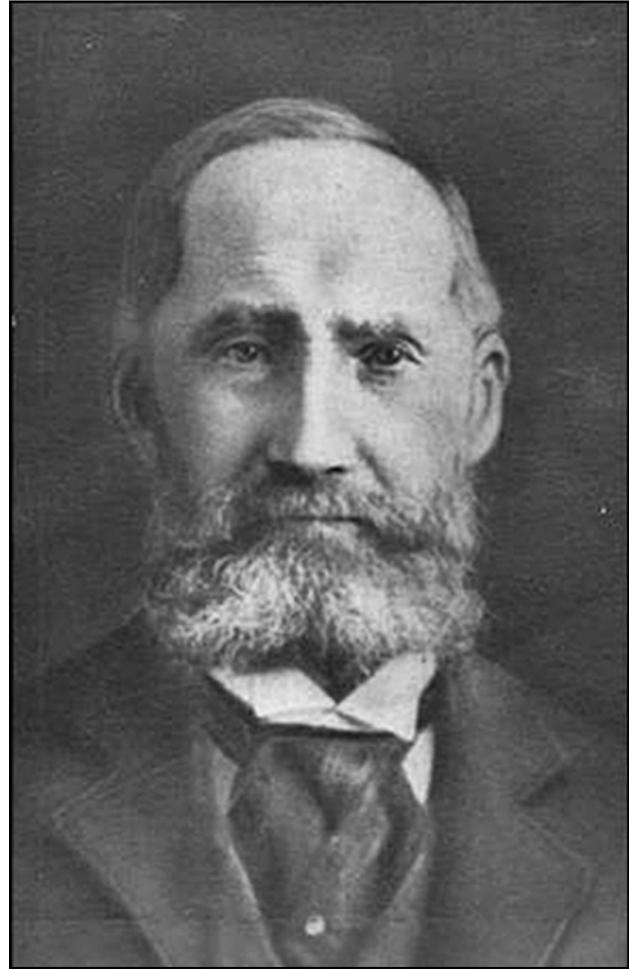


# Introduction

Alexander Walker was a remarkable man who lived at a remarkable time for the North East of Scotland. His 1851 census entry, which stated that he was a 'gardener, mathematician and instrument maker', actually underestimated his abilities. It does not include his skills as musician, composer, inventor, journalist, surveyor, archaeologist or meteorologist. John Forbes a lawyer from Portsoy, summed up Alexander in a speech to mark Alexander's leaving Enzie for Newe Castle in 1851, when Alexander was just 31 years old. Mr Forbes remarked that:

*"I had slight acquaintance with Mr. Walker before, but since he came amongst us I have had occasion to transact a good deal of business with him, and I have always found him to be a man of the strictest honesty and integrity, a man conversant with science, literature and the arts, a contributor to many of our most scientific periodicals of the day, As a musician, his name is well known, not only in the rural districts of Banff and Aberdeen but in London, where he has occasion to be called to conduct our national Scottish music in the highest circles of that city"*

Alexander's life is fully explored in the biography that follows this introduction and is also complemented by the stories behind the names of the tunes the scene behind his life and works and to show how a man, who came from one of the most isolated crofts in Aberdeenshire, grew up to rub shoulders with the landed gentry, scientists, thinkers and royalty itself.



Alexander Walker, late 19th century

## Jacobite Rebellions

To understand Scotland at the time of Alexander Walker, it is important to note the effect of the Jacobite Rebellions of 1715 and 1745 on Scotland. After the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603, James the VI of Scotland became also James I of England and one of his first actions was to unify the Crowns of both countries. After the death of James's son James II, the Stuart line ended and eventually in 1702 the crown therefore passed to the Elector of Hanover in Germany, great grandson of James I of England and VI of Scotland, who thus became George I, a protestant king.

Many of the Scottish Highland Clans were Catholic and Jacobites ('Jacobus' is Latin for James), and were supporters of the claim to the throne of James II, (who abdicated in 1688), and his Stuart descendants, the 'Old Pretender' (his son) James Edward Stuart and the 'Young Pretender' (his grandson) Bonnie Prince Charlie.

In August 1715 The Earl of Mar raised the standard at Braemar (near Balmoral) to start the first Jacobite rising. The rising petered out and was over by 1716. A second Rebellion took place in 1745 and was more successful with the Scots Army reaching half way into England until they were turned back and eventually defeated at Culloden in 1746.

From 1746 on the British government passed laws to dismantle the clan system ending most Jacobite support in the Highlands. Wearing of Highland dress and bearing arms were forbidden. More importantly for the long-term

social structure of the Highlands, the feudal relationships and heritable jurisdictions which underpinned the power and authority of clan chiefs over their clansmen were abolished. Pro-government forces were garrisoned in the Highlands e.g. at Corgarff Castle until the early 1800's. The Clans of the uplands of Aberdeenshire were closely involved in the rebellions (Old Glenbucket – Bonnie Prince Charlie's Lieutenant general came from Glenbucket just behind the site of the future Castle Newe) and thus suffered in the post rebellion repression.

Many of the harsh laws imposed on the Highlands in the aftermath of Culloden were repealed in the 1770s and 1780s. A wave of mass emigration (The Clearances) came in 1792, known to Gaelic-speaking Highlanders as the 'Bliadhna nan Caorach' (Year of the Sheep) when landlords replaced crofters with sheep farming. It was in the early 19th century that the second, more brutal phase of the Clearances began. A new idea of Highlandism' however was reached when King George IV made a state visit to Scotland in August 1822. Despite being grossly overweight, George paraded in a Highland costume of his own design, complete with a kilt in a specially-designed Royal Stewart tartan - a spectacle that was ruthlessly caricatured in the popular press.

Alexander Walker was born in 1819 just at the start of the resurrection of Highland Culture

## **Emigration and Empire**

Agricultural changes at the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries put an end to feudal strip farming (run-rig) and introduced modern farms with tenant farmers and farm servants. This meant less land for the growing population. Also, in some areas, as a result of some landowners replacing people with sheep, there were mass evictions. More commonly, such as in Strathdon, despite reasonable lairds, there was still emigration for economic reasons.

The net result was a great emigration of Highland Scots to Australia, Canada, and New Zealand at other parts of the British Empire. Another positive reason for leaving was that the expansion of the British Empire had created lots of opportunities for expatriate Scots. It was said that, although the English ruled the empire, the Scots ran the Empire. The Scots were the Doctors, the Teachers, the Engineers, the Soldiers, the Planters and farmers who made the Empire work. As a result a lot of money returned to Scotland from these émigrés.

One of these beneficiaries of the Empire was John Forbes of Bellabeg (Bombay Jock). It was on April 22, 1764 that John set sail on board the ship 'Asia' as a 'Purser' and set foot on Indian soil on December 6, with a load of fifty bolts of canvas. Since his ship had to leave hurriedly on the East India Company's service, he sold off his load at a profit of 45%, which, otherwise, would have fetched him a gain of 100%. After over three years in Asia. Forbes was one of the fortunate ones to be authorised by the Court of East India Company to proceed to India as a 'Free Mariner' and later was a part of the select category of 'Free Merchants', at Mumbai.

With time, John set up Forbes and Co which became one of the biggest trading companies in East India. As well as trading, they had a fleet of ships and undertook insurance and banking. At a time when the Scottish taxable intake was £40,000 per annum Forbes and Co were lending individuals and Governments 1-2 Million pounds. John Forbes died at London in 1822 and his estate passed to his nephew Sir Charles Forbes, the first baronet, father of Sir Charles 3rd Baronet, employer of Alexander Walker. It is said that the sum inherited was £1 million which today is equivalent to £72 million.

Charles Forbes, the first baronet, built Castle Newe in 1831 and Alexander Walker became employed by him at Newe in 1851.

## **The Enlightenment and Education**

The removal of the post rebellion restrictions and the improved trading with England and the Empire produced a resurgence of Scottish financial, social and cultural development. The blossoming of Science and the Arts in the late 17th and early 18th centuries became known as the 'Enlightenment' The people involved included David Hume – philosophy, Adam Smith, - economics, Thomas Reid - philosopher, Robert Burns –Poetry, John Playfair - Geometry, Joseph Black- Chemist , James Hutton – geology, Alan Ramsay – Painter, and Walter Scott – writer.

A factor in such an explosion of intellectual talent was the Scottish Education System. John Knox at the reformation wished that all Scots to be educated to read their own Bible. Therefore every parish had a School run by the Church. In 1834 the minister at Glenbucket, the neighbouring parish to Strathdon, stated 'There is not an individual but can read and write.'

Alexander Walker was the product of this system. Although he lived in the most isolated part of Aberdeenshire called the Cabrach (by some called unkindly, The Siberia of Scotland), he had a small Parish School only four miles from his house.

J. Murray Neil who wrote *The Scots Fiddle: Tunes, Tales & Traditions of the North East and Central Highlands* states,

*“Up to the age of eleven Alexander Walker was too young to walk to school at Lesmoir, some four miles from his home at New Forest farm, Rhynie, where he was born on the eighth of April, 1819 but he received private tuition at home along with two other children during these formative years. When he did go to school, and that was restricted to the winter months since he had to herd sheep in the summer, he was fortunate to have an excellent teacher in Robert Milne. In addition to giving him a good general education, particularly in mathematics and surveying, which was to stand him in good stead in later years when he practised engineering and land surveying, he also taught him to play the fiddle with lessons on a Saturday morning.*

Another aspect of intellectual advance in Scotland was the advance in engineering. James Watt from Greenock and who died in 1819, Alexander's year of birth, had developed the steam engine. In 1803 the 'Charlotte Dundas', the world's first steam powered boat plied the Forth and Clyde Canal to Glasgow. By 1850 the railway had reached Aberdeen, thus Alexander was able to easily travel to London to the Great Exhibition in 1851 to demonstrate his inventions. The Railway then was built up Deeside making it easy for Queen Victoria to travel from London to Balmoral.

## **Scottish culture**

It was noted above that the arrival of King George in full Highland Dress in Edinburgh in 1822 introduced the rest of Britain to the romance of the Highlands. Sir Walter Scott the writer, in his novels of Scotland also added to the public interest, so much so that tourism to Scotland was greatly increased.

The wealthy expatriates, who had made their money in the Empire, also returned to Scotland and wished to encourage Scottish culture. No one did more for this than Sir Charles Forbes who was Treasurer of the Royal Highland Society in London and whose patron was the Prince Albert. Sir Charles inaugurated the Lonach Highlanders and the local Highland games in Strathdon. Other groups of Highlanders were started by other landed gentry and Highland games became the norm for even the smallest village. Sir Charles also encouraged and supported Scottish dress, music and poetry

A great boost to Scottish culture was given by the arrival of Queen Victoria and Albert at Balmoral Castle on Deeside, 15 miles from Strathdon. They both loved the Scottish countryside, the people and the freedom they gained there. Victoria loved the tartan, the bagpipes and the Scottish dancing. Although Sir Charles Forbes was only a Baronet, one of the lowest ranks of the aristocracy, he was deeply involved with court life at Balmoral and also in London where he also had a house.

It was into this world of 'Regal Scottishness' that Alexander entered when he came to New Castle in 1851. The royal contacts of Sir Charles enabled him to use his Musical talents and join the Balmoral orchestra and play for Royalty.

## **Fiddle Music**

The early 1800's was a golden age of fiddle playing in Scotland especially in the North East. As there was no radio, TV cinemas or theatres, entertainment was self-made and centred on dances in the local hall or even a local barn. Music was the centre piece of these events and the fiddle was king as it was portable, and had an excellent range for dancing to. Good fiddlers were the pop idols of their day and would tour the country playing at many different venues. Many wrote their own tunes.

In the Glens around Strathdon the fiddle was ubiquitous. Mr Wattie at Bellabeg owned a Guarneri violin, Alexander Murdoch from Glenbuchat was a maker of violins, some of which Alexander bought and James Strachan the expert fiddler known as Drumnagarry lived at Drumnagarow croft in Glenbuchat.

Some of the most famous fiddlers of the 18th and 19th centuries include Niel and Nathaniel Gow from Perthshire, William Marshall from Fochabers, James Scott Skinner from Banchory and Willie Blair, the Queen's Fiddler. Alexander Walker surely ranks amongst these.

To finish with we can enjoy a contemporary account of Alexander Walker's fiddle technique as reported in the newspaper when Alexander and playing along with James Taylor, his pupil, at a dance in Cullen, Aberdeenshire in 1851.

*"We have often heard of Mr Alex. Walker's abilities on the violin, but had never before heard him perform except along with others, at Balls, etc.; but now that we have had a fair opportunity of hearing his solo performance, we only speak the voice of the audience, when we say there has never, to our knowledge, appeared in this quarter, any other who will throw down the gauntlet to him. His style of bowing strathspeys and reels is something quite original. His principle 'forte' indeed seems to be in his command of the violin bow – its rapid and varied evolutions in his variations to "Nae luck about the House", "Jonnie Cope", "Reel of Tulloch", and many other fine Scotch tunes, to which he put a tail, caused a breathless silence throughout the audience, but only before a burst of applause at the end of each piece. His young pupil, Master Taylor, has, we think, the best success on the flute; and his performance on the violin shows him to have an exceedingly fine ear and taste for music."*

## **Acknowledgements:**

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A lot of information has been gleaned from the internet and, where ever possible, sources have been acknowledged. I recognise all the work that has been undertaken by countless contributors and am grateful to them and also regret if any work has been used unacknowledged. If I have done so, I do apologise and amends will be made if you contact me via Paul Cranford.

Finally, I am grateful to the great resource of the 'British News Paper Archive' which allows access to newspapers as far back as 1750. It is amazing how much information about life in Alexander Walker's time is available in the archive.

Peter Duffus  
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