly think it could be afforded at that rate if the merchant that sold it had stolen it ready made."⁶³

In August 1789 Dempster visited Stanley and following a tour round the works and the village appears to have been somewhat reassured by what he saw.⁶⁴ Arkwright also appears still to have had faith in the mill's future. Although no longer a partner he continued to take an active interest and in November 1789 offered to provide instruction at Cromford for the new manager, David MacVicar, as he had previously done for MacVicar's predecessor, Andrew Keay.⁶⁵ MacVicar had become a partner sometime after 1787 (see p.243) but was showing limited enthusiasm. He did not take up this invitation and in the letter reporting this Dempster expressed a rather jaundiced view of MacVicar's management of the project:

"It is hard to be borrowing when all the cotton spinners in GB are making fortunes. We are [sic] to have had a meeting for balancing our books that has not taken place. ... I expected at least the Int[erest] of our Capital that I have paid out of our Beef & Mutton. I have borrowed it indeed. What is to be done. ... I have disliked the indemnity of our ailing Partner [MacVicar], as being absolutely the reverse of the agreement that should have been made with him. No purchase no pay is a great spur to action. The contrary pay & no loss whether purchase or not must affect the activity of the most active character."⁶⁶

In the same letter Dempster mentioned that he had suggested the use of mule jennies to the other partners. Samuel Crompton had produced his 'mule' in 1779 and by the early 1790's it had become a most efficient device producing a thread that was both fine and strong in contrast to the coarse thread produced by Arkwright's machine. With it weavers were reputed to produce muslins superior to those of India.⁶⁷ The other partners were reluctant to introduce this new machinery, despite Dempster's enthusiasm for it, probably because of the extra cost involved at a time when the mill was not doing well. No record survives of whether or not Crompton's mule was ever installed, but without it the Stanley mill would have been at a severe competitive disadvantage.

In the summer of 1791 the company entered a prosperous phase and Dempster attempted to take the opportunity to extricate himself from it. He mentioned this in a letter to Graham.

"I had last Post written to the Stanley Co. that as we were now prosperous I hoped they would suffer me to retire, at Par. Since that Capt[ain John Hamilton]

Dempster wishes to be assumed as a Partner in my Room, I have written to Mr MacVicar to mention this to the other Partners, but reserved to myself the mentioning it to you. May I beg your consent to this Exchange as I really wish to contract my worldly concerns within as narrow a Compass as possible.”⁶⁸

However, Dempster allowed himself to be persuaded to stay on as a partner (see below). In April 1792 a new feu contract for an additional seven acres was drawn up in which Dempster was again named as a partner, and which showed four new partners: the manager, David MacVicar (described as “formerly a merchant in Perth now in Stanley”), James and Alexander Keay, and Thomas Marshall. Three of the former partners had died since the last feu contract had been drawn up in 1787 - William Sandeman, William Marshall and the previous manager, Andrew Keay.⁶⁹

Further evidence that the company was running at a profit in 1792 comes from a letter Dempster wrote in February, the jocular tone of which suggests that he was in good spirits regarding the company’s affairs. Alone among the partners he insisted on being paid a dividend from the profits. That there was resistance to this (presumably because payment of dividends was thought to be premature before there had been a reasonable run of profits) is evident from the fact that Dempster mentioned it again in a number of other letters:

“I am just about refusing my assent to the Stanley Proposal of not dividing our Interest when our Profits can afford our doing so & for a reason that will be found unanswerable, that I do not know to what other Fund to look for paying my Interest. I have also made a very accurate Calculation, by which it appears that 5% on £1,000 paid to a man when he is alive is equal to $15 \frac{3}{4} \frac{5}{8} \& \frac{9}{20}$ ths % after he is dead. From the same Theorem it also follows as a Corollary, that G. Dempster at the Age of 60 is considerably nearer to Death than young Tom Marshall [one of the new partners, see above] at Twenty one altho’ just on the Top of his marriage. I shall send you over the Process, by which these astonishing results come clearly out which I beg you will communicate to Mr Key [one of the two Keays who had become partners, it is not clear which], to whose dissent to this measure I can discover no other Key but that it is better to be the man of business for 500 Gentlemen of Landed Estate, than to be any one or perhaps any two of number. You see how favourable a Country Life is to the study of the abstruse Sciences. The occult ones Shall next obtain my Attention. And I don’t despair before I die of discovering the Art of making Gold.”⁷⁰

By 1795 there were said to be 100 families living in Stanley village while the mill employed 350 people.⁷¹ In 1796 the old Statistical Account for Perth mentioned that the company “have lately built another mill, which will probably be employed soon in spinning linen yam by water.”⁷² This flax mill was referred to in an insurance policy of 1796, which mentioned two mills, one being a cotton mill and the other a “New Cotton and Flax Mill near unfinished”. The mills were valued at £10,500 which was the highest for any Scottish mill apart from New Lanark which was valued at £24,400.⁷³

For the next few years the subject was absent from Dempster’s correspondence from which it must be concluded that there were no fresh crises during those years. However, the mills must have been struggling to survive because when the next crisis did come the company was overwhelmed. In September 1799 the flax mill was destroyed by fire and although the building was fully covered by insurance the partners immediately afterwards agreed to dissolve the company. This was the occasion of Dempster’s next letter to Graham on the subject, written in somewhat emotional terms:

“This year has turn’d with nothing but misfortune to you, & has brought me the Heaviest in point of Finance that ever I experienced. It would have been lighter had I not had you also as a fellow sufferer. A Comparison in distress on the present occasion is no consolation; altho in general as the Irishman said Misery loves Company. So much by way of Preface. You would see the sky enlightened with the flames of our Stanley Flax Mill. The Partners met in consequence thereof last Tuesday. They were all present but you, for whom I took upon me, in consequence of your former Letter, to act and answer. There is no reason to regret the Fire. The Insurance is fully equal to the Price at which she would have sold. It was proved to all our conviction, that the project of spinning Flax would not have retrieved our affairs, even could we suppose the enormous price of spinning to continue. There is now paid for spinning yam 2/6 per spindle. A few years ago one shilling & fourpence was a high, at least the ordinary price.

We therefore dissolved the Company by Acclamation. I huzzaing with my other hand for you. The Firm of G. D. cotton spinners at Stanley in Perthshire is no more. Thus ends a project promising on the year before the war so much wealth to the Partners & Prosperity to the Country! On that year [1791] you may remember I proposed to withdraw & weakly suffer’d myself to be overruled, and to continue as you also did. We appointed McVicar our Factor for disposing of the subject. Collecting our Property, & applying the produce towards discharging our Debts. The Balance must be furnished by the individual Partners. This will not, I fear, be

a small sum. James Keay has inspected our affairs the most minutely of any of us, and offer'd for his 1/2 share to pay any of us £3,000. I am persuaded he would not have lost by the Bargain. I ought to be paid something for discharging the painfull Task of communicating this state of our own Concern to you, which they imposed on me. Where are our Duke of Athols? Our Arkwrights? & Sandemans? originally engaged to partake in this Adventure? Some have escaped by their Strength, others by our weakness, and nothing remains but a few of us poor mice to be crushed under this immense ruin. It has not only crushed me, but my Poor Wife. It has broken her Post Chaise all to atoms - Her desert set - Her drawing room furniture - It has chased the upholsterer and Painter out of the House. It has broken everything round her but her Heart. As to myself I have long been prepared for the Blow, & had retired into so snug a Comer, that I am still alive; and on surveying the Rubish I find among 'em most of the little things I have use for. There remains, I hope, a House to cover me & Bed to lie upon, Food for my Belly a weekly news Paper & all my Books. I should feel much more for you, but that I know what you value the most is proof against all the violence of the Elements, your Honourable and Gentleman like Principles your affection to your Friends and Family are all as safe as a Thief in the Mill and your Experience in worldly misfortunes and disappointments has made you an Adept in bearing them & I hope in parrying them."⁷⁴

A few months later, writing to Sir John Sinclair, Dempster was able to make a rather more measured reference to the affair:

"From this last concern [Stanley] I never was able to extricate myself altho' it was my intention so to do as soon as it had become profitable to the Adventurers. Mr Arkwright resigned. The war surprized us just when we were beginning to reap the Profits of our Labours. The price of Cotton rose the value of Cotton yam fell & considerable loss was incurred. In the year 1799 The Company was dissolved & those Admirable Mills are now on Sale."⁷⁵

Although it is true that the Napoleonic wars were partly responsible for wildly fluctuating fortunes in the cotton industry, the price variations mentioned here by Dempster were probably the result of Arkwright's loss of his patent. A great many mills were started immediately afterwards, whose demand for raw cotton raised its price, while at the same time their output of finished yam flooded the market.⁷⁶ The business appears to have been formerly wound up in December 1799. Dempster wrote to Graham:

"By a letter I have since had from Mr Ja[me]s Keay the misfortune of missing each other so often is like to be soon repaired. He says his Correspondence with Mr McVicar proves so inconclusive that we shall be forced to have a personal Interview between him & the Partners. To this I have agreed and desired him to

settle the Time with you and give me notice when I should meet you & them. This is A d-d Business and would not be improved were one to write Pages & ages about it. McVicar seems to be mismanaging our Business after it is over, which I thought impossible for the worst manager to do.”⁷⁷

The mills eventually began to operate again in January 1802, having been bought by two Glasgow merchants, James Craig and James Muir. They paid £4,600, somewhat less than the original asking price of £6,500.⁷⁸ Elsewhere Dempster recorded that his loss amounted to £6,000 (worth £600,000 today.)⁷⁹ Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, under a variety of ownerships and with further interludes of closure they continued operating until very recently, only finally closing down in 1989.⁸⁰ One of the more noteworthy of the later owners was Robert Owen (1771-1858), of New Lanark fame, who became a partner of Craig’s after Muir’s withdrawal. Owen was the son-in-law of David Dale and it was Dale who paid the third instalment of the purchase price in 1803 and who kept the business supported with working capital until his death in 1806. After his death the trustees of his estate continued to provide working capital for some years. In total the sum of over £40,000 (worth £4 million today) was poured into the business in this way.⁸¹

The reasons for David Dale’s involvement with Stanley are unclear; possibly he wished to provide a training ground for his son-in-law to prepare the latter for eventually taking over at New Lanark. He could not, however, have realised just what an expensive undertaking it was to turn out to be. The Atholl family had an ambivalent attitude to Stanley; it lay on the edge of their estates in an area of poor agricultural land and therefore had considerable potential for increasing both employment and their income from ground rents and feu duties. The duke advanced £2,000 to the company at the outset⁸² and a further £1,755 in 1790.⁸³ On the other hand, he carefully avoided involving himself as a shareholder and was cautious to the point of obstruction in the granting of feu charters and the like to the village - probably because he had been persuaded to avoid Dempster’s ideas of constitutional democracy from gaining a foothold. As regards Dempster himself, although the venture fitted in with

his desire to encourage Scottish manufacturing generally it would appear that he viewed it primarily as a commercial enterprise rather than as another attempt to improve the economic condition of the peasantry.

The failure of the original Stanley Company appears to have been a result of mismanagement and a lack of adequate working capital. Many of the partners, and above all Dempster, appear to have been idealistic enthusiasts rather than hard-headed businessmen and to have been too willing to leave the day-to-day running of the business to the (as it proved) incompetent manager. The cotton trade, both then and subsequently, was a volatile and precarious one with sudden fluctuations in the demand for, and price of, both raw cotton and finished cotton thread.⁸⁴ This is borne out by the correspondence quoted above; Dempster at one moment writes of boom conditions and at the next of the ruinous state of the trade. In such conditions tight managerial control and expertise would have been essential, as also substantial reserves of capital: the Stanley Company possessed neither.

Similar considerations, together with the additional handicaps of remote location and poor communications, obtained in the case of Dempster's other spinning mill venture at Spinningdale on his newly-acquired estate of Skibo in Sutherland, which forms part of the subject matter of the next chapter.

Chapter 10: Notes

1. For Arkwright, see R. S. Fitton, The Arkwrights: Spinners of Fortune (1989). For the early history of the Scottish cotton industry see, for example, W. H. Marwick, 'The Cotton Industry and the Industrial Revolution in Scotland'. The Scottish Historical Review, vol.21 (1923), pp.207-218; Fitton, The Arkwrights, pp.69-71; and John Butt, The Industrial Archaeology of Scotland (1967), pp.64-73.
2. Dempster to Sinclair, 21 January 1800: SRO, RH4/49/2/266-270.
3. Ibid.
4. For David Dale, see Robert Chambers (editor), A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen (6 vols. 1875), vol.2 pp.422-425; also George Stewart, Curiosities of Glasgow Citizenship, as Exhibited Chiefly in the Business Career of its Old Commercial Aristocracy (1881), pp.45-64. For a recent biography see David J. McLaren, David Dale of New Lanark (1983) - but see also the unfavorable review of this work by A. D. Cameron in The Scottish Historical Review vol.65 (1986) pp.93-94.
5. For Arkwright's difficulties with his patents see Edward Baines, History of the Cotton Manufacture in Great Britain (1966; second edition, first published 1835), pp.187-193.
6. Fitton, The Arkwrights, p.71.
7. Ibid., p.72.
8. Glasgow Mercury, 7 October 1784: cited in Fitton, The Arkwrights, p.72.
9. The Scots Magazine, vol.47 (1785), p.42.
10. Robert Dale Owen, Threading my Way. An Autobiography (1874, reprinted 1967), pp.29-30.
11. Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.15 (1795), p.46.
12. Dempster to Sinclair, 21 January 1800: SRO, RH4/49/2/266-270.
13. Fitton, The Arkwrights, p.75.
14. Ibid. For an account of the court case see Baines, History of the Cotton Manufacture, p.191.
15. Nottingham Journal, 19 February 1785: cited in Fitton, The Arkwrights, p.75.
16. For a recent history of New Lanark, from its foundation to the present day, see Ian Donnachie and George Hewitt, Historic New Lanark. The Dale and Owen Industrial Community since 1785 (1993).
17. Fitton, The Arkwrights, p.75.

18. Butt, Industrial Archaeology, p.70.
19. Dempster to Sinclair, 21 January 1800: SRO, RH4/49/2/266-270.
20. Wilhelmina Murray to George Murray, 25 December 1786: Atholl Muniments, 65/5/171.
21. Fitton, The Arkwrights, p.75, citing Arkwright family papers.
22. For the story of the Stanley Company, see A. J. Cooke, 'Richard Arkwright and the Scottish Cotton Industry'. Textile History, vol.10 (1979). The same author was editor of Stanley. Its History and Development (1977; reprinted with corrections, 1980).
23. The partners are named in the contract for co-partnery signed on 2 December 1785 and registered 1 January 1787. See note 54 below.
24. About Keay as manager, see Cooke, 'Arkwright and the Scottish Cotton Industry', p.200.
25. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 26 December 1784: SRO, GD151/11/8/24.
26. For Robert Graham, twelfth of Fintry, see Louisa G. Graeme, Or and Sable. A Book of the Graemes and Grahams (1903), pp.633-636; also Sir Francis Mudie and David M. Walker, Mains Castle and the Grahams of Fintry (1964), pp.17-18. For the sale of Linlathen see Graham of Fintry to duke of Atholl, 15 February 1787: Atholl Muniments, 65/6/2.
27. Duke of Atholl to Major General James Murray, 16 July 1784: Atholl Muniments, 65/5/22.
28. 'Considerations on the Cotton Manufacture' (no author or date, but almost certainly written 1784): Atholl Muniments, 25/9/1 p.4.
29. 'Draft Lease by the Duke...to the Stanley Company', 28 August 1786: Atholl Muniments, 25/9/5.
30. For Sandeman and Luncarty see Durie, Scottish Linen Industry, pp.81-86; also John Butt and Kenneth Ponting (editors), Scottish Textile History (1987), pp.3-10.
31. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 13 December 1784: SRO, GD151/11/8/22.
32. Fitton, The Arkwrights, p.69.
33. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 20 December 1784: SRO, GD151/11/8/23.
34. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 26 December 1784: *ibid.*, GD151/11/8/24.
35. Duke of Atholl to James Murray, 20 February 1785: Atholl Muniments, 65/5/43.
36. Butt, Industrial Archaeology, p.67.

37. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 28 December 1785: SRO, GD151/11/8/38; Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.18 (1796), p.515.
38. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, undated but endorsed February 1785: SRO, GD151/11/8/25.
39. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 28 December 1785: *ibid.*, GD151/11/8/38.
40. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 1 July 1785: *ibid.*, GD151/11/8/31.
41. Duke of Atholl to George Farquhar, 26 July 1786: Atholl Muniments, 25/9/7/1.
42. Farquhar to duke of Atholl, 14 August 1786: *ibid.*, 65/2/128.
43. James Keay to Farquhar, 9 March 1791: *ibid.*, 25/9/7/8.
44. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 14 November 1785: SRO, GD151/11/8/35.
45. 'Contract of Feu between His Grace the Duke of Atholl and George Dempster & Company', 25 March 1792: Atholl Muniments, 25/9/8.
46. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 10 May 1785: SRO, GD151/11/8/28.
47. Fitton, The Arkwrights, p.77.
48. Decree Arbitral between the duke of Atholl and the Stanley Company, 17 May 1785: SRO, Sheriff Court of Perthshire, Register of Deeds, SC49/48/99 ff.307-322; cited by Cooke, 'Arkwright and the Scottish cotton industry', p.198 n.19.
49. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 26 May 1785: SRO, GD151/11/8/30.
50. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 1 July 1785 and 25 July 1785: *ibid.*, GD151/11/8/31 and 33.
51. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 5 July 1785: *ibid.*, GD151/11/8/32.
52. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 28 October 1785: *ibid.*, GD151/11/8/34.
53. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 14 November 1785: *ibid.*, GD151/11/8/35.
54. Contract for Co-Partnery, 1 January 1787: SRO, Sheriff Court of Perthshire, Register of Deeds, SC49/48/104 ff.1-5; cited by Cooke, 'Arkwright and the Scottish Cotton Industry', p.200 n.24.
55. *Ibid.*
56. Feu Contract between John, duke of Atholl and the Stanley Co., 13 February 1787: SRO, Sheriff Court of Perthshire, Register of Deeds, SC49/48/104 ff. 120-129; cited by Cooke, 'Arkwright and the Scottish Cotton Industry', p.202 n.25.

57. Butt, Industrial Archaeology, pp.67-69; Fitton, The Arkwrights, p.77.
58. Butt, Industrial Archaeology, pp.67-69.
59. Fitton, The Arkwrights, p.77; New Statistical Account, vol.10 p.440.
60. Fitton, The Arkwrights, p.77.
61. Dempster's suggested name occurs in Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 1 July 1785: SRO, GD151/11/8/31.
62. Dempster to Thorkelin, 21 August 1788: Harvey Wood, 'Letters to an Antiquary', p.300.
63. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 29 June 1789: SRO, GD151/11/8/55.
64. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 25 August 1789: *ibid.*, GD151/11/8/60.
65. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 7 November 1789: *ibid.*, GD151/11/8/68.
66. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 8 June 1790: *ibid.*, GD151/11/8/82.
67. Michael M. Edwards, The Growth of the British Cotton Trade 1780-1815 (1967) pp.10, 200-201; Watson, Reign of George III, p.333.
68. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 23 July 1791: SRO, GD151/11/8/96.
69. 'Contract of Feu between His Grace the Duke of Atholl and George Dempster and Company', 25 March 1792: Atholl Muniments, 25/9/8.
70. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 5 February 1792: *ibid.*, GD151/11/8/103. The subject is also mentioned in GD151/11/8/102, GD151/11/8/108, GD151/11/8/114 and GD151/12/20/9.
71. Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.17 (1796), p.556.
72. Ibid., vol.18 (1796), p.515.
73. Guildhall Library London, 'Sun Fire Policy No. 640186', dated 2 April 1795: 'Valuation of Cotton Mills at Stanley' Ms.11937/8 pp.609-610. 'Sun Fire Policy No. 638322', dated 13 February 1795: 'Valuation of New Lanark Mills' Ms.11937/8 pp.413-414; S. D. Chapman, 'Fixed Capital Formation in the British Cotton Industry 1770-1815'. The Economic History Review, second series vol.23 (1970), p.262.
74. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 20 September 1799: SRO, GD151/11/8/141.
75. Dempster to Sinclair, 21 January 1800: SRO, RH4/49/2/266-270.
76. See, for example, Butt and Ponting, Scottish Textile History, pp.13-14; Edwards, Growth of the British Cotton Trade, pp.10-11.

77. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 7 December 1799: SRO, GD151/11/8/142.
78. Cooke, Stanley. Its History and Development, p.16.
79. Dempster to William Soper, 10 May 1802: Dempster Muniments, vol.6 item30.
80. The story of the subsequent history of Stanley is given in Cooke, Stanley. Its History and Development.
81. Ibid. pp.16-17.
82. 'Lease from His Grace the Duke of Atholl to Messrs Graham, Dempster, Arkwright, etc. of the Mills of Stanley', 2 June 1785: Atholl Muniments, 25/9/2.
83. 'Bond by George Dempster, Robert Graham, etc. to the Duke of Atholl', 2 June 1790: Atholl Muniments, 25/9/7/7.
84. See, for example, Edwards, Growth of the British Cotton Trade, pp.10-24.

CHAPTER 11

SKIBO

On 25 October 1785 Dempster's half brother, Captain John Hamilton Dempster, married Jean Fergusson, niece of Dempster's oldest and closest friend, Sir Adam Fergusson (she was the eldest daughter of Sir Adam's brother, Charles).¹ This marriage delighted both families, but it was a particular pleasure to Dempster since it further consolidated his already long friendship with Sir Adam. In addition it drew him closer to his half brother John for whom Dempster had a high regard and with whom in any case he seems to have had a closer relationship than with his other brothers and sisters.

Captain Dempster had achieved considerable success in the service of the East India Company, and by now was in command of the East Indiaman Ganges (see p.69). A year after the marriage the couple's only child, a son named George after his uncle, was born and henceforth Dempster, who had no children of his own, regarded young George as his heir and rested all his hopes for the future in the boy.² Dempster involved himself in devising elaborate schemes for the boy's upbringing and education, much evidence of which survives in his correspondence. From this time also Dempster was anxious for his brother to give up his seafaring life for the less hazardous and more settled land-based life of a country farmer, a prospect which the Captain himself seems to have found quite agreeable. He had already amassed a comfortable fortune from his Indian voyages and he and Dempster calculated that only a voyage or two more were needed for him to be able to purchase an estate.³ Fortunately, in July 1786 a number of sequestrated (i.e. taken into judicial possession on behalf of the owner's creditors) estates in Sutherland were put up for auction by the court of session and Dempster was successful in acquiring Skibo estate, centred on the ancient castle of Skibo. A letter dated that month from William Ramsay, an Edinburgh lawyer who was acting on Dempster's

behalf, confirms that the price paid was £11,500. Ramsay reported that he had also bid for the nearby Langwell Estate but unfortunately the price for this went above Dempster's limits.⁴ In 1789 Dempster bought the adjoining estate of Pulrossie, much smaller than Skibo being of only 500 acres compared with Skibo's 18,000 acres. In 1791 Dempster transferred ownership of Pulrossie to Captain Dempster and in 1796 the latter himself bought another adjoining estate, Over-Skibo.⁵ Dempster managed all the estates during his brother's frequent absences at sea⁶ and intended the Captain to own and manage all three once he retired from the East India Company's service. He also looked forward to his nephew, young George, inheriting them in due course.

The reaction of Dempster's friends to these purchases seems to have been one of unqualified horror—unsurprising considering the number of projects and activities to which Dempster was already committed. In 1786 Dempster was still a member of parliament and during this and subsequent years was very active in the debates of the house of commons (see chapter 7). These years also saw his involvement with the British Fisheries Society reach a peak, requiring the investment of much time and energy in attending meetings in London, corresponding with fellow directors, and in making visits to the sites of intended settlements (see chapter 8). During these years also Dempster was heavily engaged in the Stanley Cotton Mill project, again requiring much correspondence, attendance at meetings and site visits. Finally, these were the years in which Dempster commenced his second great wave of improvements at Dunnichen, including the draining of Loch Restenneth and the founding of the village of Letham.

Given these existing commitments it is hardly surprising that those who wished him well were appalled that he should be contemplating yet a further major project which would require a heavy investment of time and energy and which had the additional disadvantages for its management of being remote from Dunnichen in an area with which Dempster had no previous connection and with

poor communications with the rest of the country. Furthermore, the purchase and development of Skibo would have to be carried out using borrowed money with the danger that if things went seriously wrong Dempster's ever-shaky finances would be plunged into ruin. James Guthrie of Craigie (1740-1830), a Angus neighbour and close friend of Dempster's,⁷ wrote to Dempster in November 1786:

"It is lucky you have found in London funds to answer the term of payment of Skibo, for had you left it to your friends here we could not have borrowed so large a sum under £5 per Cent which would have immediately raised all our former engagements to the same interest.

I shall always rejoice at every thing that gives you pleasure, but I must confess I would on this occasion have been much happier had you told me you had got entirely free of that Highland Estate tho at a considerable loss; because the distant advantages you expect from it appear to me very uncertain and the immediate inconveniences it will subject you to inevitable. ...I think Skibo a most desirable purchase, even at your price, to a man born beyond Inverness who would reside upon it and had abilities & inclination to improve it but to you, my most dear friend, I fear it will prove a Mill Stone -And when I consider how much the lands are already exhausted by bad management, the tenants beggars, their houses ruinous, every thing about it daily growing worse, its immense distance, impracticable to yourself in winter and nobody in the north to manage it for you whose fidelity you can rely on I think my calculations not exaggerated and that there will be a loss of money which you will feel very sensibly before Captain Dempster can be ready to relieve you."⁸

Two weeks earlier, Dempster's old friend Sir Adam Fergusson (who was cautious at the best of times) predictably wrote along the same lines:

"I am happy that you have obtained Money, so as to avoid any embarrassment about the price of Skibo. But if I am to speak my Mind, I own I have not the same satisfaction in hearing of your Intention to attempt the Improvement of it in any Degree however apparently moderate. ...[There follows a reasoned discussion of how Dempster's proposed improvement would be unlikely to ensure a proper profitable return.] If it is said that the Estate may be sold, is it certain that the original price will always be got for it? I fairly say I doubt it. And because I do so, I was happy to think there was something like an opening for your getting rid of it altogether.

I am afraid I have said too much, & certainly much more than I have any proper Title to do. But my clear conviction that the Southernmost County in Scotland would not be the worse for a Degree or Two more of Southern latitude, the prodigious Inconvenience of so remote a situation, the excessive poverty of the People, which tho' making it highly the Duty of those whose lot has fallen there to

attend assiduously to every means of rendering their situation easier, creates no Call on any other person to settle himself among them; the decided opinion I have that purchasing and improving Land on borrowed Money is attended both with risk and Inconvenience led me to venture thus far on your Indulgence. I will say no more but that whatever resolution you take, I sincerely hope it will be for the best;...”⁹

Dempster, however, remained unmoved and unflustered by these warnings. His reply to James Guthrie has not survived, but to Sir Adam he wrote:

“I am angry with you for apologizing for your free discussion of Skibo. It is so painful a task to speak out even to one’s friend and in an important concern, and so very easy to stand well with one by acquiescing implicitly in one’s opinions and projects, that I have often thought the leaves of some tree should be allotted for crowning this kind of sincerity. The palm, the myrtle and olive are already cons[e]crated to such noble purposes. We’ll assign that I mention to the larix [larch] our favourite. Some of the most usefull lessons of my life have been taught me by my enemies when angry and my acquaintances when drunk. For which reason I drink both their healths. - Now as to Skibo. I agree with you if the money were always to be borrow’d; but if worth keeping, Jack will pay for it in a voyage or two. Next if the difference between the rent and the interest is pay’d out of my savings, which I am certain I am able to do, and if those savings would be spent by me, which I am certain they would be, or rather would never be made but for this purpose - there is no great harm. Next I am anxious my brother should have a farther inducement than even a wife and children to save money. But next and last if it shall be deem’d expedient to part with this estate it will not sell the worse that we are not obliged to sell it. Next it is actually the only habitable spot in Scotland I ever was possessed of. The sea, an arm of the sea, fine sailing, fishing, river and sea, dry and warm rides - climate near the level of the sea better than any I have as yet [known] - the distance I think nothing of, the roads being good, I wish it were still more sequester’d that one might once or twice in a season have a day to themselves [sic] in the country. You see clearly that is not to be had in the island of Coll. I should like a happy medium between Coll and Stafa. - With all this I shall not be much against listening to proposals for purchasing it from me. But this is widely different from making offers of selling it. My experiments, you may depend upon it, shall not be with borrow’d money - but on a very confined scale.”¹⁰

As regards the managing of the estate, Dempster was fortunate to find the previous factor, a Mr John Fraser, to be a reliable man and willing to serve him. A considerable series of letters passed between the two during December 1786 and January 1787 of which most appear to have survived, giving a fascinating insight into Dempster’s method of management from such a distance and also of his early ideas and plans regarding the estate.

On 5 December 1786 James Sutherland and Dugald Gilchrist, two of Dempster's new neighbours in Sutherland, provided a reference for Fraser:

“Mr John Fraser (who was Factor on the Estate of Skibo during the Sequestration) tells us that you are to employ him as Factor for your Brother on that Estate ... as we are fully satisfied of his honesty and ability, we hereby agree to be his Cautioners.”¹¹

Four days later Fraser himself wrote to Dempster (it is clear that this was his second letter to Dempster, the first not having survived):

“On the 26th Ultimo [26 November] I did myself the honor of writing you pretty fully about Skibo to which referr, And it will make me happy if any thing I can say or do can be of the least avail, in promoting your public or private Interests. Meantime I enclose a line from Col[one]l Sutherland & Mr Gilchrist my Suretys...

I have not yet heard from the person to whom I wrote for an answer to your Queries about the Depth of water at the mouth of the Firth of Domoch etc.”¹²

In subsequent letters Fraser was able to inform Dempster that there was a good bank of shell marl on the estate, which Dempster intended to use as fertilizer to improve the arable land, as he had been doing at Dunnichen, and that there was a sufficient depth of water at the mouth of the Firth to permit reasonably sized ships to enter.¹³ From this last enquiry it is clear that Dempster had it in mind from the outset to found a village with a harbour on the estate. As with his other projects, he formed decided ideas early on as to what he wanted to do with Skibo.

Other topics covered in this correspondence included arrangements for collecting rents, illegal cutting of timber on the estate, removal of the existing tenant from Skibo Castle and the appointment of a gardener.¹⁴ John Fraser was a wise choice as factor: he seems to have been a capable and conscientious individual who served Dempster well, being able to work without close supervision yet with no tendency to exceed his authority.

Fraser was most displeased with the illegal cutting of timber, which he felt sure was being carried out by Dempster's own tenants. He advocated taking a strong line with them and was:

“of Opinion that the whole tenants of Skibo and others nearest it right to be cited before our first meeting of Justice. And asked on oath about the hurt done to those woods & since the sale. By this means it probably [sic] the guilty be found out, and those practices prevented in time coming.”¹⁵

Characteristically, Dempster chose a quite different solution, and as at Dunnichen decided that the best way to protect the trees was to grant part of their value to the tenants (see chapter 9). That Fraser disapproved of this is clear from a later letter:

“It is very good on you, to show so much Equity to your tenants, when its plainly seen, that your Interest is hurt. I wish they may do as they ought in return. I will directly intimate to them, your answer to me, about presenting them for the woods and planting, and I shall be sorry if you have cause to say, when you come to Skibo, that you wished you had not been so Indulgent.”¹⁶

Also as he had done at Dunnichen, Dempster granted his Skibo tenants a constitution, which he called the Constitution of Criech, after the parish (also spelt Creich) in which the greater part of the Skibo estate lay. However, whereas at Dunnichen it applied only to the villagers of Letham, at Skibo it apparently applied to all the tenants. What Fraser thought of this radical move has not survived, but when Dempster described the proposal to Sir Adam Fergusson he did so with some trepidation, as the first part of the following quotation shows:

“I am almost glad you are not with me because I am engaged in a project which the soundness and moderation of your brains would not probably approve of, and would assign such reasons for your disapprobation as I could not answer. What I am about is this. You know some part of this purchase is a Highland estate. There are upon it about 40 families. ... My project is to give this estate what I can a constitution. I fix all the present tenants for their lives at the present rent in their houses, gardens and cultivated ground. At their deaths I give the refusal to the person they name for their successor at a rent to be fixed by two arbitrators, and so on for ever - no alteration of rent but on the demise of the tenant. I give leave to any body to settle on the waste ground, paying 1 shill[ing] a year for their lives. The same rule as that for the old tenants when they die - only the first generation after the new settler sits at half the apprized rent. The waste remains in common till planted or settled or improved, which I reserve power for myself and heirs to do. I

bind myself, heirs and successors for ever to these conditions. I abolish all personal services, and I give the tenant full leave to leave his farm on due notice whenever he pleases, and to resign it to any of his family, the rule of a revaluation being then to be observed as if he had died. At present they pay for their wood for their houses. Who ever builds a stone walled house thatched with heath or straw is to have wood gratis. I call this the Constitution of Criech - for God sake don't say a word against it. One word of your mouth will blow away as many happy visions of the future prosperity of the Criechs as ever illumined the dying moments of a saint."¹⁷

Dempster first visited Skibo on his return from the British Fisheries Society's tour of the west coast in the summer of 1787 (see chapter 8); until then he does not appear to have visited Skibo at all since his purchase, the entire organisation and management having been conducted by letter through John Fraser. He found the conditions of the tenancy there, in common with those all over the Highlands, wretched to an almost unimaginable degree. The old Statistical Account contains numerous references to such conditions, and the entry for the parish of Criech differs little from dozens of similar accounts. At the invitation of Sir John Sinclair, Dempster himself wrote a supplementary account of the economic conditions of the parish, with particular reference to his own estate.¹⁸ In this he stated that the estate comprised 18,000 acres of land extending about 12-14 miles along the north shore of the Domoch Firth. There were about 200 families in all (rather more than in the letter to Sir Adam Fergusson quoted above) and the whole rent of the property was no more than £700-800 per annum, and of this more than a quarter came from two large farms. The people were living at the barest subsistence level and their only occupation, apart from growing their own food, was a little spinning for the women. The young men of the parish were forced to travel to the south each spring in search of farm work and towards harvest time many of the women joined them to assist in cutting down and getting in the crop. They all returned for the winter, however, which they spent in virtual idleness gathered around peat fires. As for their houses, these were mere hovels:

"The estates furnish some wood, with which, and the swarded surface of the ground, cut into the form of large bricks, they make houses and offices for themselves, covering them with the same swarded turfs, cut thinner, and resembling slates in their form. Once in three years, all the earthy part of these houses is thrown on the dunghill, and new houses built again in the same materials.

The cattle commonly occupy one end of the house, during the winter season. Some holes in the walls and roofs serve for windows and chimneys. An iron pot, for boiling their food, constitutes their principal furniture. Nothing can exceed the wretched appearance of these habitations.”¹⁹

Dempster went on to explain that in view of the poverty of the people it was not the intention of himself and his brother to increase rents for the time being, but rather to give the tenants every encouragement to improve their plots and their houses.²⁰ As at Dunnichen all the tenants’ services were being converted into money rent and the ancient thirlage to the mills of the baronies abolished. Also, in line with what Dempster had told Sir Adam Fergusson, the tenants had secure possession of their houses and land (at least for their own lifetime) and full liberty to cultivate waste land as they pleased and to pasture their cattle on any uncultivated waste land, but Dempster and his brother reserved the right to enclose such land for tree planting where it was fit for no other purpose. Dempster mentioned that some plantations of this kind had already been made and appeared to be thriving, the trees being principally larch (a favourite of Dempster’s), Scots pine and birch, with some beech and mountain ash. The rest of the waste ground was open to any settler, and twenty to thirty new settlers had taken advantage of this and had “already exhibited strong proofs of what Highlanders can do, in the improvement of their own country, when secured in the enjoyment of the fruits of their labour.”²¹ Dempster went on to describe the fairly sophisticated system of concessions and incentives he had introduced to encourage new tenants to settle on the estate. His clear intention was to maximise the productive potential of the estate by an increase in population.

In characteristic fashion Dempster used the opportunity of the entry in the old Statistical Account not merely to describe his estate and his proposed improvements, but to write what is in effect a manifesto. After describing the financial advantages he hoped to accrue from his improvements he went on to declaim:

“Shall we state none of the advantages, but those of a pecuniary nature? Is nothing to be set down, for the PLEASURE OF BEHOLDING THE PROGRESS OF

THE PROSPERITY OF A COUNTRY? IS THE JOY OF SEEING TOWNS AND HOUSES ARISING AROUND YOU OF NO VALUE? NOR THE ULTIMATE BENEFIT DERIVED TO YOUR COUNTRY, BY ADDING TO IT, INDUSTRIOUS INHABITANTS AND CULTIVATED LAND; THRIVING TOWNS AND FLOURISHING MANUFACTURES? Is there no pleasure in beholding the growth of woods of one's own planting? nor in the success of a system, so intimately connected with the HAPPINESS OF PEOPLE PLACED BY PROVIDENCE UNDER OUR CARE? Some have thought, that it would be a fitter use for the Highlands, to convert them into sheep-walks. That it might be better for the people to cultivate sheep, instead of black cattle, is probably true. That the sheep is a hardier, and a more useful animal than the ox, may be true also. That the increase of rents, by converting cattle-breeding farms, into sheep-walks, would be more sudden, than by the system here suggested, is not to be disputed. But that the estates would ultimately become more valuable, is by no means so clear a proposition. Tracts of land, which have been converted into sheep farms, yield little more, at an average, than £1 sterling, per 100 acres. This is indeed a better rent than before. But how contemptible must this rent appear, when compared with an estate occupied by industrious manufacturers, and abounding in large woods of the finest fir, birch and other trees?... The comparison is not to be made by units or decimals; for the advantage of men instead of sheep, are as thousands to one. As the understanding, industry and ingenuity of man, in a state of freedom, are superior to those of the brute creation, so is the value of an estate inhabited by mankind, to one occupied by sheep."²²

Between 1786 when Skibo was purchased, and the close of the century, Dempster divided his time almost equally between Skibo and Dunnichen. Skibo he was much taken with and his correspondence, especially that with Sir Adam Fergusson, contains frequent mention of the beauties of the scenery and, as the following examples show, the mildness of the climate:

"Not being able to divest myself quite of my attachment to Dunnichen, it is with extreme concern I acquaint you that the estate (i.e. Dunnichen] is colder by 4½ degrees all the summer thro' than our 35 square miles on the north bank of the firth of Dornoch. My gardener here and I at Skibo have by accurate observation of the thermometer at both places and at the same hour ascertained this curious fact."²³

"We have had but three day's frost too slight to carry one safely on the ice and are now riding without great coats and our ladies playing the swing in the open air as if it were Italy. We see no bad weather but in the news papers and in the purchase of Skibo have certainly stumbled on a portion of the finest climate in Scotland quite omitted in the judicial rentroll altho' it adds several years' purchase to the value of the estate."²⁴

For Dempster, purely agricultural reforms, essential as he thought them to be, were not in themselves enough. This was the period when he was heavily engaged in the early stages of the British Fisheries Society's village building programme on the west coast and also when he was at last seeing the village of Letham come to fruition. He was eager to establish similar settlements on the Skibo estate and selected two sites: one on the Skibo estate at Spinningdale (then known as Spanziedale), and the other two miles further east at Balnoe (formerly Newton; now Newton Point) on the Pulrossie estate, under the control of Captain Dempster. Both villages were sited on the banks of the Domoch Firth in order that they might be served by the boats carrying coastal trade. At Spinningdale Dempster, drawing on his experience at Stanley, ambitiously proposed to establish a cotton spinning mill. Meanwhile at Balnoe a friend of Dempster's from Dundee, Mr Alexander Morison, had "undertaken to establish the weaving of linen, and to encourage the extension of the spinning of yarn all around the country."²⁵ Originally the name 'Balnoe' (Gaelic for 'new town') was applied to the site at Spinningdale and the company which operated the cotton mill was accordingly called The Balnoe Company. However, over time the name Spinningdale reasserted itself and by 1794 Dempster himself was using this name. The name Balnoe was then used for the 'linen town' at Newton but to avoid confusion it was agreed that the company's name should remain unchanged.²⁶

Both projects were intended to provide employment for farm workers made surplus by the introduction of advanced and thus less labour intensive farming methods.²⁷ For the cotton mill Dempster approached George Macintosh, a Glasgow manufacturer and associate of David Dale, and persuaded him to visit Skibo in the autumn of 1791.²⁸ Macintosh (1739-1807) had in partnership with Dale introduced Turkey red dyeing into Scotland and was the father of Charles Macintosh, inventor of the raincoat of that name.²⁹ Macintosh had been born at Newmore in Ross-shire and was very much a Highland patriot. He wrote to Dugald Gilchrist of Ospisdale, Dempster's neighbour and one of the future partners in the cotton mill, that his interest in the project was "more from patriotic

motives than that of profit.”³⁰ No time was lost and the company was formed quickly enough for Dempster to be able to report the same in his entry in the old Statistical Account, the relevant volume of which was published in 1793.³¹ It had a total capital of £3,000 made up of thirty shares of £100 each all but seven of which had already been taken up. At the end of his entry Dempster listed the eighteen shareholders: Dale and Macintosh took two shares each (later increased to three³²), Dempster and his brother also took two each, while the other subscribers, among whom was Dempster’s factor John Fraser, took one share each. Some of the subscribers were based in Sutherland or Ross-shire, but many were Glasgow merchants. Sir Richard Arkwright was not one of the shareholders, but it is possible that he provided advice and assistance with training of the workforce, as he did at Stanley. There is, however, no surviving evidence that this was so. Written into the contract of partnership (dated 1792) was a clause stating that the object of the partners was to introduce a manufacture into Sutherland that would give employment to the poorest inhabitants, rather than immediate profit to themselves.³³ This was confirmed by Dempster when introducing the list of partners in his supplementary statement to the old Statistical Account:

“The reader will observe, that public spirit is the motive by which most of the partners have been induced to embark their property in an undertaking, which may prove highly advantageous to the Highlanders, and particularly so to the proprietors of the above and other contiguous estates; but never, probably, will prove so profitable to the other partners, as undertakings of this kind, situated more immediately under their own eye.”³⁴

The mill, of which only a ruin now survives, was a fairly large one, of four storeys and probably an attic. It was built on a rectangular plan of 58 feet x 38 feet and later a 20 feet wide extension was added at one end. The walls were of harled rubble with yellow sandstone dressings (now weathered to grey) with regular, tall rectangular windows with stone lintels strengthened by stone relieving arches. The floors and roof, no longer existing, were presumably all of timber, the roof being double-pitched and gabled.³⁵ Each floor was provided with two fireplaces, but Dempster experimented with

a form of central heating, which he also tried at Dunnichen House. In January 1794 he wrote to Sir Adam Fergusson:

“I turn the leaf to tell you of a curious experiment I am trying at Dunnichen - to heat the saloon, dining room, drawing room, and principal bed chambers, by means of an oven that bakes the air and diffuses it in tubes thro’ all the house. Our cotton mill here [i.e. Skibo, from where this letter was written] is warmed in this way. One oven bakes more air than is sufficient in half an hour to make a story of the mill too hot for human habitation.”³⁶

The mill was completed this same year (1794) at a cost of £974. 2. 8½d.³⁷ Dempster was highly delighted: in 1792 he had written to Fergusson “Our cotton mill goes on charmingly. The banks of the Kyle [Firth] appear to me a paradise already highly improved and ornamented”,³⁸ and in 1794 he wrote “Our Glasgow friends have also adomed its [the Dornoch Firth’s] banks with a palace cotton mill round which a little town is rising tolerably fast for there are already ten houses on it.”³⁹

In May 1791 the Dempsters received an offer to purchase Skibo and Pulrossie for a total sum of £18,000. The intending purchaser (whose name is unknown) was a friend of Sir John Sinclair and it was through Sinclair that the offer was made. The latter wrote from his Whitehall address to Sir Adam Fergusson’s brother Charles (father of Jean Hamilton Dempster) who lived in London.⁴⁰ Sir Adam was also in London at this time and Charles must have immediately communicated the offer to him for only two days later Sir Adam wrote concerning it to Dempster.⁴¹ Though he was careful to avoid making any recommendation, Sir Adam probably saw this offer as a means by which his friend could extricate himself from an expensive mistake. Dempster, interestingly, did not reject the offer out of hand but first discussed it with Captain Dempster, leaving the final decision to him. It would appear that the Captain’s latest East India voyages were proving less profitable than had been hoped, temporarily dampening even Dempster’s optimism. In a letter to the Captain shortly after receiving the offer Dempster wrote:

“Proposals have been made to me for the Sale of Skibo and Pulrossie - £18,000 for both - Sir John Sinclair made them but for some other Person. My Answer was

that these purchases having been made solely with a view to your benefit & particularly to furnish you with a secure inexhaustible & usefull employment when you gave up the Sea Life I could say nothing on the Subject till your return when I should mention it to you. A Sale that would indemnify us & give you £1,000 in your Pocket would be the most agreeable to me so far as my pecuniary Interest is concerned. ... Had the East India Trade gone on as we had reason to hope my answer would have been, no very flat. You will judge how far the falling off of that Trade may make it advisable to listen to these proposals.”⁴²

Although Captain Dempster’s reply is not known, the decision evidently was to reject the offer.

Despite the doubts expressed by Dempster in the letter just quoted he was clearly pleased with this, for when he reported it to Fergusson it was combined with another panegyric on the beauties of Skibo:

“All idea of a sale of our property here is vanished. You would be charmed to see how the value of both estates is increased by their union. Like husband and wife they lie in one another’s arms, both indeed at present fast asleep. They form an extent of 14 or 15 miles along the north bank of the Firth of Dornoch which is on the point of becoming one of the most beautifull of our firths. The Captain has lotted out a sea port town that will adorn the coast of Sutherland and enrich its fields. The town is nearly finished, wanting now nothing but houses and inhabitants. The harbour is perfect and the position very happy which are the great points. A plan for a cotton manufacture is on the point of being carried into execution with Glasgow partners. Fifteen or sixteen little people have accepted of settling on waste ground and the progress they have made in cultivating land and housing themselves in a short space of time gives me every reason to hope I may survive all the heather of Skibo. We are planting the eminences with larches and Scotch firs to join beauty with utility.”⁴³

Dempster concluded by saying “We leave this [Skibo] for Dunnichen the 17th Instant with sorrowful hearts for we are going to a colder climate and an uglier place.”⁴⁴

The cotton spinning mill, however, was to prove unsuccessful. One reason was high initial expenditure. Although the cost of the mill building itself seems reasonable, it was only the largest of a number of buildings built at the same time. Also constructed were a large weaving house with a store overhead, a smaller weaving house, a store and washing house, a large barrack for workpeople and a smithy. The machinery proved unexpectedly expensive also, and altogether over £3,000 was

laid out on the mill, the machinery and the auxiliary buildings - well in excess of the initial paid-up capital of £2,300, necessitating an advance of £700 from the Bank of Scotland in Tain.⁴⁵ The company was therefore heavily in debt before production started, and it suffered the further misfortune of commencing operations in the teeth of a slump following the outbreak of war with France in 1793.⁴⁶ It was soon realised that the scheme had been over-ambitious and that demand was nowhere near meeting the production capacity of the mill - for example, in 1795 fewer than half the spindles were employed in spinning yarn.⁴⁷ Nor do the Highland workers appear to have been the paragons that Dempster would have his correspondents believe. Macintosh considered them to be lazy, but it is more likely that they merely found it difficult to adjust to long hours of regular work in the mill that were entirely foreign to the old Highland way of life.⁴⁸ Macintosh also mentioned difficulties with the manager, and the venture without doubt was hampered by the same disadvantages that have discouraged other attempts to bring industry to the Highlands: distance from markets, little local demand, high transport costs and unskilled labour.

Nevertheless, the company struggled on. In 1802 Robert Owen, David Dale's son-in-law, visited the works on behalf of Dale and Macintosh and made one or two suggestions for improvements in the organisation of the mill. However, he reported that the works were not extensive and that the locality was unfavourable for extension or for a permanent establishment.⁴⁹ On this advice both Dale and Macintosh withdrew their support. In 1805 the mill was sold for £2,000 to a Mr McFarlane, a prosperous cotton spinner from Glasgow.⁵⁰

Although Macintosh placed the blame for the failure firmly on the poor attendance and application to work of the workforce who "never ... produced not more than $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{2}{3}$ ds per Spindle [than] other ordinary works in this country" together with poor and over-indulgent management,⁵¹ typically Dempster would have none of this. Writing to Macintosh in 1803 he blamed "the Times" (by which

he presumably meant the Napoleonic War, on which he blamed the failure of the Stanley mill - see p.245):

“Also I fear the Times are not yet arrived for a Manufacturing business succeeding beyond Inverness & Cromarty. All our Efforts in that may have been attended with loss to the Partners & to have been finally abandoned. I have had my little share of those Misfortunes. All however trifling compared with my Major Loss of £8,000 by Stanley Mills. This heavy loss has kept me ever since as poor as a Church mouse and as contented as any Pauper in the Land having still wherewithall to supply my few wants for a few years, and having the satisfaction of knowing that those who will succeed to me have wherewithall to subsist independent of what they may look for.... I shall lament sincerely the Fall of Spinningdale. I have been there Twice [presumably since the failure of the original company] and a busier or more enchanting scene I never beheld. It is surely to be imputed to the Times that so well conducted an undertaking fails of success. I carry some of the yarn finer than the spider’s web to the south with me as a Curiosity.”⁵²

In 1806 the factory was accidentally destroyed by fire and this killed the project; it was never rebuilt.⁵³ When Robert Southey saw it in 1819 it was “no more than a picturesque ruin attracting the eyes of curious travellers”,⁵⁴ a description which fits it as well today. Southey believed Dale and the Dempsters lost over £20,000 in the project, though this is hard to believe in the light of Dempster’s relatively sanguine comments quoted above.

The failure of the cotton mill also caused the decay of the village of Spinningdale, although its post office and role as a minor commercial centre have ensured its survival in some form to the present day. The houses built by Dempster in connection with the mill were far superior to those formerly in existence in the area and were afterwards taken over by farm workers.⁵⁵ The projected village at Balnoe never seems to have amounted to much and apart from a warehouse completed by 1793,⁵⁶ only one or two houses seem to have been built. In 1796 the weaving manufacture (see p.262) was moved from Balnoe to Spinningdale because of insufficient water power, much to Captain Dempster’s disappointment. Captain Dempster’s suggested use of horse or steam power was to no avail.⁵⁷ In April 1800 a newspaper advertisement announced the imminent dissolution of the Balnoe

Linen Company and the consequent sale of its bleachfield and weaving houses.⁵⁸ By 1834 there was no village at all there, although the site was still being used as a shipping point for locally produced wool, corn, timber and so forth.⁵⁹ Dempster had described this site as “so fine a natural harbour that I have no doubt of it becoming the seaport of the county.”⁶⁰

Even if the venture had been more successful to start with, and had been able to take advantage of the new roads and the Caledonian Canal built in the ensuing decades by Telford and giving readier access to Glasgow, centre of the cotton trade, it is most unlikely that it could have lasted out against the rapidly improving techniques and ever-changing machinery in the large scale mills owned by the wealthy cotton businesses further south. The Stanley mill was in a considerably more favourable location and yet could not survive; it was even more difficult for the Spinningdale concern, located in the most remote part of the country, to do so.

Dempster enjoyed rather better success with his programme of agricultural reforms at Skibo. He gained enormously in popularity by resigning so many of his feudal rights and by granting security of tenure to as many of his tenants who wished to take advantage of it. The success of these policies can be judged from the account in the New Statistical Account of Scotland (the estate straddles the parishes of Dornoch and Creich, both accounts being dated September 1834).⁶¹ Here it is stated that in the Dornoch section of the estate alone there were now 800 acres of arable land, together with 350 acres of tree planting of which a considerable portion was hardwood. Four large farms each paid rent of £150 per year and there were besides a great number of smallholdings. In the parish of Creich where the bulk of the estate lay much more had been done: extensive plantation of firs and hardwood had been made and the rents of the Creich part of the estate were £1,195 for 1834, between a third and a half of the total for the entire parish. A half-century earlier the total rent for the Creich and Dornoch sections combined had been only £700. In these accounts, as in so many others, great

tribute is paid to Dempster; for example, the Dornoch account concludes its description of the Dempsters:

“He was most active and assiduous in devising measures himself, and in encouraging measures planned by others, which had for their object the improvement of his native country. He took an active and leading part in promoting its manufactures, its fisheries, and its agriculture. He was a gentleman of great benevolence and suavity of manners. While he and his brother remained in Skibo, they were much respected by all ranks; and as landlords, they were kind and indulgent to their tenants.”⁶²

During Dempster’s Skibo years an active correspondence sprang up between Dempster and an old friend of his, Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster, in Caithness. Sinclair’s researches for his monumental Statistical Account of Scotland, a project which aroused Dempster’s keen interest, seem to have been the cause of their friendship becoming much closer. One of the earliest surviving letters expresses Dempster’s willingness to assist in providing a contribution for Dunnichen Parish:

“My minister & I are setting about to give you the late and present State of this Parish, which will not make a contemptible Figure among the improving Parishes of Scotland.”⁶³

As Dempster thought more about the project his enthusiasm increased and his comments to Sinclair grew more fulsome. Sinclair attached less importance to the abolition of personal services than Dempster and in March 1791 Dempster protested strongly that Sinclair’s list of queries to all the parishes omitted any mention of this topic:

“The occasion of this Letter is furnished by your printed Circular Letter to the Clergy lately transmitted to them and only shown to me this minute by my Clergyman. How shall I account my Dear Sir John, for none of the supplementary Queries Turning on the Subject of the Personal & other services performed by the Tenants? It is not as yet too late a short Advertisement from you in the Scotch Papers would still supply that material Defect. For allowing that to you it did not seem very important yet as many other Politicians consider it as the bane of our Agriculture & one of the Weightiest Causes of the Beggary of our Northern Tenantry, believe me your Statistical Account of the Country will be incomplete if this shall be omitted.... I hope you will do something to remedy this defect [sic]. I earnestly beg it of you to do it. The Service you will do to Scotland thereby will be infinite & more immediate than by any of all the other matters upon which your enquiries turn.”⁶⁴

In another letter Dempster was extravagant in his praise of Sinclair's project, comparing it with the Domesday Book "& promises to be more read & quoted than any Book printed since Domesday Book."⁶⁵ Warming to his theme, Dempster suggested that it should eventually be extended to England and Ireland, to give a composite view of all three kingdoms. Dempster took the opportunity to press Sinclair to abolish personal services on his own estates:

"And now Sir John what you say concerning your Intention to Kentify Caithness gives me sincere pleasure. It is time that a change of some kinds must be affected by slow degrees to render a nation addicted to Drunkenness, sober, to render an idle people, Industrious is not to be done in a day more than Rome could be built. But I would not tell a man whom I meant to release from Fetters, that I would take off his chain Link by Link for fear he might suffer by being restored in too great a hurry to the use of his Limbs. Why not with one act of volition & a single dash of your Pen put an end to the whole system of servitudes on your own Estate. I did so in one day, you'll have enough to do after that. ... Tell me why you won't do this, now in the month of February 1791, and I'll undertake to convince you it would have been for your Interest to have done it and that it might easily have been done in that Time. Whenever that first step is taken I am a convert to the Wool Society. I am a subscriber, and a labourer in the Sheep fold. Favour me with the earliest Intelligence that I may give it a place in little Annals that I keep of important Events as they occur. Put an end at once to Personal Services."⁶⁶

The latter part of this quotation refers to the British Wool Society, founded in 1791 by Sinclair. The latter was an enthusiastic proponent of the introduction of sheep farming to the Highlands, to which Dempster was fiercely opposed,⁶⁷ but this strong difference of opinion did not diminish Dempster's friendship towards Sinclair. The subject of personal services crops up again and again in the correspondence. For example, in September 1791 Dempster again implored Sinclair to free his tenants from personal services:

"Tell me then Sir John, my Dear Sir John, what benefit do you derive from the Poverty of your Tenants from their precarious holdings from their Personal Services or as I find it called in Caithness from their Master's work? Can our Lands ever be well cultivated by such Tenants? and can we ever derive the full benefit we might from our Lands while poorly cultivated?"⁶⁸

Sinclair's biographer, Rosalind Mitchison, is no doubt correct to assert that it was much easier for Dempster to abolish personal services on his small estate than for Sinclair on his large and remote one.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the strong impression gained from reading Dempster's side of the correspondence is that Sinclair was much less enthusiastic than Dempster about the whole idea.

Dempster was some twelve years older than Sinclair but from their correspondence the age difference seems to be reversed for it is Dempster who exhibits youthful exuberance and who does not hesitate to poke fun from time to time at the rather pompous and humourless Sinclair. It is easy to believe Mitchison's claim that there is no trace in Sinclair's correspondence of any other friendship as close as that between him and Dempster.⁷⁰ Dempster's friendship with Sinclair was successful for the same reason as that with Sir Adam Fergusson; in both cases he would indulge his sense of fun and playfulness as a contrast to the other's sobriety, to mutual advantage. Disagreements with other parties never seemed to trouble Dempster and even quite serious differences of opinion as revealed by his letters only seem to have acted as a spur to closer friendship. In Sinclair's case Dempster was occasionally able to extract a flash of humour. For example, following the letter last quoted Dempster thanked Sinclair for his replies (there appear to have been more than one) and "particularly for your elegant drawings of sheep"⁷¹ implying that Sinclair had included in his reply humorous drawings of sheep intended to better persuade Dempster of the merits of the animal.

Sinclair was one of very few contemporaries of Dempster to surpass the latter's range of interests,⁷² and consequently the range of subject matter in their correspondence is vast. Dempster wrote on agricultural matters of all kinds, depopulation and emigration, safety of ferries, inventions, currency depreciation and many other topics. In one letter Dempster lamented the length of time he had spent

in parliament, when he could have been more usefully employed in carrying out improvements to his estates:

“When I reflect on what I might have done to serve my Country in the Course of the Thirty Years I sate in Parliament and how little I have done in Fact, I feel my self unworthy of having occupied a Place in that House or indeed on this Globe for a whole Generation. My Sutherland Improvements are more in my Brain than anywhere else and cannot be too modestly mentioned not to hurt my feelings.”⁷³

In the same letter Dempster referred also to his inclusion of the list of subscribers to the Spinningdale Cotton Mill “as a Compliment to their public spirit” and went on:

“Their great-great-great-great-great-great-Grand Children will boast of this honourable mention of an ancestor, and be proud to be descended from one who is noticed as a friend to the infant Improvements of the Highlands of Scotland, when it will hardly be believed that a Country so capable of Improvement was at that time occupied by a few indigent Cattleherds. ... Great Ships will be transporting its lofty Larches and Pine Trees and perhaps its Oaks Ash & Elm together with its finer Manufactures to every corner of Europe. ... the most careless traveller will extend his peregrinations to the Highlands of Scotland to behold its beauty fertility and conveniency, and the wealth Industry and ingenuity of its Inhabitants. And when the fleeces of its sheep ranging on its most barren and interior Mountains will, by your care, rival those of Tibet and Spain, in numbers & beauty.”⁷⁴

Another frequent topic of correspondence was Sir John’s pet project for a Board of Agriculture, which Dempster fully supported.⁷⁵ Typically, Dempster recommended extending the board’s remit to Ireland, Nova Scotia and the West Indies, and even perhaps to the East Indies: “Your publications would thus be infinitely more entertaining. But you might in the West Indies be the means of gradually Introducing the Cutlase by Brutes with four legs instead of Two.”⁷⁶

Another long correspondence concerned Pitt’s Act for relieving banks of the need to redeem paper money for gold and silver in order to cope with the drain on the national bullion reserves during the Napoleonic Wars. Unlike Sinclair, Dempster deprecated this Act and expressed his views a number of times, of which the following is a typical example:

“You will never make me a convert to your Faith, tho’ you try to establish it by Miracles. By a Miracle the Country is the better for losing all its gold & silver.

And the People improved by being drained of all their substance, by such Taxes as never were imposed on any People before except on the Dutch after the Peace of Aix la Chapel. Give me Twenty Shillings Sterling as you promised me for this scrap of Paper! It's intrinsic value is nothing. It is your promise to pay specie for it that makes it valuable, and you break that promise and with the Impudence of Peter in the Tale of the Tub, you tell me it is not only as good, but a great deal better than Silver or Gold. ...

My Dear Sir John, after weighing most impartially all your Reasons, I call God to witness, they have made no impression on my Judgement. Your unexchangeable Circulating Paper has excited a Fever in the nation, not I trust a fatal one: for it has still Liberty, the source of all Prosperity, & Liberty is not a Barren Mother. Before Pitt's act she was surrounded by all her Family, by Industry, Agricultural, Commercial & Colonial. You ascribe to the Lie of the Bank [of England], all the merit the Bank had when it kept its word. But the Bank has quit its former honest Trade & not only Lies by the Hour, but has set up a Lancastrian School to teach others to Lie."⁷⁷

However, this subject was one on which, unusually, Dempster eventually changed his mind and admitted defeat. This appears to have been brought about by Dempster's reading of a well-argued letter in his regular newspaper, the Dundee Mercury:

"My Dear Sir John

Here blazes the Glory of Independence. I change my political opinions as I do my shoes, & for the same reason, because the change is for the Better. A Lucubration in our Provincial Paper has effected, what you & Lord Stanhope's speeches had begun. I renounce my inveterate Passion for Gold in my 82nd year. I'd swear I'd rather have a Pound weight of Bank Paper, than as much weight of Gold."⁷⁸

Sinclair was evidently sufficiently delighted with Dempster's conversion as to pen what was for Sinclair a very light-hearted reply:

"I had the pleasure of receiving yours of the 11th. It reminded me of the celebrated text (Luke Ch.15.v.7) 'I say unto you that likewise, joy shall be in heaven, over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety & nine just persons which need no repentance.' To whatever your conversion is owing, it is a satisfactory circumstance to me;"⁷⁹

Other correspondents of Dempster's during the Skibo years included his new neighbours in Sutherland. The subject matter tended to be concentrated on agricultural matters generally and in

particular proposals and advice for the management of Skibo and Pulrossie. Politics and other national affairs still occupied part of Dempster's mind and were frequently referred to in his letters to longstanding friends such as Fergusson and Sinclair.

One of the more interesting of Dempster's correspondents at this time was Dr James Anderson, author of one of the two celebrated reports on conditions in the Highlands that led eventually to the inauguration of the British Fisheries Society (see chapter 8). Although Dempster disliked John Knox, author of the other report (see p.191) he evidently struck up a lasting friendship with Dr Anderson. A small number of letters from Anderson have been preserved, all rather rambling in tone and mentioning enclosing cuttings, seeds, etc. for Dempster to experiment with at Skibo.⁸⁰ Anderson, like Dempster, could not resist teasing Sir John Sinclair with whom he was also apparently conducting a friendly correspondence, but assured Dempster that he meant Sir John no real offence and hoped that the latter bore him no ill-will.⁸¹

Politics closer to home troubled Dempster. In 1791 he was outraged to find that the Ayrshire freeholders had removed his name from the electoral roll:

"I observe by the newspapers the freeholders of your county have very illegally in my opinion made free with one of the most valuable parts of my property by expurging my name from the roll long after I had been four months in quiet possession of this honour. I would sooner have excused their selling a farm off my estate in Angus or Sutherland and I think they would have been as justifiable in doing the one as the other. For we may have too many lairds for the good of the country but we can never have too many voters in the election of Members of Parliament to represent it. It is somewhat singular that no body has yet stated the situation of our county elections in Parliament nor proposed any remedy for its defects, we are consigned over to the arbitrary and contradictory determinations of our courts of law. I have some thoughts of drawing up a complaint to the Court of Session, in which I should propose to enter some what more into the political circumstances of the kingdom than perhaps a lawyer in practice would choose to do. But I am now so completely idle that I fear I shall never find time to execute this design, but submit quietly to my own disfranchisement."⁸²

Nevertheless, the subject remained in Dempster's mind for some weeks afterwards. Undoubtedly in his younger days he would have been willing to fight a major battle over it, for the sake of the principle rather than the effect of disfranchisement on him personally. One is reminded, for example, of the ferocious legal battle he fought with Macintosh in the 1768 general election (see chapter 4). However, age had clearly tempered his spirit and he ultimately decided to let the matter rest, as he confessed to Fergusson:

“And now for your county politics. I wake quite mad every morning at the madness of your freeholders acting so directly in the teeth of the law, and by lessening the number of county voters so directly in the teeth of the very spirit of our constitution. I have had the pen in my hand to write to my ageunt [sic] to complain against their arbitrary proceedings and I do not know what restrains me. Yet I do know. I am done with politics.”⁸³

At about this time (c.1791) there appears to have been a rumour circulating that Dempster was considering returning to Parliament, possibly as member for Sutherland or Cromarty.⁸⁴ The overwhelming evidence from Dempster's correspondence, including the letter just quoted above, is that this was not the case. However, there is some evidence that Dempster's brother, the Captain, may have been considering such a move once he had finally given up his seagoing career, and one can imagine that this would have met with Dempster's wholehearted approval. In the same letter to Fergusson Dempster mentioned that:

“The Captain has a notion if he were in Parliament he could do good to the Highlands. He would not, he says be afraid of rising up in Parliament and telling them they ought to make roads and bridges thro' that country, that they ought to lower the rate of licences on many of our infant trades such as tanning and candle making, and that they should really contrive something of a constitution, whereby the people might have some hold of their possessions a little less precarious than their present tenures.”⁸⁵

Nothing further came of this idea, which may have been nothing more than a passing whim.

From about 1790, when mention of it first begins to appear in Dempster's correspondence, the health of Jean Dempster (wife of the Captain and niece of Sir Adam Fergusson) began to cause concern. She developed a persistent and recurring cough which it gradually became clear was caused by tuberculosis.⁸⁶ Over the years this subject occurred with increasing frequency in Dempster's correspondence. Invariably his references to it were as optimistic in tone as he could make them, but the number of references to this complaint indicates his own, and other relatives', anxiety. James Fergusson, in suggesting that the family made light of it, is surely incorrect.⁸⁷ In the hope that a milder climate might effect a cure Captain Dempster took her (and young George) to Lisbon for the winter of 1790-1791. This in itself is indicative of the seriousness with which he regarded the symptoms. Dempster thoroughly approved of this plan; in November 1790 he wrote to his brother:

"I return you in all our names many thanks for your kind attention in giving us so regularly news of our Dear Sister's Health [i.e. Jean Dempster's]. Your last from Truro is very satisfactory, and we earnestly pray your succeeding ones may be in the same Strain of mending & recovery. I still think the measure of going to Lisbon a wise one nor indeed do I know how you could have spent six months while the Rose lies by the walls better.[i.e. while Captain Dempster's ship lies in harbour prior to its next voyage]. You will see a new Country and a new People, and many curious works of art & nature towards which your wife's recovery will admit of your paying some attention."⁸⁸

Unfortunately, it is clear that the sojourn in Portugal did not result in the hoped-for cure. In October 1791 in writing to Sir Adam Fergusson, Dempster again made reference to Jean Dempster's cough, once more in the most optimistic terms possible:

"I have left your favour hitherto unanswer'd [a reference to a letter from Sir Adam, which has not survived] because I hoped every day to have been able to tell you your niece the great object of our concern was restored to perfect health. But she had no sooner been rid of her cough than it returned again upon her. At present I cannot say she is quite free from it, but almost the next thing to being so. My alarms on her account are considerably lessen'd since I have observed the nature of her cough and remarked particularly, that in spite of it I really think she gains strength and does not at least loose [lose] flesh."⁸⁹

Thus things remained for the next few years, relapse alternating with remission, until during 1797 her health declined rapidly and in April 1798 seems to have broken down completely. A letter to Sir Adam Fergusson from Dempster dated 29 April is noticeably lacking in optimism:

“Your niece, your dear niece, my sister, Mrs John Dempster - now here with all her family around her - touches, I fear, the term of her continuance among us. She came from Edinburgh [she had been spending the winter with relatives at New Hailes⁹⁰] very weak and quite emaciated. She had lost her appetite and strength. The sight of meat created sickness and the last morsel she eat was instantly thrown up. But on Monday last her distemper assumed a still more alarming appearance. She spit up a great deal of blood and has ever since been almost constantly confined to bed. It is a case, I fear, that will admit but of short and trifling relief. ... In short the meaning of this letter as you will easily perceive is to prevent you and Miss Fergusson from being too much shocked should you hear in a few days that her long illness has ended in the worst way.”⁹¹

Jean Dempster died a few days later, on 5 May 1798, and on 14 May was buried in the Dempster family burial plot at Restenneth Priory.⁹² Soon afterwards Captain Dempster sailed on another voyage to India and China,⁹³ and young George was thus left in the care of Dempster and his wife.

This was a considerable consolation for Dempster after his sadness over the death of Jean Dempster, and for the next two years he was preoccupied with looking after his nephew (aged 12 in 1798) and in developing his plans for the education and upbringing of the boy. These plans were described in detail in letters to Sir Adam Fergusson.⁹⁴ The clearest exposition of Dempster’s ideas were set out in a letter of 5 August 1799 (incorrectly dated July by Dempster):

“A very ugly rainy day affords me an earlier opportunity than I could have wished of saying a few words in answer to your observations about the plan of George’s education. Primo - my divided object in his education is to try to make him a lawyer in winter and improver of land, particularly moss land, in summer and a gentlemanlike wellbehaved modest companionable man every day in the year. His father and I both wish him to marry a good Scotch gentleman’s daughter as soon as he falls in love with one and if Parliament should fall in his way we wish it to be at a late period, when fully aware of all his duties as a good subject and a good citizen. If God bless him and our endeavour for his benefit, he may one day sit during winter on the Bench beside one of his uncles [possibly a reference to Lord Hermand, one of Sir Adam’s brothers] and vie with another in planting and improving his estate in the vacation. It will then be scarce two days’ journey between Sutherland and Edinburgh. Already the mail coach has reached Inverness

and turnpike roads the extremity of Aberdeenshire - and such a field for improvement at Skibo, 21,000 acres of land, 14 miles of the north bank of a navigable firth, two towns already lotted out and peopling, seaport towns, vallies with no very high mountains separating them from one another, brooks running thro' them the year long, yet now cover'd only with heath and occupied by grouse, plover, and wild ducks, mosses of 1000 of acres calling 'Come drain and lime and lett me for 40 shillings per acre.' Were it not for those tomados and hurricanes call'd passions, for women, wine, play, finery or slovenliness, we might mould the boy into what we please. While those tempests rage we must commit him to the care of the great Pilot of the world and recommend him to his mercy and protection. When the monsoon is over and the ship safe, tho' with some dammage to the rigging and perhaps to the upper works and hull itself, he will find the benefit of the stores and provisions his parents had profided [sic] for him. I could wish to provide my nephew, with English and Latin first, and both grammatically, with writing and arithmetic, with mathematics and natural philosophy, chymistry, and natural history, and the vacancies in the packing cases, I would fill up with dancing, chess, whist, backgammon, piquet, tric-trac, and field exercises. But where's the Greek? Oh, it is coming by and by."⁹⁵

Predictably, Dempster and Sir Adam differed on various points. Sir Adam's reply has on this occasion survived and in it he wrote that he would have preferred a public to a private education for young George (at Dempster's insistence he was being educated by a private tutor, Mr James Henderson⁹⁶) and also felt the life of a country gentleman to be unsuited to George's active mind - quite apart from the fact that many years were likely to pass before he could expect to inherit Skibo from his father. Nor did he think much of Dempster's proposed leisurely pursuits of backgammon and the like, considering that thereby "what a risk he runs of falling into all the folly, the idleness and the vice that characterise an unoccupied country gentleman." He recommended greater emphasis on intellectual activity, of which he placed the study of Greek in first place, instead of last as Dempster had done.⁹⁷

Comparing the two letters, Fergusson's ideas appear the more sound of the two. Dempster appears to have been trying to impose on his nephew an idealised version of his own life, with a better balance between the law, parliament and estate management than Dempster himself had been able to achieve. The low priority given to Greek probably reflects Dempster's own difficulty with the

subject, as is hinted at in one or two of his letters.⁹⁸ As to Dempster's insistence on having a private tutor for George, this can only be explained by some dissatisfaction on Dempster's part with his own education, the reasons for which have not been recorded.

Dempster's hopes and plans for his nephew proved to be doomed. In November 1800 he first alluded to "a little short cough which remained with him [young George] after a touch of fever he had almost three months ago."⁹⁹ This proved to be the first indication that the boy had contracted the disease that had killed his mother, and which was to prove equally fatal to him. Unlike in his mother's case, however, young George's condition deteriorated rapidly; in March Dempster took him south by sea to Exmouth in a desperate hope that the milder climate might effect an improvement. This was not to be, and the boy died there on 17 March 1801.¹⁰⁰ To add to Dempster's distress it was soon afterwards learned that Captain Dempster's ship was missing¹⁰¹ and some time later it became obvious that the Captain had drowned in October 1800 after his ship, the Earl Talbot, had been caught in a typhoon in the South China Sea while on its way from India to China.¹⁰²

The extinction of his brother's family within a space of only three years came as a shattering blow to Dempster. It is clear, though, that it was the death of his nephew, in whom he had rested so many hopes, that affected him most and was the greatest tragedy of his life. In a letter to Mr William Soper (for whom see next chapter) he wrote:

"Your favour... reached me here a few days ago for which I am obliged to you. ... It found me in a state of Agony & despair for the too certain loss of a kind Brother & most excellent man, to whom if it please God still to preserve in Limb & Life the news contained in your Letters, would prove no small consolation for the afflicting news that awaits him of the Death of his only Son George of a consumption. He had ailed a little thro' the winter but in Feb[ruar]y last was seized with a spitting of blood & Fever. We carried him to Exmouth in your County where I closed his innocent Eyelids on the 17th April at Exmouth & brought home his remains to be laid at his most excellent Mother's feet in our Chapel here."¹⁰³

To Sir Adam he wrote:

“On my return here after a passage of 18 days I found your kind favour and have since been favour’d with your second and thank you kindly for both. They proved as consolatory to me as any thing could to a mind smashed and broken to pieces by the loss of our dear boy, to which we must submit, but it is difficult to accompany our submission with due resignation and far less cheerfulness altho’ both are due to the Author of our affliction. ... Writing and almost everything that formerly afford[ed] me pleasure is become burthensome to me since I have lost poor George. I had formed so many pleasing plans for giving him such an education as should fit him for the enjoyment of human happiness, for making him a learned and worthy gentleman - and his own talents were beginning to open so favourably, his memory strong, his mind acute and penetrating - that his being snatched from me is a cruel disappointment and always uppermost in my mind. ... What a moment was that of the 17th of April when I received his last breath and saw his innocent expressive eyes shut for ever! But to this too we must submit. I derive but little consolation from my wife, for she loved and mourns for George as if he had been her own and only child.”¹⁰⁴

Chapter 11: Notes

1. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.155.
2. Ibid.
3. Dempster to Fergusson, 10 November 1786: ibid., p.157.
4. William Ramsay W. S. to Dempster, 8 July 1786: Dempster Muniments, vol.5 item1.
5. Private letter Dr Malcolm Bangor-Jones to Mrs Stokes of Ashenden, Kent. For Over-Skibo, see also Dempster to James Home, 10 July 1795: Dempster Muniments, vol.5 item26. For the history of Skibo, see William Calder, The Estate and Castle of Skibo (1949), chapter 4; and of Over-Skibo, Peter Gray, Skibo. Its Lairds and History (1906), pp. 57-63.
6. Calder, Skibo, p.31.
7. For James Guthrie, see Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.213 n.1.
8. Guthrie to Dempster, 13 November 1786: Dempster Muniments, vol.1 item 9.
9. Fergusson to Dempster, 31 October 1786: ibid., vol.1 item 8.
10. Dempster to Fergusson, 10 November 1786: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.157-158.
11. Sutherland and Gilchrist to Dempster, 5 December 1786: Dempster Muniments, vol.1 item 11.
12. Fraser to Dempster, 9 December 1786: ibid., vol.1 item12.
13. Fraser to Dempster, 6 November 1786 and 26 November 1786: ibid., vol.5 items 4 and 6. John Gallie to Fraser, 7 December 1786: ibid., vol.5 item 8.
14. Fraser to Dempster, 14 December 1786, 20 December 1786, 9 January 1787, 15 February 1787, 18 February 1787, 27 February 1787 and 24 March 1787: ibid., vol.1 items13-16,18,20. Fraser to Dempster, 19 October 1786, 6 November 1786, 26 November 1786, 28 December 1786: ibid., vol. 5 items 3, 4, 6, 10.
15. Fraser to Dempster, 14 December 1786: ibid., vol.1 item 13.
16. Fraser to Dempster, 15 February 1787: ibid., vol.1 item16.
17. Dempster to Fergusson, 23 August 1787: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.165-166.
18. Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol. 8 (1793), pp.375-378.
19. Ibid., pp.375-376.

20. Ibid., pp.376-379.
21. Ibid., p.378.
22. Ibid., pp.380-381.
23. Dempster to Fergusson, 2 November 1791: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.208-209.
24. Dempster to Fergusson, 9 January 1794: ibid., p.247.
25. Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.8 (1793), pp.377 and 383.
26. Sinclair B. Calder, 'The Industrial Archaeology of Sutherland. A Scottish Highland Economy 1700-1900' (unpublished MLitt thesis for the University of Strathclyde, 2 vols. 1974), vol.2 pp.165-166.
27. Smout, 'Landowner and the Planned Village', pp.73-106; see especially p.77.
28. Calder, 'Industrial Archaeology', vol.2 p.163. For an account of the Skibo villages see pp.160-185.
29. For Macintosh see George Stewart, Curiosities of Glasgow Citizenship, pp.65-92; for Turkey red dyeing see Naomi E. A. Tarrant, 'The Turkey Red Dyeing Industry in the Vale of Leven'; in Butt and Ponting (editors), Scottish Textile History, pp.37-47.
30. Macintosh to Dugald Gilchrist, 2 April 1792: Calder, 'Industrial Archaeology', p.163; citing Lyon Papers [which now form part of SRO, Gilchrist of Ospisdale Papers, GD153].
31. Sinclair, Statistical Account., vol.8 p.377.
32. Calder, 'Industrial Archaeology', vol.2 pp.166-166a. for brief details of each of the shareholders see pp.166-168.
33. 'Contract of Co-partnership of Balnoe Co., 1792': Calder, 'Industrial Archaeology', vol.2 p.168; citing Lyon Papers.
34. Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.8 p.383.
35. A full description of the mill in its present condition, by G. D. Hay, together with a photographic survey, is held by the Royal Commission on the Ancient & Historic Monuments of Scotland, Edinburgh, from which the details in the text have been taken.
36. Dempster to Fergusson, 9 September 1792: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.223.
37. 'Balnoe Co. Balance Sheet 1 November 1794': Calder, 'Industrial Archaeology', vol.2 p.170; citing Lyon Papers.
38. Dempster to Fergusson, 9 September 1792: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.223.

39. Dempster to Fergusson, 27 November 1794: ibid., p.251.
40. Sinclair to Charles Fergusson, 12 May 1791: Dempster Muniments, vol.3 item 4.
41. Fergusson to Dempster, 14 May 1791: ibid., vol.3 item 5.
42. Dempster to Captain J. H. Dempster, 9 June 1791: ibid., vol.3 item 7.
43. Dempster to Fergusson, 14 October 1791: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.206.
44. Ibid.
45. 'Balnoe Co. Balance Sheet', Calder, 'Industrial Archaeology', pp.170-171, citing Lyon Papers.
46. Calder, 'Industrial Archaeology', p.171; for the slump, see Edwards, Growth of the British Cotton Trade, pp.51-55.
47. Calder, 'Industrial Archaeology', p.174.
48. Macintosh to Dempster, 11 December 1805: Dempster Muniments, vol.8, item 10.
49. Robert Owen, The Life of Robert Owen, by Himself (1920), pp.100 and 104.
50. Macintosh to Dempster, 11 December 1805: Dempster Muniments, vol.8 item 10.
51. Ibid.
52. Dempster to Macintosh, 11 October 1803: private collection of Dr Ian Boyle.
53. Calder, 'Industrial Archaeology', p.178.
54. R. Southey, Journal of a Tour in Scotland in 1819 (1929, edited by C. H. Herford), pp.132-133.
55. Ibid.
56. Sinclair, Statistical Account, vol.8 (1793), p.377.
57. Captain J. H. Dempster to Dempster, [undated but almost certainly 1796]: Dempster Muniments, vol.6 item 2.
58. Edinburgh Advertiser, 1 and 15 April 1800; cited by Calder, 'Industrial Archaeology', p.186.
59. New Statistical Account, vol.15, p.21.
60. Dempster to Fergusson, 27 November 1794: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.251. For the Newton Point venture, see Calder, 'Industrial Archaeology', pp.185-186.

61. New Statistical Account, vol.15. The account of Domoch occupies pp.1-16 and that of Creich pp. 17-23.
62. Ibid., p.4.
63. Dempster to Sinclair, 12 September 1790: SRO, RH4/49/2/238.
64. Dempster to Sinclair, 22 March 1791: ibid., RH4/49/2/241-242.
65. Dempster to Sinclair, 11 February 1791: ibid., RH4/49/2/243-246.
66. Ibid.
67. For the foundation of the British Wool Society, see Mitchison, Agricultural Sir John, p.115. For Sinclair's enthusiasm for sheep farming, see chapter 9.
68. Dempster to Sinclair, 25 September 1791: SRO, RH4/49/2/247-251.
69. Mitchison, Agricultural Sir John, p.27.
70. Ibid., p.92.
71. Dempster to Sinclair, 10 June 1792: SRO, RH4/49/2/251-252.
72. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.312.
73. Dempster to Sinclair, 14 February 1793: SRO, RH4/49/2/255-258.
74. Ibid.
75. For the history of this proposal, see Mitchison, Agricultural Sir John, pp.135-136 and chapter 11.
76. Dempster to Sinclair, 16 May 1793: SRO, RH4/49/2/253-254.
77. Dempster to Sinclair, 22 October 1810: ibid., RH4/49/2/352-353.
78. Dempster to Sinclair, 11 January 1814: ibid., RH4/49/2/379.
79. Sinclair to Dempster, 15 January 1814: ibid., RH4/49/2/374-375.
80. Anderson to Dempster, various dates: Dempster Muniments, vol.5 items 30-32, 34.
81. Anderson to Dempster, 1 March 1796: ibid., vol.5 item 30.
82. Dempster to Fergusson, 14 October 1791: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.205.
83. Dempster to Fergusson, 2 November 1791: ibid., p.209.

84. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.206 n.2; Tinker, Letters of James Boswell, vol.2 p.434.
85. Dempster to Fergusson, 2 November 1791: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.207-208.
86. The earliest mention of Mrs Jean Hamilton Dempster's illness seems to be in Dempster to Captain J. H. Dempster, 10 October 1790: Dempster Muniments, vol.1 item 38.
87. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.204.
88. Dempster to Captain J. H. Dempster, 28 November 1790: Dempster Muniments, vol.1 item 43.
89. Dempster to Fergusson, 14 October 1791: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.205.
90. Miss [Christian] Dalrymple of Hailes, Private Annals of my Own Time (1914), pp.11-12.
91. Dempster to Fergusson, 29 April 1798: ibid., p.268.
92. Ibid., pp.268-269; memorial tablet [still surviving] in Dunnichen church.
93. George Dempster to Captain John Ramsay, 17 May 1798: Dempster Muniments, vol.5 item 36.
94. Dempster to Fergusson, 5 July [dated thus but actually August] and 14 August 1799; Fergusson to Dempster, 10 August 1799: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.274-281.
95. Dempster to Fergusson, 5 July [August] 1799: ibid., pp.274-275.
96. Dempster to Fergusson, 27 November 1794; ibid., p.252.
97. Fergusson to Dempster, 10 August 1799: ibid., pp. 276-278.
98. See, for example, Dempster to Pinkerton, 18 July 1789: Dawson Turner (editor), The Literary Correspondence of John Pinkerton Esq. (2 vols.1830), vol.1 p.219.
99. Dempster to Fergusson, 17 November 1800: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.283-284.
100. Dempster to Soper Dempster, 3 February 1802: Dempster Muniments, vol.6 item 28; Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.287.
101. Dempster to Fergusson, 18 June 1801: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.288.
102. Ibid., p.287; Dempster himself wrote an account of the loss of the Earl Talbot in a letter to the daughter of an old parliamentary friend, William Smith: Dempster to Miss Smith, 5 July 1813, NLS, Ms.5319 ff.157-158.

103. Dempster to Soper, 3 February 1802: Dempster Muniments, vol.6 item 28.
104. Dempster to Fergusson, 18 June 1801: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.287-289.

CHAPTER 12

THE LAST YEARS: DUNNICHEN AND ST ANDREWS

The loss of John Hamilton Dempster and his family formed a turning point in Dempster's life. Although he continued to visit Skibo he henceforth confined his agricultural improvement activities to Dunnichen and its environs. Skibo and Pulrossie were inherited by Captain Dempster's natural daughter, Harriet Milton Dempster, who returned to Scotland with her husband to claim it. Her origins are unknown, there being no previous mention of her in Dempster's correspondence, not even in the considerable body of surviving letters between him and his brother. One of Harriet's grand-daughters, Charlotte Louisa Hawkins-Dempster, averred that Harriet's mother was Olivia Marianne Devenish, afterwards the first wife of Sir Stamford Raffles.¹ James Fergusson is almost certainly correct in refuting this allegation, on the grounds of chronology alone.² Harriet herself was named after the ship Harriet in which her father, as second mate, made two voyages to Jamaica in the early 1770's.³

What is known is that Captain Dempster carried her with him on his last voyage delivering her safely in Bombay in August 1800.⁴ Once there she seems to have lost little time in falling in love with and marrying an up-and-coming East India Company writer, William Soper (b.1763). He came originally from Ashburton in Devon and had amassed a considerable fortune in India. On taking possession of the Skibo estates he and Harriet added the name of Dempster to their own, in accordance with the terms of a deed of entail made by Captain Dempster in 1799.⁵

Dempster thought highly of both the Soper-Dempsters and formed a close relationship with them. They formed in his eyes a replacement family for the one he had just lost, and he

continued to be on very affectionate terms with them for the rest of his life. In 1802 Dempster wrote to William Soper describing Harriet in very complimentary terms (this in fact was the first mention of her in his correspondence):

“Herriott [sic - Dempster often referred to her thus] was my guest & darling some years before you saw her and I congratulate you on holding in your Arms a virtuous Girl with a tender & feeling Heart and no small share of Goodsense”⁶

Dempster’s feelings towards both the Soper-Dempsters, in the years immediately after their return to Scotland, are evident from the following passage from a letter to Sir Adam Fergusson:

“Since I wrote you last my niece, Captain Dempster’s daughter, and her husband are come home from India. Ever since their return we have been mutual guests to one another. We with them last autumn for 3 months at Skibo, they with us here before and since that time. Before the prospect of her noble succession and during her father and brother’s life time Mr Soper (now Soper Dempster) had taken a fancy for and married her, so that he is exempted from all suspicion of fortune hunting. He is a Devonshire man, son of an eminent clothier in Ashburton - had been 20 years in the Company’s civil service and an esteemed and trusted servant. In the service he has pickt up a competent little fortune of his own, a Colonel Duncan kind of fortune. But health joined to the legacy brought both home. They wish to consider my wife as a mother and me as a father. They live with us as our children and none could be more dutifull. They both ratified a donation of Captain D.’s to me of £300 a year for life. But as I am not sure but I am richer already than they are I have suspended my acceptance of it. It forms an army of reserve, and helps to relieve my mind from my uneasiness about money matters - if it had any. She promises in two months to make her husband a father likewise, which the entail of the estate renders a most desirable object - if a child wanted any additional cause of endearment to its own parents. Soper Dempster is an elegant, good-temper’d, sensible, wise and frugal man, self-educated as far as our English classics, our poets and essayists can confer the title of being educated. He also plays most wind instruments with great taste. They form a steady evening party at whist with my wife and me. Do you wonder, Sir Adam, if I consider them as comforts sent me directly from Heaven to repair in some degree the dreadfull loss of your niece, her husband and promising progeny - my dear George?”⁷

Colonel Duncan was probably Alexander Duncan of St Fort, Fife, provost of St Andrews 1783-1793. He was an old friend of Dempster’s and received a favourable mention in Dempster’s will.⁸ The reference to Captain Dempster’s £300 a year for life concerns the

winding-up of his estate, during which Dempster, to his evident embarrassment, had had to delicately inform William Soper that Captain Dempster had agreed to give Dempster £300 per year for life as part of the arrangements for the purchase of Skibo and Pulrossie.⁹ As can be seen, in typical fashion Dempster eventually decided to forego this payment, although holding his entitlement to it in reserve in case of any deterioration in his own financial circumstances.

Dempster and his wife continued to make regular, and lengthy, visits to Skibo and the Soper-Dempsters for their part made reciprocal trips to Dunnichen and took an active interest in Dempster's activities there. William Soper-Dempster had taken over the management of Skibo and seems to have departed somewhat from Dempster's benevolent approach; although he never evicted a tenant he found it necessary to prohibit squatters (Dempster had welcomed them) and, on the death of a crofter he consolidated holdings and prevented the automatic succession of a relative.¹⁰ The population necessarily declined, thus dissolving the dreams of Dempster, and Soper-Dempster's popularity declined also, not helped by his manner and bearing which, in contrast to Dempster's opinion, reportedly were haughty and arrogant.¹¹

Although Dempster now confined his activities to Dunnichen, James Fergusson is probably wrong to ascribe this entirely to a loss of spirit following his brother's family's extinction.¹² It is likely that increasing stiffness of limbs and other infirmities consequent upon increasing age were another factor that disinclined him to travel as much as formerly. The subject of his health cropped up frequently in his correspondence from now on.

In February 1802, Dempster wrote to William Soper:

"I am now in my 70th. year & the loss of my dear nephew and the too certain & well founded Apprehensions for having lost his Father also, has quick'ned the pace of my decline very fast, and Herriot will tell you how unwieldly and breathless I was before she left me."¹³

To Graham of Fintry he wrote in March 1802:

“A Fat man is not like a fat ox. There is not much breaking up in him. I am told the operation when once begun goes on very fast. I have already lost the sight of one of my Eyes, and I hear very indifferently with one of [crossed out] both my Ears, and my memory has failed me to a degree that surprizes myself. The last 14 or 15 months have been very fatiguing ones...”¹⁴

By his own admission Dempster in his later years was very much overweight; he several times referred to his weight as 18 stones, substantial for someone of middling height.¹⁵ As early as 1788 he was complaining to Alexander Carlyle:

“You are a year older than me and I at Fifty six am so unwieldy and so stiff that I could hardly stoop to take up all the Honours of the Crown were they laid at my Feet.”¹⁶

However, while physical infirmity may have caused him to be more confined to Dunnichen he had lost none of his zeal for public projects. In this same year, 1802, he rebuilt the church at Dunnichen, the third building to exist on the site and which still stands. In the same year he restored the old well of Saint Causan, renaming it Camperdown Well in token of his admiration for the brother of his friend Provost Alexander Duncan. In October 1797 Admiral Adam Duncan, first Viscount Duncan, had won a notable naval victory against the Dutch at Camperdown.¹⁷ The following year, on 4 July 1803 (the choice of the date of the Declaration of American Independence may be only coincidental) Dempster founded ‘The Lunan and Vinney Farming Society’, naming it after the two principal burns on the Dunnichen estate.¹⁸ Thirty-four members, including Dempster himself, attended the first meeting and the membership in later years reached a peak of about 80. The members tended to be Dempster’s own friends and neighbours in the local farming and landowning community. The society’s only activity was the holding of an annual meeting, the proceedings taking the form of a formal meal, usually commencing at 3.00pm, followed by speeches and discussion on agricultural

matters. The meal presumably enabled those present to sample the agricultural produce they were there to discuss - it was made clear from time to time in the minutes that everything consumed, including alcoholic beverages, was of local origin.¹⁹

At the inaugural meeting Dempster was unanimously elected 'Perpetual Preses' and James Roger was elected secretary. Roger had become ministerial assistant at Dunnichen and shared Dempster's enthusiasm for agricultural affairs. The two of them collaborated in the compilation of the Dunnichen parish report for Sinclair's Statistical Account and Roger also served with some distinction as reporter to the Board of Agriculture, for whom he provided a report on Forfarshire.²⁰ In 1804 he became minister of Dunino in Fife, but contrary to James Fergusson's assertion²¹ this did not mean he severed his connections with the society: as is clear from the minute book, he remained its secretary and continued to attend the meetings.

The meetings discussed a wide range of agricultural matters, including the importance of improving the breeds of cattle, horses and sheep; of preventing the smuggling and consumption of "foreign spirits, & several other foreign articles which drain our pockets, when we might find substitutes of our own country growth, to answer the purpose";²² the best ways of eliminating weeds, especially wild mustard, from the soil; the importance of a proper rotation of crops; and the advantages of growing such novelties as Swedish turnips and various new types of grain crop. Dempster himself invariably opened the proceedings (following the meal) by making a speech in which he generally tried to introduce some new piece of information of interest to the members. He clearly enjoyed making these speeches, which gave him an outlet for his talents in public speaking denied him since his retirement from politics. In the first of these ("a short but masterly speech" according to James Roger in the minutes) Dempster

"wished it to be marked how much he valued the honour of being made Chairman in such a meeting; on the importance of agriculture in general he

judged it unnecessary there to dwell, where he took it for granted it was understood by all, that the promoting of it tended to the good of the Proprietor, tenant & public at large. He shewed how beneficial Institutions like the present were. They excite enquiry, diffuse knowledge & stimulate zeal. They were the parents of Kindness & good neighbourhood, & proved a cement to Society."²³

The atmosphere at these meetings was very convivial, almost certainly encouraged by Dempster, who would have had pleasant memories of similar gatherings of the Select Society and the Poker Club. Innumerable toasts were drunk towards the close of the proceedings, along the lines of "Prosperity to the Plough; The Cow; the horse & the purse; May the first Feast of the Lunan & Vinney water Farming Society not be the last; may all its members live in unbroken harmony forever."²⁴ Roger's concluding remarks to the minute of the first meeting were to be echoed many times later, and give a flavour of the feeling of goodfellowship which imbued the proceedings:

"The meeting broke up between the hours of seven and eight in the evening; and never did any agricultural association exhibit more union of affection, more of the 'feast of reason & the flow of soul' than did the first Farmer feast of Lunan & Vinney water."²⁵

However, also as with the Select Society and the Poker Club, Dempster saw his new society as having a serious purpose behind the conviviality and banter. A sense of this is gained from his opening address quoted above; he saw the society, like others springing up at the same time, as being a vehicle for new ideas and new information, and as a means of persuading others to adopt the agricultural reforms he had himself practised. At the second meeting, in July 1804, he presented the members with a carefully worked out series of four crop rotations, including one suited to clay soil, and linked with this was a set of five 'Golden Rules', the whole comprising a kind of manifesto of his principles with regard to the stewardship of farmland:

- “1. Keep your land Clean [i.e. free from weeds]
2. Keep your land Dry
3. Keep your land Rich [i.e. well limed and manured]
4. Never take two corn crops running

5. Better dung well than rest long."²⁶

The enthusiasm engendered by these meetings can be gauged from their length - this one was typical and having started at 3.00pm it did not end until between 7.00pm and 8.00pm. Dempster's own popularity in the locality is demonstrated in the following extract from the minutes of the 1807 meeting (making allowance for their having been composed by James Roger, whose admiration for Dempster seems to have verged on adulation):

"On Mr Dempster leaving the room, his health was drunk standing by every gentleman present, with the utmost warmth & with three times three cheers. All present felt a respect approaching to veneration for a gentleman who at the advanced age of seventy-five possesses the same ardour for every patriotic improvement as ever; still puts on the same agreeable manner by which he gained all he asks; & displays the same persuasive eloquence by which he influenced Senates."²⁷

Although playing the leading role, Dempster characteristically did not attempt to dominate the proceedings. Discussion was unconstrained and other members were able to make important contributions; James Roger, for example, read a paper to the second meeting and James Headrick, appointed minister at Dunnichen in 1807, gave a similar address to the society at its eleventh meeting in 1813. Headrick (1759-1841) was an expert writer on agriculture and was an assistant and correspondent of Sinclair's during the compilation of the Statistical Account. He remained minister of Dunnichen until 1837, a period of thirty years.²⁸

At the fifth meeting, held on 17 August 1807, the proceedings were augmented by a display of livestock and this became a regular feature of the meetings thereafter. Four years later, in 1811, Dempster at his own expense presented gold and silver medals as premiums for the exhibits judged to be the best of their kind. Four gold medals were awarded, including one to Dempster himself for the best cow of the Teeswater breed.²⁹

Although now rarely moving much beyond the bounds of Dunnichen, Dempster maintained an extensive and varied correspondence, and encouraged people to visit him at Dunnichen. Inevitably time was taking its toll of his relatives and friends. On 18 November 1803 Dempster's last surviving brother, John, died at Dunnichen and his sister, Ann, died at Bath in 1805.³⁰ His contemporaries among his neighbours were also passing away, leaving in their place a new and unfamiliar generation: "all my neighbours around have left me. The surrounding estates are occupied by the children and grand-children of their former owners, whom I do not understand half so well as their forefathers."³¹ Dempster himself developed what he described as a chronic bowel disorder, which appears to have been similar to dysentery; he fell severely ill with this in 1805³² and a recurrence in 1807 confined him to bed for 70 days.³³ On the latter occasion he was still sufficiently an invalid to have to leave early from the Lunan and Vinney Society meeting of that year.³⁴ On both occasions, fortunately, he made a full recovery from what he clearly thought was his death-bed as a letter to Henry Dundas (by now Viscount Melville) indicates:

"I have not enjoyed so much health as I have done since last summer [1807], that I peeped into the Grave, and did not much admire its Accommodations. Since that I have used a more spare Diet, and that chiefly farinaceous, and a more regular Exercise than formerly. These two prescriptions are the Quintessence of Sir John Sinclair's four Quarter Volumes on Health and Longevity."³⁵

Dempster's correspondents during this period include, of course, Sir Adam Fergusson, and also Sir John Sinclair. His correspondence with Graham of Fintry petered out after about 1801, although there is one surviving letter, of 1811, the tone of which suggests that Dempster had been in regular contact in the intervening period. Dempster appears to have tried to build up a circle of new correspondents, particularly from among his friends from his parliamentary days. These included Henry Dundas (now Viscount Melville) with whom prior to 1800 the only letters had been of a strictly formal variety, but to whom he now started to write a series of

letters which although still being mainly about business matters are nonetheless notable for their friendly and intimate tone. For example, in one of the earliest of these, written in October 1802, he wrote:

“I had heard of your disagreeable accident from a fall as you passed thro’ our County & regreted accordingly being deprived thereby of the chance of seeing you. But I hope you are now restored to the use of your Limbs. I shan’t consider you as a Farmer in earnest till I see you quietly seated for Life in that Hospital of Incurables as it is said, Lord Chatham stiled the House of Lords [Dundas became Viscount Melville and Baron Dunira on Christmas Eve 1802].”³⁶

Another correspondence that started up at this time was with William Smith, MP for Sudbury and later Norwich, a merchant and an old parliamentary friend of Dempster’s. Dempster first wrote to him recommending a young friend of Dempster’s from Dundee and hoping that Smith might be able to offer him some employment as a travelling salesman.³⁷ From this developed an intermittent but very friendly correspondence and in 1809 Smith and his wife joined the Dempsters as guests of the Soper-Dempsters at Skibo.³⁸ William Smith shared Dempster’s enthusiasm for fisheries, road building and other Highland improvements. He had become one of the directors of the British Fisheries Society in 1789 and later deputy governor from 1806 to 1835.³⁹ In 1802 he was appointed as one of the commissioners of Highland roads and bridges, much to Dempster’s delight (in expressing this he seems to have become muddled as to the titles of the two bodies):

“I most sincerely rejoiced on observing you had been added to the Comm[issione]rs of our British Fisheries and composed one of the original Commission for the Caledonial [sic] Canal and the more immediately usefull purpose of making Roads and Bridges thro’ our immense Tract of Highlands and over our Highland Rivers & Torrents. Be assured My Dear Sir you will find a large fund of agreeable occupation at those Boards and are providing a still larger source of agreeable recollections for Old Age. You are making many human creatures happy & your Country great. You are opening resources of population and production of an extent that few are aware of.”⁴⁰

For Dempster, now retired from public life, this correspondence afforded an opportunity to make his views known where they could be effective and to influence the work of these bodies. Smith, for his part, probably also welcomed Dempster's letters, for although genuinely desirous of benefiting the Highlands he had no personal knowledge of either the land or the people. His only previous connection with the area was that his father had sent presents of tea and other luxuries to Flora Macdonald when she was confined in the Tower.⁴¹

From time to time Dempster also heard from long lost friends whose letters would have brought back pleasant memories. One such was Grimur Thorkelin, with whom Dempster had ceased corresponding some years previously. In April 1806 Thorkelin wrote to Dempster:

"I am not yet dead, nor do I ever forget you; one of my three sons [Thorkelin had married in 1793], George Dempster, a hopeful youth, reminds me of you every day, and makes me ardently wish, that he may resemble his dear namesake."⁴²

It is a startling indication of Thorkelin's high regard for Dempster that he should have named one of his sons after him (see p.190), particularly since such a name would sit oddly among Thorkelin's Scandinavian neighbours. Dempster clearly appreciated the honour; the following year, shortly after his illness, Dempster in reply apologised for the delay and wrote:

"I learn you are become a married man and have Honour'd me with the name of some of the Fruits of your marriage for which I thank you and pray for the Prosperity of my God Son. Your friends [for whom Thorkelin's letter had served as an introduction] found me recovering miraculously from a violent Dysentery, which however has left me and at the Age of 75 in a weakly State insomuch that writing has been forbidden me."⁴³

It does not appear that Dempster paid much attention to his doctor's advice - in addition to this letter to Thorkelin he had only four days previously written a long letter to Sir Adam Fergusson.⁴⁴

Another occasional correspondent was the Reverend Samuel Heming, his wife's nephew, rector of Drayton in Leicestershire. A letter to him of July 1806 gives a delightful glimpse of Dempster's life at Dunnichen at this period; despite his recurring bouts of illness and the loss of many family members and friends, Dempster was still surrounded by a good crowd of relatives which, given his love of company of any kind, must have been a particular pleasure to him:

"Come, Sam, and see the robust Health of the dying man whose bedside you attended so Dutifully last year. Harriet & her 4 Babbys are with us Charlotte & her Three Girls & Governess & Kitty Bur[rington]. This with your Aunt composes our Family. I stand in need of an Additional Confessor - companion at least to this nunnery. ... We are going tonight to the Beefsteak [The Beefsteak Club in Forfar] & Soper Dempster is gone to see his Friends in Devonshire for a start. We are thinking of passing a few weeks at the Ferry [Broughty Ferry] for Seabathing, but nothing is as yet decided."⁴⁵

Dempster also obtained great pleasure and solace from reading the books in his library. Throughout his life he had been an avid reader of both books and newspapers and it is clear that in old age these continued to provide sustenance for his lively mind:

"But in a library [sic] of my favourite authors I find a never failing resource and daily discover new beauties that I had either never observed or which is more probable had forgotten, which is nearly the same thing. Eighteen volumes of Cicero, with Pliny's Natural History, the Encyclopaedia of antiquity, prove never failing resources to me."⁴⁶

In 1808 Dempster's penchant for writing verse reappeared and his letters to Sir Adam Fergusson and Sir John Sinclair, and even Henry Dundas, were henceforth peppered with epigrams and verses of varying length and quality. Dempster's annual new year greetings were delayed that year as a result, as he reported to Sir Adam:

"I have delay'd two months later than usual to ask how you do in the year 1808, and to wish you may live to see at least the year 1880, and in good health and spirits. You would guess for ever, before you hit upon the cause of my silence. So to save you so much fruitless trouble, please know, that neither being able nor willing to transport my frail body to an Italian or Madeira winter climate, I imported one from Newcastle. By means of three Franklyn's stoves in my drawing room, little dining room, and study, kept in perpetual

activity, and by never quitting this apartment, I have not breathed one mouthfull of air colder than 52 on Fahrenheit thermometer. This change of climate has work'd a no less extraordinary change in my mind. It has revived a poetical tendency which broke forth in the early part of my life, and manifested itself again when we lived some 53 years ago in Lisle Street. Business, politics, sickness and idleness, and folly, and health, have all conspired to cover, but not extinguish this feeble spark. To my own surprize, when heated to a certain pitch, it broke out again in January last, not, indeed, so like a fire as a sore. It occasioned such an itching for rhyme as to keep me continually scratching the sore part with my pen. When I bid it write a friendly letter to Sir Adam Fergusson, behold it produced me the inclosed Familiar Epistle to Sir John Sinclair. A short prose apology, says I, then, to Sir Adam, that he mayn't think me unkind - behold, a second and a third Familiar Epistle. Be it never so short, write some thing to my friend - there again - a batch of epigrams, and I declare upon the solemn word of a gentleman poetaster it was not till March was well advanced, that I could write a common receipt to a tenant in plain prose."⁴⁷

Over the following few years Dempster bombarded Sir Adam with sheets of verse, much of it doggerel but some of undoubted ingenuity and quality. He launched "Familiar Epistles" in the direction of Lord Melville (Henry Dundas) and in particular Sir John Sinclair. These were among his best efforts at poetry; for example, one of several to Sir John Sinclair:

"A flattering familiar Epistle to the Right Hon[ourable] Sir John Sinclair Bart.

Crown, Sir John, your usefull Labours,
For th' improvement of your neighbours:
Crown your merit with the nation,
By a work on Education.

Thus having shewn us how to lengthen
Life, and all its powers to strengthen:
Proved our Goods are just as wisely sold,
For tattered Paper, as for sterling Gold:

And swell'd the Farmer's Purse with gains,
Oh! mend our Hearts & whet our Brains!
Your worth at length is to our Sov'reign known,
He sees & calls you to approach his Throne:
Plants you a star, in that bright Constellation,
That gilds the Throne, and guides the nation.

Tho
To Thurso Castle now retire
The seat of your respected sire
There may your offspring prove your Pride

And their sweet Mother still your blooming Bride -⁴⁸

One of the most interesting, as well as being one of the best, was a poem entitled 'Bragadocio' in which Dempster reviewed in self-mocking style his own efforts at improving the lot of the Highlanders. Dempster seems to have spent some time over it for there are several versions, none of them complete, and at least one has had further revisions by Dempster superimposed on it:

"Bragadocio - a Satire
January 7th 1809

I who erst saved the Highlanders from want,
And taught them how to plough, to build and plant;
Attack'd the feudal dragon in his den,
And of his slaves made valiant Highland men:
Illum'd by night their seas, and coast, and bays,
With all the splendour of a moontide blaze;
Of sea port towns the first foundations laid:
Towns, the resort of freedom, arts, and trade;
Plann'd a canal with many a costly lock,
Surpassing far the coast of Languedock:
Tho' old, still active in the Highland cause,
I drew my pen to give it English laws,
In vain I tried the Highlanders to keep
From being devour'd by flocks of Lowland sheep;
But rage for rent extinguished every thought
For men who bravely had our battles fought.

"How oft to all my Highland friends I've said,
'Oh, quit your gibb'rish, bagpipe, kilt and plaid.
For how can union ever be found among
Two people, strangers to each other's tongue?
Your pipes seem groaning to our nicer ears;
Your dress, to ladys, nakedness appears' —⁴⁹

Fergusson was singularly unappreciative of these poems - at one point he seems to have begged Dempster to send no more;⁵⁰ it made no difference, for Dempster continued to send them with undiminished enthusiasm. Sir John Sinclair and Viscount Melville, however, seem to have been pleased enough to receive them. Sinclair, indeed, wrote: "I am glad to find that you have not

given up your Poetical Exertions”,⁵¹ and endorsed the Epistle quoted above “Poetical Effusions”.

In June 1809 Dempster demonstrated a revival of his physical abilities to match those as a poet when he and his wife attended a ball given by the Forfar Beefsteak Club. This apparently was an annual event.⁵² His wife wrote the following account of it to her nephew:

“Much of our time since we parted with you and our other friends has been taken up with paying off an old score and numerous sets of visits, and we have cut a figure at our Forfar Beef Stake [sic] party. Mr Dempster assi[sted] Mrs Ogilvy in directing it, and he (Mr D.) insisted that the ball should be opened by a reel danced by him, and Mrs O., and Mr Ogilvy [Walter Ogilvy of Clova (1733-1819)] and your humble servant, both the gentlemen the same age. After the reel Mr Dempster beg’d to observe no excuse need be offered by the rest of the gentlemen for not dancing. I never saw Mr D. in greater spirits and no young man could have gone thro’ the task with more attention and good humour.”⁵³

Early in July 1809 the Dempsters travelled north to pay an extended visit to Skibo, remaining there over the winter. Dempster enjoyed being at Skibo as much as ever; his new year epistle to Sir Adam Fergusson of the following January was high-spirited in tone, and he was even able to make light of the numerous deaths over the previous few years of family and friends:

“Again, thanks to God, I am able to send you, and you to receive, the good wishes of another New Year, and to wish you with much sincerity many happy returns of the season. We are got into the hottest of the battle that Death wages against us mortals. Almost all my comrades of our corps have fallen, or are falling round us. Our ranks are thinning, as if the engagement were in the plains of Talavera de la Regna, and Lord Wellington our commanding officer. [A reference to Wellington’s costly victory at Talavera in the summer of 1809]. ... I am passing the winter on my most favourite spot on this earth - Mrs D. and me -... We had reason to expect the roads to have been blown up with snow, and vitrified with ice. Yet we can hardly be said to have seen ice or snow this year. Our Kyle might vie with the Rhoan [Rhone] or the Ebro. I never remember so mild a winter. It admits of our being a-horseback every day.”⁵⁴

Dempster's parliamentary friend, William Smith, and his family paid a visit to Skibo at this time, arriving sometime in late October-early November 1809 and, after a trip by sea to see Sir John Sinclair, departing the following spring.⁵⁵ No sooner had they left than a double tragedy struck: both Rose Dempster and Harriet Soper-Dempster fell seriously ill. In Rose Dempster's case, the illness proved so serious that from the start there was very little hope of recovery. William Soper-Dempster, on 27 May 1810, wrote to Samuel Heming:

"Mr D[empster] takes her out in the carriage as often as the weather and her strength will permit, but even in doing so, and while she is getting her cloaths put on, fainting fits frequently intervene - Mr D's hopes of her recovery seem daily to lessen."⁵⁶

Rose Dempster died on 10 July 1810 and her body was brought south to Dunnichen to be laid to rest at Restenneth Priory, the funeral taking place on 21 July.⁵⁷ Once again, as with the death of young George, such troubles did not arrive singly. During Mrs Dempster's illness the health of Harriet Soper-Dempster was giving equal cause for concern; she had contracted the same tuberculosis which had already cut such a swathe through Dempster's immediate family. Also as with young George, it was hoped that the milder climate of southern England would provide a cure and at the end of July 1810 the Soper-Dempsters headed south to Devonshire while Dempster himself returned to Dunnichen, accompanied by Charlotte Boddam who had broken off a holiday in Yarmouth on hearing the news of Mrs Dempster's death.⁵⁸ On 17 October 1810 Harriet died in her husband's native town, Ashburton in Devon.⁵⁹

The sudden and unexpected illness and death of his wife induced temporary confusion in Dempster; he wrote to Samuel Heming "What the sequel of my life will be, how long it will last, where, and how it will be spent, none but God knows. I do not."⁶⁰ Her death affected him deeply at the time, though not as much as that of young George. In the immediate aftermath he wrote to Sir Adam Fergusson:

“My poor wife has left me very inopportunately, and deprived me of my good nurse, at the edge of my second cradle, and when I had use for all her talents as a nurse, and hardly for any thing else in the world. We lived very contentedly together for thirty and six years. It was my right to have preceded her, but it is my destiny to be the survivor. At our ages we are so familiarized with the loss of friends and relations, that we might grow as callous as sextons and grave diggers, but we do not. I went to church last Sunday where our minister [James Headrick] concluded his sermon by a few sentences adapted to the occasion of his having lost one of his most constant attenders. They were elegantly expressed, and so full of beauty and truth, that they drew irresistibly tears over my iron cheeks, and defied the stoick precept.”⁶¹

Dempster’s old friend and neighbour James Guthrie wrote to Soper-Dempster shortly afterwards to express his condolences, and while doing so mentioned that Dempster was still suffering from the after-effects of his wife’s death:

“I am sorry to tell you I do not think our excellent friend Mr Dempster so well as when you left Dunnichen. His spirits appetite & sleep are more variable for the worse. I lately accompanied him a week’s tour among our friends at the foot of the Grampians, and he recovered exceedingly but his complaints have returned upon him, and we have another jaunt in contemplation... I think it necessary that he keep moving...”⁶²

Towards the end of the year in a letter to William Smith, Dempster summarized the family’s misfortunes in the following terms:

“You had hardly [left us] when in answer to separate consultations, Dr Gregory of Edin^r. sent us a confidential Line, to prepare S[oper] Dempster & me, for the worst: for that his wife was consumptive, & mine had water in her Pericardium, which would sooner or later stop the Motions of her Heart, and a better hardly ever beat in a Human Breast. His predictions proved Oracular. God allowed me to enjoy my Sweet Heart, but has taken away my nurse from me when stepping into my second Cradle - His will be done. She was 16 years younger than me. I had in my folly allotted her at least that number of years to survive me, for her last Distemper was her first in the Course of 36 years uninterrupted Health. But I’ll do in writing this letter as I have done very often since 5th July last. I’ll away to another subject very foreign to the present.”⁶³

By this time Dempster had made a substantial recovery from the shock of losing his wife.

Charlotte Boddam (née Burrington) had taken on the role of housekeeper at Dunnichen and thus re-established the stability of his domestic life.⁶⁴ She, having gone to India in 1795, had

there married Charles Boddam, a collector of revenue at the time, who later became a judge at Chupra, Bengal. In 1806, for the sake of her health, she had returned to Britain with their four children.⁶⁵ In a lively postscript to the letter just quoted Dempster demonstrated that he was by no means absorbed in self-pity but that he was taking as active an interest in political and world affairs as ever:

“It may not be unentertaining to hear our Angus Edition of the London news. The King in bad bodily Health. The Prince to be unlimited Regent. The Prince to make no change of Minister! The Irish Catholic Bill not consented to! The Prince turned Methodist & the Elders of the Tabernacle to form the Interior Cabinet of St. James’s! Mira caro! I hope you form a more favourable opinion than I do of our affairs in Portugal, for it will be a juster opinion. Mine is derived from the Chess Board. Massena will not move till he has more Pieces than Lord Willington [sic]. He can then exchange Piece for Piece & if he remains with a single Pawn more when ours are all taken we lose the Game. Good God what Camage my foreboding mind presents to it self! May Heaven in its mercy conduct our Brave Army safely to the Ports of G. Britain and Ireland for their sakes and our own. I recollect Athens being undone by the Sicilian War.”⁶⁶

According to James Guthrie, Dempster planned to spend the winter of 1810-1811 in St Andrews or Broughty Ferry,⁶⁷ the latter was where in the past Dempster and members of his family had taken bathing holidays.⁶⁸ In the event he seems to have divided his time between Dunnichen and Broughty Ferry; he wrote to Sir Adam from Dunnichen on 1 January⁶⁹ and on 17 January to Lord Melville (Henry Dundas) from Broughty Ferry, extolling its virtues:

“There is a spot in our Country, in which you never was but flying Past through it, from whence this is dated. It is a fishing village, frequented by saltwater Bathers in the season. It is the Baia of Angus. Since my widowhood, I have a Pied a Terre here, to which I retire from the Frosts & Snows of our Interior. I have described its Properties in my Familiar Epistle of the New-Year to Lord Dunsinnan, in these Lines.

Broughty that Boasts she’s evergreen
No Frost has felt; no Snow has seen;
She boasts her Downs, for Walks & rides
She boasts her Douglasses besides -

Douglas of Bridgetown has built a House here, & resides constantly in it, as does Col[onel] McKenzie, Balgowan’s friend.”⁷⁰

During this stay at Broughty Ferry Dempster paid visits to St Andrews, and on one of these was delighted to encounter Dr Adam Ferguson, one of his Poker Club contemporaries and now almost 90 years old.⁷¹ The two renewed their friendship with enthusiasm and were to see much of each other over the next few years. Dempster attempted to organise a gathering at St Andrews in the summer of 1811 of himself, Sir Adam, Dr Adam and Lord Dunsinnan;⁷² the scheme was thwarted by the death of Dunsinnan on 23 March 1811.⁷³ Later in the year Dempster rented a property as a base in St Andrews, as he reported to Fergusson: "I have hired an apartment, a cell, in St Andrews for the sake of spending the winter near a public library and a game at whist."⁷⁴ Charlotte Louisa Hawkins Dempster recollected that in her childhood Dempster had had an attractive house in South Street, St Andrews,⁷⁵ which would seem to be rather grander than a "cell"; either Dempster was being modest in his description or he later substituted a larger dwelling.

In one of his last letters to Sir Adam, also written in 1811, Dempster mused at some length on religious matters. Although Dempster lived the life of a sincere Christian (an Episcopalian, like his great-grandfather, see p.7)⁷⁶ his lifelong enthusiasm for the views of Hume would indicate a streak of unorthodoxy in his thinking, and this is confirmed by the following extract. It is clear from it, also, that a degree of religious scepticism had been present in his mind since his youthful days:

"We are not endow'd with faculties to preserve God or Nature... I see the four elements compose the solid parts of animals and vegetables, and see them reduced to their elementary state again. But that part of man and vegetables, which gives them life, motion, and above all mind, or intelligence, I see no more than the mole. I attended my grand-father [George Dempster senior] during his last illness. The Bishop hurried up while his pulse still beat and with fervent prayers directed his soul to Heaven. How eagerly I looked while the pulse gave its last beat to see the soul issue out of his mouth, and take its flight. I was then 21 years of age, and had never... heard any but bishops on the topic. The Bishop was my uncle [actually Dempster's great-uncle, James

Rait (1689-1777)] and told me spirits could only be seen by the eye of faith. I declared I was one of the faithfull. 'If you are so', replied he, 'believe you saw it'. - So much for bishops, bramins and talpoys [Buddhist monk]. My humble conjecture is that this world contains a fifth element of the nature of fire, perhaps, which communicates procreation and germination to organized bodies: part of that vast source of intellect which may either be really God, or an emanation from God, who fills, forms, and governs the universe by his own laws, no way like ours, God knows, but bestowing on his highest creature, man, moral powers as well as animal powers, for acquiring as much happiness as he destines to be our lot. When our visible organs are worn and tatter'd, by age or sickness, to be no longer a fit habitation for our spiritual part, God knows, the Bishop my uncle believes he knows, but I declare I know not what becomes of it - and believe my ignorance not blameable. I go farther, I doubt if it be God's plan that we should know. For if otherwise, a few of the inhabitants of my church yard, rising for a moment on Sunday, and stepping into the lattern [lectern], would save my minister many an asserveration."⁷⁷

Despite the introspective and contemplative tone of this letter, Dempster proved that he had not yet lost his sense of fun or his zest for life by announcing to Sir Adam later in the same year that he and 14 inhabitants on his estate had formed themselves into the 'Dunnichen Dune Body Club', the essential requirement for membership being an age of at least 70 years, with Dempster himself as its 'Perpetual Preses'.⁷⁸ The following year, rejoicing in being in his 80th year he noted:

"In the course of the last 4 years, I have had two colds, that might have killed a horse, and a bowel disorder (of 70 days in bed) that would have killed all Wordsworth's livery stable. I gradually recover'd a state of health to which I had been a stranger for the 20 preceding years, and am here playing golf, whist, and the fool, better than I did 63 or 4 or 5 years ago, when I first enter'd this university [he was writing from St Andrews]"⁷⁹

One of Dempster's guests at Dunnichen in the summer of 1812 was John Pinkerton (1758-1825). Dempster himself seems to have got on well with him, but his opinionated and dogged assertions on any subject rendered him obnoxious to Dempster's grandchildren:

"Said a young miss of thirteen to Mr Dempster one morning, before the antiquary joined the breakfast-table 'Grandpapa, when is Mr.. Pinkerton going away?' 'Whisht, my dear', said Mr Dempster with a smile."⁸⁰

Pinkerton, as Dempster's guest, was present at the twelfth anniversary meeting of the Lunan and Vinney Water Farming Society held in July 1813 and was admitted as an honorary member. He took part in a discussion on the merits of fiorin grass, the topic having been raised by Dempster in his opening address of the previous year.⁸¹ However, despite his desire to be known as a universal genius "Mr Pinkerton... had not lent much of his mind to modern things" and was able "only to state that Camden mentioned a field in the west of Scotland, which cut four times a year, and consisted of fiorin grass."⁸²

The society held two more meetings, in 1813 and 1814, although the second was, for unexplained reasons, poorly attended. This meeting was also notable for the resignation (submitted in writing to the meeting) of James Headrick, again for reasons not explained.⁸³ Although before the meeting closed arrangements were made for holding another on 3 July 1815, no more meetings were in fact held. According to Charles Rogers this was because of Dempster's age and infirmity (he was by now 83 years of age). In Rogers's own words:

"Having attained his eightieth year, Mr Dempster was unable longer to discharge the presidential duties, and as his election was for life it was deemed ungracious to choose a substitute."⁸⁴

Delightful though this idea is, it seems more likely that the society died because interest in it had faded away. Despite his age Dempster still seems to have been remarkably fit and active, but the poor attendance at the last meeting and the somewhat desultory level of discussion at both that one and its immediate predecessors, probably discouraged him from continuing. Since he had been the founder and main driving force behind the society it is quite reasonable to suppose that none of the other members would have cared to take over the leadership without his express consent.

In his last years Dempster spent much of his time playing whist, a game of which he had always been fond. He had befriended some old ladies in St Andrews who became his partners at whist, and regularly used to send round what he facetiously termed "The route coach" in order to convey them to his house in South Street.⁸⁵ He also maintained his friendship with Dr Adam Ferguson as is demonstrated by the postscript to Dempster's annual new year epistle to Sir Adam Fergusson of 1813:

"P.S. Your learned namesake here, my modern Epictetus as I call him, is in his 90th year, in perfect health and in the full possession of his mental faculties, and keen for conversation, tho' very deaf and almost blind."⁸⁶

This was the last of the annual epistles to Sir Adam, who died on 25 September 1813 after an illness which began in the summer.⁸⁷ His namesake, Dr Adam Ferguson, followed in 1816.⁸⁸ These losses must have made Dempster's last years rather lonely since virtually none of his contemporaries now survived and he therefore lacked correspondents with whom he could be as intimate as he had been with Sir Adam. A favourite theme in his letters of these years was of life as a battleground, with numerous casualties. For example, at the close of 1813 he wrote to Sir Adam's nephew and heir James Fergusson:

"I consider human life as a battle of 70 or 80 year's duration, in the course of which all the combatants 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 forlorn hope myself."⁸⁹

Nevertheless, the large number of nieces and great-nieces surrounding him at Dunnichen must have provided lively enough company and he still retained his interest in public affairs. In 1815 he was able to perform his last public action, the placing of a marble tablet on the wall of the toll-house at Bonar Bridge, whose northern abutment was on ground belonging to Skibo.⁹⁰ The bridge had been designed by Telford, and built between September 1811 and November 1812. It replaced a dangerous ferry crossing (the Meickle Ferry) which Dempster himself had had

frequent occasion to use on his visits to Skibo, and he evidently regarded it as a symbol of the road building undertaken in the 1790's and subsequently which he had so enthusiastically supported. Despite several rebuildings of the bridge the tablet still exists; on it is an inscription commemorating the building of the bridge, the names of the road commissioners and some details of the mileage of roads constructed in the Highlands. Organising the installation of this monument from such a distance cannot have been easy, and Dempster was reliant on the commissioners (of whom William Smith was one) for the necessary information:

“My Mural Monument for the Iron Bridge of Bonar is ready. The Marble Cutter only awaits for the No. of Bridges, & Miles of Road your Committe[e] has been assisting in making. I take no notice of the Grand Caledonian Canal Committee, leaving that Duty to the Gentlemen, or to some public spirited Gentleman of Inverness-shire. It mayn't be easy to ascertain the Facts wanted to a Bridge or a Mile, but I hope your Secretary will be able [to] send us a gross Guess of the Numbers desired, and soon.”⁹¹

In light of this it seems rather unkind of Robert Southey, who passed the spot in 1819, to comment that the tablet was “full of errors... and to crown it all it is fixed against the Toll House instead of the Bridge.”⁹²

In the autumn of 1815 Dempster was, at James Roger's instigation, honoured with a diploma of the Musomanik Club of Anstruther founded by the poet William Tennant. Dempster's letter of thanks to Roger shows Dempster still retaining his exuberant high spirits:

“The carriers of St Andrews and Forfar brought me last night the favour of your letter and packet. The compliment contained therein is one of those pieces of good fortune commonly preceded by some supernatural intimation or presage. Such was not wanting on this occasion, for, beside passing the day in uncommonly good health and high spirits, in the morning Dream of that night I was honoured with an unexpected visit from Apollo. Though my windows were shut, he opened my door, presented me with a sprig of laurel, and most lovingly said, in the words of his favourite child -

‘Accede! O magnos, aderit jam tempus
honores, Cave Deum’.

I had hardly time to reply Agnoseo Deum, when he vanished, and I awoke to the reception of my diploma, before sleeping again, for which be pleased to return thanks to all my worthy Maniacs. Assure them I am twice as mad as any of them, though not half so ingenious, and that I shall not fail to attend the next anniversary.”⁹³

In the summer of 1816 James Roger hinted that he would be prepared to write Dempster’s biography. This idea clearly appalled Dempster who brusquely rejected the suggestion and thereafter seems to have set about destroying his personal papers:

“Some time before his death Mr Dempster was requested by my father to express his wishes in regard to a memoir. In answer, he wrote on the 9th June 1816, ‘You joke about the life of an individual to whom nothing but oblivion belongs:

‘Vixi, et quem dederat cursum
Fortuna peregi.’

After his decease, no document likely to be useful to a biographer could be found in his repositories. The whole had been destroyed.”⁹⁴

Charles Rogers relates how Dempster, from a mistaken idea of his poverty, once tried to dismiss his valet of forty years standing:

“Latterly, he [Dempster] became frugal in his domestic arrangements from a delusion, incident to old age, that he was on the verge of poverty. He dismissed his valet, who had been in his employment for forty years. The disconsolate old man applied to my father to intercede for him. ‘It is unnecessary’, said my father; ‘return to your duties, and Mr Dempster will at once relent, if he has not already forgotten what occurred.’ The advice was followed, and the faithful valet remained till his kind master bade adieu to time resting in his arms.”⁹⁵

Although Dempster appears (despite his frequent complaints to the contrary) to have remained in full use of his faculties almost to the end of his life, in November 1817 there occurred the first indication of serious infirmity. James Guthrie wrote to William Soper-Dempster towards the end of that month:

“I heartily wish I could make a more satisfactory & pleasing reply to your inquiries regarding our so much loved & honoured friend Mr Dempster. As to bodily health & appearance his is much as when you last saw him - his

appetite is good but his mental faculties much impaired, and from his having lost the use of his limbs he is now wholly confined to his bed & easy chair. After he could no longer write to me himself I received a weekly bulletin from Miss [illegible] of his health & situation; but ever since that Lady's removal all regular information about our friend to me has ceased. I am not now able to go to him so frequently as I would wish to do, and am given to understand he has now no desire to see any body but those who are in constant attendance about him."⁹⁶

From this description it would seem that Dempster had suffered a stroke, and he was destined not to recover. On 13 February 1818, in his 86th year, he died at Dunnichen and was buried beside his wife in the chancel of the ruined Priory at Restenneth.⁹⁷

The estate of Dunnichen passed to his sister Helen Burrington and on her death in 1831, to her daughter, also named Helen, who had married Francis Hawkins of the East India Company's civil service, son of Bishop Hawkins of Raphoe, Ireland. On the death of the last of the Hawkins-Dempster family the estate was sold and broken up. Skibo went in 1825 to George Soper-Dempster, who sold it in 1866, and died childless in 1889.⁹⁸

Chapter 12: Notes

1. Charlotte Louisa Hawkins Dempster, The Manners of my Time (1920), p.13.
2. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.290 n.1.
3. India Office, Marine Records Misc., L/MAR/C/652 pp.195-196.
4. 'Petition by Reverend John Cleland against Miss Harriet Dempster', 14 December 1812: Dempster Muniments, vol.13 item10; Dempster to Miss Smith, 5 July 1813: NLS, Ms.5319 ff.157-158.
5. Calder, Skibo, p.33; Dempster Muniments, vol.19 item 2, p.4. For William Soper's East India Company career, see India Office, 'Bombay Civil Servants 1750-1858', BDG/CH p.365.
6. Dempster to William Soper, 3 February 1802: Dempster Muniments, vol.6 item28.
7. Dempster to Fergusson, 1 January 1804: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.292-293.
8. See Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.217 n.2 and p.314 n.1. For the reference in Dempster's will, see 'Inventory, Trust Disposition and Settlement of George Dempster Esq. of Dunnichen': SRO, CC 3/5/5 p.228.
9. Dempster to William Soper, 10 May 1802: Dempster Muniments, vol.6 item30.
10. Eric Richards, A History of the Highland Clearances (2 vols. 1985), vol.2 p.25; George Dempster, In Memoriam (1889), pp.11-12.
11. Marchioness of Stafford to Marquis of Stafford, 4 August 1808: R. J. Adam (editor), Papers on Sutherland Estate Management 1802-1816 (2 vols.1972), vol.2 p.86.
12. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.290.
13. Dempster to William Soper, 3 February 1802: Dempster Muniments, vol.6 item 28.
14. Dempster to Graham of Fintry, 13 March 1802: SRO, GD151/11/8/146.
15. For instance, Dempster to Sinclair, 24 March 1794: SRO, RH4/49/2/262-263.
16. Dempster to Alexander Carlyle, 10 July 1788: NLS, Ms.Dc.4.41 f.94.
17. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.290;
18. The minute book of this society has been preserved and is now held in the NLS, Ms.1929. Charles Rogers summarized the proceedings in Social Life in Scotland from Early to Recent Times (3 vols.1884), vol.2 pp.398-404.

19. For example, this point was explicitly made in the minute of the eighth meeting on 3 September 1810: 'Minutes of the Lunan and Vinney Water Farmer Society', NLS, Ms.1929, p.165.
20. Roger, Agriculture of Angus or Forfar; see also Dempster to Fergusson, 27 November 1794: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.252; Rogers, Century of Scottish Life, p.41.
21. Rogers, Century of Scottish Life, p.64; Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.291.
22. 'Minutes of Farmer Society', p.12.
23. Ibid., p.8.
24. Ibid., p.15.
25. Ibid., p.17.
26. Ibid., pp.32-33.
27. Ibid., pp.119-120.
28. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.325 n.1; Hew Scott, Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticonæ. The Succession of Ministers in the Church of Scotland from the Reformation, vol.5 p.283.
29. 'Minutes of Farmer Society', pp.172-173.
30. The Scots Magazine, vol.65 (1803), p.816, and vol.67 (1805), p.77 respectively.
31. Dempster to Fergusson, 1 January 1807; Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.299.
32. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.298; Dempster to Samuel Heming, 29 July 1806: NLS, Ms.5319 ff.226-227.
33. Dempster to Fergusson, 6 January 1812: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.338.
34. 'Minutes of Farmer Society', p.119.
35. Dempster to Melville [Henry Dundas], 11 October 1808: SRO, GD51/9/295.
36. Dempster to Dundas, 20 October 1802; SRO, GD51/1/433.
37. Dempster to William Smith, 23 July 1801: NLS, Ms.5319 ff.141-142.
38. Dempster to William Smith, 10 October 1809: ibid. ff.147-148.
39. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.102.
40. Dempster to William Smith, 14 August 1805: NLS, Ms.5319 ff.143-146.

41. Dunlop, British Fisheries Society, p.135.
42. Thorkelin to Dempster, 4 April 1806: EUL, Ms.La.III 379/249.
43. Dempster to Thorkelin, 12 August 1807: EUL, Ms.La.III 379/243.
44. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.308-310.
45. Dempster to Heming, 29 July 1806: NLS, Ms.5319 ff.226-227.
46. Dempster to Fergusson, 1 January 1807: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.299.
47. Dempster to Fergusson, 7 March 1808: ibid., pp.310-311.
48. SRO, RH4/49/2/337: undated but probably attached to Dempster to Sinclair, 24 November 1810: RH4/49/2/336. A number of examples of Dempster's verse occur in the Dempster Muniments: vol.10 items 2,9,10,13; vol.13 items 2,7-9,14. Dempster's verses to Sir Adam Fergusson are in Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.313-317, 320.
49. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.320. A slightly different version, and missing the last four lines, is in Dempster Muniments, vol.13 item2. This version has line-by-line explanatory notes apparently written by Dempster himself.
50. Dempster to Fergusson, 18 January 1809: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.319.
51. Sinclair to Dempster, 1 July 1809: SRO, RH4/49/2/329-330.
52. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.321.
53. Mrs Rose Dempster to Rev. Samuel Heming, 28 June 1809: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.321.
54. Dempster to Fergusson, 9 January 1810: ibid., pp.321-322.
55. Charles Ross of Balnagown to William Soper-Dempster, 26 October 1809: Dempster Muniments, vol.11 item5; Dempster to William Smith, 1 December 1810: NLS, Ms.5319 ff.151-152.
56. Soper-Dempster to Samuel Heming, 27 May 1810: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.323.
57. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.324.
58. Dempster to Samuel Heming, 26 July 1810: ibid., p.324.
59. Ibid., p.326.

60. Dempster to Samuel Heming, 26 July 1810: ibid., p.324.
61. Dempster to Fergusson, 27 July 1810: ibid., p.325.
62. James Guthrie to Soper-Dempster, 27 October 1810: Dempster Muniments, vol.11 item19.
63. Dempster to William Smith, 1 December 1810: NLS, Ms.5319 ff.151-154.
64. Dempster to Fergusson, 6 January 1812: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.339.
65. Ibid., pp.256-257, 300.
66. Dempster to William Smith, 1 December 1810: NLS, Ms.5319 ff.151-154.
67. James Guthrie to Soper-Dempster, 27 October 1810: Dempster Muniments, vol.11 item19.
68. Dempster to Samuel Heming, 29 July 1806: NLS, Ms.5319 f.226.
69. Dempster to Fergusson, 1 January 1811: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.327-329.
70. Dempster to Lord Melville, 17 January 1811: SRO, GD51/9/352/1.
71. Dempster to Fergusson, 1 January 1811: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.329-330.
72. Dempster to Fergusson, 7 March 1811: ibid., pp.332-333.
73. Ibid., p.333.
74. Dempster to Fergusson, 17 September 1811: ibid., pp.337-338.
75. Hawkins Dempster, The Manners of My Time, p.14.
76. See, for instance, Dempster's comment in his will: 'Trust Disposition and Settlement of George Dempster Esq.' [last will and testament]: SRO, CC/3/5/5, p.227.
77. Dempster to Fergusson, 6 April 1811 [incorrectly dated by Dempster 6 March 1810]: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.334-335.
78. Dempster to Fergusson, 17 September 1811: ibid., p.336.
79. Dempster to Fergusson, 6 January 1812: ibid., pp.338-339.
80. Rogers, Century of Scottish Life, p.61.
81. 'Minutes of Farmer Society', p.196.

82. Ibid, p.220.
83. 'Minutes of Farmer Society', p.233.
84. Rogers, Social Life in Scotland, p.404.
85. Chambers, Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen, vol.2 p.71.
86. Dempster to Fergusson, 14 January 1813: Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.342.
87. Ibid., p.344.
88. Ibid., p.345.
89. Dempster to James Fergusson, 28 December 1813: Ayrshire Archaeological & National History Society Collections 1947-1949, second series, vol.1 p.150.
90. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.344-345.
91. Dempster to William Smith, 13 October 1814: NLS, Ms.5319 ff.163-164.
92. Southey, Journal of a Tour in Scotland, pp.131-132.
93. Dempster to Roger, 29 October 1815: Rogers, Century of Scottish Life, pp.94-95.
94. Ibid., p.62. A slightly different version of the story occurs in the same author's Leaves from my Autobiography (1876), p.25. The Latin quotation comes from Virgil, Aeneid, Book 4, l. 653.
95. Rogers, Century of Scottish Life, pp.61-62.
96. James Guthrie to William Soper-Dempster, 23 November 1817: Dempster Muniments, vol.17 item7.
97. Lowson, Portrait Gallery, p.15.
98. Calder, Skibo, p.33; Dempster, In Memoriam, p.10.

CONCLUSION

After Dempster's death there was found among his surviving papers a remarkable memorandum, in which he summarised his public life:

"TO THE SUCCESSORS AND HEIRS TO THE LATE GEORGE
DEMPSTER, MY GRANDFATHER

A Fragment

I have apologies to make to you for having been a bad steward of the fine estate to which I succeeded, but which, unluckily, my grandfather, the founder of our family, did not secure by entailing it on our family. There remains 2500 acres. I have sold the same number, and have left it encumbered with a heavy debt.

1st - When studying law in Edinburgh the estate devolved upon me, and put an end to my studies; nevertheless, being very vain, I thought myself also learned.

2nd - I became a member of the Poker Club, consisting of learned men and great politicians and decided Whigs, which gave [me] the principles of the party and its prejudices.

3rd - My ambition was a very false kind of it, for I had neither head nor heart of a truly ambitious man.

4th - Before I became a rich laird I had a little money and a turn for reading: I really studied hard for a year or two, and in Montesquieu's works I found his ideas of our constitution coincided with my own, and was particularly struck with his observation that our government would end when the legislature became more corrupted than the executive.

5th - I obtained a seat in Parliament, and soon joined the Whig party, to which I adhered in general during the whole twenty-eight years I sat there, the Ministry and the Monarch being Tory.

6th - I wasted my fortune, sold land, contracted debts, and became what was justly reckoned poor. From the doctrines of Epictetus recommended by Montesquieu I learned to despise wealth, and to pity those whose sole pursuit it was. I became a Stoic. ..."¹

Thus did Dempster summarize his life. This document makes an interesting comparison with his earlier attempt to review his life's achievements, his poetical 'Bragadocio' quoted earlier (see p.299). While the latter is lighthearted and optimistic, the memorandum is markedly more self-deprecatory.

The documents illustrate the two sides of Dempster's character; throughout his life boyish enthusiasm was intermingled with the more negative qualities of self-deprecation and an undervaluing of his own abilities and achievements.

The memorandum reinforces other evidence that suggests that the inspiration for Dempster's parliamentary career, to which he devoted such a large part of his life, came from the people he met while a student in Edinburgh, and particularly from his membership of the Select Society and the Poker Club. He retained a great affection for St Andrews and its university, but his time there does not seem to have left a mark on his later life. While many of his lifelong friends and correspondents can be traced back to his Edinburgh student days, there seem to be none that are associated with St Andrews.

During his early years as an MP Dempster seems to have relished the excitement of being involved in the debates that were to determine the nation's future, but as has been seen, in later life he felt his parliamentary career to have lacked achievement. Dempster's later view has some justification; despite being a frequent and outspoken speaker his speeches lacked the power and eloquence of his contemporary and fellow Rockinghamite Edmund Burke, and he achieved only one minor political office. For most of his parliamentary career he found himself insufficiently able to influence the course of debates, undoubtedly due, as he himself came to recognise, to his unwillingness to work within the party system emerging in the late eighteenth century. Although aligning himself with the Rockingham faction Dempster took pride in being an 'independent' member and almost invariably spoke and voted in accordance with his own beliefs and principles. While earning himself a reputation as a Scottish patriot and the complimentary sobriquet 'Honest George' he was not taken sufficiently seriously as a party member even in opposition, let alone as part of a governing administration. Paradoxically, Dempster was at his most effective as a parliamentarian towards the

end of his parliamentary career, when he gave up all attempts at being a party member and concentrated instead on successfully pushing through those measures (involving roads, lighthouses and the fisheries) that most concerned him. Throughout his parliamentary career he was successful also as a constituency MP, attaching great importance to this role and being ever willing to introduce petitions and raise issues to good effect on behalf of his constituents.

Dempster's parliamentary activities did however keep him in the public eye and earned him much favourable press coverage in such organs as The Scots Magazine. Outside parliament Dempster's reputation was very high, at any rate in Scotland, and he became one of the best known and most popular Scotsmen of his time. He gained great public esteem for his championing of the cause of the Scottish linen trade and for his public-spirited endeavours with regard to such matters as lighthouses, fisheries and the cotton industry. Within his own constituency he made himself electorally unassailable, and this in a group of burghs remarkable even by the standards of the time for the ease with which votes could be bought by the highest bidder. His independent stance, his unwavering devotion to Scottish interests and his refusal to join almost all his fellow Scottish MP's in becoming government 'lobby fodder' earned him great credit with the wider Scottish public. This is manifested by the innumerable favourable references to him in Scottish newspapers and magazines, by the poems written in his honour, including honourable mentions in the poems of the great Burns himself, who as far as is known never met Dempster and can thus only have known of him by repute, and by such instances as the rapturous reception given to him by the citizens of Paisley on the occasion of his visit there with Arkwright (see chapter 10).

Dempster's involvement with the East India Company, which also absorbed a significant amount of his time and energy, merits mention neither in 'Bragadocio' nor in the memorandum. Nor does Dempster appear to have commented on it in his correspondence or elsewhere, in contrast to the

other aspects of his life. This suggests that he regarded it as a minor and unimportant episode in his life and certainly his early interest in the company is likely to have stemmed from an income that could be derived from it and in order to use the company in the furtherance of his political career, by virtue of the patronage possibilities it offered. From this pragmatic, even cynical, starting-point Dempster's views on the company and on East India affairs generally developed into a far more idealistic and high-minded form and ultimately merged with his outlook and policies towards the British and imperial constitution generally. It is perhaps for this reason that it merits no separate mention in his later review of his life: he regarded it as part and parcel of his parliamentary experience.

Although Dempster was by no means the first to introduce cotton spinning into Scotland, by his own efforts at Stanley and Spinningdale, and especially by his encouragement of Richard Arkwright, he clearly played a major part in the development of the industry in Scotland. This was recognised, for example, by Sir John Sinclair who stated explicitly in his published correspondence that he had solicited a letter from Dempster giving Dempster's account of his cotton activities for later publication.²

In his own terms, and by his own admission, Dempster's greatest satisfaction and greatest achievement came from his agricultural reforms on his own estates. He undoubtedly gained the gratitude and affection of his tenants by these measures, and gained also the satisfaction of seeing the income from his estate increase rapidly in the last decades of the eighteenth century. However, arguably the boom in agriculture at the time was as much responsible for this increased prosperity as the reforms themselves. It is important to note also that although Dempster was among the early group of improving landlords his activities in this field were by no means unique - by tradition no landowners were more deeply and sincerely paternalistic than the Scots, treasuring the old values

that a laird's worth was still to be measured as much by the abundance of the dependent population around him as by the weight of his rent roll. Foreign emigration was regarded as a waste of manpower, and Dempster's thoughts and opinions along these lines - which abound in his surviving correspondence - were typical of most of his generation.³

From being a popular and familiar figure on the Scottish scene Dempster's remarkable and rapid fall into almost total obscurity has been a cause of puzzlement and concern for later commentators.

Elizabeth Harvey Wood, for example, commented:

“The almost total eclipse of the reputation of a man who would have required no introduction in any part of Scotland in the second half of the 18th century and who indeed was sufficiently well-known in Parliamentary circles in London surely calls for explanation.”⁴

James Fergusson took the view that this sudden descent into oblivion was consequent upon Dempster's having outlived all his contemporaries with the result that there were none surviving who had known him in his youth and few even who would claim to have been intimate with him in his middle years.⁵ There is obvious truth in this, but equally significant, if not more so, is the fact, noted by Harvey Wood, that Dempster retired from politics, and virtually from all public life, some thirty years before his death.⁶ During his parliamentary career his frequent speeches in the house of commons were regularly reported in the press thus keeping his name in the public eye. Inevitably, these reports ceased on his retirement in 1789, but it is still striking to observe how immediately and completely his name disappeared from the columns of, for example, The Scots Magazine. Dempster himself seems to have been more than content to live a life of quiet retirement on his Scottish estates - his reaction to James Roger's offer to write his biography demonstrates that he had no wish to court publicity, and he does not appear to have cooperated with the author of the account of his life published in Public Characters of 1809-10.⁷ It seems probable that Dempster derived far more

satisfaction from the esteem and affection in which he was held by those with whom he had immediate contact, his tenants and correspondents, than from the fickle acclaim of a wider public.

By their very nature, most of his achievements were ephemeral, and some of his efforts were doomed to failure; the British Fisheries Society, for example, never fulfilled the hopes entertained of it and none of the villages which Dempster founded, or helped to found, grew into the mighty cities that he envisaged. Nevertheless, it is a matter for some regret that his more lasting achievements - lighthouses, the freezing of fish for transport, the introduction of cotton manufacture into the west of Scotland via Arkwright - remain generally so unacknowledged.

Without doubt, however, Dempster's most lasting legacy to posterity has been the marvellous collection of his letters, which even after the interval of two centuries (and perhaps increasingly so, with the passage of time) can still be read with interest, pleasure and satisfaction. This is a comment that seems to be made by all who have had occasion to study them⁸ and is a result of their spontaneous and unaffected nature. Sir John Sinclair wrote appreciatively of Dempster that:

“He had a peculiar felicity in expressing his thoughts in writing; and when speaking on any interesting subject, his manner, tone of voice, fervour, sincerity, and the candour with which he seemed to be animated, operated like a charm, and gained on every heart. He spoke without the least premeditation, and was always listened to with attention and delight.”⁹

Although, unfortunately, there is no record of Dempster's spoken discourse, its quality can be judged from the considerable surviving body of personal letters which were written in the same candid and spontaneous style in which he was reported to have spoken. They bear out Sinclair's comments; with the exception of certain official correspondence Dempster appears to have written just as he thought and felt, without prior composition. Often in the originals crossings-out show where he changed his mind or refined his thoughts during the writing of the letter, and in several instances he was quite

prepared to change his line of argument during the course of a letter. Despite the considerable historical interest of these letters, and their appeal to the modern reader by virtue of their informality and conventional style, remarkably few have appeared in print. An outstanding exception, of course, is the correspondence between Dempster and Sir Adam Fergusson containing some 109 letters which has been skilfully and sympathetically edited by Sir Adam's descendent, Sir James Fergusson. Fergusson claimed to have examined some 200 letters written by Dempster.¹⁰ After reading many hundreds more Fergusson's following comment on them and on Dempster cannot be bettered:

"The keynote of the personality behind all these letters is enthusiasm. Dempster could not be mildly interested in anything. Whether he gave his thoughts to the constitution of Switzerland or the construction of roads through the Highlands, the draining of a moss or the study of old Norse, the powers of the East India Company or the question of whether his nephew should go to school, he flung himself into the discussion of the subject as if it were the one thing nearest to his heart."¹¹

This enthusiasm survived the failure of many of his projects, often at great financial cost, and the deaths of so many of his relatives and close friends. Dempster retained his fundamental optimism and zeal for innovation and progress to the very end of his life. But he retained also his humility regarding his own abilities and there remained an undercurrent of pessimism particularly with regard to his personal finances of which the attempt to dismiss his valet and the whole tone of his 'Memorial' form the most obvious evidence.

Despite the failures, and the transitory nature of most of the achievements, Dempster could at the end look back on his life in the knowledge that he was one of the fortunate few who have left the world a better place than they found it:

"It may be safely said, that no man in the present generation has left the world more generally and deservedly applauded and admired than Mr Dempster of Dunnichen."¹²

Chapter 13: Notes

1. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, pp.346-347, quoting Lowson, Portrait Gallery, p.14. This memorandum has been quoted elsewhere, e.g. Alan Reid, The Royal Burgh of Forfar. A Local History (1902), p.405, but the original manuscript appears to have been lost.
2. Sinclair, Sir John, Bart., The Correspondence of the Right Honourable Sir John Sinclair, Bart. with Reminiscences of the Most Distinguished Characters who have appeared in Great Britain, and in Foreign Countries, during the last Fifty Years (2 vols. 1831), vol.1 p.359. The letter itself is on pp.360-363.
3. See, for example, Fergusson, Lowland Lairds, especially pp.13-18.
4. Harvey Wood, 'Letters to an Antiquary', p.145.
5. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.xvi.
6. Harvey Wood, 'Letters to an Antiquary', pp.145-146.
7. [Phillips], Public Characters, pp.238-268.
8. For example, Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.xx; Harvey Wood, 'Letters to an Antiquary', pp.146-147; Mitchison, Agricultural Sir John., p.92.
9. Sinclair, Correspondence, vol.1 pp.358-359.
10. Fergusson, Letters of George Dempster, p.xx.
11. Ibid., pp.xx-xxi.
12. Ibid., p.xxi, quoting Dempster's obituary notice in The Scots Magazine, vol.81 (1818), p.296.

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