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## **Scotland: Aberdeen on the North Sea (1992)**

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## II. SCOTLAND

I flew from Norway across the North Sea to Aberdeen, Scotland, home to the oil industry in the United Kingdom. With me were Scottish oil field workers, whose red hair and grizzled faces showed the wear of time in offshore oil work. They were dressed in blue jeans, cowboy boots, and ornate leather belts with silver and turquoise buckles, and had the look of graduates from Texas A&M, the petroleum industry's premier school and the college more Mobil guys call home than any other. Oil is the universal commodity, its pursuit and rewards the universal language. Oil Patch Texas Aggies and Louisiana Cajuns are welcome around the world, as is their music, styles and attitude. After 20 years of oil industry in Scotland, there is now a Scottish subgenus: Angus the Aggie.

I was picked at Aberdeen's Dyce Airport up by Frank Beach, the company's community relations expert, an English Catholic from the Midlands who, for the past four years, has paid attention to the company's neighborhood duties in Scotland. We drove 40 miles north to St. Fergus, north of Peterhead, south of Fraserburgh in the area of Scotland called Grampian. I was to tour the new Scottish Area Gas Evaluation (SAGE) plant.

During the drive, Frank pointed out dozens of Pictish stone markers, placed in patterns in distant centuries for unknown reasons by invaders from Ireland. The Grampian sector in Northeast Scotland remains home to most of these ancient and mysterious Pictish remains, which still survive. Other antiquities include the more modern ruins of Inverugie Palace; a structure built in the 12th century and one of the few royal palaces in Scotland. Today it is a red stone heap overgrown with brambles and grasses, and with a barbed wire fence surrounding its perimeter to keep children and stone collectors out.

Upon our arrival at the SAGE plant, we were given an orientation tour by a contractor's general foreman, a native of Wales. As he explained, here just south of Rattray Head are four natural gas processing plants operated by Mobil, Shell, British Gas and Total (the French outfit), one after another.

Here, amid a relentless wind, was an industrial colossus. To the east was the raw Scottish coastline against the North Sea; while around us was the sluggish farmland whose primary use was to produce fodder for livestock. In this remote treeless coastline, the gas produced from the petroleum fields 200

miles out in the British North Sea would be treated and then piped to British Gas's grid for distribution throughout the U.K. Taken together, these four plants would have the capacity to process half the natural gas used by the U.K. every day. Mobil's plant alone could handle 20 percent of the total.

For the plant operators, the neighborhood issues remained the same: suspicious townsmen, greedy landowners, fearful parents, and local businesses, which wanted contracts. Mostly, however, it was just people nearby who preferred to be left alone to tend to their lives without industrial interruptions. Challenges abounded. The farmer and owner of the Invereugie Palace wanted the company to build him a sewer in a quarter nearby, so he could subdivide his land for home construction. If we built the sewer, he would, in exchange, give wet unproductive farmland nearby to the municipality of St. Fergus for a park. We had said nix to that deal. Instead, the company drained a soccer field and built a fieldhouse for equipment.

A local contractor wanted to do fabrication on the gas plant construction, until he was told what was involved. He kept quiet thereafter and remained happy with the concrete footing work for warehouse Quonset huts.

There were three community councilmen in St. Fergus, a town of nearly 1,000. One, a former milkman, was now on the plant payroll as a photographer, a career dream come true. Another, the village postmaster and owner of a small news/tobacco/notions shop, had signed a contract to be the vendor of canteen supplies to the plant when it opened later in 1992. The third was also employed in construction by the plant. Thus do local leaders form favorable opinions as neighbors of your operations.

Peterhead is also home to a maximum-security prison, where the U.K.'s most desperate criminals reside behind high wire fences topped by razor wire above a grassy cliff overlooking the North Sea hundreds of feet below. Next to this grim edifice is the home of the value and plumbing contractor, which Lord Cullen said was likely to blame for the Piper Alpha platform fire which some years before and had killed more than 170 offshore oil workers. Piper Alpha was the cash jewel of Occidental Petroleum, operated by the late self-promotion expert Armand Hammer. Our guys called Hammer's Oxy a sleazy operation from top to bottom. Piper Alpha was a gas production facility where the main compressor was built right below the residential/accommodation portion of the platform, and it burned and killed 170. Some 60 survived. The disaster at Oxy Pete's Piper Alpha forced the U.K. to implement the strictest safety rules in the offshore industry worldwide.

On the radio as we drove through the plant were reports of the visit to Scotland this day by former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who was campaigning for the Tories. She was making nasty cracks about Labourites, but particularly against the Scottish National Party (SNP), which held nine seats and was threatening to grow as the Scottish nationalism again stirred and

threatened the United Kingdom of Great Britain (England, Wales, Scotland) and Northern Ireland.

Thatcher said such nationalists would destroy the work of 300 years that had brought the U.K. good works, influence around the world and prosperity at home. Into the news mix, the BBC reported that the Ulster Unionist Party in Northern Ireland was exploiting the tension between Scotland and England by claiming that the U.K. should scrap the 1985 Anglo-Irish treaty, which is a roadmap for relations between the two countries over Ulster and its murderous troubles. There were also continuing news reports of IRA bombings. Today a bomb ignited near a British soldier's post in Ulster with little effect on the barricaded center, but destroyed homes and shops nearby.

Around the perimeter of the SAGE plant was a very forbidding construction: a bombproof double fence with an open "dead" zone. The Welshman explained that the U.K. National Defense people had declared the gas plants in St. Fergus a "strategically important industry" and thus had ordered the construction of this bombproof double security fence to protect the plant from attack by a vehicle driven by a suicide bomber. The fence wire was strung together so tightly that no individual could get a toehold to scale it, and even if an intruder could, he would have to contend with the razor wire spun along the fence top. In addition, surrounding the interior of the fence was an invisible microwave protection beam to warn controllers of an intruder.

Said the Welsh contractor: "With what we hear every day, we take the Northern Irish problem seriously. I wouldn't put anything past them. I wouldn't be surprised if we have been looked at by them since we began construction."



Beach and I rode a chopper at dawn to the Beryl Alpha petroleum production platform in the North Sea, arriving after a 90-minute flight at 7:45 a.m. The chopper was a Bristow Tiger, holding 17 of us in our orange rubber treated sea survival suits for the flight 200 miles from Aberdeen. The water depth is about 124 meters. The platform is a huge industrial structure atop three concrete legs, which are imbedded into the sea floor 148 meters below the base of the deck. Beryl Alpha is a processing factory on stilts. It began operations in 1976, and today is a mature facility. It had 30 wells from this one platform, which produce 44,000 barrels of oil and 150 million cubic feet of gas a day. Its 16 sub-sea storage cells that can hold 900,000 barrels in storage. Between 1976 and the end of 1990 Beryl Alpha produced 345 million barrels of oil, generating an estimated \$7.6 billion revenue stream for the U.K. over that 14-year period. Across the horizon we could see Mobil's Beryl Bravo, Alpha's sister platform.

Normally 240 people would be on board during production, but the facility was currently shut down for routine maintenance and repairs. Next

to Beryl Alpha was the Polycastle, the flotel, or accommodation platform, which was anchored next to Beryl Alpha and connected by a long metal gangway. It is operated by a Norwegian company named Rasmussen Offshore A/S and provided living, dining, exercise and recreation quarters for more than 500 people. Right now 700 men and a few women were working on the Beryl Alpha complex in a shut-down, repair and maintenance operation.

The Polycastle was like a huge bedroom hotel for scaggy Scottish and English workers walking around unshaven and unkempt in their sweat clothing and flannels, with the thickest accents imaginable. This was U.K. working class in the extreme: tattoos, spotty complexions and constant smokes. Each of these folks works two weeks on, then two to three weeks off. They have good jobs but earn the money.

The North Sea work environment is exceedingly hostile—a Class A stress creator. Frank and I were on the helideck on top of the five-story residential complex on the Alpha surveying the horizon of the North Sea around us. Frank had spent six years as a maintenance supervisor on the Alpha and described life this way:

*You leave behind home for two weeks and your parting wasn't the best. Your wife didn't want you to go and you didn't finish what you wanted with the kids or working on the flat. You're a bit guilty coming here away from home. Then you put on the survival suit in Aberdeen and climb on board a helicopter and you enter a very treacherous world where in your mind you know the following: Last week, a chopper operated by Bristow crashed into the North Sea after taking off from a Shell platform, killing all 19 aboard. You are going to live on a platform with 250 other men. You know all about the Piper Alpha. You know that in North Sea waters without protection you last 7 minutes and then die from hypothermia. This is where you are working.*



Back on land, the company's office was called Grampian House and was located on Union Row in Aberdeen, a city of 250,000, which braggers say is the oil capital of Europe. It is better known as the Granite City, owing to the gray construction stone in evidence everywhere with a somewhat depressing effect. Union Street, the city's main drag, was a mile long, 70-foot-wide granite canyon. In the rain, the town looked like wet dirt. In summer's bright sunlight, however, the quartz flakes in the stone glisten in a shimmering beauty. Take your choice. Granite, though used for its maximum municipal effect since the 19th century and imposing a simple, somewhat plain heft to the downtown, was first used as early as the 15th century, when it was the material used in the reconstruction of St. Machar's Cathedral,

which was built in 580 AD and destroyed in 1336 by a fire started by Edward III of England. Old Aberdeen, home to the city's educational and religious institutions, is where King's College was founded in 1494. New Aberdeen, the city's commercial center, has Marischal College, founded in 1544 and rebuilt in 1844, on Broad Street and is the second largest granite building in the world. These independent universities merged in 1860 to form Aberdeen University, which today produces some of the world's best petroleum engineers.

Beach told me that I would be staying at what I thought he said was "D Side," which in my ignorance I believed was a section of town like, say, the A Side or B Side. No, I learned, Deeside refers to the River Dee, south of Aberdeen. North of town is the River Don. The town name Aberdeen is a long since shortened version of the moniker "as between the Dee and Don."

The name of the hotel was Ardoe House, on South Deeside Road, Blairs, a five-minute drive from Aberdeen. The hotel was built in 1878 by Soapie Ogston, a soap manufacturer, for his wife and has somewhat overripe nouveau riche surroundings favored by a poser soap maker. Ardoe House was, of course, granite and modeled in the Scottish Baronial style favored by Queen Victoria and which she used as the style for Balmoral Castle, 40 miles away down the River Dee.

Balmoral Castle is located on 50,000 acres of mountains and pine forests on the bank of the Dee. It was built in 1855 for Queen Victoria and the royal family still comes to Balmoral for weeks at a time to enjoy the Scottish weather and countryside as well as the fishing. Fishing on the River Dee is of high quality, and coveted since Balmoral Castle is nearby. The Dee is a salmon river, among the best in the world, about 100 miles long with its head high in the Cairngorm Mountains in Grampian. When royals show they attend services at the parish church at Crathie.

I stayed in Room One and had a magnificent view of the River Dee and the rolling hills to the east and south. This side of Aberdeen is genteel and beautiful and has very high real estate values, comparable to what we have in Fairfax. Just out of the sight was a castle that I was told once housed a Jesuit seminary, here in the heart of Presbyterian Scot country where Anglican monarchs rest. It is now abandoned and the people aren't quite sure what to do with the building.



I was driven to dinner by a Scot who liked to talk. When he found out I was American he immediately went after Iraq and Saddam Hussein and how he had been involved in the fight. He was a lance corporal in a Scottish regiment and he had seen service in the Gulf: Oman, UAE, etc. He volunteered for the latest. But he sounded frustrated. They didn't give him his due. Said

he: "Just like the English, the lieutenant from my regiment becomes a major, and I stayed a lance corporal."

Beach had arranged dinner at Invery House, Banchory, Royal Deeside, Kincardineshire, with a guy named Bill Anders, a company consultant, and former director of the North East Scottish Council for Trade & Industry, which is like a chamber of commerce.

Invery House was an elegant mansion house on the west bank of the River Feugh, on 40 acres a mile south of Banchory on the Royal Deeside. In 1985 it was purchased by hoteliers who created a small country house of genteel comfort. The Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott visited Invery House in the early 1800s, and in the drawing room where Beach, Anders and I sat in front of a fire Scott was said to have written part of "Marmion." The 14 bedrooms at the place are called Marmion, Lady of the Lake, Ivanhoe and the Red Gauntlet, etc.

In this setting, Anders described his background: a Scotsman with a daughter in London married to a Norman/French, with his mother's family in upstate New York, and as a consultant to Mobil and others in the industry, he gave his views. He was worldly. He served in Germany, Spain and England in the Royal Air Force, worked in Rudby, England, and in Dundee, Scotland, for NCR (we talked about Dayton and the small world in which we live). He got tangled up in the downsizing caused by the consequences of NCR's sluggish response to electronic payment trends and its continued reliance on mechanical systems. Dundee went from 5,000 to 50 jobs, and now is back up to 2,000 as NCR has developed in Dundee and begun manufacturing automated teller machines, in which it dominates. Anders took considerable pride in Scottish ingenuity. He came back to Northeast Scotland, or Grampion, 25 years ago to work for employers trying to become exporters. He rode up with the oil industry.

Prime Minister John Major was in Cooper, Scotland, that day and trashed the notion of devolution, or independence, for Scotland. He said Tories as a political party would benefit from being rid of Scotland and its laborites, separatists and socialist tradition, "but it would be wrong." Anders had no patience for devolution or independence. He said Scotland didn't need a new government in Edinburgh. It already could deal directly with EC countries and did not need independence or co-equal status with England. All that would do is add a new layer of government. No need to worry, he said. Grampion may not be pro-English, but it is anti-independence. His advice and comments were more in the complex nuances of personalities and the subtle political machinations of the civil service. Glasgow versus Edinburgh versus Aberdeen, and how England and Westminster manipulate and complicate it all.

Anders said that Scottish nationalism comes back in rhythmic waves

every 10 to 20 years or so, and this most recent wave was stronger than the last, which was put to a vote in 1979 and defeated. But he held no faith in its progress, as the Scots know a bargain when they see it.



The driver who works for Mobil in Aberdeen and traveling political people (and thus is secure and reliable and thoroughly vetted as a professional driver able to get away if necessary in case anybody wanted to steal a lay-about like me) is a Scot, and he drove me to the airport Thursday morning. We had a lovely conversation. I kept him talking not only because it was an agreeable exchange but because I liked to listen what he did with the sound of English.

I told a joke about driving on the wrong side of the street and how countries like mine ruined a fellow like me in England and Ireland. I would always feel I'm driving in my rear view mirror in Britain. I joked how Nigeria recently changed the side of the street that people should drive on: one day cars switched, and the next day trucks switched.

"Oh, yes," he said, "that one sneaks up on you in a moment or two. We had that joke some years ago about Ireland when Irish jokes were popular."

This wasn't out of line particularly, but Irish jokes! Were Irish the humorous butt of ethnic "Polish" or "Nigerian" treatment by English and Scots? Served me right for teasing Nigerians.

The driver sensed my unease. "The Irish are a much put upon race," he said, trying to salvage the moment.

Race! Oh, my. I couldn't help myself. "Yes, and because they are, millions came to my country and good thing or I wouldn't be."

I didn't mean it to be nasty. He meant no harm, of course; he was just a victim of his own culture's bias. But this bias had sent millions overseas to populate the U.S. and other countries where one's status in the U.K. counted for nothing, except to instill an hostility to snobbery.