

Tenth Anniversary of The Moray Firth Partnership – AGM

Opening speech by JLK.

I should like to begin by re-quoting a quotation from Magnus Magnusson's opening speech delivered ten years ago on board the 69,000 ton cruise liner *The Splendour of the Seas*, owned by the Royal Caribbean Cruise line, and anchored at Invergordon. It was a great venue and a great day for the Moray Firth.

The quotation was taken from Neil Gunn's *The Serpent*. Tom, the philosopher, comes to the end of his climb into the Heights and to the end of his life's journey.

*'For at the end of the day, what's all the bother about?
Simply about human relations, about how we are to live
with one another on the old earth. That's all ultimately.
To understand one another, and to understand what
we can about the earth, and in the process gather some
peace of mind, and with luck, a little delight.'*

It was an excellent quotation to use. And the source was impeccable: Neil Gunn was born on the shores of the Moray Firth at Dunbeath and finished his days at Charleston on the Beaulieu Firth. His novels were drawn from the folk tales and the often uncomfortable lives of the fishing villages along the Firth's coast. His most celebrated, *The Silver Darlings*, shows us just how utterly dependent the 19th century Highlanders were on the remarkable abundance of inshore herring.

By the 1870s the annual migration of men and women into the fishing ports of the Aberdeen, Moray, Inverness, Ross-shire, Sutherland and Caithness for the catching season was over 5,000 people. By 1891 three out of four of the total population of the Highlands depended either directly or indirectly on the fishing industry.

When the herring population crashed in the early years of the 20th Century the Highlands was to see a huge outpouring of its people, mostly to the Lowlands, Glasgow and then overseas. This period saw the fastest exodus in the entire history of the Highlands – between 1911 and 1951 the Highland population fell by 28%.

We still don't properly understand why the herring crashed as dramatically as they did, but you can be sure that over-fishing was a factor, as we definitely do know it was when, after a slow recovery it

happened again in the 1970s, causing unemployment, decommissioning of trawlers and a long lasting moratorium on herring fishing throughout Scotland. A whole age class of herring had been wiped out, forcing the herring, for its own survival, to alter its breeding cycle so that it could spawn a year earlier.

For me, this quotation is what the Moray Firth Partnership is all about – as Tom says and Neill Gunn obviously felt: ‘To understand one another and to understand what we can about the earth.’ It may well have been that the first herring crash was unavoidable – the science didn’t exist to enable us to understand what we were doing to this precious protein resource. But the second one was entirely avoidable; we were no longer acting in ignorance, but in greed. And now, in the 21st Century, we have at our finger tips a great deal of the knowledge and technology to monitor our actions and assess what we are doing and the impacts and implications. But there are two aspects of the Partnership’s remit that I should like to draw particular attention to this morning.

The first relates to Tom’s first, wonderfully apt observation: *‘What’s all the bother about? Simply about human relations and how we are to live with one another on the old earth.’* Fishing remains a vital economic activity, but for a whole host of different reasons we all need and use the Firth. We love it and it feeds and clothes us still. Tourism is big now, thanks to cruise liners and the dolphins, and human settlement – an uplifting place to live and work – is even bigger.

More and more people are buying boats in this affluent age, marinas are popping up and much larger leisure developments are on the drawing board. The oil industry is still a key component of the local economy, side by side with a new and exciting experiment in coastal management by the RSPB, with SEPA and SNH to breach the sea wall and flood 25 hectares of agricultural land, creating new salt marsh to help with flood defences and to provide precious habitat for waders and salt tolerant wild flowers. In the last few weeks we have learned of a new biofuel use for the old smelter site at Invergordon. More than ever before we need to know how to live together on the old earth.

For ten years The Moray Firth Partnership has proved its worth as a neutral honest broker. And I should like to add here that despite its roots, the Partnership is not an environmental lobby group. There are no hidden agendas, political, social, economic or green. But we must be realistic here, climate change and rising sea levels are happening and the political world is rapidly adjusting. One thing is certain: Green Politics and Sustainability are the future - that is going to mean compromise and moderation for everyone, those two; and neither is simple or straightforward to embrace. All the more reason to have a time-served

honest broker. I see that as one of the Partnership's greatest values – the bringing together without bias the many parties and widely differing interests who would seek to live and work on the Firth. Not only do I believe this function is worth while, but I also believe it is essential if we are to achieve the balances we need for a sustainable future.

The second is imbedded at the heart of the Partnership's purpose: Integrated Coastal Zone Management. I find it very interesting that in the 21st Century there is no chair of integrated land or sea management in any university in the Western world. Perhaps this is a challenge to UHI. Where better to launch such a worthwhile academic initiative than the Highlands & Islands.

Where I live, in Strathglass, there is no effective integrated land management at all. Foresters get on with growing forests; farmers and crofters tend their crops and their livestock; anglers fish for salmon and trout and walkers and climbers roam the hills doing their best to avoid the deer stalkers. Each activity is governed by its own association or lobby group, but they don't talk to each other at all well at any level, except perhaps in the pub, when all too often it ends up in a row! Even the statutory authorities, planners, fishery boards, tourist boards, SEPA and SNH, SERAD, The Forestry Commission, the Crofters' Commission, the Deer Management Groups and others all seem to me to live in little boxes, reluctant to discuss openly the problems of deer numbers, overgrazing, clear felling on steep slopes, siltation of salmon redds, acid run off, nitrate and phosphate use, scenery and access. The truth here is that they have no honest broker, no common, neutral ground where their many differences and sometimes very serious impacts upon one another can be sensibly worked out.

Our coasts are only different in that they are more complicated, often more entrenched, and involve more players, many of whom are not regulated or represented at all. And yet we are all supposed to be working towards the now long-stated goal of Integrated Coastal Zone Management and a sustainable future. I believe we urgently need to get our act together if we are to avoid some of the excesses of the past and the social, economic and environmental consequences we have all seen before.

This isn't about blaming anybody. Far from it, it is quite the reverse. It is about using the Moray Firth Partnership as a means to communicate our differences and our creative ideas to each other on common, neutral ground – and in the process, as Tom said, *To understand one another, and to understand what we can about the earth, and in the process gather some peace of mind, and with luck, a little delight.*'

I should like to leave you with a quotation of my own. It comes from Emily Dickinson, the Amherst Maid, writing about her home in Massachusetts in 1866.

*I held a jewel in my fingers
And went to sleep.
The day was warm, and winds were prosy
I said: "Twill keep."*

*I woke and chid my honest fingers, -
The gem was gone;
And now an amethyst remembrance
Is all I own.*

I congratulate the Partnership on its tenth birthday and its many achievements and I wish it a fair wind for the next decade.