New Blackfriars

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Comment: Beaufort's Dyke

Beaufort's Dyke is back in the news. The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, soon after the election, floated the proposal to build a bridge between Scotland and Northern Ireland, setting up a team of civil servants to consider how feasible it would be, say from Portpatrick in Galloway to Larne in Antrim. It would bind the United Kingdom together, physically, once and for all, even if Scotland and Northern Ireland voted in favour paradoxically of remaining in the European Union. Unlikely they say but it could be as little as 22 miles long and take about 20 minutes to cross. It would be nothing compared with the 102-mile long bridge between Beijing and Shanghai. On the other hand, winter weather is so harsh in the Irish Sea that it would regularly be closed to high-sided vehicles. The cost of maintenance would be huge. But, above all, it would have to cross Beaufort's Dyke.

About seven miles off the Scottish coast Beaufort's Dyke is a deep 30-mile long trench on the sea bed, two miles wide, caused by glacial erosion, millennia ago, which has been used by Britain since the First World War and especially since the Second as the principal deposit for redundant and obsolete munitions, including some with phosgene and perhaps even nuclear warheads. Two decades ago, during the construction of a British Gas pipeline, shoals of incendiary devices were washed on shore. It seems likely that, if the sea was rough, loads of munitions were cast overboard, unofficially, some way short of the trench. The risk of disturbing so much dangerous material during construction seems not worth taking.

Dumping went on until 1976. In post Second World War disposal of armaments some effort was made to map where different types were offloaded. The tidal currents are so strong that quite a lot may have moved. Of course, disposing of munitions of that era bears no comparison with the problem of dealing with nuclear waste now. Several ships were packed with munitions and scuttled as privately as possible in various sites off the west coast of Scotland. But the story of Beaufort's Dyke is quite intriguing for readers of this journal.

For one thing, funnily enough, I was myself a spectator at the start and the finish of several expeditions to dump munitions in Beaufort's Dyke. My National Service in the early 1950s took me, eventually with the rank of Flying Officer (not that I ever left the ground), to 91 Maintenance Unit, then at RAF Acaster Malbis, an airfield five miles south of York, vacated by aircraft in 1944 to clear the space to stack vast quantities of armaments until they could be safely disposed of. We regularly

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sent off truckloads, travelling in convoy at 15 mph, to Cairnryan, where the contents were transferred to ships and taken out to release into Beaufort's Dyke. Sometimes it was my duty to sign the passes for the drivers and loaders on their return to have a few days on home leave. Dumping bombs in the Irish Sea, though not without ethical implications, couldn't be compared with dropping them on people in Germany.

Beaufort's Dyke is named after Sir Francis Beaufort (1774-1857), a Protestant with Huguenot ancestry, born at Cavan, County Meath, and son of a clergyman. Off to sea as a keen young teenager he was to become Hydrographer to the Admiralty, retiring to Hove, by then an Admiral and Knight of the Bath. With a remarkable career in the Royal Navy, quite colourful and worthy of a biography, he is best remembered for inventing the Beaufort scale for wind force, the origin of reports in weather forecasts today.

His son, Francis Lestock Beaufort (1815-1879), was to make a career in the Bengal civil service, becoming Judge of the Twenty Four Purgunnahs, including Calcutta, an administrative unit in the legal system. One of his daughters, born in Madras, was Agnes Delacour Beaufort (1850-1930). In 1874 she married Henry (Harry) Sullivan Jarrett (1839-1919), in Calcutta. Educated at Prior Park he had made a career in Bengal, like her father, but in the Bengal Army. He was a scholar of some distinction, in particular translating work by the major fifteenth-century Sunni scholar al-Suyuti.

Mrs Jarrett became a Catholic after the birth of their first son. The fifth of their six sons, born at Blackheath in 1881, was Cyril Beaufort Jarrett, better known by the religious name given him when he entered the Dominican novitiate at Woodchester in 1898 — Bede Jarrett, founder of this journal. Obviously he never saw his grandfather. Indeed, until his father retired in 1896 and settled in East Grinstead, he saw little of his parents either. When they came 'home' on leave from the Bengal Army they put up in a hotel near Stonyhurst College, which enabled them to take the boys out to tea. Nothing in his extant writings allows us to guess how much Fr Bede knew of his great grandfather, the Hydrographer, let alone of Beaufort's Dyke.

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