

Full of Egotism, Diaries of Rev John Hastie

By Ronald Morrison

This is the text of Ronald's talk to the Society on 21st March 2004.

Whether or not because of television there can be little doubt that these days there is a considerable increased interest in all matters historical and we find ourselves inundated daily by a plethora of new historical material hitting the bookshelves, much of it, though, it has to be said simply a rehash of what has already been written. It is almost therefore a matter of surprise when something completely new at least in the sense of being previously unpublished material emerges.

So it was with me when by the sheerest turn of fortune I came across the previously unpublished diary of one Rev. John Hastie, minister of the Parish of Edrom in Berwickshire for the years 1797 to 1822. The Diary had previously been and remains in the personal possession of the Marjorybanks family descendants of the author on the female side. To the family I am much indebted for making the Diary available and for their fullest co-operation in editing and indexing it and also to Borders Family History Society for agreeing to publish it.

It would be stretching matters somewhat to proclaim the Diary a great work of literature. Like virtually all diaries, apart perhaps from those of some well known politicians, it was written for the diarist's eyes only and for the most part is a series of short staccato sentences, phrases or even single words - not in some ways the lightest of bedtime reading.

This, though, is not to detract in any way from its value as giving an insight into the live and concerns of a Parish Minister in the Borders of the time with the tremendous added bonus of much previously unrecorded genealogical information.

I suppose in some ways we are all conditioned in our thinking and have our own preconceived notions. For me the idea of a Scottish Minister of the period was perhaps one of dour, sober, Calvinistic censoriousness and this notwithstanding a reading of the fictitious diary of the Rev Balwhidder in Galt's Annals of the Parish of which this real life Diary so reminds me.

Nothing it would appear could be further from the truth. However he may have presented himself to his Parishioners, and this does not actually come out, the character of the man was in many ways the complete opposite as clearly borne out in the subtitle he himself ascribed to the Diary - "Personal Recollections and Full of Egotism".

Here was a man who much enjoyed life, who in his earlier days was a keen sportsman indeed a founder member of the Friendly Golfing Society of Edinburgh and who enjoyed nothing more than dining, wine and socialising and it has to be said trying to ingratiate himself with those he considered as gentry or at least those he termed the respectable classes. A very human man indeed with whom one can very easily empathise.

To quote but one example shortly after his Ordination at which there were some disturbances a not uncommon occurrence at the time we have the following entry;-

“18th. October 1797 - Gallons 24 of Highland Whisky from William Calder arrived yesterday - 6/6d.” Perhaps rather more than we might find in a manse these days - or perhaps not - but then at just over 3d. per gallon even allowing for inflation just that little bit more affordable.

His comeuppance, if comeuppance it is - for what might appear some slight excesses he takes with stoicism indeed almost with a modicum of pride and achievement.

“15th. February 1813 - the writer rising into consequence - a fair formed fit of the gout. It came on instantaneously at Butterdean on the fourth - moderate at first but afterwards most excruciating - no pain like a racking gout. The paroxysms are over but there is a gnawing pain left. I can however walk in flannels about the house and have never been sick or feverish”.

Perhaps however for any excess imbibation we should blame the Company he kept.

“9th February 1797 “Yesterday paid Mr. Watson a guinea for his own trouble and another for the clerk and forty shillings for wine for the guzzling Presb.”

Perhaps we must charitably assume the purchase was for communion wine.

Taking the overview what also struck me was that here was a minister not of a proclivity such as we might expect today but rather that of an establishment figure holding his position because of the Patronage system as a placement of the local laird. The Church of England may previously have been described as the Tory Party at prayer which is understandable granted its establishment by the royal decree of Henry VIII for reasons of dynastic continuity. The Church of Scotland though was of a very different clay being almost unique in that it translated itself into the National Church if not exactly by the will of the people certainly in the face of Royal opposition. For this reason it has always had a much more radical predisposition.

The Rev. Hastie however did not fall into this mould and we find little if any sympathy in the Diary for the various reform movements which were struggling to express themselves notwithstanding the tremendous hardships which prevailed throughout the land particularly after the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

Hastie, by any yardstick, a true patriot enrolling in the local Cavalry Regiment and taking part in the well documented if slightly ludicrous 'False Alarm' of 1804 was at all times and in all things very much opposed to change of any sort, dismissing all radicals and reformers as trouble makers or rabble-rousers. In Church affairs we see his opposition to the establishment of quoad sacra Parishes, (the creation of other Churches within the Parish), to missionary work - 'romantic schemes' and even to Sunday Schools. The Rev Hastie was not a man who would be found today on the picket lines but was rather as a staunch supporter of the 'establishment' It is easy to discern how the climate was appropriate for the sowing of the seeds of Disruption which would eventually burst forth in 1843.

However it is perhaps as genealogy that the book will appeal - it certainly did for me and I can only recount my own experience on opening the Diary for the first time and seeing the name of a distant ancestor jump out at me - there he was with a dozen other farmers pulling together for the purchase of a robe for the minister.

I made a point of indexing the Diary finishing up with no fewer than 774 names, not in fairness all local but a goodly proportion considering the Parish population, at the time of the 1801 census numbering 1355. I also made a point of extracting and detailing separately births, deaths, and marriages of which I found respectively, 30, 78 and 106.

Granted his proclivity to gravitate towards the gentry and the respectable people of the Parish a number of these it has to be said are already recorded in the Old Parish Records. There are however a number, particularly of deaths which I was otherwise unable to locate and must afford a new source of reference for anyone researching their ancestors in the area.

And even where the basic details are already known some meat can perhaps be put on the bone as there are often details of the event which will not appear in the basic records or references to ancestors which might bring out a trait or feature of the personality which might otherwise be lacking.

The Rev. James Aitchison of Berwick is for instance described as "*a silly drunken beast*" not an aphorism which might appear in the Session Records and I particularly liked the image of one George Drummond who gave Hastie a cow on one occasion only for the Diary to record as an aside "*The cow is as poor as he is fat*".

This is a diary which I think should appeal to those with an interest in local history, a snapshot of life in a rural Parish and for those with a connection to the area might afford a unique opportunity to 'meet the ancestor'