# WILLIAM McCOMBIE of TILLYFOUR (1805-1880)

Perhaps the most famous native of Alford is William McCombie, although his name is now not at the forefront of our minds, but his legacy, Aberdeen Angus cattle, is known and eaten today throughout the world.

William McCombie of Tillyfour, Alford, was born in 1805, the second son of Charles McCombie, farmer and cattle dealer, and his wife Anne Black.

William was educated at the local parish school and, although he showed keen interest early in life in the farming industry, it was his father’s wish that he, with his elder brother, should enter the learned professions, and he was sent to Aberdeen “*in order to obtain the benefits of a university education*.” After only completing part of his studies at Marischal College, the results were so unsatisfactory, Charles yielded to his son’s wishes, and allowed him to return to the farm at Tillyfour, where he placed William under the care of his farm overseer, working and living alongside the other farm servants. The neglect of his early education was later regretted by William, and the higher the position he attained, the more he felt the disadvantages.

The farm was extensively involved in the rearing and breeding of cattle, to the extent that one year more than 1,500 head of cattle were sent to the Falkirk October tryst, an open-air market, doubtless by way of the old North South drove road which ran from Fettercairn, Kincardine, over the Cairn o’Mounth, via Lumphanan and Bridge of Alford and then on to Huntly. The proceeds of the sale were used by Charles McCombie to purchase the farm at Tillyfour.

Gradually, as he gained experience, William took over the running of the farm from his father. It was as a breeder of the pure blacks that his name will be long associated. He was a firm believer of the Aberdeenshire, or Angus, breed of black doddies, having noticed them at Aikey Fair and similar big cattle trysts in Aberdeenshire, and was among the earliest to strive for preservation of purity of the breed, and one of the most ardent workers for its improvement.

He bought a bull, named Angus, from Mr Watson of Keillor, Angus, and later a cow named Queen from Mr Fullerton of Mains of Ardestie, Tayside, and from these began cultivating the native breed which was to reap awards, medals, prizes and financial remuneration. In 1832 he began to take prizes at the shows of Vale of Alford Agricultural Association; in 1840 he took his first prizes at the show of the Highland and Agricultural Society, held that year at Aberdeen; and in 1844 he began a like successful career at the annual shows of the Royal Northern Agricultural Society, of which body he was long an esteemed office-bearer.

His ventures and triumphs as an exhibitor of stock were not limited to his immediate district or county, nor even to Scotland. William also tried his fortune at international contests, and with like results. In 1856 at the Concours Agricole Universal, held in Paris in connection with the Great Industrial Exposition, he was most fortunate; at Poissy in 1857 he repeated his victories; and at Poissy in 1862, when he carried away the Hundred Guinea Cup presented by Prince Albert to be competed for between English and French oxen, besides gaining other large awards. Only eighteen months ago, at the last great Exhibition in Paris, he achieved further honours by winning the prize for the best group of six animals. The plate and medals at Tillyfour might be termed an embarrassment of riches; but they were never displayed ostentatiously, and unless the visitor specially asked to see them only one or two were usually visible.

He was amongst the first in the North who risked their reputation at Birmingham and Smithfield. In 1859 he gained substantial honours at the fat stock shows in both these places, and other English exhibitions, and continued producing a winner almost every Christmas. His success in these displays reached its highest point at Smithfield in 1866, when the celebrated “Black Prince,” a magnificent ox weighing more than a ton, carried off the chief trophy. Queen Victoria demanded that William take the winning bull to Windsor for a private showing and ordered him to be reserved for the table at Windsor Castle. Not satisfied with merely seeing results of William’s careful and enterprising breeding, Her Majesty resolved to visit the nursery-ground of the black polled cattle and, on 11 June 1868, she personally visited Tillyfour from Balmoral to see the award-winning herd for herself.

William also showed great judgement in his latter style of cattle “dealing.” He went to various markets in the counties between the Dee and the Cromarty Firth, and picked up such lots as suited his taste. Taking these to Tillyfour, he carefully reared and finished them, and at suitable periods sent them off to the London market, to which he was one of the largest consignees from Scotland, as he had been one of the earliest. His drafts to Smithfield would scarcely be less than 300 head a-year, and his “prime Scots” almost invariably realised the top price at the Christmas markets.

The Industrial Revolution and the event of steam travel began to alter agricultural patterns. Instead of driving herds of cattle hundreds of miles along drove roads to market, ships from Aberdeen Harbour would take them to London and other major cities. In the 1850s cattle also left Aberdeen on the railway and the opening of the Alford Valley Railway in 1859 must have been a huge boost to the cattle trade.

At the end of 1868 William’s political aspirations were aroused by the upcoming general election and, despite doubts of his success, he realised his dream by becoming MP for West Aberdeenshire, the first tenant farmer in Parliament. In 1874 he won a second term by a sweeping majority, but the long hours began to take its toll and, having been elected specially to represent tenant farmers and vigorously fighting on their behalf, with his telling speeches in Doric gaining the attention of the House, in the spring of 1876 he reluctantly resigned.

As an employer, William was strict and kindly, and servants recommended by him rose to high positions of trust. Many of his ploughmen and cattlemen remained with him for very many years. He was appointed a Justice of the Peace, and discharged his duties as a Magistrate in a thoughtful and painstaking manner.

William McCombie died at Tillyfour on February 1, 1880. He was unmarried and is buried with other members of his extended family in Tough Churchyard.