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ALASDAIR GRAY

AS THINGS HAPPEN

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2006

Dunfermline, Carnegie and Scottish Labour

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In 1994 I was called to Dunfermline by Elspeth King, former curator of the People's Palace Local History Museum on Glasgow Green. A Heritage Trust, with money bequeathed by Andrew Carnegie for the good of his native city, had bought its oldest dwelling still in use – The Abbots House, separated by a kirkyard from the ancient cathedral and royal palace ruins. Elspeth was working to turn that two-storey cluster of rooms into a local history museum, and was using Carnegie and other money to employ Scottish artists – wrought iron workers, carvers and painters. She was then one of the few people who remembered I was a muralist. Two of my six murals were in buildings that had been destroyed, two others had been papered over. She invited me to paint the biggest area in Abbots House: the ceiling of the long gallery on the upper floor, with long cornices sloping down to panelling on the north and south walls. This was a wonderful opportunity, and well paid too! Within fourteen months I painted down the length of the ceiling a Scottish thistle-tree of Dunfermline history. Its roots were among prehistoric remains and every century had a branch, starting with the 1064 castle built in Pittencrieff Glen by the first Scottish King and ending in 1995 when the Abbots House Museum opened.

Every town and village, properly studied, is historically important, and Dunfermline obviously so. Like all castles Malcolm Canmore's was built on a defensible site. The Glen curves round the corner of a fertile plateau, descending steeply to the plain beside the Forth. When kings ruled their lands by commuting around them Dunfermline – like Edinburgh, Linlithgow, Stirling, Falkland and Perth – was a capital city with a palace maintained for the monarch by a local monastery. Dunfermline Abbey was founded by Queen Margaret, Malcolm's wife, who was later made a saint. Her shrine in the Cathedral became the first stop for pilgrims when they had crossed the Forth by Queens ferry, when travelling to the relics of Saint Andrew at St Andrews. Iona was first sacred burial ground of

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Scottish royalty, but by the 11th century it was part of the Norwegian empire so Scottish kings and queens were buried in Dunfermline Abbey, Robert the Bruce among them. William Wallace's mother is buried in its kirkyard. The great poet Henryson was a monk and schoolmaster here. James 6th of Scotland and 1st of England spent his honeymoon in Dunfermline Palace, where his son was born forty-nine years before the English Parliament chopped his head off. The monks of Dunfermline were among the first in Scotland to distil whisky and mine coal. With the Reformation the town became a main centre of Scottish industries, particularly mining and weaving. By the 19th century Pittencrieff Glen, like most Church and Crown properties in Scotland, had been privatised. It was now a rich family's private park. Which brings me to Andrew Carnegie.

Carnegie's people were hand-loom weavers when Dunfermline's damask table linen was earning an international reputation and weavers were Scotland's most prosperous, well-educated, and politically radical craftsmen. Andrew was born in 1835 shortly before the power-loom factories opened and drove hand-weavers into poverty. His family took him to America when he was thirteen and United States industry booming. Carnegie became a telegraph operator when brokers exchanged the latest market prices by telegraph. He learned to invest all he earned where it would bring the most profit, first in railways, then in oil. He became a railway owner, organised transport and pay for the Union Army during the American Civil War, then he and his partners took over U.S.A. iron and steel production. He was now the world's richest multi-millionaire, probably richer than any European emperor. Like the other great U.S.A. capitalists he had called in the military to shoot workers campaigning for better wages. Being a murderous exploiter depressed him, so in 1901 retired to Skibo Castle in Sutherland, lived like a Highland laird and worked hard at being a philanthropist until his death in 1918.

From his vast profits he funded colleges, technical schools and concert halls in Britain and North America, creating institutes to work for international peace in Washington and the Hague. He founded the *Carnegie Hero Trust* which gives pensions to those disabled by saving lives, the *Carnegie United Kingdom Trust* to "improve the well-being of the masses" by creating public libraries, and supporting social services, the *Carnegie Trust for Universities of Scotland* which gave money to study and research departments, and bursaries to poor students, *The Dunfermline Trust* for the improvement of his native city. These four trusts operate from Dunfermline. They created a music college and a girls' college for

teachers of physical education. The Dunfermline Trust owned three local golf courses, two playing fields, six institutes with bowling greens and (Carnegie's largest gift to the town) Pittencrieff Glen.

When a boy Carnegie and other lads of the town were charged with trespass if they played in the woodlands and by the burn in the Glen, though the main entrance was in the very heart of the town. By paying the owner a sum too big to refuse he bought that Glen and, through the Trust, gave it as a park to the people of Dunfermline *to be theirs in perpetuity*. It contained greenhouses and a former owner's house that could be used for private functions.

After World War 2 many Carnegie Trust functions were absorbed by the Welfare State. Dunfermline Girl's College had shifted to Aberdeen and thence to Edinburgh. In 1976 Dunfermline Town Council took charge of Pittencrieff Glen at the rate-payers' expense. By then the town – like Britain – had finally lost its historically famous industries and coal mines were being privatised and closed. This was also a bad time for local councils because the London government began making them spend less on social services.

In Glasgow, the town I know best, the council began by sacking park keepers. Gates were no longer locked at dusk and opened at dawn. Bandstands fell derelict, monuments vandalised, lavatories defaced, bronze plaques and wrought iron ripped off for sale as scrap metal. Quiet corners became refuges for drug users and alcoholics while the homeless started sleeping there. Some of this has also happened in Pittencrieff Glen. Carnegie created the Dunfermline Trust to improve his native town. Could the trustees have paid park-keepers to patrol the Glen? Open a hostel for the homeless? An addicts' drug-rehabilitation centre? Scotland is worse off for these things compared with England, worse still compared with several other European nations. I cannot regret that instead it opened a local history museum because it thereby paid me to paint a big mural. And despite loss of industry Dunfermline is now the fastest growing town in Scotland since the Forth Road Bridge has made it a pleasanter, cheaper commuter suburb of anywhere else near Edinburgh. And for over a century it has still had one of Scotland's finest public parks, but perhaps not for much longer.

In November 2004 *Scotland on Sunday* reported that a £30m "executive super-school" for businessmen would be erected in Scotland, with a dean or managing director earning £150,000 a year. The centre would have a hundred beds, be within 30 minutes of a major airport, and a site for it had been chosen. In commercial

democracies, however, great projects begin with quiet deals between wealthy consultancies, some big businessmen and a few politicians. These folk detest projects being publicly discussed before they are in working order, so in January 2005 the world's greatest business schools in Harvard and Switzerland denied all knowledge of such a scheme while a Scottish expert in Lausanne said he hoped such a business college would eventually come to Scotland, there was no plan to site it in Dunfermline.

Gordon Brown (expectant British Prime Minister) is a Fife Member of Parliament. Early this year he made speeches supporting the Labour Party candidate in a Dunfermline West by-election. A factory in a Dunfermline business park had just been closed by the American owners. When asked about this Mr Brown announced that a great new project would replace it – the Carnegie Trust would soon lease part of Pittencrieff Glen to be made the site of a huge college for senior executive businessmen. Adjacent buildings would contain new “state-of-the-art” offices for Carnegie's Trusts, and Dunfermline Labour Council was agreeable. The announcement did not stop a huge majority voting a Liberal Democrat into what had been a safe Labour seat for half a century or more.

A combination of college classrooms, conference halls, hundred-bedroom hotel facilities will occupy a very big part of the Glen, for it will need pleasant grounds where big business people can stroll and converse in peace and security, and security for important modern businessmen needs a lot of room. If this structure goes up once again local people will be shut out by fences far more impenetrable than those the young Andrew Carnegie climbed, and before these are erected big bulldozers must move in and start knocking down the woodlands.

A Pittencrieff Park Support Group has gathered over four thousand signatures from citizens opposing the scheme. The secretary, Lizz Mogg, has pointed out spaces adjacent to the park where the college and its hotel could be sited, but the local *Scottish* Parliament MP “who has been kept up to date with the plans throughout the process”, says the people behind the business park want no other location – “It's the Glen or nothing for the business school.” Yes, the beauty of this historical glen must make it very attractive to wealthy visitors, and since the Thatcher era the main power wielded by local councils is the disposal of public property. An independent councillor tells me that in Glasgow a week never passes without the sale of some being authorised.

Andrew Carnegie obtained a royal charter for the Dunfermline Trust to keep Pittencrieff Glen open to the citizens *in perpetuity* – which made it law. But with the help of leading politicians and royal support the trustees can change that law. In theory British monarchs can use the royal prerogative any time they like; but only use it when a Prime Minister tells them to, which is why senior politicians don't want a republic – the royal prerogative lets them sneakily change legislation without parliamentary discussion. The Park Support Group has written asking the Queen not to change the charter, and has received a politely indefinite reply.

Meanwhile Nora Rundell, Dunfermline Trust Executive, has announced that plans for the park are “a proposal, and no more” and the Trust has not yet fulfilled its obligation to inform and consult with the public because, “right now we have nothing to consult about.” She says her Trust will lose a chance of restoring the park with additional millions from the Lottery Fund, unless the trustees of this charity propose a commercial venture like the super-college. She too says it must be built in the Glen or not at all. And the people who so urgently want this Glen are strangely shadowy. We are told they want to create a “Harvard-style” business college, which indicates they are American, but Harvard still says it has nothing to do with the scheme. All we are certain is that these un-named folk are wonderfully pally with the Scottish Labour Party and the Dunfermline Trust.

The Trust's Chairman, Andrew Hogg, says, “**Alterations in the charter, which are currently being implemented, are necessary to comply with changes in the law. When they are complete the public will see for themselves that they make no tangible change to what can or can't be done within the park.**” This honest admission that when the law is changed the public will see *they* can't change what the trustees decide to do, is exactly what lovers of the park fear. He says he is “**appalled at recent misinformation, misunderstanding and accusations**” by friends of the park. “**Any suggestion we're out to destroy the Glen is just completely and utterly wrong.**” True. The proposed college would only privatise much of the Glen, not destroy it, just as atomic power stations do not destroy coastlines but stop most people going there.

Mrs Thatcher called upon the Scots to start exploiting their natural resources, not meaning that they should learn to produce good food, clothes and housing for each other, but earn the money to buy these from tourist industries, thus becoming a nation of boarding houses, heritage trails, golf courses and summer schools, with business

conference centres in some of the prettiest places, with nuclear submarine and airforce bases in others. New Labour continues this policy, while drug addiction and brutal crime grow worse in once hopeful housing schemes that are now our new slums. There may be small nations in the world with effective democratic constitutions. Scotland is not among them, perhaps not England either.

POSTED BY ALASDAIR GRAY AT MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2006

3 COMMENTS:

wolfie said...

It's depressing to hear that "in perpetuity" no longer means forever-but perhaps making this issue public will encourage the Carnegie Trust to think again. Of course, Gordon Brown might step in to save the day? (I know, there's no call for sarcasm)...

8:16 PM

Ecojoe said...

Can local people get themselves elected onto the Board of Trustees?

Will look and see if we can prevent the spammers like the anonymous arse above/below accessing the blog

4:51 PM

Grendel said...

I remember being one of the kids who benefitted from a day out at the expense of Andrew Carnegie. I Was grateful to him. It showed that normal people could overcome big landowners and donate a place "in perpetuity" to the people. The Glen was always the secret asset of Dunfy. As houses seemed to spread like a mould across the farmland, I always thought at least The Glen will remain as a haven. I seriously can't believe anyone who truly cares about the town would insult Andrew Carnegie's wishes by commercialising the The Glen. Who are such people? Are they 'entrepreneurs' (ie. exploitationists) from places that Carnegie destroyed/developed in the US, perhaps out for revenge?

Why do humans always have to destroy what they once valued? I now live on the other side of the world (escaping) trying to keep this sort of crap at bay.

Why not create a new park to enhance a new business school (aren't there enough already?). Or is that too difficult? Exploitation of something existing and weak is easier. No courage or imagination. Just out for quick financial gain. Not acceptable.

They could have brought the old gardens at Kevil House back up to scratch if thoughtless planners hadn't let an American Hotel chain destroy them and create another faceless hotel back in the 1980s. No respect for unique quality things that could enhance a place. Narrowmindedness. Thoughtlessness. That could have been a suitable place for their business school but it's been lost now. Don't let the same fate befall The Glen. The Skids were right... 'working for the yankee dollar'. But not enough people realised or cared, so nothing seems to have changed or stopped it.

What's next? How about bulldozing Culross and building a seaview hotel/business school? Surely that's better use of the location? Or perhaps High Valleyfield?

In the end people clearly just don't seem to really care. Cos if they did, no one in their right mind would even consider changing the use of The Glen in the first place. They are missing the point of its very needed existence.

Another step towards becoming another State of the Union.

Shame how Carnegie seems to have helped create what could, will?, ultimately destroy (change) what he clearly once valued, The Glen.

3:47 PM

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