

Yince a Souter, Aye a Souter: A Detroit Colonial Returns to His Scottish Town for an Ancient Rit



By JAMES TURNBULL
For Detroit Magazine

Seventeen years ago Scotland was my home. I was — I am — a Souter, a man of Selkirk, a town of incredible beauty and history in the south of Scotland. Sir Walter Scott was my town's most famous citizen, its sheriff for 30 years. He put the town and some of its worthies into several of his Waverly Novels, assuring Selkirk's fame as long as civilized men read books.

I went home to Scotland this year, taking my American wife and our three sons. It was my first trip home, and it was made with some pomp and ceremony, under conditions that surpass most other home-comings. I returned to be the Standard Bearer of the Selkirk Colonial Society for the town's 1971 Common Riding.

As soon as we landed in Scotland, the 17 years began to fall away. Each corner now showed me some once commonplace view, now a treasure for the eye and the heart. Galashiels. The town where I had learned to loup and fling upon a crummock. Only six miles to go. My hands shook. There was the deep pool in the Tweed where I learned to swim and caught my first bawbee. The rapids I fished. The trees I climbed. The ewes I had called to the nowes.

But wait. The tale is spinning ahead of me. You need to know a little about this Common Riding ceremony and what I was to do in it. And you ought to have a bit of history of Selkirk itself.

It is a town of 5,400 souls in the south of Scotland, 40 miles south of Edinburgh and 30 miles north of the English border. For that reason, the area around about is called the Borders. The natives speak in a different but pleasing dialect.

Now that the Colonial Society had invited me back as their Standard Bearer, I would carry one of the six great banners in the parade. I would represent the wandering Border Scot. That's about as far away from my job as an advertising man as you can get, but my reason for going back was a good one.

The Common Riding is hard to explain. I'll drink to that. You see, people born in Selkirk are called Souters, a souter being the medieval name for a shoe maker. It was the most popular occupation in Selkirk before the introduction of tweed cloth about the beginning of the 17th century. Since then, the Souters of Selkirk claim to make the finest woven woolens in the world. Another toast to that. And to this: Yince a Souter, Aye a Souter. Once a Souter, Always a Souter.

The Souters have an annual festival called the Common Riding. In its simplest form, it commemorates the annual checking of the boundaries of the common land, known as the marches, where the townspeople graze their flocks.

The most moving single event in the Common Riding festival is the Casting of the Colors. It dates from the battle of Flodden, in 1513, when the Scottish Army was cut to ribbons. The Souters of Selkirk were there — archers who were part of the royal bodyguard. They were reported to be of such surpassing strength and handsomeness that they were called "the flowers of the forest."

The flowers of the forest were among the last to die.

One of their number, Fletcher, wrested a great battle banner from an English captain and fled the field. He rode through the night and clattered into Selkirk early the next morning. The crowd of women and children let him pass. He reached the market place, mud covering his wounds. Raising the great flag, he cast it about his head and fell dead.

The generations passed and the Casting of the Colours and the Riding of the Marches have been woven into the mystical ritual of the Common Riding. It is this magnet that draws all Souters, no matter where they are, back to Selkirk.

And so I was going back, as the Colonial Standard Bearer. It was my privilege to represent the Souters of Selkirk who have wandered far from home — the "Colonials." Other standards are carried by the bona-fide representatives of the various crafts — the Hammermen, Weavers, Merchantment, Shoemakers, Ex-soldiers — plus the flag of the Royal and Ancient Burgh itself.

After my formal acceptance of the Standard Bearer's position, telegrams of congratulations and support started coming in from some of the other candidates. With such datelines as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, the scope of my position began to fall into place.

We landed near Glasgow and a car picked us up for the ride to Edinburgh and Selkirk. The countryside showed off the 200 shades of green that result when it rains softly three times a day. We pushed on. Selkirk lies 40 miles of magic from Edinburgh. Forty miles of road through the winding Cheviot Hills, which teem with burns and freshets of crystal water. Fields of porridge stretching to the sky. The sheep make the hills

look snow-covered and the lushness of the grass defies description. Whenever we stopped the car, barefoot children offered us glasses of tweed.

The car swept around the final corner and Selkirk lay in front of me, gentle unchanging through the centuries. I wanted to embrace every building, kiss every tree. I was home.

The next six days passed like a Brigadoon dream.

There were cousins to see, friends from my childhood, old teachers, grandparents, farmers and mill folk. A strange thing happened to my memory. Usually I am good at remembering faces, but incapable of remembering names. In Selkirk, someone would approach me and when they were 10 feet away, their name would come to my tongue like whisky to the throat.

This was Common Riding Week. Each night we danced the mad Balaklava and drank sporrán until we could scarcely move. And each morning would find us swimming in the Skirl or some other Selkirk river. The ceremonies reached the home stretch. The excitement was overwhelming. On Wednesday evening the Colonial Society held their Bussing Ceremony in the Victoria Hall. Bussing means kissing. When a flag is bussed, it has ribbons tied to it. My wife was the lady busser. By having the flag bussed and then passed to me, it meant that the flag was now my responsibility until the end of the Common Riding, three days hence.

If only the ceremony had not been held in the Victoria Hall. The High School choir sang the old ballads. The bands played the centuries-old melodies. The flag of the Colonial Society was handed to me.

It was heavy with the silken ribbons of 50 previous

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Standard Bearers. Scarlets, blues, golds, green fluttered proudly fifteen feet above my head. Beside each name was embroidered the country of the Standard Bearer. It was a roll call of Scottish wanderlust.

I cleared my throat to give my speech — a poem of love to my native town. The speech was never delivered. I raised my head and looked out.

In that corner of the hall I had attended my first high school dance, dressed in my first pair of long pants. I had sat in the fourth row of this hall and watched my first Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. My eyes raced along the rows of seats. There was Jimmy Johnston whose daughters I used to walk to school. My Uncle Phil and Aunt Rose. Billy Bryson. Gordon Wood. My foreman in the mill. The man who took the collection at Mass. My Boy Scout Leader.

I got as far as "I wish to thank you for the honor . . ." That was it. I clutched the standard until my knuckles went white. I could no longer raise my head. A great sob welled up in my throat. I sat down.

The hall exploded in pandemonium. They blew on their skein-dhus and filled the night with thunder. They understood what I felt. Damn, it was great, but embarrassing.

Thursday night we marched around the town. Three bands played for the procession. The flags had yet to be brought out. Then came Friday, the Common Riding Day. The sun came up at 3 a.m. So did the Flute Band. Straight from the all-night dance at the Victorian Hall. They marched around the town announcing the new day. We left the hotel, shined and pressed and polished.

The day was full of the ancient ceremonies of the ridings the marching and horses and singing. Before noon, the most solemn

happening of the Common Riding remained. The Casting of the Colors. Sacred to the memory of that far away warrior who brought the battle flag back to Selkirk. Victory in defeat.

As we marched to the Market Place, flags danced in the breeze. The medieval houses were gay with bunting and pennants. Photographers clustered like rooks on the roofs. A platform stood in the middle. The statue of Sir Walter Scott smiled over all.

A silver band was arrayed before the platform. The provost and the town council provided an honor guard for the Standard Bearer and his attendants. Horses neighed nervously on the edge of the square. If Robert the Bruce had appeared and announced the formation of the Fourth Crusade, we would all have taken ship for the Holy Land.

The Burgh Standard Bearer removed his coat. He mounted the stairs, flag in hand. Another great cheer. Then, spreading his feet for balance, he raised the staff. Satisfied, he nodded to the conductor. The first notes of "Up With the Souters of Selkirk" shivered the air.

The entire casting is over in 76 seconds. Silence reigns until the flag is raised in a great sweep on the last bars. Then, thunderous applause.

Then the Hammermen. Then the Weavers. Then the Merchant Company. Then I was handed the largest banner of them all, the yellow, blue, and scarlet Colonial banner. I stood on the platform. Looked at the crowd and froze. No time to cry, no time to laugh. Finally, I caught my wife's eye. She smiled. I nodded to the conductor.

form. Looked at the crowd and froze. No time to cry, no time to laugh. Finally, I caught my wife's eye. She smiled. I nodded to the conductor. Again the cornet notes which start "Up with the Souters."

Now the banner was spinning. One and one, two and two, round, up over the right shoulder, round over the left, three spins. God, this is great. Three and three. Up and over. Never let it end. Round, down and up. The last sweep. The folds

slowly settled about my shoulders. I walked stiffly from the platform. Again, the cheers. I watched the Shoemaker's Standard being cast. There was now only one flag left, the Standard of the Veterans, the Union Jack of the ex-soldiers.

The veteran mounted with dispatch and polish. His sleeves were rolled up to display tattoos from half the European battles in the Second World War. His casting was as precise as a military tattoo. When he was finished, there were no cheers. The crowd knew what was coming. A moment so poignant that some Selkirk people prefer not to watch.

Standing at attention, the bearer lowers his staff until the tip of the Union Jack rests on the ground. He bows his head. For two minutes there is silence. Silence for the military dead. For the Scottish graves at Waterloo, at the Somme, in Ypres, Flanders, Egypt, Burma, El Alamein, Dunkirk and Berlin. For the boys, for the men of Selkirk who did not come back for this or any other Common Riding.

In the silence, the strange silence of a great multitude, a horse neighs, a child cries. After two minutes, the band completes the four hundred year journey from the Battle of Flodden by playing the lament. "The Flowers of the Forest Are All Withered Away."

The crowd recovers with a short speech from the provost, and three cheers for the Standard Bearer. There will be more. Games, sports, and balls and dinners, but the formal ceremony is over.

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I have relived the ceremony many times since
coming back to Detroit. Even now, as a grey mist
hangs over the Detroit River and the freighters
blow mournfully, I open a drawer in my desk. I
pull out the blue and yellow ribbons of the Colo-
nial Society. It was glorious summer. Glorious
memory. It will happen again next year and the
year after that. I pray it will go on forever. [D]



Selkirk's Colonials get in order before the parade. That's Turnbull straining along at the base of the exiles' tall, heavy flag.