

# THE SCOTTISH FARMER

ONE HUNDRED YEARS



Angus MacDonald

## Chapter 1

### Pioneers in Agricultural Journalism

In 1953, when I was 23 and working as a general news reporter on the Stockport Express, I received a letter that was to change the course of my journalistic career. It was from William Adair, editor of the weekly Farming News, which was printed in Perth but whose editorial office was in my home city of Glasgow.



Some years previously I had been on the telephone room staff of George Outram's, publishers of the Glasgow Herald and Evening Times. With other young aspiring journalists, my job was to take reports from staff reporters and correspondents all over the country. From time to time Mr Adair telephoned livestock sales and other agricultural news to us.

On such slight acquaintance, the editor was writing to offer me a reporting job on Farming News. He had learned I was wanting to get back to Outrams and, as it happened, there was a vacancy on his staff. City-bred as I was, with little knowledge of farming, I had good reason to hesitate. I travelled up to Scotland for the interview, however. One reason was to get my expenses paid for a week-end home in Glasgow.

Willie Adair was a genial big man with a ruddy complexion, twinkling eyes and a direct way of speaking that seemed to me to epitomise the popular idea of a farmer. He was, however, like myself, Glasgow-born and bred. It was easier, therefore, to believe him when he reckoned I would soon pick up enough farming knowledge to do the job. The rate of progress was, of course, up to me, and, he reassured me, I would find farmers helpful.

That was forty years ago and I have been in agricultural journalism ever since. Getting to grips with agriculture had not been as easy as Willie inferred. The industry was becoming more complex even then. It has continued to do so at an ever faster rate. One constant in agriculture however, it is said, is job satisfaction. This can apply also to working in farming publications.

Now, I look back on not just 40 but 100 years. The reason is that I occupy the editorial chair of The Scottish Farmer, arch rival of Farming News, which began just a century ago. And, as I do so, I find myself still in considerable awe of the important industry in which I have been working. More particularly I take pleasure at having followed in the footsteps of great agricultural writers who have gone before and working in the challenging company of my contemporaries.

A year or two previous to our centenary, we on the staff of The Scottish Farmer had had to admit that our knowledge of our paper's history was hazy to say the least. Most of those who could have informed us were now gone and the only company minute book to be found was for the 21-year period beginning 1948.

There seemed only one other main avenue of research if I was to discover more to mark this special occasion. I had to start going page by page through more than 100 large black bound volumes, each of them containing at least 1000 pages and often much more. These contained all issues printed so far of The Scottish Farmer, some years in two parts instead of one because of too great a bulk.

Formidable as the task seemed at first, it gradually became obsessional. As I read more and more about the people involved, they seemed to come alive with all their enthusiasms and prejudices, their hopes and fears. A gripping kaleidoscopic tale of Scottish farming and the countryside in the past century, I discovered,

has been well set down. Expressed, variously with anger, humour, criticism, prejudice and sympathy, and often in commendable poetic verse, it involves farmers, farm workers, their wives, children and their livestock, educationists, politicians, auctioneers, businessmen and salespeople — the rich mix of people which is the essence of the healthy countryside community.

Willie Adair once wrote that just as Scotland had led prominently in the sphere of stock-breeding so she had been a pioneer in agricultural journalism. It was not an empty boast of this founding member of the Guild of Agricultural Journalists. Willie also claimed that Scottish daily newspapers were the first in Great Britain to appoint agricultural correspondents as regular members of staff. He recalled that when he started as a cub reporter on *The Scottish Farmer* at the turn of the 20th century there was already a notable group of specialist agricultural writers on all the Scottish dailies.

He might well have added that Scottish writers and editors were also to be found at that time editing farming magazines and newspapers south of the Border and over in Ireland. A Scot had been among the editors of that early famous agricultural journal, *Mark Lane Express*, also the *Livestock Journal* and *Agricultural Gazette*. They were also among agricultural correspondents for *The Field*, *London Morning Post* and *The Times*, and one of their number was the first agricultural specialist for the Press Association.

It was a Scot who started *The Farmer and Stockbreeder*, the weekly which was highly popular south of the Border from the beginning until well into the second half of the 20th century. He was Sandy MacDonald, one of a Banffshire farming family of four brothers and a nephew. These brothers gained remarkable prominence in agricultural writing after training on their uncle's newspaper, the *Elgin Courant*.

Indeed, from this North-east publication proceeded a steady stream of farm writers — among them Lewis Grant from Tomintoul, who began as sub-editor of *The Scottish Farmer* in 1898 and retired as business manager in 1938; Andrew Grant from Glenlivet who became editor of the *North British Agriculturist* in 1911; William MacKay who succeeded Grant at the NBA in 1919, and was, in turn, succeeded by Willie Adair in 1942.

Sandy MacDonald's *Farmer and Stockbreeder* had begun in Scotland as *The Scottish Farmer and Horticulturist* in 1861 and was the first such magazine to reach a circulation of 100,000. Its next three editors — Sandy's nephew, James Smith MacDonald, followed by Alexander Grant another Banffshire man, then Alan Ramsay — had all been trained in Scotland. When the *Stockbreeder* absorbed the *Agricultural Gazette* in 1925 it was acquiring a publication which had started in 1844 and had been edited for its first 40 years by John Chalmers Morton, an agricultural student of Edinburgh University.

Scots had been making their mark in agriculture writings before then, of course. A pioneer in the 1740s was Robert Maxwell of Dumfries, enthusiastic secretary of The Honourable The Society of Improvers in Knowledge in Agriculture in Scotland. The Reverend Adam Dickson of Duns published his famous *Treatise of Agriculture* in 1765 and it was re-issued in 1785. The "Gentleman Farmer" book of Lord Kames of Blair Drummond peat moss fame was published in 1766 and ran to six editions. Not to be forgotten also is Andrew Wight of Ormiston whose survey of the whole of Scotland between 1773 and 1782 ran to six volumes.

In 1980 when the source book, *Victorian Farming*, by CA Jewell, was produced, it was based largely on *The Book of the Farm*, produced in 1844 by Forfar farmer Henry Stephen. Dr EJT Collins, associate director of the Institute of Agricultural History at Reading University, provided the foreword. He wrote that *The Book of the Farm* had been the leading practical text of its day. (In fact, it had been reprinted three times in this country and twice in America). Also, Dr Collins commented, "for some inexplicable reason, most encyclopaedists on farming at that time were native or expatriate Scots."

In 1843 there appeared the magazine which was to hold sway in Scotland for the next 50 years and was to be locked in battle with the new publication, *The Scottish Farmer*, for almost another 80. Beginning as the *Ayrshire Agriculturist* at the dear price of 6d monthly, then being issued fortnightly, it became the *North British Agriculturist* in 1849 when it moved to Edinburgh and ended its days as *Farming News* in Glasgow in 1970.

Under editors of journalistic skill and agricultural enthusiasm it became widely respected and often was known simply as the NBA. Charles Stevenson of Cumbernauld for the first 25 years battled against landowner iniquities, unfair game laws and farm labour exploitation. For the next 14 years the editor was William Macdonald — first of the Banffshire Macdonald brothers to take up the pen — highly respected and particularly renowned for his knowledge of beef cattle breeding. In 1887, the new editor was David Young from Carmyllie, Forfarshire, the man whose pen, it was said, was sometimes dipped in gall. Such occasional acidity may, or may not, have been a reason for the coming into being in 1893 of *The Scottish Farmer*.

Before this event, there had appeared three fore-runners of similar title. *The Scots Farmer* started as a monthly in 1772 by a William Auld of Edinburgh and ran for two years. *The Scottish Farmer and Agricultural Advertiser* was launched in Aberdeen in 1844. It was said to be "in loose connection" with a society formed the previous year — Aberdeen, Banff and Kincardine Agricultural Society, which five years later became the Royal Northern Agricultural Society.

This monthly, later fortnightly, publication ceased by 1850 but in 1861 there began to be brought out weekly in Edinburgh by John Grant The Scottish Farmer and Horticulturist. This became, in turn, The Farmer in 1865, still published by John Grant but along with Charles Layton, Fleet Street, London, The Farmer and Chamber of Agriculture Journal in 1882, and the Farmer and Stockbreeder, under Alexander Macdonald, in 1889.

One other farming publication must be mentioned before the scene opens on the foundation of The Scottish Farmer of which it became part. The Farming World was brought to Edinburgh from London in 1888 by James Macdonald, who had first made his name, like his brother William, as agricultural correspondent of The Scotsman. An experienced writer — sent to America on a major assignment to report on the agricultural scene there — he had been editor of a magazine in Ireland before several others based in London.

Farming World also had an illustrious Scottish connection, having sprung from the Agricultural Gazette, edited for so many years by John Chalmers Morton. James Macdonald latterly edited it in London and published a Scottish edition called the Scottish Agricultural Gazette. This he bought out and changed its name when he returned to Edinburgh.

And thus to The Scottish Farmer, which has so won its way into the affections of the farming community that it has become known to many as the Scottish farmer's "bible." Remarkably, it has had only four editors in its first century:

Archibald MacNeilage — 1893-1931

Alexander Sutherland — 1931-1951

George C Millar — 1951-1973

Angus MacDonald — 1973-1994

The history which follows is about them and their colleagues and the people they wrote about in a countryside which has perhaps changed more in the last century than in many hundreds of years previously.



*Founding directors of The Scottish Farmer, clockwise from top left - Rev Dr John Gillespie, the "Minister of Agriculture"; Charles Howatson, Glenbuck, "The Laird"; Patrick Hunter, Waterybutts, chairman of the General Accident Assurance Corporation; John Martin of Auchendennan, a founder of the Clydesdale Horse Society.*



*Editors of The Scottish Farmer clockwise from top left - Archibald MacNeilage, 1893-1931; Alexander Sutherland 1931-1951; George C Miller, 1951-1973; Angus MacDonald, 1973-1994.*