

# The Cattle Trade of Aberdeenshire in the Nineteenth Century

By J. H. SMITH

**B**EFORE the introduction of sea and rail transport only store animals surplus to local requirements were exported from Aberdeenshire and the north-east. They were driven south, many of them to be fattened in Norfolk for the London market. The journey was costly in time since the rate of travel rarely exceeded sixteen miles per day, and considerable loss in condition occurred even with the hardy type of beasts bred in the northern half of Scotland. Animals often suffered injuries or were stolen, and there was the added risk that drovers might abscond with the money realized by the animals when sold.

Farmers, and especially small farmers, were highly dependent upon dealers and drovers, and on occasions when the scarcity of fodder coincided with a severe winter they often had to sell at prices dictated by buyers.

Steam transport opened up new markets and in particular made the London fat stock market available to farmers in Aberdeenshire; it "opened Smithfield market and its prices to Aberdeenshire as well as to Norfolk. The drover's occupation was gone. It was no longer the raw material that left for the south but the finished article of commerce, carrying as is well known the highest price in the metropolis."<sup>1</sup>

## SEA AND RAIL TRANSPORT

Transport of cattle by boat from Aberdeen to London commenced in 1828. At first shipments were small, for there was a lack of ships fitted for this trade, and farmers dreaded losses at sea. The following summary shows the progress made during the twenty years prior to the opening of the Aberdeen Railway in 1850.

1828-32 Yearly shipments increased from 150 to 800.

1833-6 Yearly shipments increased from 1,250 to 8,049.

1836-41 Yearly shipments varied between 5,843 and 8,049.

1842-9 Except for one year the yearly shipments increased from 9,543 to 15,858.

After 1850 sea transport of cattle declined to about one-third of its previous size, but many farmers continued to use the sea route until well into the present century.

Sea transport suffered from a number of disadvantages and limitations. Storms at sea caused delays and losses. William McCombie, a foremost breeder of Aberdeenshire cattle in the nineteenth century, noted: "I have known them [the ships] a month at sea. I have seen the same cargo of cattle driven back to Aberdeen two or three times. Although the loss by deterioration of condition must have been great, it was astonishing how few deaths occurred in sailing vessels; the proportion was greater in steamers. A year seldom passes without the shippers having heavy losses. I was owner of part of the cattle when every beast aboard the *Duke of Wellington*, except three, was either thrown overboard or smothered in the hold."<sup>2</sup>

The sea route limited Aberdeenshire farmers to markets served by east coast ports, and although London was a large and growing market, butchers knew that farmers in the north-east had few other fat stock markets open to them.

In 1850, when the Aberdeen Railway was opened, 12,000 cattle were carried by rail to

<sup>1</sup> A. Harvey, *Agricultural Statistics of Aberdeenshire*. British Association, Aberdeen Meeting, 1859.

<sup>2</sup> W. McCombie, *Cattle and Cattle Breeders*.

Edinburgh, Glasgow, and London, and over the twenty years from 1850 to 1870 (years for which railway statistics on the movement of cattle from Aberdeen are available) the equivalent of between 27,000 and 44,000 cattle passed through Aberdeen each year on their way by rail to markets in the south. The yearly numbers varied more commonly between 34,000 and 44,000, and nearly 90 per cent of the trade was with London. As railway communications extended north and westwards from Aberdeen an increasing number of farmers changed over to the production of fat cattle. Each proposal for an extension of the railway system was studied with care, and when alternative routes were proposed for the same area the case for and against each was fought in the local press and on Parliamentary Committees. Naturally, every farmer, while reluctant to have his own farm severed by railway embankments and cuttings, was anxious that the railway should pass within easy reach of his steading.<sup>1</sup>

The advantages of railways to cattle rearers and feeders are seen in the following extract, which compares conditions before and after the introduction of railways. A writer to the *Aberdeen Free Press* in 1860 noted: "Those who have a distinct recollection of the last twenty years will remember that when there was a season of scarcity of food for cattle coupled with a severe winter, the price of cattle generally went down 30 to 50 per cent. There was not only the necessity of selling off the extra stock to save the keep, which the buyers were but too well aware of, but the drove roads being blocked with snow, presented serious difficulty in removing the cattle after they were sold." He then dealt with the conditions during the winter of 1859-60. "For the last five months the farming interest has had to contend with all the difficulties of scarcity of feed and a severe winter, and how has he come out of them? Why, he could sell every fortnight through the winter to willing buyers at a good price, if he was inclined to do so, or if he would keep

them on he had oil-cake in unlimited quantity within three or four miles of his door along the line of the railway."<sup>2</sup>

One important advantage to farmers following the introduction of rail transport was the reduction in freightage rates. Steamship owners had previously been charging up to £3 per head for taking cattle to London, but after 1850 the rates were steadily reduced until in 1865 the journey by sea cost only 21s. and that by rail about 25s. per beast.

Only small quantities of meat, mainly salted pork, were dispatched by sea before 1850, but by 1855 butchers in Aberdeen had developed a substantial trade in beef carcasses and in that year 8,000 tons of beef—the equivalent of 28,000 carcasses—went by rail to London. This trade in meat reached a peak of just over 10,000 tons—about 35,000 carcasses—in 1865.

#### CHANGES IN OUTPUT

It is difficult to make any precise assessment of the increase in production of cattle in Aberdeenshire during the nineteenth century, largely because of changes in the character of the trade, the increased dependence upon imported store cattle, and the growth in the number of cattle produced outside the county which passed through Aberdeen on the way to markets in the south. At the beginning of the century the yearly output was about 22,000 cattle, of which 12,000 left the county as lean beasts to be fattened in England. In 1870, the last year for which estimates are available,<sup>3</sup> 11,224 fat cattle and 8,040 tons of meat—rather more than 28,100 carcasses—left Aberdeen. In addition just over 26,000 beasts were slaughtered for consumption in the county. About one-half of this total of just over 65,300 cattle were bred and reared in the county, perhaps rather more than one-quarter were imported stores fattened in the county, and the remainder came into Aberdeen as fat beasts from other north-eastern counties. Bearing in mind all the circumstances, the production of beef within the

<sup>1</sup> *Aberdeen Free Press*, 2 May 1856.

<sup>2</sup> *Aberdeen Free Press*, 30 March 1860.

<sup>3</sup> *Aberdeen Free Press*, 15 September 1871.

county, as distinct from the sale of fat cattle, doubled during the years 1800 to 1870. Expansion after 1870 was relatively small compared with the growth during the first sixty years of the century.

#### DEPENDENCE UPON IMPORTS

The expansion in the cattle trade was made possible by the imports of store cattle. Farmers in Orkney and Zetland began to export cattle to Aberdeen in 1868, and between that date and the end of the century they sent between 6,000 and 9,000 beasts each year. It is not known how many of these were fat and ready for slaughter on arrival at Aberdeen, but perhaps most of them came to the mainland for fattening.

Ireland sent large numbers of store cattle to Britain each year, and many came to Aberdeenshire. Unfortunately there are no figures showing the extent of the county's dependence upon stores from this source.

Canada had been sending live cattle to Britain for several years before 1890, when exporters began shipping animals direct to Aberdeen. Supplies from this source came to an end in 1893 when an embargo was placed upon imported store cattle<sup>1</sup> in an attempt to rid the country of pleuro-pneumonia and other contagious diseases of cattle. During the three years 1890 to 1892, however, nearly 39,000 Canadian cattle came to Aberdeen. Some of these may have been slaughtered on arrival, but most of them went to farms in the north-east to be fattened. In these three years the imports from Orkney and Zetland and from Canada averaged 20,000 per year and when to this is added supplies from Ireland it will be seen that the dependence upon imported store cattle was appreciable.

This dependence was so important that many farmers became greatly alarmed when the government imposed its embargo. They maintained that Canadian store cattle were particularly suited to their system of stall feeding. Breeders and rearers naturally

favoured the embargo because they hoped it would eradicate cattle diseases and also increase the profitableness of their farming enterprises. Low prices had caused store raising to be unprofitable, and this was said by some to be a good reason why store raisers should turn to cattle fattening and obtain their lean animals from outside the county.<sup>2</sup> Opponents of the embargo maintained that the restriction had benefited the Irish and not Scottish farmers. When supplies from Canada were terminated, many farmers turned to Ireland for their store beasts because the small Aberdeen type of cattle did not suit their requirements.

#### BREEDS OF CATTLE

By the 1880's farmers in Aberdeenshire had established three distinct types of cattle enterprises. In the remote areas store cattle were produced and sold to the lowlanders for fattening. Some farmers in the lowlands bred and fattened either Aberdeen cattle, short-horns, or crosses of these two breeds. Others either concentrated on fattening the larger type of imported store beast or fattened native-bred animals. Fatteners produced cattle for markets, catering for the varying needs of large and small families and with widely differing incomes. This tendency towards specialization was a distinct outcome of improved transport and demonstrates how farmers adapted their businesses to the needs of a wider and more variable market.

At the beginning of the century farmers produced cattle able to live hard on the meagre supplies of food from poor and exhausted soil; cattle which could withstand the rigours of the long journey by road to fattening farms in England. But after 1828 they rapidly turned their attention to fattening cattle for the London market. They soon became convinced of the importance of breeding and feeding for early maturity, and found it was more economical to "feed the

<sup>1</sup> The embargo did not apply to Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> Royal Commission on Agriculture: *Report of Assistant Commissioner for the counties of Perth, Fife, Forfar, and Aberdeen*, 1894. C.7342.

young cattle properly from the commencement and not *keep them alive* until three years old, and *then* feed them."<sup>1</sup> Early maturity meant lower costs of production, and "in the place of pure bred animals of the slow feeding Scotch breeds, beasts crossed with the shorthorn are brought to market one or two years earlier, and of greater bulk than could formerly be accomplished. Now, though the proportion of fat to lean meat may be somewhat greater than in the older pure Scots, it will be found that the consumable meat is also greater."<sup>2</sup>

The shorthorn had size and a more favourable rate of growth, but the quality of its flesh was inferior to that of the Aberdeen breed. It was claimed by some that the Aberdeen shorthorn cross-bred beast combined the best qualities of each of the parent stocks. One Aberdeenshire contributor to the Second Statistical Account noted, "The bullocks of this cross attain a greater weight in three years with good keep than the pure Aberdeenshire in four; and, from the facility with which they can be conveyed by steam, without loss of weight, to London markets, they yield a much greater remunerative price to the feeder."<sup>3</sup> It was generally admitted, however, that the cross-bred animal was inferior to the pure native stock, but "as no preference seems to be given to the pure Aberdeenshire breed in the London market, an inferiority in the article exposed to him, so long as that inferiority does not affect its exchangeable value, cannot be supposed to have much influence with the Scottish farmer."<sup>4</sup>

Breeders feared that Aberdeen cattle would decline in numbers and "that the good name of Aberdeenshire will be lost in the London markets."<sup>5</sup> The changed circumstances produced a conflict of interest between breeders and fatteners. The former, regretting the growing tendency of fatteners to buy the larger type of lean animal bred out-

side the county, failed to appreciate that the demand for high-priced top-quality joints from Aberdeen cattle was limited and that any substantial extension of demand for fresh meat was dependent on the production of larger and cheaper joints. The larger store cattle could be fattened cheaply and sold at prices attractive to butchers supplying the needs of lower middle and working-class people with large families.

Published information on the relative importance of breeds is limited to data collected under the Markets and Fairs (Weighing of Cattle) Act, 1891. Under this Act provision was made at the larger markets for weighing and grading cattle. Use of the facilities was voluntary, but at Aberdeen the proportion of all cattle entering the market which were weighed and graded increased from just under 30 per cent in 1893 to well over 40 per cent at the end of the century. The reports relating to the operation of the Act during the two years 1894 and 1895 showed that the native breed accounted for less than six, and cross-bred beasts for more than 86 per cent, of all cattle presented for weighing at Aberdeen market. These figures understate the importance of Aberdeen cattle, and it seems likely that weighing and grading found greater favour with the feeders of cross-bred beasts than with the owners of the smaller native stock. The former liked to advertise size while the latter preferred to direct buyers' attention to conformation, the more favourable relationship between live- and dead-weights, and quality.

Aberdeen cattle presented for grading at Aberdeen market in the two years 1894 and 1895 were of slightly lower quality than the cross-bred beasts; this is contrary to the known differences in quality of the two classes and supports the view that the better class Aberdeen cattle were sold without being weighed and graded.

<sup>1</sup> 'A Word for the Native Breed of Cattle', *Aberdeen Journal*, 25 January 1854.

<sup>2</sup> *Aberdeen Journal*, 19 September 1860.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Thomas Burnet, Parish of Daviot, Aberdeenshire. Second Statistical Account.

<sup>4</sup> Rev. Robert Robertson, Parish of Ellon, Aberdeenshire. Second Statistical Account.

<sup>5</sup> *Aberdeen Free Press*, 6 June 1862.

## PRICES

During the first half of the century, when the cattle industry of the county was largely independent of outside supplies of store animals, there were few complaints about prices. Steam transport had proved such a boon that farmers' main concern was to expand the production of fat cattle. When, however, large numbers of farmers turned away from rearing and concentrated on fattening purchased store beasts, there were frequent complaints, mainly from feeders who suffered from adverse short seasonal fluctuations. Between 1850 and 1867 prices of fat cattle rose steadily; by the latter year they had increased by 50 per cent, and in the absence of short period fluctuations the improvement favoured both breeders and feeders.

Between 1869 and 1884 prices remained high, but short period fluctuation often caused feeders to suffer losses or at best to earn only small profits. During the winter of 1871-2 some farmers complained that the prices realized by fat cattle were 15s. per cwt below those previously paid for the same beasts as lean stores. Feeders felt fairly confident of being able to plan for normal long-

term trends; it was the unpredictable short period fluctuations which made cattle fattening a risky undertaking.

The steady decline in prices which began after 1884 caused greater difficulties for breeders than for feeders, since it was not so easy for the former to make adjustments in their cattle enterprises to meet falling prices. On many of the breeding and rearing farms the major items of farm expenses were fixed, and occupiers often felt themselves to be at the mercy of the feeders, who were able to pass back to producers of store cattle almost all the expected reductions in prices and stabilize their own 'feeders' margin'. Prices of animal feeding stuffs declined rather more sharply than those of fat cattle and since feeders were more dependent than rearers on purchased foods, the general movement in prices was more favourable to them.

Throughout the century, however, cattle rearing and fattening was, financially, more satisfactory than the production of grain crops for sale. And those farmers in Aberdeenshire who concentrated on the production of pedigree or of top-quality fat cattle had little cause for worry even in years when prices were generally low.

NOTES AND COMMENTS (*continued from page 113*)

meetings, but he took a keen interest in both the work of the Society and this *Review*. His first historical publication was *A History of Wye Church and Wye College* in 1913. There followed in 1928, perhaps his most important work, *The Reclamation of Exmoor Forest*. Together with his wife he wrote *The Open Fields*, which was first published in 1938. His last book, *A History of English Farming*, came out in 1949.

## SURVEY OF ENGLISH FOLKLORE

Plans have recently been announced for a survey of English Folklore which is to be made by the English Department of University College, London, under the guidance of Pro-

fessor A. H. Smith with the assistance of Mr J. McN. Dodgson. The survey will aim at the study of the traditional elements in the life and customs of England and will include such topics as folk-tales, anecdotes, beliefs and superstitions, customs, traditional plays, games, pastimes, and so on. Information about the traditional material culture will be recorded, but primarily as a background against which folklore may be properly examined.

Members of the Society who feel they may be able to help in this important work are asked to get in touch with Mr J. McN. Dodgson at the Department of English, University College, Gower Street, London W.C.1.