

The Town That Adopted Flekkefjord

Johs. Seland tells of his journey to Burntisland

English translation of the feature published in Agder - Flekkefjords Tidende, Monday 11 March 1946, issue no. 30. The article begins on page 1 and continues on page 4.

Translator's note: The translation follows the original wording and tone closely. English expressions already printed in the Norwegian article have been retained or lightly regularised. Obvious scanning errors and broken words have been corrected against the page images. Names and historical claims are reproduced as printed, without modern fact-checking.

Scotland - that is the country!

The butcher in North Ealing speaks with a distinct Scottish burr on the tip of his tongue, and when I popped into his shop last Saturday afternoon to collect the week's meagre beef ration, it seemed only natural that I should add a little to the routine exchange of "How do you do?" and "Rather fine weather" remarks that are always part of good manners across an English shop counter.

"Tonight I am travelling to Scotland," I said.

"To Scotland? Really? You lucky man!"

The butcher, Hugh Foster, drove his axe into the block and looked at me with a mixture of mild disbelief and honest envy.

"Scotland - that is the country!" he cried.

Then he leaned across the counter and looked deeply into my eyes.

"Where in Scotland are you going?"

"To Burntisland."

That was too much for Mr Foster. It seemed to me that the faintest wet streak began to run down his cheek.

"Burrntisland! Me o'en home tauwn! Rreally!"

It ended, of course, as such stories usually do. After I had heard every visible and invisible virtue and delight of Burntisland described in detail, and had rashly promised to visit the Foster family as soon as I had set foot on Burntisland's sacred soil, I found myself standing outside the shop with an extra piece of beef in my hand and Foster's assurances of eternal friendship ringing in my ears.

My diplomatic mission had already produced its first tangible result. I took it as a good omen.

Scots and Norwegians are cousins by blood

The night train to Edinburgh was well into Yorkshire before I fell asleep. The airman with whom I shared the sleeping compartment was a Scot, and he had been at Sola, Forus and Lista. That settled it for me. Of course he knew Norway, and of course he knew the Norwegians! Had he not been stationed on Shetland with them? Fine lads, sure!

Once he got started, there was no stopping him. The people he disliked most were the Poles. Then came the Germans and the French. Then the Italians and the people of Manchester.

“Why the people of Manchester?”

No, he did not quite know. But “there was something missing in their mentality” - whatever that might mean. He had once met a Mancunian who spoke disparagingly of bagpipe music. What do you make of that, Sir?

I offered a profound observation about the rhythmic kinship between Norwegian and Scottish national music - that I had often been struck by the way the Hardanger fiddle and the bagpipes seemed to speak the same language.

“How very interesting!” The airman lifted his head from the pillow and stared at me inquisitorially. Did I know Scotland? So I had been there several times during the war? Up in the Highlands too? In the autumn, when the heather was in bloom?

“But then we are relatives, brother! Physically, because Scots and Norwegians are cousins by blood, and spiritually because we know one another. Let’s shake hands!”

So we shook hands across the bedside table, in perfect agreement that nowhere on the globe were there finer, prouder, more excellent, more honest or wiser people than Norwegians and Scots.

“The Scots,” my airman friend declared, “are the salt and leaven of the British Empire. We are hospitable. We are friendly. Hard-working and energetic. Don’t you agree?”

“You said it.”

“But we are not modest.”

“No.”

“We do not hide our light under a bushel.”

“No.”

“We let it burn on the lampstand.”

“Yes.”

“We boast about ourselves a little from time to time.”

“Yes.”

“The Norwegians do that too.”

“Do we?”

“Oh, gracious, yes! The Norwegian soldiers on Shetland were quite straightforward about that.”

He had sandwiches with bully-beef filling in his suitcase. At two o’clock we ate a late-night meal. At half past two we smoked our evening pipes. At three we agreed that it might be sensible to sleep for a little while during the darkest hours. At about six he woke me.

Herring and tea for breakfast

“Lift up your heart!” he shouted. We had just crossed the border into Scotland.

The North British Hotel in Edinburgh is known for its good breakfast. On this Sunday morning the menu offered Scottish herring, Scottish porridge, Canadian dried eggs, Indian tea and English strawberry jam.

“Start with the herring, Sir,” the waiter whispered confidentially. “It really is firrrst class!”

Dear readers of Flekkefjord - have you ever tried beginning the day with herring? And drinking tea with it? If not, try it. I assure you that the experiment will be so successful that you will be tempted to repeat it.

On historic ground

I have a couple of free hours in the morning for a walk in the sunshine up the King's Mile to Edinburgh Castle. Greater figures have walked - and lived - here before me. Every metre of street, every house and every close literally breathes history. Mary Stuart, Darnley and the Earl of Bothwell held feasts here. Walter Scott walked here, and Robert Burns sang his songs here. Here the old Scots burned their witches. Today children play on the asphalt, while young Edinburgh men and women sit beneath Marshal Haig's equestrian statue and hum a newly imported line from Hollywood.

The local train to Burntisland glides over the sky-reaching arch of the Firth of Forth Bridge. It winds onward between patches of farmland, past clusters of houses and sparkling little streams; stops at one station or another, then hurries on northwards. I nod in recognition at some red heaps of waste behind a large factory - on our journeys to St Andrews during the war, we always used to begin a kind of guessing competition about what chemical substance this red sludge might actually contain. A couple of minutes later, the train stopped at Burntisland.

The disputed name

What does the name Burntisland mean? On this point the learned disagree. Some divide the word in two - Burnt Island - and say that the name comes from a small island at the harbour entrance where the stone has a peculiar burnt-brown colour. Others cut the word into three - Burnt Is Land - “burnt is the land” - and explain it by an event said to have occurred in prehistoric times, when the town was attacked and burned by enemy hands.

But it is not quite so simple. Some evidence suggests that the name is of Gaelic origin. Over the centuries it has been written Brintilun, Brint Eland, Brint Yland, Bertiland, Bertilund, Byrtiland, Erefland and Cunyingayrland. So there is plenty to choose from. Burntisland's own Morten Ringard, the local historian Andrew Young, believes that the name means “the King's sea”. It is certain that the old Scottish kings attached great importance to this harbour and poured money from their treasuries into making its fortifications strong and its breakwaters long and solid enough to withstand a blow. Roman army and naval forces have been here. Cromwell besieged the town. It guards the northern entrance to the Firth of Forth, just as Edinburgh and Leith guard it from the south.

The secretary of Burntisland Youth Council, teacher George McIntyre, is waiting for me at the station with a taxi. As we drive through the streets, my eye is caught by a series of posters shining white from walls and plate-glass windows, with FLEKKEFJORD in enormous type.

The car stops outside the home of headmaster Macpherson. He is president of the Youth Council and is to be my host during my stay.

“It was splendid that you came,” says Macpherson. “Glad to see you.”

“Glad to see you.”

Over lunch he gives me more details of the programme of meetings. At three o'clock that afternoon I am to speak in St Columba's Church Hall; the Provost will sit on the platform beside me, the members of the Town Council will fill the front row, and Burntisland's various youth organisations will turn out together and in uniform. The hall holds two hundred people, and it is expected to be reasonably full today. Tomorrow at noon I am to speak to two hundred pupils at Burntisland Junior Secondary School - what in Norwegian would be called a middle or secondary school.

An imposing gathering

St Columba's Church Hall looks like a flower bed when I survey it from my place at the lectern. Provost Meldrum - the Scottish word is “provost”, while the English use “mayor”; his function is really something between a council chairman and a mayor - appears with a gleaming gold chain of office around his neck, as custom requires in this country when the Provost acts in an official capacity.

For colour and ceremony, however, the Provost is nothing compared with the town officer, Mr Main, who arrives in a tall, highly polished top hat and a ten-centimetre-wide, flame-purple coat collar against a black background. He radiates authority and dignity from a considerable distance.

Behind the Town Council sit, in orderly succession: the Girls Training Corps under Section Officer Miss Waddell; the Girl Guides, led by Captain Miss Reid; the Girls Association, headed by Miss Robertson; Erskine Youth Club, led by Miss Sutherland; the Life Boys, under the petticoat command of Miss Noble; the Army Cadet Corps in battledress, led by Lieutenant Edwards; Scoutmaster Thomson in a kilt, commanding both the Boy Scouts and the Rover Scouts; and the Boys' Brigade boys, wearing broad white cross-belts over blue uniform jackets, led by Captain P. McDonald. Finally, at the very back of the hall sits the sports club - Burntisland Amateur Athletic Club - with its chairman, McNiven, standing guard at the door.

It is certainly an imposing gathering!

Adopted towns

Headmaster Macpherson opens the meeting. He recalls the warm friendship that grew between the Norwegian soldiers and their Scottish hosts during the war. This feeling found vivid expression when five towns in the County of Fife decided the previous year to “adopt” five towns in allied countries on the Continent. The schoolchildren were entirely free to choose which country and which town they wished to adopt.

By an overwhelming majority the children voted for Norway, and in the next round the choices fell respectively on Trondheim, Kristiansund, Ålesund, Flekkefjord and Halden. Difficulties with passports, visas and shipping have so far prevented the plan from being put into effect, but it is hoped that exchanges of holiday children across the North Sea can begin in the summer. A raffle

for this purpose was held in Burntisland last year and produced a net return of £230 (4,600 kroner), so we have something with which to begin. Now the Flekkefjord municipal executive has sent one of its town's sons here to greet us and establish personal contact between the two towns.

For mutual pleasure and benefit

I began the lecture by reading a greeting to the people of Burntisland from Mayor G. Selstad: "On behalf of the inhabitants of Flekkefjord I am sending you our best greetings and thanks for the good-will you have shown us by adopting our town ..."

The Mayor of Flekkefjord hopes that this adoption "will be to the mutual pleasure and benefit of Burntisland and Flekkefjord in the future, and that strong bonds of friendship will be forged between us". We look forward to the day when the children of the two towns can travel and visit one another, and "all the people of Flekkefjord will do their utmost to bring this hope to fulfilment".

Stormy applause, and a cry from the middle row: "Hear, hear! Excellent English!"

The lecture lasts about an hour. I describe life in Flekkefjord in olden and modern times. Drawing on Morten Ringard and other sources - some of them my own - I give a brief survey of the town's history from 1600 to the present day. The chapter on the years of occupation and the illegal activity at Helle, with the "Birmarck affair" as its central point, clearly arouses undivided admiration. Bursts of applause follow one another closely as I describe Gunvald's exploits in Søylandsheia. To keep to the style of The Times parliamentary reports:

Old history dusted off

"In the eighteenth century Flekkefjord exported a considerable quantity of timber, mainly to Scotland. (Hear, hear!) At that time the dye works in Scotland also bought a great deal of rock lichen from Flekkefjord. (Is that so?) Did you know that a Flekkefjord sea captain named Jens Henrik Beer was made an honorary citizen of Montrose? (Bravo!)

"But during the Napoleonic Wars we went to war with Great Britain and built the fort at Grønnes to defend ourselves against you. (Laughter.) The British nevertheless issued licences to Norwegian vessels wishing to bring timber to England. Birch logs in particular were sawn into barrel staves in Scotland and used for barrels in the great Scottish fisheries. Freight rates were very high and laid the foundations of the prosperity of several Flekkefjord families. (Oh!)

"In 1842 we established the first tannery in Flekkefjord. Our great industrialist Anders Beer probably got the idea from Scotland, with which our town had long maintained trading links and from which Beer also recruited his master tanners. Today tanning is Flekkefjord's most important industry. (Thunderous applause.)

"In response to direct questions from the back rows, the speaker stated that both football and boxing were popular sports in Flekkefjord, that the town's football club had repeatedly won the district championship, and that a muscular man from Flekkefjord had once won the Norwegian heavyweight championship. (Clapping and expressions of approval.)"

Our own town

The atmosphere in the hall is excellent. In the middle of the lecture I send thirty or forty selected photographs of Flekkefjord around the audience, so that they can gain a closer impression of what the town looks like. The aerial photograph showing the sports ground at Uenes is studied particularly closely by the younger age groups.

I have to explain in detail life at school, the Scout movement, bathing at Grønnes, skating on Søylandstjødna, the ski slope at Helle and the shooting range by Raulivannet. A sturdy little twelve-year-old asks on which days we go to the cinema in Flekkefjord, and I list the days on which performances are held.

“But when do you go to church, then?”

In Burntisland the cinema is closed on Sundays. That is the general rule in Scotland. The fact that things are different in Norway clearly gives the boy something to think about. “Rather funny,” he says.

Young people shall forge brotherhood

Provost Meldrum is a coal exporter by profession and a fine and wise man. If I had had a shorthand pad at hand, I would gladly have reproduced the Provost's closing speech word for word. He speaks of the young people who are to build the new world, the young people who are to forge brotherhood between nations, the young people who carry humanity's eternal dream of goodwill between hearts.

Those of us who are older must try to help the young, encourage them and support them in action. One means of doing this is to give young people the opportunity to travel and meet people of their own age in other countries. May the initiative now taken to forge a pact of friendship with our kindred people beyond the North Sea bear fruit.

Scotland in general and Burntisland in particular

After supper, until almost midnight, I sit in pleasant conversation with Headmaster Macpherson and the Norwegian vice-consul in Burntisland, Mr Fotheringham. The talk concerns Scotland in general and Burntisland in particular. From the window of the headmaster's sitting room we see the sea of lights in Edinburgh shining across the firth.

The principal political controversies in Scotland at present concern the development of hydroelectric power in the Highlands, the housing problem, Prestwick Airport and - not to be forgotten - the new great road bridge across the Forth, estimated to cost £6 million, about which the Scottish nationalists in Parliament have been filling the ears of their English colleagues for several years.

The housing problem is serious. Burntisland has 6,000 inhabitants, and it is to the credit of the town authorities that the Town Council has now approved a municipal building plan for no fewer than 200 new houses. The fact that the town fathers are alert to the needs of young people is shown by the grant of £10,000 - 200,000 kroner - for the splendid swimming pool built shortly before the war.

The shipyard and the aluminium factory employ several hundred men. All goods traffic between Edinburgh and Dundee is directed through Burntisland's marshalling yards. Before the war the town was a well-known port for the shipment of coal, with annual exports of about one and a half million tons.

During the evening's conversation I noted two or three small points in my notebook, which I now venture to send to print without attempting to arrange or systematise the material:

Burntisland Sports Club has 300 male and female members. Its principal activities are gymnastics, boxing, speed skating, football, swimming and golf. The town's old whisky distillery has closed. There has been a church here - St Columba's Church - since 1138; the present principal church of the same name was built in 1592. Altogether the town has five churches: three Presbyterian, one Episcopal and one Roman Catholic. There are two schools, one Episcopal and one Presbyterian.

The district's Member of Parliament belongs to the Labour Party, while Burntisland Town Council itself has a narrow "bourgeois" majority. At municipal elections the Conservatives and Liberals usually stand together as the "Moderates".

The ship in the coat of arms

Most of the shipyard workers live outside the town, and every day one can see a long column of twenty double-decker buses rolling in with the workforce. Macpherson is head of the "middle school", the Junior Secondary School. It has the modest total of 700 pupils and a teaching staff of twenty-four, plus part-time teachers in certain specialist subjects. McIntyre is the senior teacher of mathematics and science.

Burntisland's coat of arms resembles Flekkefjord's in that both display a ship on the shield. Burntisland's back, however, is protected from the westerly weather by brown-green hills that rise steeply to a height of two hundred metres. The coat of arms therefore bears an inscription that has little to do with seafaring: "God give the Hills for our Protection."

To the north-east of the town stretch kilometres of sandy beach, visited in summer by thousands of holidaymakers and Sunday visitors from all over Scotland. Among the foreigners who have settled in Burntisland, I must especially mention the wholesaler, ship chandler and translator Müller from Aarhus. He came here as a young man and began in the ship-chandlery trade. He married a wholesaler's daughter and later also took over his father-in-law's business.

The children in Burntisland regularly receive Norwegian letters from Flekkefjord. When they have difficulty understanding certain words and expressions, they run to Papa Müller and ask him to help with the translation. He is a useful man to have in a tight spot.

Flekkefjord across the North Sea

On Monday morning I find myself standing in the gymnasium of the Junior Secondary School, with two hundred inquisitive girls and boys sitting in a circle around me - on the floor. The children have made two splendid maps of north-western Europe on which FLEKKEFJORD is displayed in letters so enormous that they literally stretch right across the North Sea. London, Berlin, Copenhagen and Oslo are apparently no more than small villages compared with the metropolis beneath Lilleheia, if these maps are to be believed.

The children have also provided a blackboard and chalk for the lecturer. The idea is that I should draw a sketch map of the town, large enough to include Uenes, Grisefjorden, Raulivannet, Grønnes, Søylandstjødna and Gunvald's house at Helle. The thirty picture postcards have to be passed around once again, and then there erupts a veritable firework display of the kinds of questions that only knowledge-hungry schoolchildren can think of asking.

I sweat under the barrage and silently thank fate that I am not a teacher by profession. The girls are chiefly interested in their "boyfriends" in Flekkefjord - do I know this one, that one and the other? Every one of them is named. The boys are more interested in school hours. When I tell them that we attend school in the morning and have the afternoon free - apart from homework - a loud, envious sigh passes through the room. The Burntisland children are usually not released from school until four o'clock in the afternoon. On the other hand, they have the whole of Saturday free, which explains something.

The lesson passes like smoke amid steadily rising high spirits. At the end, the headmaster asks me to take greetings back to all the pupils at Flekkefjord School. This I hereby do. On my own account, I may add that I do not think I have ever met children more decent and companionable than those in Burntisland. They are "sporty" in the fullest sense of the word.

Scottish-Norwegian friendship

On the return journey to London I stop for a few hours in Edinburgh and call on Mrs Fanny MacTaggart, the soul and focal point of everything connected with Norwegian information work in Scotland. She shows me letters she has received from associations and organisations in the Norwegian adopted towns - football clubs, public-health groups and youth organisations.

I see that the municipal treasurer in Nes is seeking links with folk-dance groups in Edinburgh and Burntisland - not a bad idea, Oddvar! Particularly touching is the beautiful illustrated album made by the children of Halden and sent to their Scottish friends. It is a small masterpiece of pictorial art.

I almost forgot to mention how small this world is: the Foster family in Burntisland lives only a couple of hundred metres from Headmaster Macpherson's home. Early on Monday morning I had the opportunity to drink a cup of coffee and enjoy a pleasant chat with butcher Hugh's eighty-four-year-old mother. She also asked me to send her greetings - to the butcher in North Ealing.

J. S.