

Extract from 'Where I Belong' By
Duncan Macpherson

WHERE I BELONG



The Author aboard the "Loch Toscaig."

DUNCAN MACPHERSON

FOREWORD

Since this book was written, several dear friends mentioned within its pages have passed on. I shall miss them greatly, and I now take this opportunity to express to their kin my deep regret and sincere sympathy.

Some welcome changes have taken place. The road from Balgy to Annat, referred to in Chapter 10, is no longer private, and now a good road connects Shildaig with Torridon and the main highway from Achnasheen to Gairloch and the North-west.

Duncan Macpherson.

April, 1964.



GLENQUITHEL SCHOOLMASTER AND DAUGHTER JESSIE.

GLENQUITHEL

TO-DAY there is a surfeit of memoirs. These include the lives of ex-rulers, politicians, criminals, radio personalities and oft-married cinema stars. Again, we read the life story of someone born in humble circumstances whose early years were spent as a factory hand or labourer, but who, because of his wonderful brain, surmounted all difficulties and died a millionaire. The unbiased reader will probably prefer to remain alive without the concomitant drawbacks of vast wealth.

In so far as this rambling account may be regarded as an autobiography, I warn the reader not to expect any startling disclosures. I am neither the product of a factory nor of an English university. I have never been in prison or in Parliament, and I was born in a good home although my parents were far from being rich.

My father was Neil Macpherson, a native of Glenelg, Inverness-shire. He was born in the beautiful valley of Glenmore and spent his early days there. But he longed to see what was then regarded as the outside world. A cousin, Duncan Macpherson, was sheep manager on Knoydart estate. In those days sheep were sent to the rich pastures of the east for wintering, and Neil was entrusted with a flock. It was a wonderful experience leaving the homeland for a whole winter and going out into the unknown—to far-off Aberdeenshire.

The sheep presented no difficulties. He had grown up with them. He and his faithful collie knew their language.

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My father was a Gaelic speaker, but he had been taught to speak English at school. Indeed, at that time, if a pupil was heard talking in Gaelic he was strapped.

The pastureland was on the estate of Auchmedden, parish of Aberdour, in the Buchan district of Aberdeenshire. Most of the farms were well fenced so that it was a simple matter to look after the flocks. The people of the locality were kind and hospitable; but, alas, my father's knowledge of the English tongue was unhelpful. For the country folk spoke a Scots dialect peculiar to Buchan. Yet there was one house where English was spoken, namely the schoolhouse at Glenquithel.

The schoolmaster was Joseph Mackenzie who had received his education at King's College, University of Aberdeen. He had two daughters, Margaret and Jessie. Margaret, the elder one had remained at home to help with the housework and the work of the croft attached to the school. Jessie had been sent off to boarding-school where she had acquired such graces as would have delighted the heart of Jane Austen.

Jessie was considered the most accomplished and beautiful young woman in the parish. The rich farmers in the neighbourhood developed a sympathy for the aged schoolmaster. They came with their offerings of butter and poultry. The lonely Highland youth had little to offer, apart from his good looks and his quiet voice. Yet, such is the perversity of woman, he won the day.

Glenquithel stands beside the highway connecting the nearby fishing village of Pennan and the small town of New Pitsligo, six miles distant. On either side the land slopes downwards, and in winter the hollows are frequently packed with snowdrift—hence the name of Glenquithel, meaning "Glen of the snow wreaths."

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Pennan was noted for its coastguard station. Quite a number of men were needed to patrol this stormy coast. As the village is mainly built under the sheltering cliffs, the flagstaff was erected on high ground farther inland. Each year, on the 24th of May, the coastguards got busy. They stretched ropes across the highway into the fields beyond, and they festooned these with flags.

It was on such a day I was born. True, Queen Victoria was also born on 24th of May. Anyhow I have survived her; and even now, flags are flown on this date in practically every part of the Empire except certain parts of Scotland.

The youngest of a family of five, I have kept on living in spite of all the doctors have been able to do. Indeed, when I was six years old, one doctor did predict that Queen Victoria would outlive me, but both Her Majesty and he have long since gone to their rest. I do not remember my grandparents or my sister Marion. My twin brother and sister, Joseph and Margaret, and my brother Neil all attended the new school which was built when my grandfather retired.

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I WAS seven years of age when we left Glenquithel. My father had become the tenant of the farm of Chapelden, nearly a mile farther from school. In that part of Aberdeenshire where the average farmer had little in his head but beasts—four-legged ones, preferably good milkers—there was little demand for a large straggling farm such as Chapelden.

My father loved it. It reminded him of his "own country" of Glenelg. On the farm he kept one horse for his own use and two for the plough. Only a small part of the land was cultivated, for he was not greatly interested in crops. He wanted the hills and the glens for the sheep, and the woodlands for their shelter in time of storm.

Chapelden was a place of forgotten history. A high promontory within sight of the North Sea was known as the Altar Hill. Half a mile farther west, beneath the roots of an ash tree growing on the hillside, there is a well, known locally as the Holy Well. The water is icy cold in summer but warmer in winter. Nearby, on a field above, ploughmen had uncovered human bones. To my father this was sufficient confirmation of the legend that here was the site of an ancient burial ground. Henceforth this field remained unploughed.

The western boundary of the farm was the Tore Burn which separated it from the Troup estate, at that time owned by Colonel Garden-Campbell. The Colonel had discarded his large mansion house at Troup Head and was

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living at The Cottage, Tore of Troup. The road connecting the Cottage with the Banff highway was strictly private, but my father was permitted to drive his dog-cart along it. "The Colonel is a real Highland gentleman, even if he is a Campbell," he would say.

It is wonderful to look back upon these early days spent on the farm. I have heard town-dwellers express surprise that anyone could put up with the dullness and loneliness of the country. Chapelden was never dull and seldom lonely.

Our house stood near the farm road which stretched along the hillside from the Pitsligo highway to the Tore. It faced the woods of Troup with its magnificent beeches and pine trees covering the hills and gorges and rising to the heights above. In the distance we occasionally caught a glimpse of a carriage and pair of horses speeding along the Colonel's private road.

There was no dwelling within sight of our home. Our only help consisted of a horseman and cattleman who had their sleeping quarters in a room above the stables, and a kitchen maid who was accommodated in the house. My father preferred to look after the sheep himself.

My aunt had gone to reside in Aberdeen where, as the years passed, we all in turn shared her new home. Joseph went to the Grammar School there, and afterwards to King's College. Later, Margaret, Neil and I followed to the city. But, for a time, while I was still at Auchmedden School, my sister was one of my teachers.

Our headmaster was Mr. James Reaich, M.A., red-haired and fiery, but an excellent teacher. After graduating he had been appointed assistant at Lairdsland School, near Kirkintilloch. Some years ago he told me that Tom Johnstone had been one of his pupils there.

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In our remote part of Aberdeenshire, although many of the people were members of the Parish Church, the Old Religion had not been completely stamped out. We still spoke of Yule and Pasch or Pace, instead of Christmas and Easter. Yuletide was celebrated by gaiety and dancing; but we ignored Pope Gregory's deduction of eleven days, and instead of 25th December we rejoiced on 5th January.

Mr. Reaich may have become influenced by his sojourn in the south. At anyrate on the last day of December he announced that as next day was New Year's Day we need not come to school. We were delighted at this unexpected holiday. Incidentally, I have never been able to understand why some Scotsmen choose to celebrate the first day of such a cold cheerless month.

On the 4th of January we expected to be told not to return the following day, but this announcement was not forthcoming. So, on that Yule morning, only the children from the country districts put in an appearance. After we had taken our places, Mr. Reaich stood for some time at a window looking down the straight steep road to Pennan. No child had come up it that morning, and none was in sight.

The children were not on strike. It simply had not occurred to anyone in the village that pupils would be expected to attend school on such a day. Even a headmaster can learn. Smilingly he turned to the class and told us all to go home.

Mr. Reaich was very fond of music, and he found the village children were apt pupils. It was different with the country ones. I was particularly hopeless. Even in those days I shuddered at the thought of attempting to sing,

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"Row weel, my boatie, row weel," a song peculiarly out of place with the sound of the turbulent North Sea in our ears.

So, when singing lesson was on, I was sent into a corner by myself to study Algebra. This reminds me of the query of one of my classmates. "Isn't it lonely at your home?" he asked. "How do you spend the winter evenings?" I replied that I had a grand time. I had just got a new book of problems in Algebra, and it was thrilling to solve them. From the look he gave me, I fancied that our ideas of enjoyment differed.

Across the road from the school stood the smithy. We liked going into it. We loved to see the sparks fly from the anvil. Sometimes we were even allowed to pedal the lathe. James Alexander was the blacksmith. He was a tall man who took his glass on Saturday evening, but was regularly in his place on Sunday morning leading the church choir.

I remember, when quite young, arriving at school on a cold winter morning with wet feet and sodden clothing. Mr. Alexander stopped his work, placed a stool on the great hearth of the smithy, and literally set me up to dry. I like to recall his kindness.

Next to the smithy was Mr. Alexander's house, then the house and shop of Mr. James Murcar. I think every school should have a tuck shop close at hand. It is really astonishing to think of all we could buy for a penny in those days.

Besides being the owner of a general merchant's business, Mr. Murcar had other interests. He kept poultry and grew hot-house plants. He took many prizes at the annual show. Best of all, he had a good library. At an early age I sampled it. He would lend me a book on a

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Friday evening, and I usually managed to bring it back on Monday.

Scott, Dickens, Dumas were all in turn tasted as I wandered slowly homewards between the high dykes of the main road and then down the farm road. And what thrills reading them when lying behind a whin bush on a sunny Saturday or even on a wet day tucked away in a special hide-out in the barn with Don by my side.

Don was our collie. He was one of the family. He had grown up with us. Perhaps his name, a contraction for Donald, accounted for his aversion to our minister, the Reverend Thomas Campbell. Nevertheless, and in spite of the two miles' walk involved, Mr. Campbell visited us frequently, and we were always pleased to see him.

Don would see him walking down the farm road when half a mile distant, and would start barking. This would be the signal, "The minister is coming." My mother would see that there were cakes for tea, and my father would attend to the replenishing of the cruet. Each according to taste.

Life on the farm was very simple. Except twice yearly when the laird had to be paid the rent, there was very little cash expenditure. Wool from the sheep supplied much of our clothing. The garden produced fruit and vegetables; and plentiful supplies of brambles and raspberries grew wild in the glens and were to be had for the gathering.

We had abundance of milk, butter and eggs. We were independent of butcher, with chickens at our doors and hares and rabbits on the hillsides. Pheasants fed on our corn, and occasionally my father would shoot one, just to balance accounts. This was frowned upon by the head gamekeeper, so, in deference to that worthy man's



AUCHMEDDEN CHURCH.



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idiosyncrasies, the shooting usually took place when he was not around.

Such commodities as tea, sugar and tobacco were obtained at the village shop in exchange for butter and eggs. Oats were threshed by our own mill driven by water from a hillside stream. Straw was kept for the fodder and bedding; and the corn was carted to the meal mill where the miller converted it into oatmeal, retaining a percentage for his labour. Even the husks were returned to us for poultry food. No money passed. If we wanted wheaten flour, this was obtained by bartering more corn.

Mr. George Gibson was the miller. He was a personality. He had a wife and three good-looking daughters with whom he attended church regularly every Sunday morning. Like the blacksmith, he would pay a Saturday evening call at the village inn for refreshment. The innkeeper was Mrs. West, a name which, if unqualified, conveyed little to anyone; so that she was known locally as Annie O. I never discovered the reason for this name, further than that her late husband had been called Johnnie O.

Mr. Gibson was a favourite with the women of the village whom he loved to tease. On one occasion when he was having a friendly argument, he told some of them, "You are a peculiar people." "Why are we peculiar, miller?" they asked. "Well, you have it in the Bible," he answered, "The Book says that the sun shines on the just and the unjust. As it never shines on you in Pennan, you must be a peculiar people." He was referring to the fact that most of the houses were built under high sheltering cliffs which shut out the sunlight.

Annie O. was not the only Mrs. West, for although the village had a population of about two hundred, most

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of its inhabitants held the surname of either Watt, West or Gatt. In my class at school there were three James Watts, known respectively as James Watt II., Flora's Jamie and Kirsty's Jamie.

Even older people were known by such names as Phemie's Jock or Peggy's Maggie. At school there were several girls named Mary Jeannie, Mary Bella or Mary Annie, but in no case had the name Mary been given second place.

The meal mill was at Nethermill, about a mile round the coast from Pennan. It was driven by water from the burn which formed the boundary between the counties of Banff and Aberdeen. On the Banff side the road skirted the hillside, then sloped steeply up the Dubston Brae.

It was up this precipitous road that the first motor car to be seen in the district attempted to go. Its passenger was H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh on a visit to the Princess Royal at Duff House, Banff.

The climb was too steep. The chauffeur did his utmost, but the car refused to make the ascent. Meanwhile the Duke sat and fumed. Finally the miller came to his rescue with a pair of horses which pulled the vehicle to the top of the brae. His Royal Highness did not come this way again. Presumably he found the German autobahns more to his liking.

The roadway to our house led over a shallow ford, the waters of which consisted mainly of the overflow from the mill dam. An early improvement which my father carried out was the building of a substantial stone culvert. At the same time he diverted and resurfaced the road. Even so, in wet weather the roadway was often muddy.

I did not wish to appear at school in muddy shoes, so, inspired by parental example, I decided to engineer a

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new track. Farther up the glen was a narrow ravine. On either side I made paths connecting with the roadway. Then I proceeded to span it with a wooden bridge.

We had plenty of timber at the farm. Besides, there was a sawmill at the Tore. I was not only young, I was rather small for my age, but, thanks to Willie Buchan our cattleman who came to my assistance, we managed to get the trunks of two young larch trees stretched across the gorge. After that, the work was easy.

I nailed planks to provide a floor, then erected a wooden railing to which I attached four notice-boards. Two of these were circular in shape. They were actually the lids of boxes which had originally held American cheese, and which I had got from Mr. Murcar. I fixed one at each end of the railing, painted both white with PRIVATE in large red lettering on each. In the centre, above the railing, to commemorate the Royal visit, I painted the title ROYAL DEN BRIDGE in equally large letters.

Higher up, at the top of the centre pole, was a further decoration in the form of a notice intimating that trespassers would be prosecuted "according to the laws of Moses." Even today, alien owners of estates embellish our beautiful glens with almost similar meaningless notices.

The Tore burn held an attraction for me. On warm summer days I often went down to wade in its cool waters. There were deep pools in places, due to stones having fallen where the gorge narrowed. I did my best to remove some of these obstructions.

Don was my constant companion. He was too old now for work, and a young collie had taken his place on the hills. In places where the descent to the burnside

was too steep for him, I cut an easier path along the side of the cliff. Don would sit patiently watching me until the work was completed to his satisfaction, then he would give me a grateful look and make his way along it.

But the day came when Don no longer accompanied me. I had known him all my life, and he was the first friend I was to lose. I remember that evening when he died and was buried. I wandered alone up the glen, not wishing that anyone should see me.

The burn was noted for its trout. Although not particularly interested, I had seen others fishing and apparently enjoying it, so one afternoon I set out with home-made fishing rod. I had been advised to use a worm for bait, but the thought of unearthing and handling a live worm was too much for me.

I soon got tired dangling my line over the burn, so I fixed the rod to the branch of a tree, allowing the hook to hang down beneath the surface of the water. I had brought a book with me, and was soon engrossed in the pages of the Count of Monte Cristo. So the time passed agreeably—until the midges came upon the scene. But I caught no trout, and I never tried again.

When my brother Neil came on holiday, we often went to Kullykhan Bay to bathe. There the sands were lovely, and the sea was much warmer than the burn. At Pennan and at Nethermill, both nearer home, we could have found sandy beaches, but we preferred the shelter and privacy of Kullykhan although three miles distant by road.

Of course we did not go by road. The route we chose was shorter and much more interesting. We walked up beyond the Altar Hill, down past Uppermill and on to

Nethermill. Thence we scrambled along a narrow path over high cliffs and down to the sandy bay at Kullykhan. Here there was a private pier and boathouse for the laird's use.

On that wild coast where even in the best weather the waves came dashing against the rocky shore, this haven was calm and peaceful. We had the sandy bay all to ourselves, although, as I learnt some years later, binoculars were trained upon us from Havenlea, above Pennan. No doubt the distant viewer was only concerned for our safety.

Sometimes after our bathe we explored farther round the coast. Towering above the bay was the Castle Hill, a high rocky plateau from which, on a clear day, one could view the distant hills of Caithness. Even more interesting, there was a narrow tunnel, about twenty yards long, which penetrated the headland from east to west. During many centuries the action of the sea had worn a passage through the solid rock, accessible at all times except when there was an abnormally high tide.

We often walked along this subway, known as the Needle's E'e. In semi-darkness we would find our way to the other end which opened into an enormous cave called the Devil's Diningroom. Farther west, towards Troup Head, a barren headland rising 360 feet above the sea, we enjoyed wandering along the coast, sometimes slipping on seaweed, again climbing over boulders or holding on precariously to some jagged rocks.

At last we would be within sight of the next wonder of the district, well-named Hell's Lum. From the shore a winding path led up the hillside. We surmounted a ridge, then descended several man-made steps leading to a vast rock chamber. The grass-covered floor was flat,

and apparently just above sea-level. Ahead was a barricade of battered rock and shingle thrown up by the sea. We climbed up this bulwark to view the sea water rushing through an opening from the other side of the hill.

Unlike the subterranean passage leading to the Devil's Diningroom, this crevice, some 100 yards in length, reaches far down so that the sea penetrates at all states of the tide. In time of storm and tempest, spray is driven through the tunnel, filling the hewn-out chamber and rising aloft like a great cloud of white smoke visible for miles around. Hence the name, "Hell's Lum."

The people of Pennan were very musical. They loved singing and dancing. They were also remarkably religious, most of them being members of the Church of Scotland. In the autumn when the fishermen went south to Yarmouth, the girls and young women—and some not so young—would go too.

There they worked hard, but they also found time to attend revival meetings and services conducted by religious bodies known as Brethren. One result would be that when they returned home they denied themselves the pleasure of dancing; they ceased to sing secular songs or even the hymns of their church which they no longer attended. The village became a place of woe.

Each winter at least one wedding would take place, probably more if there had been a good fishing. The marriage service would take place in Auchmedden Church, then the wedding party would march down to Pennan. Feasting and speeches would follow. The Rev. Charles Birnie was Parish Minister, and he made the same speech suffice for each such occasion.

The bridegroom, he would tell the assembled company, was the son of very respected parents, and the bride was

the most beautiful girl in the parish. And if any mother considered this an overstatement, she had only to wait until her own Bella's turn came round.

After the speeches there would be singing and dancing. The music of piano and fiddle would resound through the village, and the cloud of gloom would be lifted. On the following Sunday a packed congregation would attend church to welcome the happy couple and to join lustily in singing hymns of praise and gladness.

The Church of Aberdour was four miles distant from Pennan. It was an ugly barn-like structure standing on high ground at the top of the village of New Aberdour. Presumably the prefix "New" had been applied to the village to distinguish it from Aberdour in Fifeshire. Below the village, near the shore, could be seen the ruins of an earlier church surrounded by churchyard. Nearby were St. Drostan's Well and Chapel and the ruins of Dundarg Castle.

Some of the farmers drove to church in dog-carts; but most of the congregation had to walk. This meant on a good day a nice long outing for the young folk, but as the years passed it became increasingly difficult for their elders, particularly in bad weather. Accordingly the people of Pennan and district decided to build a church beside the school at Auchmedden. They raised what funds they could afford, got the promise of a grant, then applied to Mr. Sleigh, the estate factor, for further help and guidance.

Mr. Sleigh was delighted to help. Although he and Mr. Birnie differed occasionally, he was very pleased to help in the erection of what he may have regarded as a rival church. He not only provided the site for the

new church, but he guided them with regard to design and fittings. The result was the speedy erection of a fine stone building with vestry adjoining and heating chamber below. The interior was fitted with pulpit, choir stalls and pews in polished pitch-pine.

Outside, the church was outstanding. Its great west door, set in finely-chiselled grey granite gable, faced New Aberdour. Thus Mr. Birnie, senior minister of the parish, as he drove along the hill road to Pennan, would see this fine edifice when over a mile distant.

The minister of Auchmedden church was the Reverend Thomas Campbell. At that time there were more ministers than available charges, so that although Mr. Campbell had received the full theological training and had been licensed to preach, he had not been ordained or inducted to a charge.

Accordingly Mr. Birnie conducted baptisms and weddings and had oversight of Mr. Campbell's congregation. One afternoon, when visiting Pennan, he met on the village street a fisherman whom he thought he knew. After conversing for a few minutes he began to have doubts. Suddenly he stopped, and asked, "By the way, is it you or your brother I am speaking to?" To this there came the immediate reply, "It's me." Both were satisfied and the conversation continued.

But that night a young wife was roused from sleep by her husband's laughter. The absurdity of question and reply had at last dawned upon him. "What would the minister have thought if I had told him I was my brother?" he asked, and kept on chuckling.

At school the annual examination, usually held in May, was a day of excitement. Her Majesty's Inspector

sent advance notice of his coming, so we were all present, girls in summer frocks, boys in their best suits, Tom Kidd and I in kilt and sporran.

One morning Mr. Reaich took me aside and asked me what I had intended doing when I grew up. I had never given the matter a thought, and said so. He told me that a pupil teacher was wanted for Aberdour school, and that an examination would be held there for the purpose of filling the vacancy. He wanted me to compete. I was not unduly elated at the prospect, but did as I was asked.

On the day of the examination I arrived at Aberdour School, where, along with several others including the miller's red-haired daughter, I sat down to tackle the examination papers. They had been set by Mr. Ironside, a retired schoolmaster who was now supervising the examination. They seemed to be remarkably easy.

A few days later I heard the result. The red-head had won! Some time afterwards my mother met Mr. Ironside.

"What went wrong with Duncan?" she asked, "when even Bella Gibson beat him?"

"Oh, that little boy," he answered, "I had no idea he was your son. If only I had known."

The time arrived for me to follow my brothers and sister to Aberdeen. Neil had chosen to be a chemist, and now I was to enter the same profession. To me it seemed to be immaterial.

So, one fine morning I said goodbye to my mother, then got up beside my father on the dog-cart. Brownie, our chestnut mare, took us leisurely along the farm road. At the top we connected with the main road and turned south. I waved to my mother who stood watching, then we rounded a bend and my home was lost to sight.

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We climbed the hill road by the Dhustrath and Windyheads, then Brownie sped downhill and on to New Pitsligo where a horse-drawn bus connected at Brucklay station with trains running between Fraserburgh and Aberdeen.

New Pitsligo is an interesting village, almost wholly built of grey granite from the local quarries. The Main Street, over a mile in length, is intersected by a stream which flows down a romantic glen. Nearby is the Scottish Episcopal Church with the church school alongside. At that time Dean Petrie was the incumbent. A frail figure in sombre clothing, he happened to pass as we waited for my conveyance to start.

"Is that the Dean?" asked my father.

"Aye," replied the driver, "He's not only dean but he's done."

3

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I SPENT five years in Aberdeen; and that is about all I spent. First of all there was a preliminary examination before commencing apprenticeship and being registered as a student-associate of the pharmaceutical society. This examination was quite easy for one who had passed through Mr. Reaich's hands. But, alas, a grounding in Latin and Greek was not very helpful when I looked forward to qualifying later on.

Like most others similarly placed, I attended evening classes each winter in such subjects as botany and chemistry. This assisted greatly when later on I entered the School of Pharmacy at Gordon's College, preparatory to sitting qualifying examinations in Edinburgh after reaching the age of 21.

At the time I went to Aberdeen, Joseph had already graduated in Arts and was studying Divinity. Margaret had qualified and was teaching at Alford. Neil was in the Union Street Pharmacy of Mr. D. A. Mortimer. I went to the West-end shop of the same firm in Great Western Road.

Mr. A. P. Wallace was manager. He later commenced business in Torry. Others on the staff were John Sleigh, James Morrison and myself. John was the star. His father, who had been a master in the Grammar School, had died young. John was a cheery soul; he preferred singing to dispensing, and was not unduly perturbed