

## CAITHNESS MONUMENTS

### 3. Sir George Sinclair, Fountain by G. Watson

In Princes Street Thurso, opposite St. Peter's Church stands a fountain to the memory of Sir George Sinclair. Originally it was located on the lower side of Sir John's Square but was moved after the First World War to make room for the War Memorial.

The inscription on the fountain reads,

"Sir George Sinclair. Baronet of Ulbster Formerly M.P. for Caithness Born 28th August 1790 Died 9th October 1868

This fountain was erected in 1894 by his only surviving son (who while he lives will think of him every day) in grateful and loving memory of the best of fathers and the most benevolent of men. Alas we ne'er shall look upon his like again.

In Memory Of Sir George Sinclair Bart. of Ulbster 1799-1868 who was during several parliaments M.P. for Caithness.

From his youth he had firm and enthusiastic belief in Christianity, was an elder of the Free Church of Scotland and devoted a tenth of his net income to works of charity. At school he was called "The Harrow Prodigy" and took the highest place, surpassing Byron and the famous Sir Robert Peel. He knew Latin Greek French German Italian Syriac Chaldaic Hebrew and English and (3 lines indecipherable)

Though he was the friend of sovereigns and of many men and women of rank and eminence it might be truly said of him in the language of Job with reference to his daily visits to the poor of Thurso during his life:-

"When the ear heard me, then it blessed me; and when the eye saw me it gave witness to me because I delivered the poor that cried and the fatherless and him that had none to help him. The Blessing of Him that was ready to perish came upon me and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I was a father to the poor and the cause which I knew not I searched out."

He resided at Thurso Castle continuously for seven years (1845-1852) without sleeping for a single night out of his house and of the last quarter of a century of his life about 20 years were spent at the place of which he once said "Thurso is my metropolis and Thurso Castle is my home". He also used to say as to the poor "Our superfluities should give way to their necessities and our necessities to their extremities." No better son, father, husband or friend ever existed and he was the most genial, modest, generous, self-denying kind-hearted and unselfish of men."

This lengthy inscription bides the fact that brilliant, stay-at-home George was once involved in a most singular incident.

In October 1806, while travelling from Gotha to Leipsic, George and a friend Mr. Regel were

captured near the village of Kostritz by the rapidly advancing French army. They were first suspected of being spies and were sent to Gera to be examined by Murat. Though he was convinced of their innocence, he refused to issue them with passports but sent them, escorted by Count Froberg, to Auma to be questioned by Napoleon.

George later described the incident: We arrived at Auma at a very early hour in the morning. The Count alighted from the carriage and repaired to the house at which the Emperor's headquarters were situated. He returned almost immediately and informed us that His Majesty had retired to rest, but added that he would come and let us know as soon as the Emperor was ready to receive us. The morning was very cold and we remained rather uncomfortably in the caleche for upwards of an hour.

My friend Mr. Regel and I agreed that we would not prepare any answers to any questions, but that by narrating every circumstance exactly as it occurred we should avoid every discrepancy which could excite any suspicion. The Count at last returned and informed us that the Emperor was up and wished to see us.

The Count opened a door and beckoned me to follow him. I heard him say "Behold, Sire, the young Englishman of whom I have just spoken to your Majesty"

The door closed as soon as I entered the room. I made a low bow and on raising my eyes from the ground perceived standing before me a little figure arrayed in a white nightcap and dressing gown; an officer in uniform, whom I found to be Marshal Berthier, the Minister for War was standing by his side. The Emperor stood still, with his arms crossed and a cup of coffee in his right hand. He surveyed me attentively and said "Who are you".

My reply was "Sire I am a subject of His Britannic Majesty".

"Where do you come from?"

"Sire, I come from Gotha in Saxony and in going from thence to Leipsig, I was detained by some soldiers of the advance guard, who brought me to the House of the Grand Duke of Berg at Gera, and his highness sent me here to have the honour of being examined by your Majesty".

"Which road did you come by?"

"Sire, I came by Weimar, Erfurt and Jena; from whence, not having been able to procure horses to take us further than Gleina".

"Where is Gleina, and what is it?"

"Sire, Gleina is a small village belonging to the Duke of Gotha".

Upon hearing that I had passed through these places, he paused, and then said "Trace out the plan of your route". Then he sat down at a table, on which a map of Germany was spread, in every

respect similar to the one which I had seen at the Grand Duke's. Berthier was seated at a smaller table, in the corner of the room, to take notes of what passed.

I stood at Napoleon's left hand, and the Count placed himself exactly opposite. Napoleon as soon as he had seated himself, placed his right elbow on the table, and leaning his face upon his thumb and forefinger, looked me full in the face, and said "On what day did you leave Gotha?" At that moment I had forgotten the exact day of our departure; and knowing the great importance of accuracy in regard to dates, I began to calculate backwards from that day to the one upon which we left Gotha.

This pause, though but a short one, excited the Emperor's impatience, and he repeated in rather an angry tone, "I ask you, what day did you leave Gotha?" His abrupt manner, and a significant look, which I saw him exchange with Berthier, would have very much interrupted my calculation, had I not fortunately at that moment concluded it, and named the exact day of our departure.

He then looked for Gotha on the map, and asked me a number of questions as to the strength of the Prussians in that place, the reports prevalent in regard to their probable movements, etc. He next sought out Erfurt, and inquired whether I had observed any troops in motion between the two places. He was very minute in his interrogatories with regard to Erfurt. He asked how strong the garrison was there.

I replied, that this was a point which I had not had any opportunity to ascertain. He asked me if I had been at the parade. I replied in the affirmative. "How many regiments were present?" "Sire, I cannot tell; the Duke of Brunswick was then at Erfurt, and there seemed to be almost as many officers as soldiers assembled on parade". "Is Erfurt a well fortified town?" "Sire, I know very little about the strength of fortifications." "Is there a castle at Erfurt?" Upon this point I felt some doubts; but was afraid to plead ignorance again, lest he should imagine that it was feigned.

I therefore boldly said "Yes Sire, there is a castle." After inquiring whether I had made any observations on the road between Erfurt and Weimar, he proceeded to question me minutely as to the state of the latter place, the number of troops quartered there, the destination of the Grand Duke, etc.

On my mentioning that Jena was the next place at which we stopped, Napoleon did not immediately discover its exact situation on the map. I, therefore, had the honour to point to it with my finger, and show him the place at which he so soon afterwards achieved so brilliant and decisive a victory. He inquired who commanded at Jena, what was the state of the town, whether I knew any particulars about the garrison, etc. and then made similar inquiries with regard to Gleina and the intervening road.

Having followed up the investigation until the moment when we were arrested, he paused, and looked at me very earnestly. I may here remark, that he put no questions to me in regard to my parentage or situation in life. I presume, that these particulars had been fully explained to him by Count Froberg. "How" said he "would you have me believe all that you say?"

The English do not commonly travel on foot without a servant, and in such a dress," looking at my

dress, which consisted of an old box-coat of rough and dark materials, which I had for some time previously only worn as a cover round my legs, when travelling in a carriage, but which I had been glad to resume as an article of dress, over my other clothes, when obliged to travel on foot.

"It is true, Sire, that such conduct may appear a little singular; but imperious circumstances, and the impossibility of procuring horses, have obliged us to take this step; and I believe I have letters in my pocket which will prove the truth of the account I have given of myself."

I then drew out of the pocket of the old box-coat some letters, which had accidentally lain there since I received them during the preceding year; and I also produced from another pocket, some communications of a more recent date.

When I laid these upon the table, Napoleon pushed them quickly towards Count Froberg, nodding to him at the same time rapidly with his head. The Count immediately took up the letters, and said to the Emperor, whilst opening them, that, from having examined and conversed with me during our journey, he thought he could be responsible for the truth of everything I had said.

After cursorily glancing through some of the papers, he said, "These letters are of no consequence, and quite of a private nature: for instance, here is one from Mr. Sinclair's father, in which, after reminding him of the attention he had paid to the Greek and Latin languages in England, he expresses a hope that the same care will be bestowed upon the acquisition of the French and German abroad."

Napoleon's features here relaxed into a smile; and I never can forget the kindness with which he eyed me, whilst he said "You have then learnt Greek and Latin; what authors have you studied?"

Not a little surprised at this unexpected question, I mentioned Homer, Thucydides, Cicero and Horace; upon which he replied, "That is good, very good;" and then turning to Berthier, he added, "I do not think this young man is a spy, but the other who is with him is probably one, and has brought this young man to avoid suspicion." He then made a slight inclination of the head, as a signal for me to retire; upon which I bowed profoundly, and passed into the ante-chamber; after which Mr. Regel was introduced.

So ended George's interview with Napoleon. The two travellers were detained at Gera for a short time then they were allowed to go on their way.

## R E F E R E N C E

Memoirs of Sir George Sinclair Bart. Tinsley Brothers 1870

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