

Arthur Clephane, Edinburgh Merchant and Seedsman, 1706-30

By TOM DONNELLY

THE union of the Parliaments in 1707 was of doubtful benefit to the Scottish economy in its initial stages.¹ However, it opened the way for fuller and more mutually advantageous economic and social intercourse between two countries, whose political relationships through the centuries had fluctuated between open hostility and dubious friendship. In the easier environment created by the union Scots lairds, such as John Cockburn of Ormiston and Grant of Monymusk, began to see the possibilities of applying some of the more advanced English agricultural techniques in Scotland.²

Although during the last decade of the seventeenth century a period of famine caused it to be described as "King William's ill years,"³ in fact during the half-century following the Civil Wars and the Interregnum bad harvests were rare, and according to Smout and Fenton "contemporary complaints were almost all of glut and inability to sell."⁴ Broadly therefore the union, coinciding with a phase of economic recovery after the so-called "seven ill years" provides a convenient starting-point for any study of the agrarian revolution in Scotland. Traditional accounts in the textbooks treat the topic in terms of implements, crops and cropping, tenures, and field systems, and no attempt has been made to investigate either the organization or the importance of the trade in seeds. This is a serious gap in our knowledge, for the seed tradesman was an essential link between the agricultural improver and practical farmers. Through him experiments in improved agriculture were facilitated and advertised.

For this reason the papers of Captain Arthur Clephane, an Edinburgh merchant and seedsman, are of great interest. They show where Clephane obtained his seeds, how he paid for them, the varying types of customers he served, and from which strata of society and which areas of the country they were drawn. They reinforce the view already held that agricultural improvement started among the landlords in the best farming lands of East Scotland, Fife, the

¹ R. H. Campbell, *Scotland since 1707*, Edinburgh, 1965, pp. 18-63; T. C. Smout, 'The Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707. I. The Economic Background', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, xvi, no. 3, 1964, pp. 455-67; Campbell, 'The Economic Consequences of the Union of 1707', *Ibid.*, pp. 468-77.

² Campbell, *Scotland since 1707*, pp. 24-34.

³ J. Symon, *Scottish Farming, Past and Present*, Edinburgh, 1959, pp. 89-102.

⁴ T. C. Smout and A. Fenton, 'Scottish Agriculture before the Improvers—An Exploration', *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, xiii, 1965, pp. 73-93.

Lothians, and the Carse of Gowrie, as they were regular purchasers of the leguminous crops associated with farming improvements at this time.

Captain Arthur Clephane was a younger son of James Clephane, Laird of Carslogie, a small estate in Fife, which had been granted to the Clephane family in 1392 by King Robert III. Arthur's elder brother David became laird on the death of his father in 1702, but following the fashion of many Scots he spent much of his time in London until his death in 1716. James Clephane, junior, became a sea captain and master of the *David* of Boness, which he sailed round Europe as a general freighter. After his retirement from the sea he set himself up as a general merchant in Edinburgh. The fourth of the Clephane brothers, George, became a minister of the kirk. Arthur Clephane, then, came from a well-established Scots family, closely connected with the land, the sea, the kirk, and mercantile life.

Arthur Clephane like his brother went to sea, became a ship's master, and on his retirement started business as a merchant in Edinburgh. In 1706 he borrowed 1,000 marks from his brother David, bought a shop from Richard Kello, an Edinburgh timber merchant, and began his mercantile career. As Mark Anderson has pointed out, prior to 1707 several commercial seedsmen and nurserymen had already become established in Edinburgh.¹ Two of these are mentioned in Clephane's papers, namely David Dowie and William Miller.² The latter was a Quaker who had set up business "near the Abbey" and who succeeded in cornering some of Clephane's trade. Clephane naturally was very bitter about this and wrote to one of his London suppliers, John Turner, complaining that as Miller was siphoning off his trade he would have to cut his orders.³

In 1712 Clephane moved to new premises, renting two shops from Patrick Hepburn, an Edinburgh apothecary, situated on the north side of the High Street, near the Ships Tavern Close. The conditions of his lease provided for a rent of £180 Scots and a tack duty of £300 Scots, and prohibited Clephane from subletting either of the shops without Hepburn's permission. The Captain stayed in these premises until 1720 when he moved to a new shop near the Foulis Close, and since the tack duty was now £500 Scots, it is a fair assumption that his business was expanding.

Two years later, in 1722, Clephane married Sybil Jeffrey, the daughter of Captain William Jeffrey, a bailie and merchant in Kirkcaldy.⁴ They set up house in Conn's Close. The following year a son was born to the Clephanes, and the proud father purchased a cradle with blue hangings for £1 2s. Unfortunately, the marriage was short lived. Sybil Clephane died in 1724 and was

¹ Mark Anderson, *History of Scottish Forestry*, Edinburgh, 1967, I, p. 599.

² *Ibid.*, p. 598.

³ Scottish Records Office (henceforth S.R.O.), Miscellaneous papers, RH/15, no. 53/54.

⁴ S.R.O., *Register of Marriages in Edinburgh, 1700-50*.

buried at Greyfriars Churchyard.¹ Clephane paid £4 for a coffin and £2 10s. for two mourning coaches and four ordinary coaches. He also paid 7s. 6d. to James McEwan for printing three quires of burial letters for his wife.

Clephane's business was of moderate size; he employed one full-time assistant, William Lithgow, and took on apprentices from time to time. The apprenticeship indenture of one states that Captain Arthur Clephane was "to entertain and give board and lodgings to, and washing to, Mr. Andrew Bruce's son in accordance with his station." He was to train him as a merchant for two years and the apprentice, for his part, "is to learn to keep shop for the said Mr. Arthur Clephane." It was also agreed that young Bruce should attend school in Edinburgh to learn arithmetic and that Clephane should receive £25 per annum for the boy's keep.

Although his business was of moderate size Clephane had financial problems which came to a head in 1728, when he found it impossible to obtain credit. His main creditor, Wishart, wrote to him disparagingly, refusing to grant him further credit or even to help him to raise it. Clephane had a bad financial record and had even embezzled £150 belonging to his father-in-law, William Jeffrey. Eventually, in 1730 Clephane was imprisoned in the Tollbooth of Edinburgh for failing to pay a debt of 8s sterling. This seems from his papers to have been the end of his career as a seedsman.

* * *

On setting up business, Clephane sought a source of supply for his seeds in letters that begin in September 1705. A modest beginner in the trade, he wrote to William Crombie of London thus:

Sir,

I make bold to write to you not being acquainted, but I presume upon my cousin Ballairdie's recommendation, hoping you will furnish me with the following goods I stand in need of at present, which are for the most part garden seeds and I expect you to get them good and fresh otherwise it will ruin my trade, who am but a beginner, and whatever your accounts remits to let me know and I will send you a bill for one half, as for the other you must allow me four months credit until I get my money from the country, which if you be satisfied therewith be pleased to let me know for I have occasion for a great many more goods afterwards and if you can get me served as good and cheap as others are, I shall be most willing to employ you for the same. Your answer I expect as soon as this letter comes to your hands.

Your Humble Servant
Arthur Clephane.

A few weeks later Clephane contacted another London merchant, John Turner, sending him an identical letter, except that this time he asked for five months' credit instead of four. True to his word, on the delivery of the seeds

¹ S.R.O., *Register of Interments in Greyfriars Churchyard, Edinburgh, 1700-50.*

What may perhaps be regarded as a standard range of seeds was set out by Clephane in an undated paper thus :

Seeds of Trees

Acord Bean seed
Myrtle Berries
Pinaster
Muzerain Berries
Spanish Brown Seed
Hibbert Nuts
Silver Fir
Yew Berries
Great Pine
Scots Pine
Lime Tree Seed

Flower Seed

Sweet Sealions
Double July Flowers
Lovets
Double Larkspur
Candy Tuft
Sweet Williams
Double Hollyoak
Convolubulous major
Convolubulous minors
Double Columbine
African Marygolds
French Marygold
Princess Feather
Sweet July Flower
Swedish Juniper

Pease and Beans

Hotspur pease
Sugar pease
Egg pease
White Rouncevals
Dwarf pease
Kidney beans
Half White Kidney beans
Stickle pease
Four Part Rose pease
Green Rouncevals
Crown pease

Seeds to Improve Land

French and Irish Furze
French Mustard

Salad Seeds

Purslane
Parsley
Curled Striped Lettuce
Common Lettuce
Cresses
Russian Cabbage
Italian Celery
Curled Endive
Early Dutch Cabbage
Pompian
Small Indian Cresses
Radish
Cabbage Lettuce

Lamb Lettuce

Imperial Lettuce
Roman Lettuce
Spanish Radish White
English Cauliflower
French Lousie
Sweet Chervil
Rouchet
Gourd
Cucumber
White Dutch Cabbage
English Melon
French Leek
Large Indian Cresses
French Melon
Red Dutch Cabbage
Dutch Asparagus

Pot Herb Seeds

Double Marygold
Summer Savoy
Pot Marygold

Sweet Herb Seeds

Sweet Marjoran
Hysop
Lavender
Thyme Seed
Rosemary
Winter Savoy

This general list can be supplemented from Clephane's accounts to his customers, and his agents. He also bought and sold red Dutch clover, white clover, great clover, pitch fir, yew berries, cypress, lentil seed, rhubarb seed, carrot seed, turkey beans, Spanish radish, and onion seed. Similarly, references to flower seeds other than those on the list include harts hornes, carnations, Venus looking-glasses, Cumberland majors, sweet sultanes, Canterbury Bells, yellow, blue, and scarlet lupins, belvideres, queen's July flowers, and anemones.

Among the seeds for improving land French furze is worthy of note, for according to contemporary books on husbandry it was reckoned to be a great improver of sandy and gravelly soil. It also provided fuel, and was useful for preventing low-lying land from being covered with sand sliding down from

nearby hills.¹ It is perhaps strange that rye grass is omitted from the standard list, but in company with clover it was purchased by some of Clephane's customers. Nevertheless, his papers list only about a dozen orders for rye grass and a few more for clover. The largest order was for 650 boxes of rye grass from a gardener called Hamilton in 1723. The more typical requests were those from a gardener called Carmichael ordering three lots of clover seed in quantities of 20 lb., 6 lb., and 2 lb. George Smollet, a gardener from Ingleston, doubled an order for four bushels of rye grass in 1722 to eight bushels in 1724, and trebled his order of 5 lb. of great clover to 16 lb. He was obviously a reasonably satisfied customer. The mere fact that these references are few and far between bears out the general impression that the Scots were relatively slow to adopt these two crops as field crops to improve their land.

Attention to the improvement of woodlands is revealed in the number of bills Clephane received from Holland and London in payment for seeds and seedling trees. In 1724 he received at least four consignments of 10,000 tr. seedling trees from his agents in Rotterdam and Amsterdam. He even purchased supplies from a Mr Liddle, a fellow seedsman in Leith, viz.

February	2,000	alder trees
4th March	500	" "
5th March	500	" "
7th March	400	" "
11th March	500	" "
14th March	500	" "

The problems of paying for imports into Scotland, owing to the shortage of liquid funds, emerge clearly from the Clephane papers. Clephane's business was based mostly on credit. His bills show that he normally paid at least some part of his accounts in cash, but for the rest used bills of exchange. When buying seeds in Holland, however, he frequently paid in cash through the ship's captain acting on his behalf. When paying by English bills, he either paid agents in Edinburgh at the Laigh Coffee House, or else sent the money to the Red Lyon Coffee House in London. Although Clephane normally asked his London agents to grant him five or six months' grace before meeting their accounts, even then he often failed to pay up as promised. On one occasion a supplier from Swaledale rebuked the captain for not paying his bills for two years, telling him bluntly that his credit could not be extended any further.

One can appreciate Clephane's difficulties only when one realizes how difficult it was for him to induce his customers to pay their debts. Often he had to resort to litigation to get his money. On one occasion he had to pay John

¹ John Houghton, *A Collection for the Improvement of Husbandry and Trade*, revised by Richard Bradley, London, 1727, III, p. 29; John Mortimer, *The Whole Art of Husbandry*, 1707, p. 196.

Marshall, an advocate, £58 9s. for sundry items necessary for summoning debtors, and legal fees such as regret bills, horning and poyning dues, protests, libels, and payments to the Clerk of the Bills. On another occasion in 1719 he summoned James Kinnear, David Mitchell, Thomas Borthwick, James Bernie, and James Birnie, all for failing to meet their accounts.

Transportation of seeds was always hazardous. Normally they were sent by sea from Holland, London, or Harwich. His letters from Crombie and Turner show that the seeds were normally placed in a cask marked (A) and were entrusted to the care of a ship's captain. Clephane received his seeds regularly from the shippers of the following ships sailing between Leith and London: *Christina*, *Argyle*, *Isabella*, *Catherine*, *Elizabeth*, *Thomas*, *Bon Accord*, and *St Andrew*, all of Leith and the *Sophia* of Pittenweem. Nevertheless, quite often the seeds were damaged by sea-water during the voyage. As a matter of routine Clephane refused to pay for damaged seeds, and the London agents normally wrote these off the account, but at times the correspondence between them became acrimonious, ending with a compromise usually in favour of Clephane.

Unless the seeds were collected from his warehouse, distribution was normally by carrier or occasionally by sea. Clephane sent goods regularly with the Haddington carriers, Alex. Thompson, the Dunblane carrier, the Newcastle carriers, James Fairbairn and James Thompson, and the Kinross carrier, James Meldrum.

In the days before the Seeds Act of 1820 the acceptable rate of germination was a matter of opinion, and not surprisingly Clephane received many letters from his customers about the poor quality of seeds, some failing to come up altogether. These, together with his own complaints to Turner and Crombie reinforce Marjorie Plant's statement that "imported seeds were not always as satisfactory as they were expected to be."¹

In October 1710 Clephane refused to pay for seeds because the quality was so poor. In another letter, he informed Turner that he was prepared to pay for good quality seeds, but not for bad, as they had an adverse effect on his trade; local gardeners, he maintained, were threatening to take their trade elsewhere. He went on to warn Turner that if the quality of the seeds did not improve, and if he was going to be charged more than his colleagues in the trade, he would be forced to seek a new source of supply. In reply to a similar letter Carpenter apologized and admitted the poor quality of the seeds, saying that his customers in Dublin had made similar complaints. Nevertheless, he reminded Clephane that he normally sent him best quality seeds. Whether there were any significant differences between the quality of English and Dutch seed it is impossible to judge; all one can say is that some of Clephane's customers expressed a preference for Dutch.

¹ Marjorie Plant, *The Domestic Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century*, Edinburgh, 1952, p. 73.

Gibson, Sir George Sinclair, Sir James Holburn of Menistry, Sir David Dalrymple, Sir John Henderson, Sir Philip Anstruther, Sir Alexander Anstruther, Lady Eccles, Lady Newark, Lady Ethelstane, and Lady Innergillie.

Apart from dealing directly with the gentry, Clephane also dealt with them through their gardeners. James Birnie was Lord Colville's gardener, John Rainey was gardener to the Earl of Wemyss. Many other gardeners crop up in Clephane's accounts, but until more Scottish estate papers have been sorted and edited it is impossible to say who their employers were. Clephane sold seeds to men from every strata of society, to merchants such as John Ramsey and John Moncrieff of Edinburgh, to professional gentlemen, such as Dr Hay and Advocate Gillan, and to ordinary townsmen, such as Baillie Grierson and Mr Gill of Edinburgh and Leith.

It is disappointing, however, that the captain's papers do not reveal who were his customers for flower seed. There must have been a market for them otherwise he would never have ordered them. Presumably, he sold them to the proprietors of the various flower gardens, which existed in and around Edinburgh at this time.¹

Clephane's seeds were distributed to areas whose communications systems were reasonably good, and which were traditionally amongst the best farming regions of Scotland, namely the Lothians, Fife, and the Carse of Gowrie. Seeds were dispatched with regularity to such towns and areas as Newbiggin, Annandale, Kelso, St Ninians near Stirling, Cupar, Kinross, Haddington, St Andrews, Leven, Leuchars, Craigiehall, Jordanstown, Markinch, Trail, Crail, Dalkeith, Pinkerton, Largo, Falkirk, and Dunblane. The area of Clephane's influence was considerable, but the maximum distance of his clients was about fifty to sixty miles from Edinburgh. One can only suppose that other places, such as Angus and Ayrshire, had parallel sources of supply in Glasgow and Dundee. Certainly in 1728 one of Clephane's customers informed him that he could get supplies in Perth.

Although he drew his clients from every class of society over a moderate sized area, Clephane never received regular orders for great amounts of seeds. The orders were in general normally small except for trees, and the vegetable and flower seeds were clearly intended for domestic garden use rather than for field crops. A typical example of such an order is that of McGill of Leith.

4 lb. Strasbourg onion	2 oz. spinach	3 drop Silesian lettuce
1 oz. onion	1 oz. carrot	2 drop Yellow cabbage
$\frac{1}{2}$ oz. leek	3 drop lettuce	2 oz. Yellow turnip

However, Clephane like most other contemporary Edinburgh merchants was also a general trader. He supplemented his seed trade by importing and

¹ Plant, *op. cit.*, ch. 3.

selling wine from France, and pens, brushes, writing-paper, clover, mace, fruit, and vinegar from Holland; he also sold oil, coal, and cloth. This makes it difficult to place a value on his seed trade, but normally he seems to have received about ten to twelve shipments of seeds from England and Holland every year, averaging usually from £35 to £45 sterling, giving a total of £420 to £540 sterling for the year, but figures of his total trade in seeds are bedevilled by figures for his trade in general goods, and therefore one has to treat these figures with great caution.

NOTES AND COMMENTS *continued from page 125.*

THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Society's eighteenth AGM was held at the Hereford College of Education on 7 April 1970 with Professor W. E. Minchinton, who had been re-elected chairman of the Executive Committee, in the chair. Mr G. E. Fussell, Mr C. A. Jewell, and Mr M. A. Havinden were re-elected President, Treasurer, and Secretary respectively, and Dr E. J. T. Collins, Professor W. E. Minchinton, and Professor G. E. Mingay were re-elected to the Executive Committee.

In his report Professor Minchinton noted a further small increase in membership from 683 to 687 and observed that the greatest scope for expansion appeared to be the larger libraries and places of higher education, most of which did not at present take the REVIEW.

He announced that the Society had decided to hold a Winter Conference at University College London on 28 November 1970 and that the 1971 Annual Conference would be held at the University of Southampton from 5 to 7 April. Congratulations were extended to the Society's President, Mr G. E. Fussell on the news of his honorary D.Litt. to be conferred by the University of Exeter in July. He expressed regret at the death of Mr T. W. Fletcher, member and one-time Secretary of the Society.

The Treasurer reported on the healthy condition of the Society's finances, which would provide a sound basis for the expansion of publishing and other activities. The Editor reported that the size of the REVIEW had gradu-

ally been increased from 64 to 84 pages and that in future it would include more articles and reviews of European, tropical, and plantation agricultures.

THE SUPPLEMENT TO THE REVIEW

In September this year the Society issued an extra number of the REVIEW as a Supplement to volume 18. It is a *Festschrift* in honour of Professor H. P. R. Finberg in his seventieth year, and places on record the gratitude of the Society for his skilful and scholarly editorship of the REVIEW for over ten years from the time when it was first launched in 1953. Bound copies of this issue have been prepared and are available from the Treasurer, Museum of English Rural Life, Reading, Berks., price 60s. or, if ordered before 31 March 1971, 45s. to members of the Society.

BANKERS' ORDERS

The Treasurer of the Society urges members to pay their subscriptions if they possibly can by bankers' order. It greatly reduces the labour of collecting subscriptions.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS

A new list of addresses of members of the B.A.H.S. is to be printed in the REVIEW in the near future. The last list appeared in 1963 in volume XI, part 2. Will members please notify the Treasurer, Museum of English Rural Life, Reading, of any recent change of address?

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