

*The young Miss Lyon.*

5.6.1885 – 15.4.1983.

The little old lady, accompanied by a small and aged white fox terrier, walking through the streets of Dornoch, was a familiar sight a few years ago. Almost everyone knew her, if only by sight – she did *not* know everybody ... "how could anyone be expected to know all these people ", her overall term for almost everyone who was younger than she was, or who had come to live in the town since she had first known it? To the casual observer her clothes might have looked a little shabby, though closer inspection would have revealed that they were good, and had once been expensive, and she almost always wore at least some of her jewellery – a beautiful diamond crescent brooch, dangling earrings of aquamarine or amethyst, large lumps of these same stones set into brooches, a gold naval crown, pretty rings. She wore them not to impress, but just because they were part of her heritage, had been left to her by her mother and grandmother, and they were there simply to be worn. She lived in an undistinguished house in the middle of the town and no one, looking at it from the outside, could have guessed what treasures there were within. Indeed, it might have been difficult for the untrained eye to notice them, covered as most of them were in a layer of dust and the clutter of day to day living. Like the jewellery, her pictures, furniture and silver had all been left to her, and were relics of a sometimes happier and much more interesting past, constant reminders of places and people connected with her youth, and therefore much to be cherished (if not dusted) on that account, and not for their intrinsic value only.. almost everything in the house had a story attached to it. There are no prizes for guessing the subject of these notes...most people locally will realise that the old lady was Miss Kathleen Jane Lyon, who lived in the small house in Castle Street for the last sixteen years of her life, and whose forebears owned and occupied Ospisdale House in the county of Sutherland from 1797 until 1929.

There were other treasures in that house too – boxes of letters, photographs, documents, maps and ledgers, some going back over two hundred years, and all providing a fascinating window on the 19th century world. It is from these papers that I have been able to compile the previous chapters. Actually, the ones with which I have been privileged to deal were but a fraction of the number she had originally, around 50 boxes of them having gone to the Record Office in Edinburgh during her lifetime. Miss Lyon was born in New Zealand in 1885, the daughter of a naval officer, Alex Lyon and Georgiana Jane Gilchrist Lyon, known as Nainie within the family circle. Her father had left the navy to go to New Zealand to run a sheep farm which had



been purchased by his father, a Liverpool businessman, as an investment. Whatever made this gentleman imagine that his son, who had embarked on his naval career at the age of twelve, and had no experience whatsoever of either farming or estate management, would be able to make a success of this venture, is hard to understand, and the newly wed Lyons were definitely not successful. They first lived in lodgings (£1 a week each) and later moved into a house which they seemed to like well enough, though there was not enough money to furnish it properly, and worse still – servants were hard to get and expensive. It may seem ridiculous to us now, but Nainie Gilchrist had been brought up on a cushion of domestic help and life without a houseful of servants must have seemed to her to be almost insupportable. She wrote to her mother that her expenditure on 'help' amounted to £128 a year 'without any comfort' whereas 'you, with five in the house, only spend £96 Even Commander Lyon had to assist on occasion with filling baths and emptying them. True, they had a string of horses, which was some consolation, since Nainie loved to ride and was an excellent horsewoman, but horseflesh was cheap in the New Zealand of the 1880s (£5 would buy a good hack) and when times got really hard and they tried to sell one or two of them,- no buyers could be found. Incidentally, there was horsemanship on the other side of the family too. Kathleens Lyon's paternal grandfather had been a keen rider to hounds and on occasion had hunted with the Empress Elizabeth of Austria, who from time to time came to England, mainly to indulge her love of the sport but partly perhaps to escape for a while the rigours of Viennese court life. Small wonder therefore, that Kathleen too was completely at home in the saddle when she was young – there is a charming photograph of her on her pony, together with her parents and groom, taken standing in the middle of what is now the A9, by the stone which stands at the roadside not far from the gates of Ospisdale. This stone had fallen in a field, and the Lyons had retrieved it and re-erected it, and maybe this picture was taken to celebrate the event.

But to return to New Zealand ... money, or rather lack of it, was always a serious problem, and this together with the terrible boredom 'every day is the same' eventually got Nainie down and increased the desperate homesickness which she suffered from the beginning. She kept hens and a few cows, hoping she would be able to make enough butter to sell, altered and made clothes for herself and the baby, while at the same time they lived very simply, but finances did not seem to improve. Mrs. Gilchrist, Nainie's mother, did what she could, sent what money she could spare even though not, by now, well off herself, and she possibly even paid for their passages on the one occasion that they returned to Scotland for a holiday. This was when Kathleen was about a year old, and it was whilst on the return voyage that she was held in the arms of an old gentleman who had actually



been present at the execution of Marie Antoinette in Paris in 1793. This man's father had been a minister in Paris at the time of the Terror and when the date of the Queen's execution was set, had been told that he and his whole family should make a point of being present if he wished things to go well for them in the future. The old man on the steamship was but an infant in arms at the time, and of course remembered nothing about it, but what a link with the past that encounter was! After this trip the family returned to New Zealand for a few years, coming back to Britain for good when Kathleen was six or seven years old. All that she could recall about that voyage was that the ship had called at Colombo and the passengers were able to go ashore for a few hours. Rickshaws were lined up on the quay waiting to be hired and little Kathleen, always modest, was allowed to choose which one she preferred – she said she immediately chose the one pulled by a coolie who appeared to be wearing more clothes than the rest!.

After they had quit New Zealand for good, the Lyons lived in London for a time though of course there were the wonderful summers in Sutherland to look forward to, when hats and gloves and the other trappings of town life could be abandoned, and a child could run wild. But though she may have run wild all week, Kathleen, like other Victorian children, had to go to church on Sundays. They went alternately to Dornoch Cathedral and to Creich Church, which sadly no longer stands where she remembered it. Services started at 1 p.m. so there was no question of a Sunday dinner, but Kathleen said she well remembered coming home after service to a marvellous high tea, with goodies that included home-cured ham and Grannie's wonderful gingerbread! Whilst in London, Kathleen went to a private day school, but for the final year of her education she was able to follow in her mother's footsteps and go to Cheltenham Ladies College. There she revelled in English Literature, polished up her French and enjoyed the art classes, but foundered absolutely when it came to mathematics, so much so that she was allowed to give up the subject and choose another in its place. She chose photography, which was somewhat advanced for those days, but she certainly profited from the experience and she became an excellent photographer, and was even able in later years to sell some of her photographs to magazines such as Country Life and the Scottish Field. She spent two years after she had left school studying at the Paris School of Art ('you needn't think that I don't know what the male body looks like – in Paris we had living models in the Life Class'), and it was not until after her death that her portfolio and an album were found, and we realised what a very competent artist she had become – her watercolours of local Sutherland scenes were especially pleasing. Also about this time she learned to be a proficient skater, going to a rink at one of the London



clubs. She was photographed there, wearing a hat and a long skirt, with only the tips of her boots and skates visible – what would she have thought of the minimal skirts worn by the skating girls of today?

Around the year 1901 the Lyons left London and came to live permanently at Ospisdale in order to help and look after Granny Gilchrist, who was by now into her 80s. Both her sons had died, as had the spinster Aunt Margaret, while Aunt Kate (Catherine) was married and living far away from home. Life must have been quiet, even humdrum, at the old house in those days; as usual, there was very little money to come and go on but I feel sure that Kathleen was happy enough. She loved the place, especially the garden, and she had her dog (a previous Trixie who later came to grief through getting under the wheels of the governess cart outside the Clashmore Inn), and her water colours, and there were occasional visits from relations including some from a favourite cousin, Nigel, a young naval officer. Her mother too was supremely happy just to be living again in her old home. Nigel, whose surname I never remember hearing and who doesn't seem to appear on the family tree, sadly went down with his ship in 1916, taking with him, we suspect, a bundle of hopes and dreams. She had a little glass scent-bottle on her dressing table which had been a present from him, and she asked that this might be placed in her coffin eventually, but this was not possible as she had also asked to be cremated, so we put it in the casket containing her ashes, together with the photographs of Nigel – taken at various stages of his naval career – which we had found in the house. He was a very nice looking young man.

At various times the Lyons managed to spend one or two summers abroad and explored parts of Germany and less well known spots such as the Dalmatian coast and the foothills of the Dolomites, places which today are over-run with tourists but in the pre-1914 years must have been remote and unusual, and very inexpensive into the bargain, but these trips were only achieved in the years when both house and shooting had been successfully let for the season.

During the first World War life must have become even more quiet and seemingly remote. Kathleen was desperately anxious to undertake some kind of war work, and nursing seemed the obvious choice, but her mother was loath to let her go. Not only had Commander Lyon returned to some sort of naval appointment, but the gardeners and other servants had left to join up and she was needed at home. She found herself trying hard to maintain the garden (she said that after the war she never willingly grew another vegetable!), bicycling down to Dornoch to do the shopping and generally coping with the household. When the war was over, her father, whose health



had been precarious for years, became an invalid and her mother too was getting increasingly frail, so poor Kathleen had her hands full. She kept poultry and bees, and even tried her hand at breeding pigs in an attempt to augment their slender resources, though this last effort seems not to have been successful. In the end, it all became too much for them, and the estate was put on the market, and finally sold in 1929 – house, land, grouse-moor, the lot for £11,000. To make matters worse, the shock and sadness of leaving Ospisdale affected Mrs. Lyon's mind, and she lost her memory completely. They went to live in a small house on the outskirts of Chester with the idea of being nearer to some of the Lyon relations. Here both her parents died, her father leaving the pathetic sum of only £104.9.5p.

After this Kathleen moved again, this time to Overton-on-Dee a few miles away just over the border into Wales. This used to be a pretty place, and perhaps still is, and there for a few years she enjoyed a freedom she had never known before, and had time to plan her garden, write articles for magazines, use her camera and paintbrush, as well as doing a certain amount of work for the Red Cross. The daily domestic chores, which she had always found very boring, were taken care of by Annie who came to her as a sort of housekeeper and general factotum, and who stayed until she (Annie) died. Kathleen had a fondness for Annie, even though she said that the woman was unreliable with money and an inveterate gambler, if only in a small way, and used money which had been given her for other expenses, such as insurance stamps, for her flutters; she also removed articles from the house which were never used and would never (she thought) be missed, and pawned them. I thought this was horrifying and wondered how anyone could keep a servant who did such things until I learned that the unfortunate Annie was never actually paid – 'She was an illegitimate orphan, and I took her in and gave her a home -surely that was enough' – well, it all depends on how one looks at things, I suppose. When the second war started, Kathleen was then in her early 50s, and having been forced by circumstances to miss helping during 1914-1918, was determined not to let the next one pass her by, so she joined the ATS and soon found herself Recruiting Sergeant in the small Welsh town of Wrexham. She was able to go there daily in her little car and I'm sure she must have enjoyed this new experience, but her army career was short-lived .. she became seriously ill with meningitis after a few months and had to retire permanently from service life.

Kathleen had been back to Sutherland several times on short visits, but around 1955 she decided she would like to come back for good, so when a small house in Dornoch, 12 Castle Street, became available, she promptly purchased it for a very modest sum, and



moved up with Annie, her dog, cat and as many of her possessions as she could fit into the house. The dog was not another Trixie, but a 'rescue' of indeterminate breed, referred to merely as 'the old dog'. After his death, she acquired the third and last Trixie, a smooth haired fox terrier, much beloved by her mistress. In Dornoch life continued much as it had in Overton – she painted some charming water colours of local places, made her small back garden a blaze of colour in summer, and wrote a good deal, including the start of a history of the Gilchrists of Ospisdale, though it is unlikely that this was ever finished. The faithful Annie cleaned the house after a fashion, looked after the animals and did the cooking, as well as serving the meals.. this routine continued until a sad day when she was taken ill, and removed to hospital where she died. Thus it came about that at the age of 80, Kathleen had to teach herself to cook, she who hadn't so much as boiled an egg up until then. She managed this remarkably well – a souffle was no problem to her and her layer cakes were beautiful to behold – but it was sad to see her, towards the end of her life, having her meals alone in her dark and somewhat Edwardian kitchen, because the dining room was too cold. She had been brought up to better things, and her thoughts must have gone back to the old days at Ospisdale and her grandmother's lavish table. By the time we came to live in Dornoch, Kathleen was 89, still wonderfully active, but finding it something of a problem to summon enough energy to give Trixie the exercise she needed, so, since I was walking my own dog almost every day, Trixie came with us and we all became good friends. Later on, I went to the house even more regularly to help with some of the simple chores, or just for a chat, and found her such entertaining company. Her stories of Highland life in the days of her youth were wonderful, and she was a mine of information on so many subjects – archaeology, the old Sutherland families, antiques – the list is endless, and in listening to them I was repaid a thousandfold for the little I did for her. My only regret is that I did not listen more carefully or ask more questions. One of her stories concerned a great uncle of her grandmothers who lived to be well over 90. Her grandmother well remembered being told by this old man when he was a small child his home had been in Preston Pans, and after the battle in 1746 the English soldiers had come to the house to ask for water. His mother had given it to them, and milk and bread as well – what a link with history! She also used to tell how she had all but danced her feet off at the Northern Meeting in Inverness in Edwardian days, describing some of the interesting and unusual people who used to be there. Once an Indian maharajah was one of the guests and dazzled everyone with the magnificence of his jewels, and there was another gentleman who got a little tipsy, and insisted on trying to dance with a curtain! But her thoughts were not always of the past..she kept up with the news of the day, despite the fact that she steadfastly refused to have television in her house. Indeed she derived great satisfaction



from being able to tell an investigator from the BBC that she did not have a set, and wouldn't have one if it was presented to her as a gift! However, she did occasionally look at other people's, and indeed spent the last Saturday afternoon of her life watching the Grand National in our house on what she always referred to as 'the coloured radio'!

Time catches up with all of us eventually, and the day came when coping with the trials and troubles of daily life became too much for her, and she had to retire to Cambusavie Hospital as a long term patient, while Trixie - now about 17, came to stay with us. It was necessary to be a dedicated dog-lover to cope with Trixie...the household at No 12 had always revolved around her and so it was not her fault that she was a very spoilt little dog, and would snap at the hand that fed, and any other hand, if things did not suit. We had her for just over a year and during that time I took her up to the hospital every week. I cannot imagine any other hospital anywhere being so tolerant and understanding...the dog was allowed everywhere, even on the bed, and if it happened to be meal time while we were visiting, a small separate portion always arrived for Trixie. She finally succumbed in February 1983 aged over 18, and her mistress, at nearly 98, followed her two months later. I could have wished it had been the other way around, but we cannot arrange these things, and finally Kathleen departed peacefully in her sleep, having been up and dressed as usual the previous day, wandering through the wards and talking to other patients. Who could ask for more than that at such an age? She was the last surviving member, as far as is known, of the Gilchrist family, a great and unforgettable lady, whom to know was indeed a privilege, and whose like we may not see again.