The Diary of Thomas Johnstone of Hallhouse

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On the first day of July 1885, the Falkirk Herald and Linlithgow Journal carried the obituary of Mr Thomas Johnstone of Hallhouse, in which he was described as *"one of the oldest and most respected heritors of the parish of Denny."*

He was one of a long line of his family to possess and farm Hillhouse or, to be correct, Holehouse, for such was the name of the lands from their earliest record in the sixteenth century until the middle of the nineteenth. Holehouse was part of the Templelands of Denny, a sub-barony of the Knights Hospitallers whose principal Scottish lands and headquarters lay at Torphichen. Among the records of the Knights is a letter of 1532 authorising Walter Lindsay, a commendator of the Order, to *"feu advantageously those lands belonging to the Preceptory of Torphichen which are remote therefrom"*[1] The earliest record of 'holhouss' dating from 1539 would suggest that it had been so fued, for it returned a 'rent' of fifteen shillings which, relative to other contemporary evidence, can only represent feu-duty[2]. The person named as being in possession of Holehouse at the time was 'Johne Jonsoun'. In 1569 William Johnstone received an Instrument of Sasine in *"the seven and one half penny land of Hoilhouse"*, reserving the life rent to his father and Katherine Chalmer, his mother[3]. This proviso indicates beyond doubt that his father held a feu of the lands before William received his. He seems to have further consolidated his claim to Holehouse when, in 1572, a discharge was granted by James, Lord Torphichen, to him of "all the feu mails, meal, poultry &c effeiring to the equal of half the lands of Hoilhouse"[4]. It was common for feus to be held of fractions of land and this gave rise to the term 'portioner' used for the minor land-owners who held such property. The Johnstones were to remain in possession of Holehouse into the 20th century.

Thomas Johnstone's obituary informs us that he was aged 86 when he died and so he must have been born in 1799, which means that he was 47 years old when we first encounter him through the pages of his diary. He continued with it until the eve of his death recording, not only his immediate world but his perceptions of wider affairs received through newspapers, of which he was an avid reader. From his reactions to these we may glean something of the spirit of the times and learn a little about Johnstone's own philosophies and political leanings. During the course of the nine months dealt with here, we observe through Johnstone's eyes several events of moment.

Among these was the passage through Parliament of the repeal of the Corn Laws. The introduction of the Corn Laws in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars was a measure to control the price of cereals. Despite its good intentions, framed in the concept that wheat would never be so cheap that it would not pay the farmer to grow it, nor bread so dear that the poor would be unable to buy it, it failed in its purpose. In fact, the price suffered severe fluctuations – with highs such as that of 1817, when it reached one hundred and eighteen shillings per quarter, while in 1822 it fell to thirty-nine shillings. As a consequence, many farmers were ruined and the poor were unable to afford bread. The Conservative majority who formed the Government at the time were staunchly in favour of its retention but several groups had been pressing for abolition. It was the potato famine in Ireland, however, which eventually caused the Tories to change their attitude and repeal the Corn Laws. This was in the very year in which the diary begins.[5]

We might interpret his obvious excitement and expressed pleasure at the outcome as a reasonable indicator of his Liberal persuasions but his joy may have been more basic in origin:

- while his living could be by no stretch of the imagination considered as existing at subsistence level, he had a large family to clothe and feed;
- he had debts and other hardships to cause him worry.

Among the latter was the failure of his potato crop: hit by the same blighting disease which resulted in the tragic famine in Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century. It is worthwhile noting the manner in which Johnstone cultivated his potatoes, for it would seem that, along with the hot weather he remarks upon, his husbandry may have contributed to the disease flourishing. Unlike his contemporaries in the greater part of Ireland and the north-west of Scotland, Johnstone was not wholly dependent upon his potato crop: he grew bear, a type of barley and oats. Part of his living came from cobbling and this provided him with cash, as did the rents from his properties other than Hallhouse, which he evidently possessed and rented to others. It is also interesting to note the extent of his use of barter. Just like business men today, he did have his cash-flow problems; these did not prevent his indulgence in his passion for books: he simply resorted to pawning his watch in such circumstances. At the end of the calendar year dealt with here, his summary shows that he considered it a successful one insofar as his debts had not increased over those of the previous twelve months.

Crop failure was not the only plague which caused concern at that time: cholera was rife. In this particular instance it was spread world-wide. Johnstone not only reports the deaths of many friends, neighbours and acquaintances resulting from the fever, but notes reports of multiple deaths in places such as Karachi. As well as reporting these disasters, Thomas Johnstone's diaries reveal certain prevelant attitudes. For instance, while visiting Greenock he took coffee at 'the Temperance'.

Greenock was the birthplace of the Temperance movement in Britain, for it was there in 1829 that John Dunlop, a magistrate, founded an organisation, the purpose of which was not the total renunciation of alcohol but of moderation in its consumption. The movement for total abstinence began in England and rapidly overtook the more liberal attitudes of those in the north. The Church of Scotland was also actively involved in the movement but, at this time it had its own internal

problems to cope with, for a great disruption had split the church asunder in 1843. Rumblings and discontent followed on for several years. On a visit to Paisley on 30 August, Johnstone reports on an incident which seems to reflect this.

We might find it difficult today to appreciate how difficult travel was until the latter half of the nineteenth century. When the diary opens, the railways in Scotland were in their infancy. And so, for instance, on one occasion he records visiting Stirling in the morning and travelling to Glasgow in the afternoon; despite his mention of a return ticket on the railway, this was a formidable journey as, in 1846, there was no railway line to Stirling! Although an Act of Parliament had authorised one to be built on that route, it did not open until 1848 and so Johnstone must have walked from Stirling to Castlecary to catch the train. However, a much more established means of transport was available in the area of that time. This was the Forth and Clyde canal, along which passenger vessels travelled and several entries show him using this means of journeying to and from Glasgow. A later part of the diary than that transcribed here shows his route from his home to the canal to have been over Denny Muir [NS7583 etc] and then by the '*Tak me doon*' road to Wyndford Lock [NS7377]. Having said that, there are equally many instances when he records having walked to Glasgow and back.

His love of books illustrates another of his facets: he was a spiritual man, both in the religious sense and as an aesthete. A scholar, in the widest sense, he appears as an avid devotee of Burns and Hogg, although he did not confine himself to their work alone. One enigmatic entry might suggest that his literary leanings were not simply passive for, at least, he seems to have been a writer of 'love odes'. A gregarious man, he speaks of his enjoyment at the dances held at both his own home and his neighbours'; of evenings stretching into nights when friends and cronies came to visit. As a sportsman he relished the contest and camaraderie of the curling pond.

The greater part of the diary is in private ownership and I am indebted to the owner, a descendant of Thomas Johnstone, for access to these. One volume, that for the year 1891, is lodged in the Scottish Records Office[6]. These volumes are written upon re-used paper; the pages are bound with cobbler's twine, the same twine with which Johnstone earned a part of his living for, as stated above, he was not only a farmer but a shoemaker. He employs little punctuation within the entries and to allow easier reading of this transcript the convention has been adopted of using | to indicate the force of a full stop, while – indicates a lesser punctuation. Where standard punctuation exists, it is given in the text. There are many non-standard spellings and these are retained, although place-names have been given initial capitals. Contractions, with the exceptions of those in common use, have been expanded; dubious interpretations being given in square brackets.

Read the diary HERE.

NOTES

1	Scottish Records Office	Torphichen Writs	GD119
2	Cowan, I.B. et al	The Knights of St John of Jerusalem in Scotland	p 8
3	Scottish Records Office	Inventory of Papers relating to Johnstone of Holehouse	GD1/227/74.1
4	ibid.		
5	General background to the period thoroughly discussed in: Smout, T.C.	A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950	Collins 1986
6	Scottish Records Office	Inventory of Papers relating to Johnstone of Holehouse	GD1/227/72

Thomas Johnstone is buried in the graveyard of Denny Parish Church