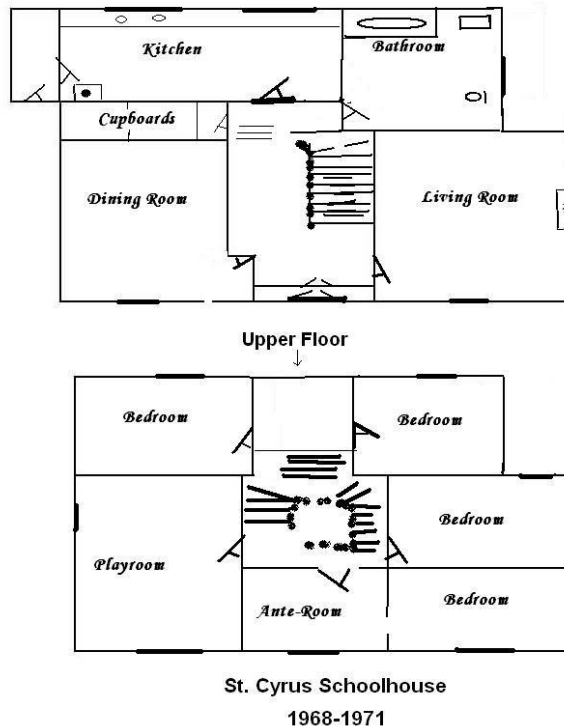


Chapter 74

St Cyrus - Autumn 1968



Nearest neighbours of about our age, who lived in Inverness Cottage within a fair acreage just down the lane behind the schoolhouse, were Colin and Hazel Campbell, and they had a son Ivor who was about a year older than Evan. In fact it was Evan who made first contact there not long after we arrived by going down to their house, knocking the door and asking if the boy he had seen playing around their garden would like to come out to play! Colin was a home-based, self-employed, clock and watch repairer, and Hazel, an English girl as I remember, proved to be very artistic and a keen gardener. They lived a pretty spartan life like us on a tight budget, but were nice folks to have nearby as friends. In due course, our sons were our main touching point, with Ivor seeming to spend more time in our house and garden than his own. In addition to having Evan as an outdoor play-mate, our having a TV to enjoy on rainy days was quite an attraction for him, as Colin either thought it an unnecessary expense, or possibly felt the radio was enough of a stimulus for themselves and their son.

Ivor started school in P1 on the same day as I took the reins, thus Evan, not due to start school until the following August, was on his own most days until after 3 p.m. However, he loved visiting Granny Simpson, my predecessor Joe's mother, who lived in a cottage just across the tiny field from our front gate, and Olive was only too happy to get a break now and then by leaving him in her loving company. Otherwise it was tree-climbing, swinging and foot-balling on the side green of our massive garden ... though Ivor's uncoordinated efforts at football often proved a severe frustration for our already skilful ball-playing offspring!

Once school had opened for the Autumn term, our lives were dominated by matters related to my getting acquainted with my new responsibilities there about fifty yards from our front door step! It was a nine a.m. start for the children, but I usually was in by at least twenty-to-nine to check that all was well with Mrs Harrison the School Cleaner ('Janitor'), and to greet my two lady staff members on their arrival.

As I had already spent many days and hours going through the official school books, its classrooms, cupboards, etc., with a fine toothcomb, I was well prepared for my first day ... and especially from all the kind advice given to me by the experienced Mrs Dickson. In fact we three on the teaching staff had decided that for a fair while anyway, we would carry on with the ways that my predecessor Mr Simpson had organised and administered school activities. Dad had also warned me to take my time in even suggesting changes, far less implementing them ... "Rural folks are canny about changes, he said. But watch out for the phrase, "We've aye done it this way ... smile and say, 'Yes' ... but keep your own thoughts to yourself until the time is ripe and you are really ready to move things in other directions."

Thus, I first concentrated on getting to know the pupils in my own P6 and P7 during normal classroom class and group-work, but also spent quite a bit of lunch time mingling with the other fifty or so pupils in P1/2 and P3/4/5. By the end of the first week I reckoned that I could recognise and name every one of my charges! Quite an effort ... but well worth it!

With the schoolhouse so handy, it had always been 'Postie' Duncan's habit to deliver both personal and school mail there, and this we encouraged him to continue. He was happy to have a blether with the dominie's wife, and always had a wee sweetie for Evan! (*The rest of the village folk depended on such as he to learn about how things were progressing at the schoolhouse!*)

As Joe Simpson had done before me, I used the twenty-minute morning break to nip down and pick-up the school mail, and, albeit briefly, see the family again. Unwittingly, I broke with tradition at lunch time by dining with the pupils in the refectory. (*I had to pay for this, but at the same cost as a pupil meal ... and worth every penny!*) The two courses were all cooked and served on the premises by two ladies from neighbouring village, Johnshaven ... and the food was great! By not only flattering them with my presence, but also my healthy appetite, my public relations' kudos rose immediately. They liked a blether ... as did I ... so we soon got on like a house on fire!

Unlike my pupils and staff, my day did not finish at 4 p.m. I made it a habit to first deal with all matters arising from the daily mail delivery and phone-calls, and then to have another chat with Mrs Harrison and note her cleaning routine ... plus, critically, to get to know what was required in the furnace room re- fuel and daily maintenance. 60 degrees F was the minimum temperature required to keep school open ... and I was responsible for seeing that this was adhered too ... if it was mechanically possible to achieve it. Even by early September I realised that by sitting atop the St Cyrus Cliffs above the North Sea, we in the school were in the direct path of a bitterly cold Nor-easter. Thus, keeping warm in school was a priority matter. The same applied to the schoolhouse where we had a temperamental kitchen stove to contend with ... plus, when the Nor-easter really howled, a nuisance of a 'smoky' chimney in the living room. But we learned how to cope!

Most days, until the clock went back in October, I, or we, or just Evan and me, also made a point of walking down the village before dusk to Johnston's Bakery, or to Blease the Butcher, or to Warden's Grocery, or to the Post Office or, importantly for Evan, to the playing field and swing-park. This was done, not only to stock our larder, etc., but also to be seen by the villagers ... and to chat to as many as possible as well. I was all too aware that I was to become an Elder of their Kirk ... and their Session Clerk ... so it seemed vital that they should find some early respect for the 'in-comer' who, not by them, but by the other Elders, had been elected to become one of their pastoral leaders.

News about our arrival locally had travelled fast amongst the rugby fraternity in Montrose, as witnessed by a phone call from Jim Smith, a former cricket mentor of mine in Stirling, who also, as a Gala man, took his rugby very seriously indeed. I had forgotten that Jim had been promoted to a local government post in Montrose – but as soon as I heard his voice, I not only knew who was calling, but also what he would be after! Yes, he was a senior committee member of Montrose RFC, and would I like to join the lads soon for September evening training sessions at Broomfield. In fact I had been thinking about exploring the possibility of playing some rugby through the winter ... *allowed by Olive with the assurance that I would give up cricket-playing altogether until any family we had would be at least teenagers* So, off I went the following Thursday to Broomfield - a windswept former wartime airfield separated from the sea by sand-dunes - liked the players and committee members I met ... mostly farmers ... if not the quality of rugby it seemed likely that they would be playing. My becoming their player/coach soon surfaced ... and thus later, after a few pints, and a plate of stovies, in their club-room in the Central Hotel, I was their man! And never regretted it.

However, before autumn chill set in, we managed a few trips to the nearby beach away from our huge inherited out-of-control garden and enormous length of overgrown beech hedge. A hundred yards past the church adjacent to the schoolhouse, we would reach the cliff-top and then enjoy the excitement of ploughing our way steeply downwards on the wending paths to the shore. Paddling was the most we ever did in the icy waters; but in the shelter of convenient rock-piles, Evan continued his sand-castling education. Getting back home was not so exciting ... rather, it was a murderous climb ... good for the appetite invigorating exercise ... but tiring!

