

A MEMOIR OF FAMILY LIFE IN THE FIRST TWENTY YEARS OF THE 20TH CENTURY AS REMEMBERED BY RGBI

Rothiemay and the deplorable uncles

I know very little beyond what came to be found in the 1810 Family Bible and from the several photograph albums enumerated at the end of the family tree. It is true that there are hundreds of books, ranging from the Forsyte Saga upwards and downwards where we can discover how the Victorians lived, but I think it would be a help to future generations if I were to attempt tell about the world I was born into and lived in until the outbreak of World War II.

My grandfather, John Foster Forbes was a Colonel in the Indian Army, as was his father. He returned with his wife on retirement from India. His eldest son, Alastair, had died in India in infancy. His second son, Ian, (Uncle Ian to me) came home with him. My mother was born in London within the sound of Bow Bells – and was proud of it. When exactly he moved to Scotland I am not sure, but his first house was Dunlugas, near Turriff on the Deveron. Later, in 1892, he bought Rothiemay House, seven miles from Huntly, with about 3500 acres of farm and woodland, and possibly a mile of good fishing water on the Deveron. He must by one means or another have accumulated a fair amount of money as an Indian Army officer. He at once set out to add to Rothiemay in the fashionable Scottish Baronial style and called it a “Castle”, which it had never been. I can still remember the last addition being built, which must have been just before World War I.

Until 1919 Rothiemay was to become our home in Scotland and I do not remember going to Raemoir, but I do remember going to Cowie.

When I was born my father was commanding a destroyer based in Portsmouth and they lived at Hazleden, Denmead Road, Havant. Every summer, I and a nanny (Nana) and Mum went off to Rothiemay. The drill was much the same: train to London and a cab to Aunt Kath (Kathleen) Innes who had a flat in 4 Greycoat Mansions, behind the Army and Navy Stores and opposite an enormous Fire Station (which is still there). In the evening a fleet of cabs took us to Euston with masses of baggage to sit in a 3rd class carriage all the way to Aberdeen where we had breakfast, either in the station restaurant or (later) in the Palace Hotel. We did not take the fast train, 8.05 out of Aberdeen because it did not stop at Rothiemay, but the 10.10 which stopped everywhere. At Rothiemay we were met by Corser(?) The head coachman in what we called the “bone-shaker”, a heavy and slow wagon pulled by two horses. The baggage, and there was lots of it, followed with a lesser minion in charge in a “dog-cart”. Mostly it was the custom for the “bone-shaker” to meet Uncles and stray bachelors. Rothiemay Castle was 2½ miles from the station.

Whilst on the subject of transport, Mrs Forbes, my grandmother, when I knew her, always travelled in a Daimler car of great antiquity (1910 model). Duguid was the chauffeur and I do not think that anyone else used it or drove it except my Uncle Humph (Roualeyn) who, when Duguid was ill on one occasion, drove Grannie to Banff. He, as was his wont, proclaimed that he knew all about cars, failed to change it out of bottom gear, all 16 miles there and back, and did it great damage.

By 1914 Rothiemay, a very handsome building, must have contained 15 to 20 bedrooms other than staff rooms. The “public rooms” consisted of an enormous inner hall, a smoking room – used as the sitting room during the day by all the family – on the ground floor, dining room and adjoining drawing room – and across a gallery over the hall, my grandmother had a boudoir. Afternoon tea was served in the hall – a wide passage really. Opposite the dining room was a billiard room. Both men and women assembled there before dinner. At weekends they assembled in the drawing room. In high season the male members of the party retired to the billiard room after dinner, whilst the females went to the drawing room. Except for a few younger – and “faster” females, the billiard room then remained all male, certainly until my grandfather died in 1915.

My grandfather was a good billiards player but his sons were certainly not. As a result one of the footmen, under John Paul, the butler, was selected for his skill at billiards, rather than his ability to wait at table or to valet.

The “ball of fire” in the house was Margaret Fraser, the head housemaid. She had heavy feet and was very active, starting work at 4.30am and ending it about 10.30pm. Her first visit to the guests was to bring early morning tea. One day she brought round a set of dentures, which she offered to the guests at the house in turn, telling them that they had been found on the billiard table! In most such houses the head housemaid was called by her surname but Margaret had – long before – been an under housemaid. The head cooks were always called “Mrs X”.

For the full summer there would be a butler/footman, head housemaid, under-housemaid, cook, kitchen maid and laundry maid. Grannie had her own “lady’s maid” (McDonald I think her name was – “Downy” to us). At peak periods, when the house was full, there might also be scullery maid, nursery maid and a “tweenie”.

The children of the family, and those of visiting friends, lived in a large nursery area on about the 3rd floor. The day nursery was a large rectangular room where our nannies and governesses existed and quarrelled mightily. We shared a night nursery with our Nana, but where the other children slept, I cannot recollect.

The Forbes family consisted of eight children of whom Uncle Ian was the eldest. (See list on last page.) He served in India, after the South African War, with a Battalion of Gordon Highlanders in a Brigade, which included a cavalry regiment. He married a Lady Helen Craven who was very top drawer and an RC. She converted Uncle Ian, who became very devout. Aunt Helen seldom visited Rothiemay and made life difficult for Uncle Ian by writing a scurrilous book about the officers of his regiment, and he was forced to transfer to another Regiment. She titled her book “It’s a way they have in the Army” and put at the beginning “All characters are fictitious”. Billy (RGI’s brother) tried to read it once. In the book the leading character was the wife of a cavalry officer of rather higher class than the others, or so she thought. Although she said it was fictitious, many wives could see themselves in it – in not too complimentary ways!

In those days Ian had two children, Victoria and George. Both were older than us, and none too friendly. Later in life he had three more children, Kitty, now Traquhair, Isobel, now a nun, and Charlie, a monk (also Rose?).

George, after serving in the Grenadier Guards, became a priest, later a master at Amplethorpe and did well, I'm told, as a Chaplain to the Irish Guards in World War 2.

Victoria never married but had a son and now calls herself Mrs Forbes. She hunts with the Duke of Beaufort and makes some money, tailoring ladies' hunting garments in Wiltshire.

I think that my Aunt Helen, aristocratic by birth, considered such lowly commoners as us unsuitable company for her daughter Victoria, who I can't remember at all. George was considerably older than us and not usually very cooperative. He also let the side down badly by refusing ever to roll the tennis court, even before the annual garden party. Now I don't really blame him. It had no grass on it, only moss. The roller was terribly hard work to pull and most reluctant to do its duty.

My mother was next down the line and then followed Uncle Bill. He married a Strutt (Aunt Daisy) and Uncle Bill managed to get rid of most of the money she brought in. He was a sailor (RN) and they had two boys, Bill and Pat.

Next came Uncle Ron. His big adventure was to marry Rosita Forbes, the so-called explorer. In fact she had never explored anything until driven to later as result of having written a book about her non-existent explorations! She once arrived at Rothiemay with a most fabulous necklace of pearls. After dinner one night, it is said, Uncle Bill bit one and it turned out to be hollow. The remaining male members of the house party bit the rest. This did not last long. Uncle Ron is believed to have fathered one daughter, Pamela, but there was a certain element of doubt as to who was the mother.

Next came Uncle Humph (or Roualeyn). He was a bachelor, RN, until after the war. Then came Aunt Sybil, who married a very worthy sailor about 1905 and bore two children who died. As a result Aunt Sybil never again got up for breakfast, but wandered daily back and forth between the house and the revolving summerhouse in the garden smoking endless cigarettes, making out that she was very frail. She was my Godmother.

The last member of the family who concerned us was Uncle Jock, a schoolmaster at Haileybury before he joined the army. When war came, he got a commission in the Seaforth Highlanders and survived the war. After the war he was at several different schools and did a bit of private tuition – always moving on. My father did not like him – but never said what he thought he did at schools, but was suspicious.

There was also Uncle Gordon, who was in the Indian Army. I do not remember ever having seen him though there is a photograph of him with myself as a baby. He committed suicide in India (Drink? Girls? Debt?)

It would be no exaggeration to say that the whole Forbes family of my mother's generation, except for my mother, were a wild and dissolute lot. Uncle Ian may have been an exception to some extent. As I mentioned above, he was forced out of the Gordon Highlanders as a result of the book his wife wrote about his brother officers.

He transferred to the Royal Scots Fusiliers, but, I think, as a territorial or militia, and I doubt if his war service got him into any danger. However, he returned to Rothiemay, as Laird, Grandfather having died in 1915, with a DSO, which he did not earn, and the rank of Lt Col or Col, which he never held. He was pretty pompous and stupid and was an “Imperial”.

Uncle Bill, a sailor, was a cheerful hearty and much drinking fellow, and I thought a very likeable chap when I was young. I saw a lot of him at Rothiemay and when I was at Sandhurst I spent my weekends with him and Aunt Daisy in their house in Welwyn. On weekdays he disappeared into “the City” where he tried out his hand at stockbroking with conspicuous lack of success. He drove a Hillman Super 6 (as did my father) in the 1920s and was reputed to carry a heap of stones beside him, which he threw at other road users whom he did not like. He seldom went South without going to Aberdeen station which he left simultaneously with the 10.00 am train to Euston. The job was to get across the level crossing at Blackford in Perthshire before the train – and I think that he quite often did. My last memory of him was during the war when I returned on leave from Sicily on my way to the Staff College. We all lunched together at the Caledonian Hotel where he had previously primed himself with pink gin. After lunch, sitting half asleep in the foyer of the hotel, he spotted a personable young female coming down the stairs and he staggered to his feet, approached her with arms held out, said: “lovely to see you my dear young friend”, and fell flat on his face, from which position he was removed to his room by the hotel staff. A fine example of a Commander RN. I never saw him again.

Uncle Ronnie was a dissolute chap but undoubtedly had a good war record with a DSO whilst commanding a Highland Light Infantry battalion in France. After the war, having got shot of Aunt Rosita Forbes, the explorer, he carried on his exploration in a big way, nearer home – often with disastrous results.

The real trouble with all these brothers was that my grandfather stipulated that Rothiemay was to remain the home of the family for ever and they all took advantage of this and settled for life in various parts of the house.

Uncle Humph was certainly one of most skilled parasites. He did no work, made no effort to earn any money and spent his life shooting - and he was a rotten shot - and fishing when it was not too cold. He became notorious for picking off birds over the heads of neighbouring guns – usually pricking them rather than killing and was not above borrowing cartridges, provided they fitted his gun. He married a Georgina Walker (Aunt Georgie) from Dumfries who survived him. I don’t know what finally finished him off but I imagine it happened when I was abroad and out of touch.

Uncle Jocky, the next down the line, was a cheerful kettle of fish. He became a master at Haileybury before WWI, joined the Seaforth Highlanders with a commission and survived the war. In fact he became a great friend of Shaw Mackenzie (?) of my regiment. After the war he became the main disciple of the Rothiemay House for the Forbes (?) cult and led an idle life for several years till he fell in with a couple of old women, believed to be wealthy. He married one and stripped them both of cash and became a vegetarian – and possibly a ??? for all things far worse.

As was pretty natural, we, the next generation took it out of these uncles as much as we could and two particular incidents remain in my memory. The first concerned the greenhouses of Rothiemay. One contained a large cape gooseberry bush, which bore the most delicious fruit and my uncles used to wander up and eat them off the bush daily before lunch. However, they seldom got many, because we had done the same after breakfast.

The second incident was more fun. Both Uncle Humph and a fairly new Aunt Georgie and Uncle Ian with a new Aunt Molly decide to stay with us at Clinterty shortly after I married Betty. The former incurred the intense displeasure of my father by carving the sirloin of beef the wrong way round. Next morning, as was the custom, before breakfast, they had both brought their cars to the front door to be “warmed up” and the baggage installed. When safely seated at breakfast kippers were carefully concealed in the most inaccessible but warm parts of their motor cars and in due course they made ready to depart.

Outside there was a distinct odour of kipper and my mother wondered why that was, as kippers had certainly not been on the menu. Uncle Humph and Aunt Georgina stood up to it, till after crossing the Dee in Aberdeen the odour was so bad that a detailed search was made and the kipper found, well and truly cooked and disintegrated. They went on, cursing the day we were born. Uncle Ian and Aunt Molly were returning to Rothiemay after their honeymoon, a starchy RC affair carried out in the Lowlands. In Huntly Aunt Molly was so irate that, good RC as she was, she said that unless the source of the smell was removed at once she would divorce Uncle Ian.

One of the longest of the visitors was her sister-in-law, Aunt Agnes Forbes who was pretty well loathed by all of us. She was apt to have fits or something and once had one in the waiting room at Forres Station. My father who had driven the car in and had had Aunt Agnes in a big way was alleged to have said: “I may bust my boiler, but if I have to carry her I’ll get her on that damned train”. Later when she returned to Rothiemay she had another of these fits at the Rothiemay School treat. Grannie, always in control of the situation, stood up to attention and said: “Aggie, Aggie, my dear, you can’t die here”. One day, at Moy, the telephone rang. By then we were plugged into a party line, shared by a dozen or more houses and farms, and Mum answered the thing. The news was that Aunt Aggie had finally perished. Mum hung onto the telephone, which was fixed high on the wall and wept and wept and wept. I always wondered what all the other subscribers on the line thought of it all. I’m sad to say, the event had the opposite effect on my father and his offspring. One less hardy annual.

One more anecdote, which I don’t think reflects badly on me. One autumn day, during harvest, I, the eldest, then 7, and several of my young cousins raided the garden and filled a bag full of unripe apples. We then visited the dairy and “borrowed” a can of cream. We were lead into the adventure by the gardener’s daughter, who was at least 12 years old. The whole party then repaired to a stook of oats, tunnelled in and prepared to dispose of the loot. Suddenly the stook disintegrated and Burns (?), the head gardener, ignoring the leading presence of his daughter in the midst of the orgy, seized me by the hair and lugged me off back to our

grandparents and accused me of seducing his daughter. At that age I was not aware of this form of sport! It was very awkward but obviously a quite ridiculous situation. However, I had the dissatisfaction of a sore bottom, some of my hair torn out at the roots and, later on, an extremely bad tummy ache! Burns and I remained arch-enemies for ever afterwards – but even with so many of us disposed around about the place, it was impossible for us to harvest more than a small proportion of the plums, grapes and most especially the cape gooseberries which were under his care.

During the war Uncle Ian found that the finances would not allow him to keep Rothiemay. It was sold three times, first to Lord Saltoun – for a member of his family who was killed on active service. So it was sold again to a member of the Nall Cain family, who sold it to Ward, a timber merchant from County Durham, who not only stripped it of everything and cut all the really lovely timber off the place, but pulled down Rothiemay Castle (or House) which had dated back partly to the 11th or 12th century, thus committing one of the most disreputable acts of vandalism ever seen in Scotland. Uncle Ian and Aunt Molly eventually moved to Wiltshire where I suppose they died.

The garden and some of the grounds were eventually bought back by Uncle Ian's second daughter, Kitty, who had qualified as a doctor and married one called Traquhair. They have built an expensive but somewhat deplorable house on the site of the old castle.

In my way I had a great love for Rothiemay. Grannie was a sweetie – but perhaps a bit gone on religion and lots of clerics would visit the place. (My father once said he would never have lunch with her again in her London flat after finding that his fellow guest - a black bishop – was washing his neck in the gents' loo in the basement.)

But Grannie was a dear old thing, though apt to say odd things and to write her letters in totally illegible handwriting to save paper. Rothiemay was visited by hordes of friends, relatives and general hangers on during summer – all known as “hardy annuals” and as a result Grannie managed an enormous staff and a large storeroom full of all sorts of goodies, which, I am sorry to say, were heavily looted by her grandchildren when her back was turned. When the war ended, we only visited Rothiemay occasionally, but always for the duck shoot which lasted for several days ending up by a big stand, usually in the snow whilst a thicket of 7 acres was driven out for roe, hares etc. that lurked therein. Thereafter the most we saw of it was on an odd visit when on the way somewhere, usually between Raemoir, Moy and Deeside, where most of my family and friends lived. Contact there still was with the wretched and dissolute uncles and one aunt, but usually it was for lunch or perhaps a night on the way somewhere. Grannie died in 1928.

The family of John Foster Forbes

Married Mary Livesey Wardle

Children

Ian	m. 1 st Lady Helen Craven 2 nd Mary Shaw Stewart (Aunt Molly)
William	m. M.H. Strutt (Aunt Daisy)
Ronald	m. 1 st Rosita Torr (Aunt Sita) 2 nd Sylvia Leslie (Aunt Sylvia)
Roualeyn (Uncle Humph)	m. Georgina Walker (Aunt Georgie)
Gordon	died 1912
John (Uncle Jock)	m. (late in life) C Hollins (RGI and WADI never met her)
Sheila	m. Guy Innes
Sybil	m. 1 st Capt Leslie Fisher, RN 2 nd Capt Cherry, RN