

THE ERSKINES OF MAR AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ALLOA, 1689-1825

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The importance of the improving landowner in the economic development of Scotland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has long been recognised. As the pioneers in the exploitation of mineral resources after the Reformation, as the driving force behind the great agricultural transformation after the Union, as the champions of commerce in unfree towns against the monopoly of the Royal Burghs, as patrons and shareholders in national undertakings like the British Linen Company, they contributed much to their several generations: men like Bruce of Carnock, Cockburn of Ormiston, Grant of Monymusk, the Duke of Queensberry and Sir John Sinclair will always be numbered among the great architects of national progress.

The present intention of this essay is to shift the focus from the national to the local scale, and to pose the question—what difference did it make to one community to have a succession of improving landowners living among them? The family chosen, the Erskines of Mar, is not one with a great heroic name among economic historians, nor is the community, Alloa in Clackmannanshire, as outstanding an example of mushroom growth as some that could be found. Nevertheless, the unusual diversity of the Erskine interests, comprehending commerce, mining, manufacture, farming, town planning and social welfare (though not all at once, or with an equal enthusiasm), and the very satisfactory growth of Alloa from a mean collier village in 1689 to a respectable small town with a mixed economy on the verge of a real industrial revolution in 1825, make it as interesting a test case as one could wish.

I

In 1689, when John Erskine succeeded to the titles and estates of his father Charles, Earl of Mar, the parish and barony of Alloa had already experienced at least a century and a half

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of expansion. The main medieval settlement had lain in the hamlet of Tullibody—a mile inland, off the coal measures, and away from the Mar estate. Already by 1660 the attraction of coal and shipping had left Tullibody with insufficient inhabitants to support a minister, and the chapel at Alloa had been erected into a parish church in its stead (*N.S.A.* 1845: 57).¹ Between 1600 and 1690 the population of the parish probably doubled: by the latter date it contained 2-3,000 inhabitants on nearly 5,000 acres, of which about two-thirds belonged to the Erskines (*N.S.A.* 1845:40-1; based on parish registers then existing). The output of coal from Alloa mines did not exceed 4,000 tons a year, and the trade of the town, which was a burgh of barony to the Earls, consisted in exporting it coastwise and overseas to Rotterdam and elsewhere.² In his *Theatrum Scotiæ*, John Slezer made a pleasant engraving of the town as it was about 1693—a collection of cottages dominated by the Earl's castle, surrounded by open fields lying in strips, with two ships at anchor in the river beyond. The plan of the new church begun in 1690 included a gallery for seamen, an aisle for colliers "and trades", an aisle for the Earl and his servants and the nave for the rural population: it neatly demonstrated the economic division of the parish (Lothian 1871).

This barony formed the central portion of the lands ruled by Earl John from 1689 to 1715. Since he had been left "more debt than estate" by his father, it is unlikely that he obtained much of the working capital he needed for its development from land: more probably it came from the fruits of high political office—he was Keeper of Stirling Castle from 1699 to 1714, Secretary of State from 1705 until 1709, member of the British Privy Council from 1707 to 1714, Scottish Secretary from 1713 to 1714. His removal from office by George I in 1714 immediately brought him into open rebellion as leader of the Jacobite venture and was followed by his attainder, and the loss of his title and estates.³ His political career might thus be judged a tragedy and a failure, but his skill as "a very good manager in his private affairs" transformed Alloa and determined the main lines of its eighteenth-century advance.

Earl John's activities comprehended four basic improvements which he carried out successively or at the same time: the transformation of his own house and gardens into a residence commensurate with his position as the most powerful man in Scotland; the beautification of the town so that it should not

shame the house; the improvement of the port; and the construction of a large reservoir to provide a head of water for his mining machinery.

The first in time, and in his affections, was the improvement of the castle and precincts, for which he brought to Alloa the best craftsmen, masons and smiths he could discover, and started a quarry to provide building stone. Apart from this, his enthusiasm for ornamental groves and avenues designed to frame a "prospect" at each point of the compass, though of little direct economic consequence to Alloa, started a fashion in arboriculture that helped to transform the appearance of most parishes in the Scottish lowlands during the eighteenth century (*O.S.A.* 1793:594).⁴

This completed or well under way, he began to improve the appearance of the adjacent village: some houses were pulled down, some were rebuilt, some roads were straightened and widened, and a broad, paved avenue lined with limes and terminating in a gravel walk was led from the town, past the castle gates and down to the harbour.⁵ All this awoke much contemporary admiration. "The town of Allaway is larger and better built, though a village, than most borough-towns", wrote Macky within eight years of the Earl's attainder; "There is one street that runs down to the harbour, the broadest and best pav'd of any I have seen next to Edinburgh, with rows of lime-trees down to the river, as at Dundee and the towns of Holland" (Macky 1729:179). Defoe was equally complimentary: calling it "spacious" and "well-built" (Cole 1927: 800-1). Fifty years later the writer of the Statistical Account remarked that "the late Earl seems to have been particularly attentive to the healthiness of the town" and that the lime avenue afforded "an agreeable shade in summer, and a comfort and shelter in winter" (*O.S.A.* 1793:595). Burghs with less enlightened landlords could not boast as much. At Bo'ness, "the town involved continually in a cloud, the houses were blackened with soot, the air impregnated with vapour, and strangers were struck with the Pandemonium appearance of the place"; but then, "His Grace the present Duke never resided in the parish" (*O.S.A.* 1796:428-9, 425).⁶

Earl John next turned his attention to the harbour. This, apart from the coal deposits, was the greatest natural asset to Alloa, for a shelf of rock bisecting the Forth just above the town prevented big ships proceeding to Stirling, while the depth of water just below the shelf—17 to 22 feet at spring tides—was

greater than that on the bar at Leith, and certainly more than any other harbour west of Queensferry; a ship of 300 tons could easily be accommodated, which was not the case in most harbours on the Firth. Throughout the seventeenth century the exploitation of these advantages had been retarded by the customs system, by which Alloa was treated simply as a "creek" of the port of Bo'ness—a circumstance which obliged every skipper making a report, and every factor or merchant paying dues, to travel ten miles down the river to the customs house. Alloa was consequently much less frequented by traders than it should have been, and in 1700 paid little more than one fifth of the tax paid on Bo'ness for the communication of trade to unfree burghs.⁷

It was therefore a red-letter day for Alloa when the Earl of Mar in 1710, having obtained a Commission for his brother to "order the customs at the port of Bo'ness", secured separation of the head of the Forth from Bo'ness precinct, and arranged for a customs house to be erected in Alloa itself (*O.S.A.* 1743:637).⁸ Henceforth the port was not only freed from the magnetism of its rival down the river, but also had a magnetism of its own which would tend to draw trade to Alloa in preference to neighbouring quays like Airth, Clackmannan and Kincardine. To follow up this tactical advantage, the Earl was "very assiduous in procuring the best tradesmen to settle in Alloa"; in a few years the town possessed two saw mills, a rope works and a sail-cloth manufactory (*O.S.A.* 1793:623n; Macky 1729:179; Cole 1927:801; Macfarlane 1748:308).⁹ Of all Scottish ports only Leith, Port Glasgow and Alloa appear to have obtained these essential adjuncts for ship building and repair so early in the eighteenth century. It was not long before Alloa began to steal a good deal of the trading prosperity of its old rival Bo'ness.

The town decent and the port improved, it only remained to ensure a steady coal supply to keep commerce going. The main problem facing the landowner was drainage, for the pits at Alloa were already too deep to be comfortably tackled by the conventional method of a bucket-and-chain gin wound by horses. In 1708, the Earl considered a wind pump, but failed to find skilled wrights who could make one. In 1709 his manager was sent to Newcastle to "learn the mode of conducting colliery-operations in every department," and returned with a portfolio of drawings of English machinery. The following year, probably as a result of this visit, the services of George Sorocould,

an English or Welsh engineer, were engaged: he advised the construction of a hydraulic pump driven by a great water-wheel. None of the local burns provided sufficient head of water, and to obtain this the Earl in 1713 undertook the building of Gartmore Dam by embanking a valley north-east of Alloa and leading water into it from the Black Devon by an "aqueduct" two miles long, to form a reservoir covering 162 acres. This was a remarkable engineering feat, considering the state of technology in Scotland, and the water thus formed was for many years the largest artificial lake north of the Tweed.¹⁰

The importance of this work turned out to be much more than in draining the mines: in the event, the plans for a pump had to be abandoned, again for lack of construction skill in Scotland, and the new water-wheel was simply attached to a powerful bucket-and-chain gin. But in an age that had yet to make effective use of steam, the easily-regulated waters of the Gartmore Dam provided the best possible source of industrial power: thus in 1791 there were two mining engines, a set of corn mills, a snuff mill, a fulling mill and logwood mill on the stream between the dam and the town (*O.S.A.* 1793: 602-3), and around this period it was also associated with breweries, distilleries, saw mills and a woollen mill. Just as 1710 marked the beginnings of Alloa as a modern port, so 1713 marked its birthday as a manufacturing town.

There is no reason to suppose that Earl John had realised all his ambitions for Alloa when he fell so abruptly from power in the fiasco of 1715: later writers, at least, attributed to him schemes for a bottle manufactory, and for a new town quarter, west of his lime-tree avenue. By his schemes in exile for the improvement of Edinburgh and the construction of a Forth-Clyde Canal, only realised a generation and more after his death, he proved himself a man of national vision. In other ways—by his evident lack of interest in agricultural improvement and his disinclination to use steam drainage in his mines—he shared the limitations of his generation. Nevertheless, his twenty-six years of rule transformed the barony, and gave it an air of advance and prosperity that all travellers noted in the next decade. If Alloa ever wishes to commemorate its greatest benefactor, it should remember Earl John.

II

The second phase of Alloa's history covers the years from the attainder of 1715 to the start of John Francis Erskine's

administration in 1770. It was a complicated period in the management of the Erskine lands. From 1715 to 1724, the barony was in the hands of the Committee for Forfeited Estates, from which it was eventually redeemed by the former Earl's brother, Lord Erskine of Grange, and certain other relations. From 1724 to 1739 these men administered it as trustees for John's lineal descendants; from 1739 until 1766 it was in the hands of John's son Thomas, much of whose money and energy went into politics; in 1766, Thomas dying childless, it passed to John's daughter Frances who held it for eleven years¹¹ but had the assistance of her son John Francis as effective manager after 1770.¹² Throughout these dynastic complications the Erskines were unable to draw on either the capital resources or the influence in high places possessed by the attainted Earl: they were forced to alienate most of the old Mar territories outside the barony in order to keep Alloa in their possessions.¹³ For these reasons, and because their talents and imaginations were not of the same high order as John's, they failed to leave the same stamp on the town. Nevertheless, these were a stirring fifty-five years in the life of Alloa, and the Erskines were not exactly neglectful. Much of the progress of these years was due either to their attentions, or to private enterprise building on the foundation left by John.

The growth of overseas trade definitely belongs to the latter category. The excellence of the port established by nature and the Earl of Mar soon attracted the attention of west-coast merchants who had hitherto used Bo'ness as their window on the Firth of Forth. The two towns were equidistant from Glasgow by road, both lying within about thirty-two miles, and Alloa had a distinct advantage in harbour facilities, especially for bigger vessels. Already by 1714 Glasgow merchants had business dealings with Alloa.¹⁴ In 1726 Defoe reported "the town . . . is full of trade, for the whole country has some business or other with them . . . this is the place where the Glasgow merchants are, as I am told, erecting magazines or warehouses to which they propose to bring their tobacco and sugars by land, and then to ship them for Holland or Hamburgh or the Baltick or England as they find opportunity or market, and I doubt not they will find their advantage in it" (Cole 1927:800). Throughout the 1730's and early 1740's the local customs officers were busy granting permission for the re-export of American tobacco imported mainly at Port Glasgow and Greenock, but also at places as far apart as Dundee, Fort

William and Kirkcudbright, with occasional shipments arriving at Alloa directly from Virginia. Re-exports went to Rotterdam, Veere, Gothenburg, Christiansand and coastwise to British ports, the Glasgow house of Fogos and Mitchell being particularly involved.¹⁵ At the same time a number of mills were erected along the stream from the Gartmore Dam to make snuff and shred tobacco leaf, and "what was called Alloa pig-tail" made the parish famous even in London itself (*O.S.A.* 1793: 602-34, 621; *N.S.A.* 1845:51).¹⁶

Some time in the 1740's this trade began to fall away, and by 1750 it had ceased altogether. The reasons are obscure, but it is possible that after 1744 the improvements to the harbour at Bo'ness, combined with the condition of the roads around Alloa, drew the Glasgow merchants back to their traditional outpost: certainly after 1777 when Sir Laurence Dundas built Grangemouth at the eastern terminal of the Forth and Clyde Canal, Alloa lost any chance of regaining an entrepôt trade. She still had a very flourishing commerce of a traditional nature, based on the export of coals and a few manufactured goods to Holland, Germany and Scandinavia, and on the import of deals, grain, linseed, and some Iberian wine.¹⁷ Clearly this was much larger by 1770 than it had been at the beginning of the century.

The years between 1715 and 1770 also saw very considerable additions to the town's industries, apart from the small scale saw-milling, rope-making and sail-cloth making that began in John's day and continued to flourish.¹⁸ The tobacco processing industry was prosperous only for a short time, and by 1780 was represented by only one mill. Malt-making became very important towards the middle of the century, chiefly to supply the large distilleries at Kilbagie and Kennetpans in the neighbouring parish, though from 1760 Glenochil distillery was operating within Alloa parish. The famous glass-works was founded in 1750. A brick and tile works began to export to the Low Countries and the Baltic in the 1760's. Alloa cabinet-makers had a reputation far beyond the parish, and the weigh-beams and still-yards of Alloa smiths were in wide demand. The staple manufacture in the countryside was the weaving of woollen camblets (*O.S.A.* 1793:621-4).¹⁹ The list shows unusual diversity for a parish of 4-5,000 inhabitants in the middle of the eighteenth century.²⁰

Some of these activities depended on water-power from the Gartmore Dam, some on coal fuel from the Mar estates,

but the only occasion on which the Erskines directly meddled with manufacturing was in the important foundation of the Alloa Glass Works. The credit for this belongs entirely to Lady Frances, although it took place in the régime of her brother Thomas who is supposed to have been too busy attending to political affairs in Stirling to concern himself about the works. The choice for a bottle manufactory was an extremely good one; it was only the fourth or fifth such undertaking in Scotland; raw materials were close at hand—sand and kelp in the river, salt at Kennetpans in the next parish, coal free on the family estates (in fact a temporary crisis in coal markets made a new means of consumption very opportune); there was a ready vent for the bottles to local brewers and distillers and to Leith wine merchants down the river. Lady Frances with a sudden energy reminiscent of her father, persuaded skilled Bohemian glass-workers to immigrate from a Baltic port, and settled them on a site near the harbour to the west of the lime-tree avenue. She owned the works for seventeen years, despite a number of difficulties in obtaining further supplies of labour, and the loss of one of the mainstays of the bottle market when the Seven Years War disrupted the wine market. In 1767 she sold out to a company of merchants, who extended operations and began to export bottles; in 1791 the works housed thirty-three families on the precincts and covered four acres; to-day it is easily the largest glass-factory in Scotland, and the company honours Lady Frances for her courage and foresight as their foundress.²¹

The natural province of the Erskines, however, was not in trade or in manufacture but in coal—and here their enterprise is seen to best advantage. Between 1718 and 1723 the Committee of Forfeited estates failed to raise more than about 5,000 tons per annum, or little more than the output fifty years before. By the 1760's, output had been increased to over 15,000 tons, and by the 1780's to over 22,000 tons, or by nearly five times in sixty years (*O.S.A.* 1793:617n).²² This revolution seems to have been largely due to the readiness of Thomas to spend money on the best machinery available, and to treat his miners as responsible human beings, instead of as the serfs and chattels they had become by Scottish law.

The first technical problem was met about 1740 with the introduction of winding gear in the main colliery shaft, which was uncomfortably deep for the unfortunate collier women who had to carry their menfolk's coal to the surface. The

machinery installed—a double water wheel with an alternating action driven off the Gartmore Dam and capable of lifting six cwt. at a time—represented an ingenious and novel solution to a familiar problem, and was a triumph for the unknown millwright who designed it. Later in the century it was much admired by English engineers and widely copied in Newcastle and Sunderland: as late as 1815 when the rotary steam engine was sweeping the board, the Alloa wheel was still described as “the cheapest and best machine for coal drawing where a plentiful supply of water can be got” (*O.S.A.* 1793:616; Bald 1812:88-9).

About 1760, the substitution of a proper hydraulic pump, such as Earl John planned to build in 1714, for the old bucket-and-chain system on the first wheel helped Thomas to make a new sinking near Alloa town. In 1764 the adoption of a Newcomen draining engine, “supposed to be one of the best”, and certainly the first example of steam power in the parish, enabled yet another sinking to be made at Collyland, nearly two miles away (*O.S.A.* 1793:616-17; Carvel 1944:13). Henceforth it was possible to tap and raise far larger resources than had been available to Earl John.

There remained the problem of transporting it over two or three miles to the coast, a task traditionally undertaken by the Mar tenants with miserable carts of “a size not larger than a good wheel barrow”, over country roads which degenerated into bogs every winter. In 1766 the Erskines solved the whole problem at a stroke: a wagonway, one of the first north of the Tweed, was laid over a mile and a half between Alloa mines and the quay; it was extended to Collyland in 1771. Although the first rails were only of fir, and quickly deteriorated, a single man and a horse could now take down 30 cwt. at a time—or five times as much as a man with a horse and cart. To this single improvement the writer in the Old Statistical Account attributed all the increased output between 1765 and 1790 (*O.S.A.* 1793:617n; *N.S.A.* 1845:30-1).

Thomas also showed considerable initiative in the treatment of his colliers. His proposal to give “some little education to the children” by providing a schoolmaster for the mining community was business-like as well as humanitarian: in an occupation in which children invariably followed their parents, and in which they were bound to the same mine for the whole of their lives, it guaranteed that the next generation of labourers would be better educated (and therefore more efficient)

than their fathers. The landlord's institution in 1760 of a Colliery Bailie Court, in which five ordinary colliers sat in judgment over their fellows in petty cases of discipline and dispute, also combined enlightenment and utility, for the main barony court at Alloa had become clogged with collier quarrels (*O.S.A.* 1793:614; *N.S.A.* 1845:34-5). What was striking about Thomas was that he regarded miners as capable of education and jurisdiction when most of his contemporaries wrote them off as too brutal to be capable of any kind of self-help.

By these means the Erskines guaranteed a constant and increasing supply of fuel to the developing industries of Alloa, and of export cargoes to the ships that ranged the harbours of northern Europe. This was undoubtedly the biggest debt the community owed to the landlords in these years.

III

The third and final period from 1770 to 1825 covers the administration of a man almost as remarkable, though necessarily on a narrower stage, as the great Earl John. When John Francis Erskine, as a young man of 28, resigned his commission in the First Regiment of Horse in 1770, he deliberately turned his back on the world of political and military ambition which came naturally to a man of his ancestry, and devoted the rest of his life to running the estate at Alloa—at first on behalf of his mother, after 1780 as sole proprietor in his own right. When he was restored to his grandfather's dignity as Earl of Mar shortly before his death in 1825, he had completed more than half a century of successful rule in barony, considerably increasing the extent and value of his lands, and earning a great reputation for benevolence and improvement. His feat was the greater in that the sole capital available was from land, and when he took over the administration, the finances of the estate were evidently in a critical condition.²³

During the period of his administration, Alloa was not uniformly prosperous. In the late 1780's it met a serious check when all the neighbouring distilleries went out of operation at once, and the old country camblet weavers began to lose their trade, while the rise of a cotton industry in Stirlingshire threatened to syphon off the population—which fell by more than 350 between 1788 and 1791 (*O.S.A.* 1793:635-7). By 1800 this crisis was over: the population rose again from 4,802

in 1791 to 5,214 in 1801, 5,577 in 1821 and 6,377 in 1831. New distilleries were built in the parish in 1799 and 1806, new breweries in 1774 and 1816: a pottery, a tannery and a foundry began before the end of the eighteenth century, and the arrival of what was to become the greatest industry in nineteenth-century Alloa was signalled by the erection of Kilncraigs Woollen Mill about 1813, on a site utilising water-power from the Gartmore Dam. A graving dock was built at the port in 1790, and further stimulus to trade was provided by the Devon Iron Works erected in 1792 three miles away, using Alloa quay for its exports and imports (*N.S.A.* 1845:48 ff.; *Lothian* 1871:12-19; *Graham* 1814:361).

In all this varied industrial and commercial activity—which, after all, determined the main lines of Alloa's growth and prosperity—John Francis Erskine played no direct part. His activities were confined to improvement of the land, of the corn mills, of the coal mine, and of the appearance and facilities of the town itself. In a less energetic man such activities might have been dilettantism, but he wrought such a transformation in each that the entire life of the parish was affected in one way or another.

The revolution in agriculture came late to Alloa, considering the enterprise of the Erskines in other directions. Even in 1773 the rent-roll breathed of medieval survivals, including part-payments in barley, meal, beans, oats, geese, capons, trusses of straw and carriage-services.²⁴ At that date there were very few enclosures, apart from the minister's glebe, fenced and laid down to clover in 1761: the Erskine farms were small (none above 90 acres), their buildings miserable, their ground overrun with whins and weeds, scratched with primitive implements and ignorant of modern drainage and rotations—a microcosm, in fact, of old Scots farming at its worst (*O.S.A.* 1793:603 ff.).

Two things in particular helped the breakout into the forefront of Scottish agricultural progress. Firstly, the construction of the wagonway enabled the landlord to abolish carriage-services for driving coals, and presented the small tenant who had spent most of his energy carting, with the alternative of cultivating the land properly or leaving (*O.S.A.* 1793:603-4). The end of heavy collier-traffic on the roads also made communications easier to maintain for agriculture, and in 1794 John Francis embarked on a general scheme to improve parochial roads (*Graham* 1814:342). Secondly John Francis

succeeded in attracting to the barony an East Lothian farmer named Hugh Reoch, who proved "remarkable for his good plowing, draining and dressing of the grounds", an organiser of ploughing-matches, and a general evangelist of the new ways (*O.S.A.* 1793:604-5n). It was at this point that John Francis set out the comprehensive programme of improvements for the whole Mar estates, beginning with the outlying farms and gradually working inwards towards the centre so that the land adjacent to his castle, though the last to be improved, should be the best improved, by virtue of the experience gained from the rest (*Graham* 1814:307-8).

Already by 1791 the parish of Alloa could be described (admittedly by local prejudice) as one where the improvement of agriculture has been "most uncommonly rapid . . . perhaps more so than in almost any other" (*O.S.A.* 1793:604). By 1815 the transformation was complete, and the details of John Francis's work were being publicised by the Board of Agriculture. Rents in kind had long been abolished. Farms were much larger (the largest by 1791 was 457 acres, and none were below 76): leases were much longer. All the land was enclosed with walls and hedges, with liberal provision of windbreaks and timber; 80 acres of Alloa Inch had been embanked from the sea. The latest implements were used—"no plough but Small's", and six of George Meikle's new threshing machines in operation by 1791. New crops and new rotations were introduced and adapted for local conditions: lime-burning began in kilns along the coast, and sewage from the middens of Alloa was spread out on the fields. The roads, the farm buildings and offices were all vastly improved (*O.S.A.* 1793:604 f.; *Graham* 1814: *passim*). John Francis gained the credit that was due to him: "by the spirited exertions of that nobleman this small county at least fifty years ago held a prominent place among the most highly cultivated north of the Tweed", wrote the *New Statistical Account*, adding proudly (as the apogee of local achievement), "it is remembered by many that a ploughman from Alloa about that period was sent with the necessary implements to plough before his Majesty King George III" (*N.S.A.* 1845:47).

The improvement of the corn-mills was an obvious adjunct to the improvement in agriculture and characteristically an Erskine employed the best skill in Scotland. About 1780 the famous wright George Meikle undertook the reconstruction of an old mill first erected below the Gartmore Dam in 1731:

he designed a building 90 feet long, with seven sets of grindstones each adapted for a different type of milling, driven by twin wheels. As the brewers and maltsters of Alloa remained thirled to these mills for many years afterwards, the efficiency of their operation was important to one of the town's basic industries (*O.S.A.* 1793:603; Graham 1814:362).

The improvement of the coal-field was a more traditional Erskine interest than the improvement of the land, and John Francis was quick to follow the lead of his uncle Thomas. Production figures measure his progress—15,000 tons around 1760, 22,000 tons around 1790 and 48,000 tons around 1810: shortly thereafter the pits at Collyland caught fire and had to be abandoned, and a lease was subsequently taken of New Sauchy colliery in the adjacent parish: by 1840 the annual quantity raised from Alloa and New Sauchy mines was from 76,000 to 80,000 tons. The main technical changes were the improvement of the wagonway by successive steps (until a single man and a horse could bring down eight tons, or more than twenty-five times as much as a horse and cart in 1760, the adoption of complete mechanical winding, and the replacement of post-and-stall hewing by longwall, which saved more than half the coal formerly left in the pillars. The landlord was well served in these matters by his two colliery managers, Alexander and Robert Bald, who served him successively for over fifty years and were among the leading mining engineers in Scotland (*N.S.A.* 1845:28 ff.; Graham 1814:401; Carvel 1944: 14 ff.).

Equally significant was the vigour and enthusiasm with which John Francis continued his uncle's benevolence towards the miners. For their education, he was fortunate in obtaining as schoolmaster an old army sergeant, who made such an impression on his charges that even the minister in 1791 was forced to admit that the colliers, from being "an unruly set of labourers . . . remarkable for their ignorance and dissoluteness" were now "rather *above* the ordinary rate of the common people" (*O.S.A.* 1793:614-15). In 1819 the landlord erected a new colliery school-house that was teaching 180 scholars by 1840 (*N.S.A.* 1845:61). To the old collier past work and to the widow John Francis paid a small pension, and permitted and encouraged the formation of the Friendly Society among the miners in 1775. In housing, it was noticeable in 1778 that whereas there was an average of 8·1 inhabitants to a house in the town of Alloa, and 12·1 in the glassworks, there was the

very much more reasonable figure of 4·3 at the Erskine colliery (*O.S.A.* 1793:614n, 615n, 635; *N.S.A.* 1845:35).

By far the most popular act, however, was the total abolition on the Mar estates of the traditional Scottish practice of compelling the miners' wives and daughters to carry the coals for no extra wage from the hewing face to the bottom of the shaft and then in many cases up the shaft to the surface—"of all the slavery under heaven's canopy (the African slavery as it was in the West Indies excepted), this was the most cruel and oppressive both as regards body and mind". The landlord's reform—he was one of the first to make it in Scotland—was probably inspired by his manager Robert Bald, who was a passionate and influential opponent of women's labour below the surface both on humanitarian and economic grounds. To the worker and his family the end of this degradation brought inestimable benefits: "the whole style of living" was improved by the wives staying at home to attend to the house, to bring up the children and to prepare meals for the collier on his return from work (*N.S.A.* 1845:29; Bald 1812).

The final contribution of John Francis to the welfare of Alloa was only partially and temporarily successful; this was the attempt to replan the town on the lines first conceived by his grandfather. Between the 1720's, when the town received such praise, and 1778 when it was described by a visiting minister as a "poor, ill-built village", Alloa had grown overcrowded and shabby. Twenty-four years later the same minister enthused over the "gratifying spectacle of spacious streets and elegant buildings" which met his eyes, apparently in the New Town that John Francis began to lay out to the west of Lime-tree Walk in 1785 (*O.S.A.* 1793:596n; Graham 1814:189). During the nineteenth century any semblance to a town plan was swept away in the competition for building sites; the mean confusion of the Industrial Revolution swamped the old town, and created still meaner confusion in the new. It only remained for the twentieth century to throw a housing estate down on the east of Lime-tree Walk, and Pandemonium was complete.

IV

In making any final assessment of the contribution of the family of Erskine to the development of Alloa, account must be taken of strong economic and social forces that were making it progressively more difficult for a great landowner to influence

the destiny of a town. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Earl John was the only affluent man within the barony, and his pocket was generally deep enough to undertake all the schemes of improvement that the community needed. The very success of his improvements, especially to the port and the Gartmore Dam, attracted merchants and manufacturers who put capital into the town, and over whom the Erskines could exercise no control. By the second half of the eighteenth century these business-men came to determine the main prosperity of the town—they stayed if they found Alloa an attractive and profitable site for their concerns, they went away if it disappointed them, or if extraneous circumstances intervened: the landlord was left with the responsibility for agriculture and mining, and with some chance of controlling the growth of the community by the way he feued out the land to manufacturers. Direct participation in industry was abandoned by the Erskines before 1770, and in any case it would have been difficult for one family to command enough capital to make a decisive impact on industrial life at that stage in Alloa's development. Their main contribution to industry was in the supply of coal.

John Francis after his death was revered as "the late venerable Earl" who "endeared himself to his tenantry and dependents by a life devoted to their happiness, and an unremitting attention to the prosperity of Alloa" (*N.S.A.* 1845:38). In fact, although his great drive and enthusiasm still made him a power and brought great benefits to the town and parish, they cannot be considered as decisive in influencing the major lines of its future development. Nineteenth-century Alloa was essentially the creation of the joint-stock company, the engineers and brewers, the distillers, the weavers, the glass-makers, who used steam in place of water-power and who alone wielded the powers of capital that could make or break a town. Even the Mar coal mines fell into the hands of a joint-stock company after John Francis's death.

Perhaps if John Francis had had successors of his own calibre some semblance of the old force might have lingered on. In fact he was succeeded by two mediocre earls, bred in the belief of their traditional influence yet unable to understand how to maintain it in changing times. For example, the grandson of John Francis set his face against gas-light for the town, warning the populace (in a disturbingly modern phrase) that "those who throw missiles might expect to receive others in

return, and perhaps of as destructive a nature". Naturally Alloa obtained its gas-light, and the landowner merely obtained the derisive sobriquet of "the Daft Earl" (Gordon 1937:77).

Such was the story of the Erskines of Alloa, an example of enterprise exploiting a good site with vigour, and being finally ousted as the prime movers of progress by the very forces they helped to unleash. Is it, in essentials, the story of every improving landlord of the eighteenth century who strove for his burgh of barony? If not, how did the others differ? Were there any towns where industrial life was still dominated by the landlord by 1830? Were there any parishes whose natural growth was retarded by obstructionist landlords who set their face against development? How much benefit did other communities really receive from their landlords? These are interesting questions, and local historians and geographers who try to answer them will find a rich field for study and do Scottish economic history and historical geography a service.

NOTES

- ¹ The first reference to coal mining in the district is in 1510, of export from Alloa coastwise in 1558, and of export abroad in 1608 (Gordon 1937: 23, 33).
- ² Scottish Record Office (henceforth S.R.O.), State papers 252; S.R.O. Pre-Union customs books of Bo'ness and Blackness.
- ³ Information conveniently summarised in *The Scots Peerage* (ed. J. Balfour Paul) Vol. 5 (Edinburgh 1908) 629-31; and *The Complete Peerage* (ed. 1932) 426-7.
- ⁴ See also S.R.O. Additional Forfeited Estate Papers, 9-33.
- ⁵ Known as John Street at the time, it is now Broad Street and Lime-tree Walk. It was probably begun in 1705—S.R.O. Mar and Kellie Papers, submission by John, Earl of Mar *et al.* 3034/1705.
- ⁶ To do the Duke of Hamilton justice, the town of Hamilton where he resided was described in 1719 as a "fine little town"; Royal Library, Stockholm, H. Kalmeter's Journal of his travels in Britain.
- ⁷ *Acts of the Parliament of Scotland*, Vol. 10, Appendix pp. 117, 119.
- ⁸ See also Mar and Kellie MSS, "Commission to order the customs at Bo'ness", 1710. *Historical MSS Commission Report*, Vol. I, p. 487.
- ⁹ Also Royal Library of Stockholm, Kalmeter's Journal. There is proof for the erection of the rope-works before 1715, and no reason to suppose the others do not date from about that time: S.R.O. Additional Forfeited Estate Papers, 9-33.
- ¹⁰ There are several references and accounts of the work connected with Gartmore: in this I have followed N.S.A. 1845:8-9, and Bald 1812: 7-11. Bald had access to contemporary papers of Earl John that cannot now be found. For proof that the reservoir was filled in 1713, see S.R.O. Forfeited Estate Papers, Mar. 9, Petition of Col. William Dalrymple of Glenmuir.

- ¹¹ *Scots Peerage* 5:632-5.
- ¹² *O.S.A.* 1793:615—"the present proprietor (i.e. John Francis) during the residence of 21 years". John Francis resigned his commission in 1770: *Scots Peerage* 5:633.
- ¹³ *Mar Peerage: Case for John Francis Erskine Goodere Erskine* 1892, p. 68.
- ¹⁴ S.R.O. Mar and Kellie MSS, Translation by Alex. Burton to Mungo Cochrane . . . 24/3/1714.
- ¹⁵ H.M. Customs and Excise Office, Alloa: Customs Letter Books, 1718-1825. I am much indebted to the Customs and Excise authorities for permission to examine these interesting documents, and in particular to Mr. Lambert for his kindness and assistance in making them available.
- See also S.R.O. Customs books of Alloa, from 1742: S.R.O. Mar and Kellie MSS, "Commissioners of the Customs *v.* William and Henry Fogos and John Mitchell".
- ¹⁶ Customs Letter Books 1736-1750 contain several references to local snuff manufacturers.
- ¹⁷ Customs Letter Books; S.R.O. Customs Books of Alloa.
- ¹⁸ For evidence of their continued existence, see Customs Letter Books, 1736-44 for debentures on sail cloth exported; S.R.O. Mar and Kellie MSS, Rental for the Barony of Alloa, 1773, for saw mill; *O.S.A.* 1793: 623, for rope making.
- ¹⁹ Also S.R.O. Customs Books of Alloa. Among manufactured exports should be noted bricks from 1761—to Gothenburg, Courland, Frederiksdal, Königsberg, Veere, etc., glass from 1768—to Copenhagen, Frederikstad, Flekkefjord, Hamburg and Veere; and a consignment of fine mahogany furniture to Copenhagen in 1770.
- ²⁰ Webster's survey of population gave two figures for Alloa parish in 1755—4653 and 5814 (Kyd 1952:37). Though later writers have only quoted the last, there is good reason to suppose the former is the correct one, and the latter was reached by adding the population of that part of Logie parish which lies in Clackmannanshire to the figures for Alloa proper.
- ²¹ In this account I have followed Carvel 1953:6 ff. Mr. Carvel had access to the company's documents dating from the foundation, and ignores the unlikely story in *N.S.A.* 1845:49, of the foundation "said to have been first worked by a Danish company".
- ²² Also S.R.O. Forfeited Estate Papers, Mar. 8c.
- ²³ S.R.O. Mar and Kellie MSS, "General view of the affairs of the family of Mar"; *Mar Peerage Case*, loc. cit. (see note 13 above).
- ²⁴ S.R.O. Mar and Kellie MSS, "Rental of the Barony of Alloa in 1773".

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