

# THE MONKS

AND THE

# FISHERMEN.

---

---

## CHAPTER I.

### INTRODUCTION.

One day, perchance, an Horestii hunter, wandering as the child of Nature by sea and shore, stops to pile or dig his hut by the brink of the skerrie, where he can launch his skiff or coracle, or chase the wild boar in the adjacent woods. The incident is scarcely more than the print of his naked foot upon the sands, but it is the birth-day, according to some of the fisher homes of Fife, those picturesque little seaports, ringing ever since with the melody of life and love. If, however, the conjecture is true concerning Skinfasthaven, or Cellardyke, and a hamlet had really sprung up at the little creek, it lay unnoticed and unknown in the eye of history till the eventful day when the lands of Kilrenny passed, by the gift of the unfortunate James the Third, into the hands of his kinsman, James Kennedy, the last and greatest of the Bishops of St Andrews. This was in 1452, and the change is immediately signalised, if we believe the old fathers, by the erection of the "Bishop's House," a stately tenement built, like the grange house of an old abbey, on a tier of massive arches, and shielded

by the pier, which was originally designed, they also tell us, to save it from the storm. We look back at this point through the mist of more than four centuries; but nevertheless the Bishop and his undertaking can be traced with singular precision amongst the shadows. But let us glance for a little at the romantic circumstances of the times. Thus going no further than Anstruther, on the opposite side of the brook, the Monks of Balmerino are seen so extensively concerned with the enterprise of the deep that the famous baptistry of St Ayles is reserved for their own sea folk, and only a mile or two further on, the beach of Pittenweem and St Monance is ringing with the sailor's song, as the big ship, gunwale deep with pickled cod or herrings, and with the Prior's flag at the main, sails out in the breeze, her course for France or Spain, from which she will not return till her freight has been exchanged for the silks and wines of those sunny lands. "Here is the secret of the golden fringe to the begger's mantle," or the old world wealth of the Fifeshire coast—a secret which none knew better than Bishop Kennedy; and remembering what the historian tells us of his great ship that was the greatest in the seas, of his princely freights that yet live in the crowning splendours of the ancient city, we can so far see and understand his work on our kindly shore, where he could participate in the harvest as he and his predecessors had never done, or could do, on the stormy bay of St Andrews.

After his death the succeeding Archbishops saw it to be their interest to continue to be the same kind masters to the little colony, which one day under them rose to the dignity and consequence of a burgh of regality. It was to the lasting envy of the fishing village of East Anstruther; but a great change was soon to follow, as we find that about seventeen years before the Reformation the lands and port of Kilrenny

---

had ceased to belong to the Church, having been disposed of by Cardinal Bethune to his favourite cousin John, who at the same time bought the vicarage or fish teinds of the Barony from the Monks of Dryburgh, to whom, with the Parish Church, they had been given as a gift to God by the Countess Ada, the mother of Malcolm the Maiden and William the Lion, those royal brothers, so strangely different in their character and history. The purchase of the teinds, however, deserves more than a passing notice. It is, in fact, one of the most memorable transactions of the period in a local point of view, for the fish teinds of Anstruther, having at the same time passed into the hands of the knight of Dreel, a yet existing agreement was concluded between the two friends, according to which their vassals were to have a mutual right to the harbours, but without any compromise in the case of the teinds, which every vassal was to pay to his own laird, or, in other words, the Skimfie fisher had no taxmaster at Anstruther pier except Laird Bethune for the teinds, and so it fared in like manner with the Anstruther fishers when they sailed into Skimfie, as the old world called the little creek of Skinfasthaven.



## CHAPTER II.

## THE OLD RECORDS AND FISHER LIFE.

"The wrath of heaven is on sea and shore," exclaimed the old friar when his nest had been blown down in the storm which overturned the Church of Rome at the Reformation, and his finger, as he did so, was pointed at one of those sea famines, which have so often come and gone in the story of the shore. But the tide turns at last, and thus before the end of the century the fisheries had so recovered that the Bailies of Kilrenny were able to rebuild and improve their harbour so as to anticipate, like their neighbours, a new and brighter era for the coast. We are indebted for this interesting fact to the old records, which at this time contain many curious glimpses into the fisher life of three centuries ago. Thus we learn from the archives of Crail that it was the established custom to have an indentured apprenticeship in the fisher boat, at the expiry of which the master or his widow was bound to fit out the young mariner with a net and line as the "sea-going gear" of the period. An old burgh charter, of date 1580, gives a valuable hint, for by it the Laird of Anstruther stipulates for 200 herrings "for ilk drave boat in my said town labouring at the winter draves yearly, and for ilk boat passing to the lanthrang lines, within the Scot's Frith, a kylling and a bannock fluke yearly and ilk year if the same be gotten"—that is, every boat at the great lines during the season in Lent was to give a cod and a turbot, the "Scot's Frith" or sea being the ancient name for the Firth of Forth.

Creers, as the large half-decked boats, rigged with mainmast and mizen, were called, now sailed from every East Neuk

---

harbour to fish herrings at the Lewis, or perhaps cod and ling at the Orkney Isles ; but while ploughing in distant seas the old fishers did not forget their native shore, which, in the eyes of the Hollander at least, was the "treasure house" of Scotland. And the idea does not end here, for just as the Australian digger writes home that the revolver must be as ready to his hand as the pickaxe or the shovel, so the fishers of Fife had then to face other storms than those of the midnight wave. The Dutch were the undisputed masters of the open sea ; but any herring day, Mynheer, vaunting in his big 'bus, which floated like a tower amongst the boats, would sweep into the Auld Haikes or the Traith, from which he would only be beaten, if beaten at all, by cutlass and pike ; but there were other adversaries to fight, and those much nearer the doors. It is a curious characteristic of the times, that the merchants of Cupar and St Andrews, and even Dundee, would come marching across the hills armed to the teeth, though on no more hostile errand than to buy and cure herring like their neighbours of the coast. In doing so, however, they forgot, or rather defied, the jealous laws, and still more jealous spirit of the burghs, and the intruders were at once resisted as pirates and robbers. A hundred times and more the Billowness and the Golden Strand have rung with the strife of tongues, and the noise of sterner battle ; but as year by year saw the strangers in greater force an appeal was taken, as we gather again and again from the records, to the Convention of Royal Burghs, but at the very instant when all parties were hottest in the controversy the cause and the quarrel disappeared with the herring from the Forth.

### CHAPTER III.

#### TWO CENTURIES AGO.

At this period the story of the coast becomes like a sad and weary prospect, in which the landmarks are all calamity and woe. Turning away from greater misfortunes we need only refer to an entry by old Clerk Spalding, which runs as follows :—

“1642.—Up to this time, from the beginning of the year, there was a scarcity of white fish along the east coast, and to the hurt and hunger of the poor and beggaring of the fishermen. It was reported that when the fishers had laid their lines and taken fishes abundantly there came ane beast, called the sea dog, to the lines, and ate and destroyed the hail bodies, and left nothing on the lines but the heads. A judgment surely from God Almighty, for the like scarcity of fishes to continue so long has scarcely been seen here in Scotland, whilk bred great dearth of meal and malt at aucht, nine, or ten pounds the boll, and all other meats also very dear.” Our own gossiping Fife chronicler, John Lamont, in the parish of Largo, continues the doleful story in his famous diary thus :—  
“1658 as also 1657.—Thir two yeares ther was few or no herring gotten in Fyfe syde, and not many in Dunbar, so that divers persons beganne to feare ther sould be no drewe hereafter, which was a great prejudice to the poor fisher men, as also to the whole places nereabout (for the like had not beine, as some thinke, for the space of a hundred years before.) 1662 and 1663.—Ther was no herring gotten in like manner.” But one pleasing anecdote invites remembrance. It is told in this way :—“In the eventful times when Episcopacy had been

established in Scotland under the primacy of James Sharp, sometime minister of Crail, Robert Bennet was the incumbent of Kilrenny, a man of strong Covenanting sentiments, but who, being of an exceedingly mild and retiring character, stood for a time irresolute in the great crisis around him. One day, while his mind was much agitated about what course he should pursue, he went down amongst his fisher parishioners of Cellardyke. It was the morning after a great sea storm that had overthrown the pier, and the people were all striving with might and main to raise a bulwark against the upflowing tide, none being more busily employed in carrying stones than the widow of a fisherman that had been drowned some years before. The good minister stood for a time intently watching the scene, and then drew near the spot, accosting the widow, as he did so with the question how she came to be so employed. 'I'm helpin', as you see, sir, for the bairns, they'll aiblins be the better o' it.' The incident made its own impression on the sensitive mind of Robert Bennet, who turned away. 'There was a poor fisherwoman faithful to her duty as she saw it in the light of a mere earthly affection, while he, "an appointed leader of the Church, wavered and stood irresolute when the Master's cause was being betrayed, and the flock led away to the desert."' 'He felt ashamed,' he tells us, 'his conscience upbraided him,' and from that day he gave that clear and emphatic testimony for Presbytery, which although it speedily led to his being expelled from the Church of Kilrenny, yet secured for him a place amongst the heroes of his time."

Here the public records again become the guides of our narrative, but the minutes are as sad, if not sadder than before. Cellardyke, like the other sea towns of Fife, had been sinking for years, in the distress of the times, till in the crisis of her misfortunes in 1672, the Bailies presented a sup-

plication to the Scottish Parliament, praying to be relieved from sending a member or Commissioner, who was then paid, like any other delegate, for his services. The Bailies asserted at this time, what Laird Bethune repeated at the Union, that the town had never possessed a royal charter, that the rights so long exercised as by such were only assumed and unchallenged, but now the petitioners prayed for restoration to their own proper, if humbler, place as a burgh of regality. This supplication was also supported by a touching account of the sufferings of the town, and became the subject of a long and tedious investigation, but being again and again renewed more urgently than before, it was at last sustained, and Kilrenny was ordered to be expunged from the rolls of Parliament as a royal burgh; but as it is well known the decree, like the process, began and ended with the disastrous era.





---

## CHAPTER IV.

### BETTER TIMES.

More than two generations, indeed, were thus as one long and dismal night to the shores of Fife; but daybreak came at last. The watchers, however, were faint and weary, and it came so suddenly that the glorious event—we refer to the Revolution—was like the risen sun, before it was known to many an honest burgher by land and sea. The first public messenger, indeed, was the Kilrenny weaver, running out of the conventicle to ring the joyful news long and loud in the old steeple, and the veteran skipper, fined till he lost his brig for his share in the escape of the Covenant saint across the seas, who that same evening hoists the old ensign as the flag of victory, which, as it streams in the breeze, is seen and rejoiced over by every faithful eye upon the shore.

Such, according to tradition, was the jubilee day over the great historical event which was in truth the advent of a happier future. But let the burgh records tell their other aspect of the story.

Thus in 1691, at the rousing of the anchorages and shore dues, old William Donaldson appeared at “the running of the glass,” as the entry goes, and became the tacksman at his own offer of £34 Scots; but in 1703 the prosperous fishery had raised the same common good to £73 Scots.

As in the beginning of the century strangers flocked from other shores “to work the silver mine;” but the Bailies of those days had an iron grasp for such intruders, and so we learn that in February 1693 they adjudge in a Burgh Court Alexander Murray, William Doig, John Donaldson, each of

them shall pay a dollar for the unfree trading, and packing, and selling of fish, and ordains them to remain in ward until they pay their fines. Every picture has its own shadow, and a dark one at this time falls on the fisher homes of Cellardyke. The old mothers weep, "Trouble rise to poor folk oot o' the ground," but we leave our readers to Clerk Cunningham's minute of date 30th May 1693. The said day the Bailies and Council of this burgh made report of the Act of Parliament made for levying of seamen, and of their putting out of five fishermen for this burgh, who were kept in prison ten days before they were sent away, and that the expense of keeping and *reacking* out these men will amount to £72, paid by the Treasurer. The Bailies and Council think it best to write to Alexander Stevenson, their Commissioner, and George Bethune, that he may apply to Parliament to see if any restitution can be had until the £72 be paid.

Here is a graphic peep at the herring successes of a hundred and seventy years ago :—

Kilrenny, 3d September 1701.—The said day the Bailies and Council, for avoiding any disorder and confusion that arises amongst those men in this burgh in the time of delivering herring by running all to one or two boats or to strangers, and neglecting to unload the boats belonging to other burgesses in the meantime, for removing whereof the Bailies and Council statute and ordain, in time coming, when the boats come in with herring, and are to unload, that the horsemen shall divide themselves equally amongst the boats that every burgess may be served alike, and discharges them to serve any stranger until the burgesses and inhabitants be served, and the boats of burgesses unloaded, and ordains all persons contravening the said statute shall be convicted in a fine of £1 Scots to the public use.

---

The following extract is at least curious and suggestive :—

Here we see that the brand and branding fee are no new thing in Scotland (Kilrenny, 4th September 1707.) The said Bailies and Council, in obedience to the late Act of Parliament, made anent the herring and salmon fishing, appoints Andrew Gooland, Councillor burgess of this burgh, as visitor, and John Gooland, cooper, his brother, to visit all the herrings and casks to be exported out of this burgh this present year, and if they find the same sufficient to mark them with the town's mark and visitor's mark ; and if insufficient to seize upon the same, conform to Act of Parliament, and to do everything requisite thereanent conform to the Act of Council, made thereanent the last year, who, having compareed personally before the said Bailies and Council, accepted of the respective offices in and upon them, and gave their oaths *de fidei administratione* ; and they are hereby empowered to exact for their pains from the owners of the herrings so to be visited and marked the sum allowed for each cask of said herrings and cask allowed by the foresaid Act of Parliament, which was acted.



## CHAPTER V.

## THE JACOBITES AND THE FISHERMEN, &amp;c.

In these years we obtain some valuable details of the fishery from Sir Robert Sibbald, who visited the coast in connection with his famous "History of Fife." The information refers to the year 1710, when he writes :—"St Monance hath usually ten fishing boats, with four men in each; but during the herring fishing (which is in August) they send out twelve boats, and seven men in each and sometimes more." In his description of the sister port he says :—"The lower part of the town of Pittenweem lieth alongst their two havens. The west haven is near the pans, and fit only for fish boats. Of late they had only six fishing boats, with six men in each, and they had fifteen boats for the fishing of herring, with seven men in each, but now more." East Anstruther was yet full of the spirit of Fisher Willie, for he says concerning the town's folk :—"They have good magazines and cellars for trade, and are provided with all accommodations for making and curing of herring, and which is the staple commodity of this town, and of all the towns in the east coast of Fife. And this town sends about twenty-four boats to the fishing of herring. Formerly they sent yearly about thirty boats to the fishing of herring at Lewis." Cellardyke is thus referred to :—"It consists of one street, and hath ten boats, with six men in each, that fish all the year over for white fish, but in the season for fishing herring they set out twenty, with seven men in each. It hath a little harbour." Thus much of the fishing, but the crews now described by Sir Robert had occasionally other adventures than with net and line. For instance, we

find them busy, as a labour of love, at the erection of the breakwater in Anstruther sands, built but thrown down by the first storm, within a year or two of his visit. That was a more eventful night, however, when the Cellardyke fishers gave a passage in these boats to Brigadier Mackintosh, the old Borlam of unforgotten terrors, and his Highlanders, though under the guns of the King's ships in the memorable rising of 1715. The laird and his drunken cronie, Dominie Robert Wilson, were the only Jacobites in the parish ; but the fishers, so distinguished for their loyalty and patriotism in all generations, were enlisted for one night at least in their plots, less, however, by the silver bribe than by the terrible oath of the gallows looking captain, who vowed to take the boats and fire the town if the skippers were not ready to his signal. The burgh records here waken into romance :—

Kilrenny, 5th March 1716.—Council met. Sederunt—James Peacock, Thomas Waddell, David Ramsay, Bailie James Waid, treasurer ; William Pitbladdo, Stephen Williamson, David Lowson, William Craigie, James Davidson, William Arnot, Andrew Murray, David Reid, Councillors. The Bailies laid before the Council a letter come to their hands from the Provost of Edinburgh, calling a meeting and Convention of the Burghs, with respect to the burdens they have of late lain under, and the invasion and encroachments upon our privileges, and the great decay of trade amongst us, so that this exceedingly imports us to deliberate upon the proper remedy. This letter is dated 16th February last.

They nominated and chose Captain Alexander Stevenson, merchant in Edinburgh, their burgess, and who had formerly represented this Burgh in the Scots Parliament and the burghs, to be their Commissioner, and his commission to be given him by way of extract, and ordains an account to be sent of the

cess or contribution the Earl of Mar imposed, and of them, which was £3 3s sterling, and the treasurer to draw out the account due to the several burgesses and inhabitants by the Highland armies they owe for meat and drink and otherwise at their transporting from this side to North Berwick or south side, and this beside £20 sterling promised to each boat of six who were forced over with them, and never paid.

The fishermen never obtained redress, but their home comforts were not resting at the time on such rewards. Fisher life, it is true, has ever the echo which rings to us from the Sea of Galilee, when "they toiled all night and caught nothing," or when they cried in the crash of the tempest, "Help, Lord, or we perish;" but yet when they remembered the old stories told by the evening fire, Cellardyke that day had much, very much, to be thankful for. The herring, perhaps, had as many vagaries as ever, but the haddock and the cod were true to the old haunts, and so abundant that the following singular facts are on record by the well-known minister of Kilrenny, William Beat, who was the son of a Bailie in Cellardyke, where he was born about 1710:—He remembers, he tells us, when the mackerel was fished with success at the doors, and as for the cod and the ling, he has seen some ten or twelve big boats sailing into the harbour loaded to the gunwale, and with perhaps thirty or forty, or even fifty, of the largest cod fastened to a rope and towed at the stern. Nor was this all. As many as fifty boats, with six men each, launched out to the drave, as part of the great fleet then casting their nets on the Lammas sea, so great, indeed, that like the trees of the forest, he could not number them, though he has heard it said the collector at Anstruther, whose duty it was to do so, estimated them as not less than 500—this collector, by the way, being no other than

Alexander Macnaughton, who instituted the famous or rather infamous order of the sovereign and knights of the Beggar's Benison. The merchant prince of those days was Robert Fall in Dunbar, who had the biggest cod on the Fife side all the year through at 4d the piece, always subject, however, to the old burgh law, by which the inhabitants had the right to go to the bulwark and "kitchen the barley bannock" with the best fish at their own price. "What, at their own price?" echoes a friend, and of course people never paid more than the merchant's fee, or, as the venerable minister assures us, of the very finest of the "many thousands" sold under his own eye he never knew any to sell at more than a groat. The old pastor lived to see the great sea famine of the Forth, when the golden past rose so vividly before him that he goes on to tell that, incredible as it might be, he himself had seen the luxury, as it was now esteemed, of a "cod head" lying in heaps amongst the offal that manured the fields.

To complete the picture of those lucky times, he goes on to say that the fishers salted their winter beef at a "merk" the stone, or less than a penny a pound; that the fat hen of the wedding feast cost only the price of a cod or a fourpenny bit; and further, that the housewife spread the oaten cake, or "soomed St Peter's fish," with butter at threepence the pound.

But we turn from the manse, though as we do so it is our good fortune to be introduced to the worthy fishers themselves. Here is the story—

"In 1755 the town of East Anstruther was very much involved in debt, owing partly to the erection a few years before of the present west pier, but much more to the feasting and carousing in which the Council indulged while managing, or rather mismanaging, the municipal affairs. All fishing

boats, with the exception of those of Cellardyke, regularly paid teinds for the fish and herrings they might land at Anstruther harbour—the teinds being let to a tacksman in the same way as the customs of the burgh. The Cellardyke boats had always been exempt, and a dim idea prevailed that they were so in virtue of an ancient charter, but, as that charter was thought to be no longer in existence, the Anstruther Bailies resolved that the privilege should be forthwith challenged, and the Cellardyke boats made to pay like their neighbours, and, as the herring fishing had revived on the coast, a considerable addition to the revenue of the burgh was thus anticipated. Accordingly, at the next letting of the teinds, a hard-fisted cooper, named James M'Dougal, the father of the eccentric worthy of the same name, became their tacksman on the understanding that the Magistrates would support him in his claims on the Cellardyke men. The fishers on their part threatened to stand out to the uttermost, but next year, at least, it was likely there would be no occasion for any dispute upon the matter, as the herring fishing had proved for several weeks a complete failure. Towards the end of September, however, a shoal of herrings set in off the Billowness, when eleven Cellardyke boats came into Anstruther with a total of 190 crans on the 18th, and with 94 and 120 crans respectively on the two following days. The poor fishers were instantly pounced upon by the surly cooper, that played the part of Friday to 'greedy' Treasurer James Johnston, of East Anstruther, who demanded teind at the rate of 1s per pound from all and sundry—the herrings having, as was usual at that time, been sold by the count at 1s per 100 on the first and second days, and at 1s 4d on the third. The skippers, as one of their wives, strapping Kirsty Powrie said, 'wudna' allow ony Bailie in Anstruther to mak' a hole in their bairnies'



parritch caup,' and so they stoutly refused to pay the iniquitous demand, whereupon they were each and all summoned to appear in Court at Anstruther on the 24th October, before the Admiral of Fife, who then had jurisdiction in such cases. It was a memorable day in Cellardyke the holding of that Court, the eleven defenders—James Watt, William Powrie, Thomas Watson, James Miller, William Dryburgh, Thomas Scott, John Anderson, Andrew Boyter, Robert Anderson, George Lothian, and William Young, with all the fishers and most of the wives of Cellardyke, were in due time at the old Tolbooth of East Anstruther—then a little grim, low-roofed apartment, which could not have held a tenth of the great crowd that pressed against the huge oaken door. The case was thought to be already tried and lost for the poor fishers, for by a reputed intrigue John Cunningham, the Anstruther clerk, a chosen friend of Bailie Johnston's, was to sit as Admiral Substitute, and so when this judge, who was a tall, thin man, with stooping shoulders, came upon the scene, there was a colour of truth in the bitter remark of an outspoken fisherwife, 'that gin he looted, it wasna' that justice burthened his back.' The Magistrates and Councillors, with crafty Bailie Johnston of Pitkierie at their head, marched in great state to the Court-Room, when, with all the formality of a little brief authority, the judge assumed his functions. The cases were then called, when, in vindication of the plea, Treasurer Johnston stood up, and in a thick and husky voice, but all the more so on this occasion from the effects of smuggled gin, read, or attempted to read, an old charter granted by Colin Adam, minister of Kilrenny, and vicar of the Parish Church there, on the 28th September 1636, in which he surrendered to the Town Council of East Anstruther the teinds of all fish landed at the harbour, so far as these belonged to the vicarage of Kilrenny.

“This was considered to be unanswerable proof, and with a haughty look, Judge Cunningham demanded of the defenders ‘how they dared to dispute so just a claim?’

“The skippers were all silent; there was not a man of them but had faced the Storm King in his wildest moods without a passing fear, but somehow or other the hardy fellows looked awkward and confused as they stood at the bar of the rickety old Court-Room. After a brief pause, however, little Skipper Miller stepped to the front, and in his own blunt way stated that he and George Lothian had been all the road to Balfour House to see their Laird, Mr Henry Bethune, who had told them that the Anstruther Bailies were a set of reiving loons, as he (the Laird) could prove by papers in his charter chest, which his man of business would look for, and send to Cellardyke without delay. The little skipper concluded by craving that the Court might be adjourned until these documents could be produced.

“The Laird of Balfour was not a man to be trifled with, and so the Court was adjourned until that day three weeks, but Bailie Johnston could not conceal his annoyance; and, turning to the Judge, he exclaimed, in spiteful allusion to the coarse jacket of the poor fisher, ‘that he hoped Mr Bethune would not only be able to give his mandatory a charter, but a coat also by the next Court;’ whereupon all the Bailies and Councillors, and Judge Cunningham, held their sides and laughed outright at the wit of the first Magistrate of Anstruther. On the day appointed the Court again met, when, to the great consternation of the Anstruther authorities, Skipper Miller drew from the inside pocket of his rough sea jacket a roll of parchment, which, on being examined, proved to be the charter obtained in 1543 by John Bethune, which, as we have already stated, clearly exonerated the Cellardyke boats from all teinds but those leviabie by the Lairds of Kilrenny.

---

“The tables were now completely turned, and without a single word the Bailies quietly left the Court. The Judge, however, to please his friends as far as possible pretended to question the authenticity of the document, and again adjourned the Court. The case, however, was virtually settled, and when the skippers appeared for a third time in the Tolbooth, it was to be formally absolved from the suit, and thus ended, to the signal disgrace of the Anstruther Bailies, their famous persecution of the fishermen.”

