

ANN HILL RESEARCH

Interview with Robin Irving, aged 82  
Lauderdale, Canonbie  
Formerly of Sarkside 1932-43  
Nutmerry 1943-68?

6th February, 1987

Robin Irving is the widower of Agnes Burnett (sister of Jack), who died two years ago. Framed on the wall is a Church of Scotland long service certificate for his eldership to 1974. My first impression was of a man shrivelled by old age, although his hearing and eyesight seemed quite good. At first I thought the interview was going to be my first flop, for his answers tended to be brief and generalised, and in order to get a response I found myself asking for more leading questions than I like. Fortunately there then appeared a visitor, David Paterson, who lives both at Woodhouse and Eaglesfield. Not only was Mr. Paterson himself something of a raconteur, but also he had a stimulating effect on Mr. Irving.

Although not a 'natural', Mr. Irving seemed pleased to see me. He remarked that when you live alone over 80 you get quite lonesome. He did not wish to see this for correction.

School

He went to Glenzier school, still, as then, 2 teachers. During World War 1 the teachers were pretty poor, he'd 11 or 13 different ones in his time, despite leaving at 14 - and it was only a 2 teacher school (so he said). Some hardly knew the lessons themselves. The headmaster, dreadfully strict, would strap you almost as soon as you looked round. Others were strap-happy too. Mr Jarvie was killed in World War 1. In Robin Irving's last year he was seldom there, worked at home instead.

W K.F.

He mentioned knowing more recent teachers - Miss Murray, who died recently, and one who lived in Lockerbie, still there, married a coachman, has girl in Brockbanks, accountants.

Church

Robin Irving is now an elder of the United Free Church, which he joined when he came to Canonbie because of its proximity and family connections. As a boy he went to the Chapelknowe Free Church, but at Kirkpatrick Fleming he was always in the parish church. At Chapelknowe they had 'all the Kirkpatrick Fleming farmers' - the Mackies of Calvertsholm, Redhouse and of Hillhead, Davidsons of Hayfield, Farish of Newton as well as

Johnston of Stoneylea, Johnston of Loganhouse and Loganlea.' Charles Armstrong of Riggheads, though, went to Kirkpatrick. The minister was Mr Eaglesham, 'a nice old man' with two children, both probably still alive. One a lecturer at Durham University, has retired either to Scotby or Wetherall (his son killed himself, jumping 'into a bridge'). The other son, Jim, taught/teaches at Duns, and married a sister of Rev James Barr.

His wife was active in the Guild.

At Kirkpatrick Fleming his first minister was Mr Fyffe - 'awfy nice', who died by taking lycil, he didn't know why. He agreed that he had a speech impediment which might have occasioned people laughing at him, but this was mainly repeating what Mr Davidson said.

He became an elder under Mr Duncan, whose daughter married a Frenchman from Brittany and used to come to Nutberry for holidays.

Sheena Beattie kept up with Mary Fyffe, may still do so. Mary Fyffe was a more positive person than her brother (Again. leading question). Fyffe was quite nice to speak to, not a great mixer. He didn't know Fyffe's interests, but he was a clever fellow. At time of his death he was 'in hands wi another church' - i.e. he was probably going to leave. At this time it was a thriving church.

Andra Burnett and Robin Irving became elders together. The leading elders were Tom Beattie and Jim Irving, who missed his vocation, he should have been on the stage, and wasn't really interested in farming (mentioned his acts with Jim Mitchell). He also mentioned Jim's daughter, Kathleen, who is mentioned elsewhere. She was head physiotherapist at Carlisle Infirmary.

On his wall were the wedding photographs of Mary and of Jennifer Beattie, so not surprisingly he turned out to have great admiration for Tom Beattie - both in church and council - 'By jove, he could speak his mind'. He claimed not to be able to remember much of his row with Mr McKenzie over the sale of the Glebe. He described McKenzie as 'a big quiet chap', but it was the one before (sic) that Tom Beattie couldn't get on with, Cartwright. Jim Irving (a lively fellow) didn't get on with Cartwright either - nor for that matter did Robin Irving, or any of them. He was a 'right tinker'.

The minister he liked best was John Grimson, recently retired, whose name he used to see regularly in the 'Glasgow Herald'. Very nice, good both as preacher and

a good visitor. Duncan very good too. McKenzie (?) Fair - never did anyone any harm, never asked for anything, easy to get on with.

They had plenty sales of work. I asked about church highlights. He mentioned collecting for a new electric organ, organised by Tom Beattie, Jim Irving and himself. A mouse had holed the bellows in the old one. Another thing was putting in oil heating.

He thought the old session books had been about. Session Clerks were Tom Beattie, David Mitchell (now Langholm), then school teacher, then another teacher whose wife also taught and lives at Kirtlebridge, leaving soon. He thinks his name was Ferguson. He was probably the last Session Clerk.

Gregory was 'ordinary', not good.

Dr Horsburgh was very good - something 'extra'.

His wife did not teach Sunday School after their marriage.

For Willie Rogerson and Jimmy Elliot see farming.

He used to visit the Beatties at Wicketthorn, Mrs Beattie died there, Tom Beattie at the 'Oaks' - suddenly one Sunday after church. Cartwright, a very strong minded man repeatedly clashed with Tom Beattie and blamed him for anything. He even got on to him for chinking his car keys in his pocket during service.

John Graham, a good churchman, may also have been Session Clerk for a time. He fell off his chair and died of a heart attack at a church meeting in the manse.

Pincod church stopped, he thought, about 30 years ago.

Sport and  
Entertainment

He said very little. Before marriage he played a little badminton, but not afterwards. He never went to the carpet bowling club.

Mr Paterson showed me some photographs of Woodhouse, and mentioned, incidentally, the tennis court.

(D.P.)  
He had been a member of Springkell scouts under Brian Johnson-Ferguson, which was a good troop. Talking of Johnson-Ferguson being adventurous, or not afraid of taking risks, he mentioned him taking them to Ullswater in a Bedford shooting brake for camping. They were let

loose until 'I'll call you at 9' - but in fact he called them at 11.55 p.m.! They got soaked to the skin and went home the next day instead of staying the weekend. Brian was Scout Master for years. Also in the troop were Rae (Sculptor) and Jardine.

They also had some memories of Eaglesfield Shows.

Occasionally by good luck he won whist drive prizes. His next door neighbour - Fiddler (!) goes to 3 or 4 whist drives a week and won a lot of prizes last year.

Economic

Beltenmont was still open when Robert Irving went to Sarkside. He called Fraser a 'mystery man' who made all sorts of things, including candle sticks. But clever, I asked him about Bill Cormack's story that he tried to make an aeroplane, but he's never heard of it.

I asked him about the British Hondurans. He said there were 'a' kinds' - some would work, some not too good. How did the people react? Here we had one of his few shafts of humour - some reacted 'too well' - there were a few black bairns. He said that for some reason these were sent to Newcastle to be looked after. One woman, who still lives in the village, had two black babies - and, I rather gathered, other white children to miscellaneous fathers. She's married now (Bill Cormack had a story of how when they visited a client his wife, sitting in the car, saw a black man emerge from back door and make through the fields while Bill waited at the front).

He had both Italian and German P.O.W.'s, but the Italian was not from the Hollee camp. Once when they were lifting potatoes the Italian said 'Italy - plenty fruit. Scotland - turnips and tatties'. The camp (which?) where Tomy Kirkpatrick lives. Two houses were built 'further up' at one of which Jim Irving died (on the British Hondurans site). The British Hondurans were not very popular, but (see Jack Burnett) he didn't remember a U.S. camp. The British Italians cut Hollee Wood.

When he went (especially to Nutberry) there were a lot of foxes and rabbits. He used to see 2 or 3 foxes a week, and they did a lot of damage. He often saw fox tracks close to the house, and a hen daren't be left out at night. From time to time fox shoots were organised, and quite a few caught, although he himself seldom shot. The foxes lived in the Hollee wood and in the moss - they'd cross from the one to the other, but

their numbers have declined greatly since the peat works started.

During World War 1 he used to catch moles and sent the skins to London. My notes say 2/9d (each) sold by the ton. He still remembers the address - 43 Downs(?) Road, London. Nutberry had more moles than Sarkside.

He thought the poor were quite well looked after at Notwen.

There were not many gang-about buddies, gypsies etc. - more in Canonbie then.

His Doctor was Dr. (& Mrs.) Ingram, Gretna. Dr. Carruthers was said to have discovered a cure for cancer of the lip, but it died with him.

Mr. Paterson talked about Eaglesfield tailors. When he began to serve his time with Urquhart there were 23 tailors vans left Eaglesfield every morning - from Urquhart (the biggest), Green, Anderson. Urquharts staff was in the teens - 8 or 9 dressmakers, Tait, the men's cutter and Jean Smith the ladies 'bridal' cutter, and others. Tait was the Ecclefechan blacksmith's son.

Urquharts sold to all the local game-keepers - Springkell, Kinmount, Castlemilk (which had a distinctive yellow check). Charlie Loudon, son of the Springkell gamekeeper, became a teacher in Stirling and is in the throws of moving to Prestwick. Probably over 80, and worth interviewing.

Joseph Urquhart was David Paterson's father's Uncle. Joseph Urquhart and his grandfather started business at the same time - one in Eaglesfield, the other in Buckinghamshire, and both finished at the same time. Urquhart's business went to Robert Wilson, who hit the bottle and the business collapsed. But Mrs. Keith (Nelly Urquhart) is still alive, in her 90's.

He remembered his first order - from his Aunt in Caldronlea - 1 linoleum square at 39/6d. I asked if that meant Urquhart did furnishings too, but apparently just clothes and floor coverings.

He produced a photograph of 'Cock o Lowrie' - some 3'9", a foreman (I think) at Urquharts - who talked with a lisp. He told some stories about him as a character.

Some deer were, and probably still are in the Nutberry Moss.

When he came there was no 'Wayside Garage'. Mrs Burns, widow of original owner is still in the village.

## Farming

For wild life see Economic.

Sarkside:- He came 1932, - already a dairy farm. Before him it was owned by Lightbody, who lived in Langholm and came from Langholm, had a manager in the farm. Before that, Elliot (later? to Hillhead), who also had a small dairy. He had about 30 Ayrshires, a cooler and big milk cans which were sold via Lockerbie Creamery to Dundee. Sometimes the cans came back full of maggots, they were away so long. He also kept quite a few sheep, mostly Cheviots, and hens, but pigs only for their own use - something hardly anyone does now.

The field names were - Pond, Bull's Eye, Sarkside, Bridgend, Milligan's Bush (?)

He'd a 5 year rotation - oats, turnips, 3 years grass.

Right at the back door was an old well, never used, and there was also what he called a wee well, but seems more like a tank for catching water from roofs 'at the garden'. Sarkside house was not old. The farm has been much altered, with a big steading built in middle of the yard. There was an old milk shed, probably a horse mill - the only one he could think of locally, though there were some in Canonbie. There were no hunting gates. There was a right of way from Moorlands along the edge of the wood at Sarkside to Williamsfield.

After him (I think) a daughter of his wife's Uncle, Mrs. Williamson, took the farm but did not make a go of it. She now lives in Gretna. It is no longer a Dairy farm.

Nutberry was only 20 acres bigger. Fields included Toppinghead, Orchard (near an orchard), Fairy Row, Mid, Bungalow (after Mitchell's bungalow) and one for which I've written 'But H'). Several old fields have been amalgamated - Wee Flosch Field and two others became one, which was easier for tractors and better for cow grazing.

When he started he used a horse plough, then paid £100 for a Fordson Tractor. He had a workman, George Clark, who has worked at Sarkside for 54 years, although he's now semi-retired. He lives in a bungalow at Nutberry, but isn't very talkative.

Nutberry was also a dairy farm, dealing with Lockerbie. He left on their Doctor's advice in 1969 when he said his wife must live a quieter life. She was on all the Committees - the Rural, the Guild and so on, and the only way she'd stop was to leave the parish.

There is a right of way at Nutberry too - down the back of the wood, and also one across the Moss. The one to Hillhead (behind the wood) was used quite a lot, but maybe not now. The wood - opposite Hollee - has just recently been cut, and has been cut twice and replanted. It had Japanese Larch and Scottish Fir. But he never planted trees. He sold 50 acres of moss to the Peat works at Eastriggs - 'Nutberry Moss' - but kept 22 acres where George Clark still cuts. Richardson (peat works) has 150 acres, of moss - West Scales, Floss and Nutberry.

He talked a good deal about good or bad farmers, although few were named. He saw himself as 'average' - too old fashioned in outlook to be considered 'good'. Jim Johnstone, although also old fashioned, was able regularly to get the top market price for his sheep because 'he can feed sheep'. Willie Rogerson was a goodish farmer, and so was his son, Jimmy, but he is to retire soon and now takes things easy. Williamsfield is one of several former dairy but now mixed farms - like Sarkside, Cranberry. His own nephew Keith (?) Irving is a better farmer than he was - and is now in Nutberry - more modern, doesn't crop but just has silage and has doubled the herd.

Travelling threshing mills used to come round - he was always glad to see the back of them, for there was an awful cleaning up to do when they left. The nearest, and the one he mentioned first, was Johnston of Beechill, Creca. Also Robinson (Annan), Charlton (Dumfries).

Electricity came to Sarkside after he'd been there a year or two. That allowed him to put in electric milker. The main milk round was then still Donaldson - Jenny, Chrissie, John (who went to Australia) and Jimmy were the family (He always thought in terms of families).

Like Burnett and Sloan, he used to show Clydesdale horses, and sometimes won. Showed at Dumfries, Langholm and Ayr. This was mainly but not entirely from Nutberry. He bred foals, and also bought and sold at Wigtown and Lanark. He had one which was first or second at Wigtown and was to be sold but was turned down by the vet for string halt (which makes them move

their legs too quickly) but it later went to Lanark where it got the prize, was cleared by the vet, and sold for £205 - double his earlier money.

Before visiting Robert Irving, I had called in at Bob Sloan, who told me he never bothered with lambing - they bought them in and fattened them up. Bob also told me that Robert Irving's wife was their bridesmaid (or vice-versa?)

He wasn't born into farming, his father being a blacksmith at Canonbie. The Irving Clan, he said, were traditionally a' Blacksmiths. It was his mother really who took up farming - at Moodyhills, perhaps. Robin had never shod a horse in his life. The whole family, except one killed in World War 1, went into farming.

I think he may have got Sarkside through his wife's Uncle (see earlier), although there is a family tie up too with the Williamsons.

Gentry

Mossknow still had a gardener, Anderson. Mrs. Graham used to come to Kirk, and Ann occasionally.

Mr. Paterson had a lot of Johnson-Ferguson stories. He was in the Scouts during World War 2 and witnessed an altercation between Lady Johnson-Ferguson and the army. She was out with the dogs, army trucks arrived. She - 'You're not allowed across here - you can just go back'. The soldiers summoned higher assistance, and their commander, a Pole, eventually came and said in halting English, ever so polite 'Madam, in War there is no private road. So just get out (of the way)'. She moved.

Sir Neil had reputation of being an old tyrant, although David Paterson had no complaint with him until a recent incident when Sir Neil emerged from the Eaglesfield's butchers and walked straight in front of David Paterson, who was drawing in his car. Sir Neil was indignant, 'You might have killed me'. Fortunately the butcher spoke up and told Sir Neil he was lucky it wasn't a young tearaway who had been driving, or he really would have been killed.

I gather that the Johnson-Fergusons are presently putting rents up.

Mr. Paterson also talked about Woodhouse - the thousands of roses, the tennis courts, and a listed building which is used for hens.

Miscellaneous Mr Irving was the only one at Sarkside to hear the Gretna bomb fall - his wife, who was ill, didn't. He thought 21 were killed. During the war he was in the ARP, which he much disliked. He went around giving out gas masks but did little else. He never built an air-raid shelter. At that time Kirkpatrick Fleming wasn't so badly affected by the war as most areas, but you had to be careful about using your car, for the Gretna policeman was said to have it in for farmers and liked to catch them using petrol for unapproved purposes. This was allegedly because his son had been killed in the 'Repulse' or the 'Renown' and he was bitter about farmers' sons getting exemption from call up.

His first car was a Standard - second-hand soon after going into Sarkside.

He mentioned being very friendly with Mrs Lindsay in Whithorn.

Follow-ups People mentioned who should be visited:-  
Mr Millar, Branteth, over 80 with good memory  
Sheena Beattie, Cedarwood House  
Charlie Loudon, who in fact is now dead (died last year and his wife very recently)  
Mrs Burns, of Wayside Garage  
*Mr Clark, Nutberry.*